

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Student Wellbeing & Netflix Series 13 Reasons Why

By Stephen Somerville

A couple of weeks back an Aurora High school student took his own life.
Soon after this tragic event, the principal at the school sent out a very poignant letter to parents.
As a public service announcement I reprint most of letter. I have had to edit this due to space limitations.

Dear Aurora High School Families,

As you may be aware, season two of the Netflix series 13 Reasons Why is now available. Recently, our school experienced the loss of a member of our community, which can affect students and leave them feeling vulnerable and experiencing difficult emotions. Exposure to dramatic and difficult television content can also raise emotions. Given this may be a more vulnerable time for your child, we want to make sure that you have information about this television series so that you can make an informed decision about the series and have resources and information to support your child if needed.

As you may recall from our letter last spring, the series deals with the difficult topic of suicide and other complex issues. Season one outlined the story of a 17-year-old girl who dies by suicide. She leaves behind cassette tapes for 13 people whose actions she perceived as reasons why she killed herself. Season two explores several other difficult topics including self-harm/cutting, bullying, struggles with identity, sexual assault, gun violence and more, which may be emotionally triggering for vulnerable students. Series like 13 Reasons Why may promote myths and misinformation about suicide. We hope the information in this letter will help you have open conversations with your child. Discussing important but difficult topics with your child lets them know you are open to talking about these subjects. This may make it more likely they will talk to you if they have any concerns/challenges. If young people do not feel they can talk to adults about these subjects, they are likely to seek advice on the internet or from friends, or worse may not talk to anyone.

You may wish to ask your child if they have heard of or seen this series. If your child has not already watched the series but would like to, review it first yourself. Adults can help share the message that suicide is not a solution to problems and help is available. You can help your child process their feelings and answer questions about the issues in the series. This is particularly important if you feel your child is isolated, struggling or vulnerable.

The following suggestions may help with the conversation:

Remind them that the series is fictional.

Share that it is normal to experience periods of stress and distress. Offer healthy coping strategies, such as exercise, art, journaling, talking to friends and adults they trust.

Let them know that there are adults at school who care and can help.

Talk about where to seek support if they need it from family members, counsellors, coaches, teachers, faith leaders, a crisis line like Kids Help Phone - 1-800-668-6868.

Talk openly about emotional distress and suicide. Doing so in a fact-based manner does not increase suicide risk (see tips below).

If you have concerns about your child's mental health, see your family physician and/or share your concerns with the school.

If the concern is more urgent, you may call York Region's Crisis Response Service, 1-855-310-COPE (2673), the Mental Health Helpline 1-866-531-2600, or take your child to a hospital emergency department. If there is an emergency call 911.

As family members it can be difficult to know if a loved one is struggling with thoughts of suicide. The information below offers several important considerations.

Possible signs someone may be having thoughts of suicide:

Suicide threats, both direct ('I am going to kill myself.' 'I need life to stop.'), and indirect ('I need it to stop.' 'I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up.'). Threats can be verbal or written and are often found in online postings (Instagram, Facebook)

Preoccupation with death in conversation, writing, drawing and social media

Changes in behavior, appearance/hygiene, sleep habits, thoughts and/or feelings. This can include someone who is typically sad who suddenly becomes extremely happy.

Emotional distress

Withdrawing from friends and family

Trust yourself as a parent/guardian. If you feel something is not right with your child or notice any of the signs above, do not hesitate

to ask directly about thoughts of suicide. This may be a tough conversation to have, but sends a message that you are open to talking about suicide and increases the chances your child will seek help. That might sound like,

?Sometimes when people are under stress, having trouble with friends, and worrying a lot, they have thoughts of suicide. Are you having thoughts of suicide??

To learn more about safely talking about suicide, consider taking suicide intervention training. Find out more at www.livingworks.net. For further resources about the series: www.13reasonswhytoolkit.org.

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