

Hospital, schools feel impact of suicide series

COEUR d'ALENE — Critics claim the popular Netflix series “13 Reasons Why” glamorizes and therefore encourages suicide.

Judging by an alarming Kootenai Health youth hospitalization trend and other reactions, the critics might be right.

“In the last month, there have been seven or eight acute hospitalizations for teens where they have referenced ‘13 Reasons Why,’ and we hadn’t previously heard that,” said Jeffrey Worley, a licensed clinical social worker affiliated with Kootenai Health. Worley said one teen even cited the suicide method used in the series as an inspiration for her plan.

According to the International Association for Suicide Prevention, “Research has consistently shown that following the detailed portrayal of suicide in the media or in a film/TV series, the risk of suicide involving the same method increased from 81 percent to 175 percent in the weeks and months after the release.”

Worley affirmed I.A.S.P.’s findings and explained how “13 Reasons Why” is partially responsible for these hospitalizations. Worley works in Kootenai Health’s Behavioral Youth Acute unit for children and teens up to age 17 who are in severe crisis.

Post Falls and Coeur d’Alene school districts sent warnings to their students’ parents about the series last month after receiving alerts about the show from several mental health organizations.

Thirteen episodes appeared on Netflix on March 31, and there’s been controversy over it nationwide ever since.

The show originated from Jay Asher’s 2007 novel, “Thirteen Reasons Why.” After a series of demoralizing incidents with her peers, Hannah Baker commits suicide after recording 13 reasons why she did it on seven double-sided cassette tapes. In the tapes, she identifies the people she feels are responsible for her death and sends them to those individuals. The show depicts the actual suicide, Hannah slicing her wrists and bleeding out, with no details spared. Hannah provides justification for her death in those 13 reasons, and that’s at least part of why so many mental health professionals are concerned.

The impact that most experts fear is that of “contagion.” Suicide contagion is a phenomenon in which those who are exposed to suicide, either by the media or reality, begin to show suicidal behaviors and even commit suicide themselves, which is referred to as a “copycat suicide.” The concern about “13 Reasons Why” causing contagion comes from the graphic depiction of Hannah’s suicide.

The Post Falls School District posted a warning on its high school website along with several talking points for parents to read. Superintendent Jerry Keane said he heard about the series from national media, and

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by Brooke Wolford

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because the school plays a critical role in suicide prevention, he said he wanted to provide information to students and parents. Keane said the district got the talking points from national sources and modified them to fit on the website.

The Coeur d'Alene School District sent out a newsletter about the series as part of its "Stand Up, Speak Up" initiative.

"We decided this year that every month, we would release a news blast on an item of interest to the community," said Megan Franklin, Fernan STEM Academy's school counselor and member of the Stand Up, Speak Up committee. "Our message is: Watch it with your kids, or watch it and talk about it with your kids. There really just needs to be parental involvement with this show."

Amy Clark, Coeur d'Alene School District's director of special education and member of the National Association for School Psychologists, said she received an alert from the organization, identifying the series with a warning that it "glorifies" suicide.

Dr. Christine Moutier from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention said in a webinar about the series that the glorification comes from the illusion that people can still influence what happens after they're gone.

Worley said he takes issue with the justification of suicide the show provides.

"The 13 reasons that she has kind of justify, in a way, what she did. So teenagers watching it, feeling suicidal and seeing it, get a sense of justification in completing suicide," Worley said.

The show sparked controversy, though, because its producers meant for it to be a cautionary tale; they wanted to bring awareness to the issues of suicide and bullying. Selena Gomez, the show's executive producer, explained her intentions in a 30-minute featurette about the series called "Beyond the Reasons."

"We wanted to do it in a way where it was honest and we wanted to make something that will hopefully help people because suicide should never ever be an option," Gomez said.

But Worley said he thinks the series failed to do this.

"I don't think the series came across how they intended it to," Worley said. "Because of the graphic ending and because of the themes and how they're portrayed, I don't think that it would be good for anyone to watch, even if they weren't struggling with suicide."

Many members of the school districts' staffs warned against watching the series, but have yet to view it themselves. Worley said to fully understand the show and its impact, you have to watch it. That's why he believes the adults in schools should watch the series, to fully understand the danger the show presents to their students.

"I think teachers should watch it because it's become so popular. I think there are more students in their classrooms who have watched it than they realize," Worley said.

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Many critics said the show is unrealistic because the events leading up to the suicide are dramatized and because when Hannah seeks help from her school counselor, he fails to respond appropriately, sending Hannah over the edge. But Worley said in his experience, these instances are a reality. And that's what scares him.

For more information on suicide and how to get help, visit <http://www.spanidaho.org/> or call the Suicide Prevention Action Network's suicide prevention lifeline at 1-(800) 273-8255.

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