

# 13 Reasons Why, and Its Unintended Consequences,

by Brooke Fox, LCSW

I am a mom. And I am a psychotherapist. I have actually been a psychotherapist longer than I have been a mom. That's originally why I picked up the book 13 Reasons Why. I was intrigued by its premise: a teen takes her life, then leaves behind a record of who contributed to her decision, and how. Intrigued is one word I have used -- but if I am being intellectually honest with myself and you, I was put off by the premise. I was scared. As a mom of two daughters, 12 and 16, facing this book seemed daunting. I put it down. Even therapists have their limits...

I buried this book, along with its premise, for a couple of years. But like all things that scare us and bring out our vulnerabilities, this stuff comes back. This time, it came back in the form of a Netflix series that my 12 year old daughter began begging to watch. "All of my friends are watching it", "They are going to spoil the ending for me!" (umm.....that's already been revealed!), and the ever-famous, "You are too overprotective...".

Was I overprotective? I don't want to shield my younger daughter from how devastating mental illness can be, especially because it is my life's work to help people combat these demons. However, the premise still scared me.

I made her an offer. We would watch the series together, and have frank discussions. This idea was rejected based on the fact that my daughter felt "uncomfortable" talking to her therapist mother about the subject matter. My answer was that if she couldn't talk about it, she was not allowed to watch it. Case was closed.

Well, the case was closed for her. I decided to watch the series. But this time, as a mental health provider, not as a mother. Here is what I learned: 13 Reasons Why is irresponsible and disturbing. I will make this an easy read, and put this into bullet points.

- **Nobody else is responsible for our mental health.** The premise of Thirteen Reasons Why disturbed me. I understand that the author was attempting to illustrate the point that our actions have an impact on people and at times, that impact can be severe. Small sins add up, and create a cumulative effect that can sometimes have dire consequences. I agree with these assertions. However, as a mental health provider, I work with people to find their power, and their voice. And yes, I work with teens to do this as well. We need to own and name our feelings as well as our actions. I believe we should teach our children to dig deep and find resilience, not point fingers at others - as Hannah did - and hold them responsible for our feelings and actions.

- **Thirteen Reasons Why is a suicide revenge fantasy.** Hannah received everything in death that she was hoping for: sympathy, deep regret, guilt, and ultimately -- love. However, what the teen brain cannot process is the fact that Hannah is dead - permanently, and never coming back. The concept of the permanence of death is not solidified for a teen at this point in development. This makes suicide seem like an actual option if this can be achieved.

- **Mental health issues -- and the help that's available -- are barely discussed.** Depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder are very real things that Hannah and other characters in the series struggle with. However, the opportunity to model both the struggle with the issues and the options that are available for addressing them -- whether that means talking with a trusted adult who actually listens, to pursuing the right kind of mental health support -- is missed. Instead, the focus is on suicide as a revenge act.

- **Girls are depicted as disempowered.** I read a great article in New York Magazine by Anna Silman that discusses Thirteen Reasons Why, and the culture of misogyny our teenage girls face. While this could have been a very powerful message in the book, it gets overshadowed by the revenge fantasy that Hannah's suicide provides. How about addressing the boys' terrible behavior head-on? How about calling attention to sexual assault and what we can do to change it? I would have liked to see more outrage, and less disempowerment, from this show.

- **The suicide scene is cause for outrage.** I am not for censorship. I am not Tipper Gore from the 80's. But this scene was, plain and simple, a tutorial on how to complete the act of ending your life. It was graphic, it was bloody, and it was unnecessary. The book ended with a pill overdose, and yet the series ended with razor blades. Why? What purpose did changing Hannah's method -- and graphically depicting the suicide -- serve?

- **13 Reasons Why glamorizes suicide.** The series, and the book, go against best practices for addressing suicide responsibly. ReportingOnSuicide.org created recommendations as a guideline for the media on how to safely report on suicide. Research shows us that how suicide is reported has an impact on the public health of society. According to [ReportingOnSuicide.org](https://reportingonsuicide.org/):

- Don't sensationalize the suicide
- Don't talk about the contents of the suicide note, if there is one
- Don't describe the suicide method
- Report suicide as a public health issue
- Don't speculate why the person might have done it
- Don't quote or interview police or first responders about the causes of suicide
- Describe the suicide as "died by suicide" or "completed" or "killed him/herself" rather than "committed suicide"
- Don't glamorize suicide

13 Reasons Why breaks all of these rules. Violating these guidelines puts our teens at risk. Romanticizing the act of suicide in a medium that teens hold near and dear to their heart is dangerous and irresponsible.

These are my two cents as a psychotherapist, not a mother. My purpose of sharing my point of view was not to judge. The decision on whether or not a parent should let their child watch is a personal one. If you do let your children watch, please heed this advice: watch it with them. Talk to them. Assure them that you are here for them, that they are loved and empowered, and that suicide is never an option.