

'13 Reasons Why' can be dangerous to certain children

As soon as "13 Reasons Why" hit Netflix, many local mental health experts heard about the new show depicting a teen dying by suicide — from our kids. Despite the "Mature" rating, local youth are seeing the show.

Also despite mental health experts being consulted in the creation of the show, "13 Reasons Why" can be dangerous to some of our children. Parents need to know that their child could have a negative reaction, and how to help.

"13 Reasons Why" tells the story of Hannah, a 17-year-old student who dies by suicide and leaves behind a series of audiotapes detailing events that preceded her death. The show depicts sexual assault and death by suicide. For some young viewers, it is a cautionary tale that suicide is destructive to those who are left behind and should be avoided. Other viewers may see it differently.

People will react to this series based on their personal history and their baseline mental health.

In the same way some people can watch and enjoy graphic movies about war, those who have combat experience and associated post-trau-



KATHLEEN KERN

matic stress disorder may have a very different reaction. They may be triggered to experience symptoms that would not be so prominent if they had not been exposed to a film about war.

Similarly, students with pre-existing symptoms of depression may be triggered by the content in a way that a non-depressed viewer would never expect.

The Lorain County Community Health Assessment found that 8 percent of sixth-graders, 15 percent of eighth-graders and 17 percent of 10th-graders reported seriously considering attempting suicide in the previous year, with 5 percent of sixth-graders, 7 percent of eighth-graders, and 6 percent of 10th-graders attempting suicide in the previous year. Almost 20 percent of sixth-graders, 26.5 percent of eighth-

graders, and 35.5 percent of 10th-graders reported feeling sad and hopeless for at least two weeks in a row, according to the 2012 Pride Survey conducted by Communities that Care of Lorain County.

Implicit in the "13 Reasons Why" story is the idea that if you are bullied, mistreated or misunderstood in life, suicide can give you an audience with those who ignored you when you were alive. The themes also suggest that suicide causes people who hurt you to finally recognize the error of their ways.

The series suggests that suicide is the fault of those in one's environment, rather than recognizing that suicide, at its core, is based on an individual's inability to see any other potential solution, typically due to depression.

It is never a good idea to even suggest that suicide is a logical response to adverse experiences. Research-based suicide prevention activities avoid a suggestion that suicide occurs when someone is too stressed or too upset. Many, many youth get stressed out and upset. The vast majority of suicides are caused by

mental illness (depression), rather than by stress alone.

As the series depicts, it is true that bullying, maltreatment and sexual violence can lead to depression. What is missing from the story is the equally true fact that depression and various mental health concerns are treatable. While not every suicide is preventable, if depression is recognized and treated, the number of people who reach the level of desperation that yields suicidal action could be diminished.

As a child and adolescent psychologist and executive director of the Lorain County Board of Mental Health, I applaud The Chronicle-Telegram ("13 Reasons' causes a stir," April 29) for offering tips to parents on how to approach the show as an opportunity for open discussion. We are offering additional tips and resources at lcbmh.org/13reasons, with talking points to start the conversation with youth.

"13 Reasons Why" has definitely increased discussion about suicide nationwide. Discussion between children and parents or other trusted adults about suicide, depression, bul-

lying or sexual assault is a good thing. It is important for parents to have these discussions and to recognize signs that indicate a child may be at risk.

It remains true that if someone is struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts, talking with a trusted and knowledgeable adult is not only appropriate, it is essential. It is also important to recognize that exposure to graphic depictions of suicide, especially outside of conversation with trusted adults, can pose risk to youth.

Help is available every minute of the day. The 24/7 crisis hotline at (800) 888-6161 is available for anyone considering suicide or having a mental health emergency. Also, a crisis text line is a great resource for teens, because it connects the texter to a trained crisis counselor who can respond via text and help problem-solve any stressful situation, which can include a mental health need. The crisis text line can be reached by texting 4HOPE to 741741.

Kathleen Kern is executive director of the Lorain County Board of Mental Health.