

Suicide Prevention

IN PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOLS

Lessons Learned from 13 Reasons Why

A Guidance Packet on Suicide Prevention for School Administrators in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Youth suicide is a topic that understandably presents challenges for school districts. The introduction of various forms of media entertainment, such as this past spring's Netflix series 13 Reasons Why, place schools and their families in difficult situations as they attempt to manage reactions from youth engaging in these media formats in ways (and at rates) never seen before. It is inevitable that many discussions originate in classrooms and hallways in our schools, so it is important for teachers and staff to understand how to address these issues. While it is certainly not anyone's expectation that school staff become experts in talking with youth about suicide, it is reasonable to hope that educators would be able to appropriately respond when these opportunities arise.

The following guidance for school administrators is the result of collaborative efforts among numerous entities involved with youth suicide prevention. A balance between providing succinct, yet reasonably comprehensive resources was sought in the development of this packet. While this guidance packet highlights one particular series for illustrative purposes, the goal is to consider the broader application of these materials to current and future programming that students may come across. You are encouraged to contact any of the noted collaborative partners listed on the final page of this resource packet should you require additional information and/or have questions regarding the guidance within this packet.

Background on 13 Reasons Why

Schools have an important role in preventing youth suicide, and being aware of potential risk factors in students' lives, as well as youth suicide warning signs, is vital to meeting this responsibility. Based on Jay Asher's fictional novel, the Netflix original series 13 Reasons Why has raised concern not only among schools and families, but also among mental health professionals and suicide prevention experts. The series tells seventeen year old Hannah Baker's story and events which lead to her death by suicide. Hannah leaves behind seven cassette tapes which recount painful events where one or more of 13 individuals played a role. The fictional series graphically depicts her death by suicide and addresses in wrenching detail numerous difficult topics, such as bullying, rape, drunk driving, and what is referred to as "slut shaming".

Why it is important to pay attention to 13 Reasons Why

This show has brought many difficult topics to the forefront of public conversation, particularly amongst youth. The story line is engaging and relatable; youth can and have easily identified with the characters' daily lives. It is important that those who care for youth, whether

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administrators, teachers, or caregivers, have the ability to engage youth in the conversations which may arise, and have an awareness of the show itself.

Concerns with the Depiction of Suicide in 13 Reasons Why

- First and foremost, 13 Reasons Why is the most viewed Netflix series to date with a social volume over three million (Business Insider, 2017). Lots of youth have been viewing this series, including youth that may be vulnerable due to prior trauma and/or their own behavioral health experiences. Resultantly, it is not recommended that vulnerable youth, especially those who have any degree of suicidal ideation, watch this series. Its powerful storytelling may lead impressionable viewers to romanticizing the choices made by the characters and/or develop revenge fantasies.
- Unfortunately, many adult characters are depicted as unaware and don't inspire a sense of trust or ability to help Hannah and others that are struggling. There is no example of successful help-seeking and a prominent theme throughout the story is silence. None of the adolescent characters talk to their parents, school staff, or other adult figures about their feelings and in many cases avoid adults that are in a position to help. Having Hannah go to the counselor and him failing to recognize or act on the warning signs she displays sends a message that help is unattainable and that students in crisis cannot rely on adults at school to intervene.
- The series ignores suicide contagion which is the exposure to suicide or suicidal behaviors within one's family, peer group, or through media and can result in an increase in suicidal behaviors and suicide. Additionally, the series lacks a clear postvention response, which is essential in reducing the risk of suicide contagion.
- Indeed, there are many different pathways to suicide. The series, however, does not emphasize that common among most suicide deaths is the presence of treatable mental illness. Suicide is not the simple consequence of stressors or coping challenges. It is most typically a combined result of untreated, treatable mental illnesses coupled with overwhelming stressors.
- The series also perpetuates the idea that someone is to blame for suicide. There is not a straight, linear path to why suicide happens and it is not constructive to point fingers at peers, parents, or other individuals.

Actual Facts about Youth Suicide

- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death of young persons aged 15-24 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015).
- In 2014, 1,668 youth aged 13-18 years of age died by suicide (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015).

