

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID AUSTRALIA

13 Reasons Why: Plot summary and content warnings

If you haven't seen *13 Reasons Why* but want to discuss it with a young person, or are trying to decide whether it is suitable viewing for a young person in your care, this summary may help. It covers the basic plot and describes content that viewers may find disturbing. *13 Reasons Why* is not consistent with many guidelines for media reporting and depiction of suicide, and watching it may be distressing for young people, especially those who are vulnerable.

13 Reasons Why is a high school based drama recently released internationally on Netflix. All 13 hour-long episodes were released together, on March 31st 2017. It is the story of Hannah, a young woman who has died by suicide before the show starts. She has left a box of audio-tapes with Clay, the protagonist of the show, each revealing one of the 13 reasons why she decided to die. On the tapes, she details a number of highly traumatic events that contributed to her developing thoughts of suicide, mostly involving her classmates. Clay is the last of several people who were to listen to the tapes, according to her instructions. As Clay plays them, he learns about many things that happened during Hannah's life. Classmates who have already heard the tapes are involved at various points, providing additional (sometimes conflicting) information and trying to keep him on track.

On the surface, the show clearly set out to do something important, like the novel of the same name; to show that actions have consequences. Hannah was raped, bullied (both on and offline), stalked and harassed. Obscene photographs of her were circulated. The list goes on; as you can imagine, the list is Hannah's '13 reasons' for taking her own life.

The show contains several distressing and graphic scenes, including Hannah's suicide and two rape scenes (one of these is Hannah's rape, the other, an almost unconscious classmate, while Hannah is hiding in the room terrified to act).

The story is told out of sequence. Sometimes we see the world through Hannah's eyes, and sometimes through Clay's eyes after her death, often with her voice narrating events as he hears her on the tapes. This can give the impression that she is present after her death, and that she is seeing the impact that her death has had on her classmates and others. Her locker is decorated by classmates who take selfies in front of it, further romanticizing and trivializing her death.

A critical plot point is that towards the end of the show, Hannah does reach out to an adult. She sees this as her last attempt to get help. She talks to a school counsellor and he handles the situation very poorly, and ultimately lets her leave his office without doing anything to help. While this was probably intended to show one specific adult who failed to help, the impression is that adults can't or won't help.

In the end we learn that Clay, who has spent most of the show convinced that he above anyone else must be responsible for her suicide, is the only person she doesn't blame. She included him in the process so that he would understand why she'd pushed him away when they were kissing, after acknowledging their feelings for each other.

If a young person hasn't yet watched the show and wishes to, encourage the following:

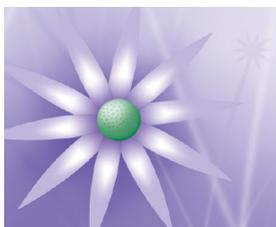
- It's okay to fast-forward through upsetting scenes. Viewing them in full is not necessary to understand the story. Suicide and rape are not romantic, and should not be considered entertainment.
- Consider watching the show with a trusted responsible adult as this would allow them to ask questions about themes and scenes that are upsetting or confusing.
- Just because all the episodes are there, doesn't mean they need to all be watched at the same time. Watching an episode a couple of times a week or even less gives a young person time to think critically about the show, rather than risk feeling upset by it.
- *It's okay not to watch the show at all*, even if other friends have.

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A not-for-profit organisation focused on mental health training and research

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13 Reasons Why: Important talking points

- It's important to remember that *13 Reasons Why* is a fictional story and many aspects should not be taken as a reflection of real life.
- If a person dies by suicide, they are not there afterwards to observe the aftermath. Because of the way Hannah's story is told, it often feels like she is there watching and seeing how the story unfolds. Some young people may view suicide as a way of punishing someone or getting revenge, however they need to understand that a person who suicides will never see or know how things turned out after their death.
- Young people who find that they can identify with Hannah, her life experiences, and thoughts of suicide, need to know that there is help available.
- The poor way the school counsellor reacted to Hannah's statement that she had been raped, and his lack of attention to her, such as taking a phone call during their session, is not typical of counsellors. Counsellors are professionals who are trained to listen and provide help, and seek additional support for a person if needed.
- A young person who believes that adults can't or won't help because of the show's themes need to be encouraged to be persistent. It's a matter of finding the right person, and there are many suitable people who can help.
- Keeping secrets about traumatic events such as rape and bullying is never okay. When these things happen, there are people who can help. Keeping secrets can delay a person's recovery.
- Suicidal thoughts are painful and difficult to endure, but most people who have thoughts of suicide don't act on them. A young person who feels like there are no other options left needs to hear that there are *always* other options.
- Young people who have lost a friend to suicide need to know that there is no one to blame in a situation like this. Young people who feel guilty need support and counselling.
- People can learn to recognise some of the signs that indicate a person is at risk of suicide. If a young person thinks that a friend is at risk of suicide, they should ask the friend directly e.g. "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" If the answer is yes, they need to get an adult involved right away.
- Though it is normal to feel guilt when a friend suicides, no one is to blame for another person's suicide. Young people may point to characters in the show, particularly the classmate who raped Hannah, and those who bullied her, and say that these characters are responsible. While those characters are guilty of the things they did, and should face legal consequences, this is not the same as being responsible for her suicide.

If a young person is distressed and in need of support, they can call or visit:

- Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800) or kidshelpline.com.au
- eHeadspace (1800 650 890) or eheadspace.org.au
- Lifeline (13 11 14) or lifeline.org.au

Mental Health First Aid Australia is a national not-for-profit charity that provides training to adults who live and work with young people (Youth Mental Health First Aid) and young people themselves (teen Mental Health First Aid) to build knowledge, skills and confidence in how to help a person experiencing a mental health problem or crisis. In addition, specific suicide first aid training is available (Mental Health First Aid for the Suicidal Person). Suicide first aid guidelines are available on the website.

For information, visit mhfa.com.au

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