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- Among students in grades 9-12 in the United States during 2013 as reported by the CDC (2015):
 - 17% of students seriously considered attempting suicide in the previous 12 months (22.4% of females and 11.6% of males).
 - 13.6% of students made a plan about how they would attempt suicide in the previous 12 months (16.9% of females and 10.3% of males).
- According to the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYs, 2015), among students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 in Pennsylvania:
 - 16% of students considered suicide in their lifetime
 - 12.7% of students created a suicide plan at least once in their lifetime
 - 9.5% of students reported having had attempted suicide at least one time in their lifetime.
- Teens that have attempted suicide in the past are at increased risk of attempting suicide again; in fact, according to the National Youth Violence Prevention Center (2015), about one out of every three teen suicide victims had a prior attempt at suicide.

How schools can help prevent suicide

Schools play a key role in preventing suicide and identifying at-risk students. By utilizing best practices for suicide prevention, like the multifaceted approach outlined here, schools can foster a caring environment that works up-stream to build resiliency in students. Recognizing that the second season of 13 Reasons Why is scheduled for release in 2018 and little is known about the content of year two, schools are encouraged to be proactive in their prevention efforts. The following guidance highlights national best practice recommendations for suicide prevention. Please see the last page of this document for more information and resources.

SAMHSA's (2012) Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools suggests a multifaceted approach for schools to help prevent suicide. These components include:

1. Protocols for helping students at risk of suicide

- a. Develop protocols for:
 - i. Assessing suicide risk
 - ii. Reporting and documenting procedures
 - iii. Communicating and collaborating strategies with families and community partners
- b. Ensure protocols are feasible for staff and broadly disseminated

2. Protocols for responding to suicide death (postvention)

- a. Develop protocols for responding to a suicide attempt, including reentry and follow-up procedures, as well as responding to a death by suicide (postvention)

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- b. Establish partnerships with community stakeholders (i.e., hospitals, mental health providers, primary care providers, etc.) that may be called upon to assist with postvention efforts
 - c. Help staff understand the protocols and provide each staff member with copies of the protocols as well as additional resources they may need
- 3. Staff education and training**
- a. Train staff to identify suicide risk factors and warning signs among students and how to take appropriate action
 - i. Gatekeeper trainings: programs that seek to develop individuals knowledge and skills to identify those at risk, determine levels of risk, and make referrals (i.e., evidence-based Mental Health First Aid, Question-Persuade-Refer, Kognito)
 - ii. Ensure all staff are informed of policies/procedures
 - b. Provide additional training in risk assessment and intervention for school mental health professionals
- 4. Parent education**
- a. Increase awareness, education, and information on suicide and related mental health issues provided to parents/guardians highlighting:
 - i. Prevalence of youth suicide and suicide attempts
 - ii. Youth warning signs
 - iii. How to respond when concerned
 - iv. Community resources and crisis information
- 5. Student education**
- a. Provide developmentally appropriate suicide prevention curriculum and/or education programs for all students that promotes mental health wellness, encourages help-seeking behavior, and provides resources
 - b. Build resiliency in at risk youth to increase healthy coping skills, stress management, self-regulation, and social skills
 - c. Engage peer leaders to promote mental health and suicide awareness
- 6. Screening**
- a. Conduct screening of students for suicidal thoughts and behaviors
 - b. Conduct screening of students at increased risk after being exposed to a death by suicide (postvention)
 - c. Establish protocol(s) for referring students based on screening results and disseminate to staff.

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The JED Foundation

<https://www.jedfoundation.org/>

Suicide Prevention Resource Center

<http://www.sprc.org/>

The Trevor Project

<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

Suicide Awareness Voices in Education

<https://save.org/>

SAMHSA Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools

<https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/preventing-suicide-toolkit>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

<https://afsp.org>

Youth Suicide Warning Signs

www.youthsuicidewarningsigns.org

Pennsylvania Department of Education Act 71

<http://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/Safe%20Schools/Pages/Act-71.aspx#tab-1>

Prevent Suicide PA

<https://www.preventsuicidepa.org/>

If you, or someone you know, is thinking about suicide call or text the numbers below. These 24-hour services are available to anyone in need of help. Never ignore or underestimate remarks about suicide.



Call 1-800-273-8255

CRISIS TEXT LINE |

Text "PA" to 741741

Free, 24/7, Confidential

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