

How to talk to young people about *13 Reasons Why*

headspace School Support has received a growing number of concerns from schools and parents across Australia about the recently aired Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*. The series, which depicts a young woman who suicides after outlining 13 ‘reasons’ for her death, has divided opinion in Australia. While some people believe the show allows for authentic conversations about suicide, others believe the show exposes viewers to harmful suicide messages and imagery.

headspace shares the concerns expressed by other youth mental health services about the potential risk the series poses to the wellbeing of young people. As many young people are currently watching the series, it is important that teachers and parents are aware of the risks associated with the content, and are prepared to discuss these with young people who have been exposed to it in a way that:

- avoids normalising or glamorising suicide
- supports young people to manage their emotional responses to the show
- empowers young people to seek appropriate information and support for their difficulties, where necessary.

To guide conversations with young people about the suicide content covered in the series, the table below outlines some of the main concerns that have been raised about the show along with suggestions for how to respond to these appropriately. **Note:** these talking points can be modified to suit the young person’s age and circumstances.

What are people concerned about?	What does the research say about this concern?	How can I talk to a young person about this?
<p>1</p> <p>By providing clear ‘reasons’ why a person would suicide, the show suggests that suicide is ‘reasonable’ if certain criteria are met.</p>	<p>Young people who have experienced similar problems may start to view suicide as a reasonable option. This approach also disregards the experience of those who cannot identify obvious reasons for their distress or suicidal thoughts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reiterate that suicide is not a common or helpful response to life’s challenges, and that there are always better ways to deal with problems, no matter how hopeless they may seem. • Encourage young people who are going through a tough time to try the headspace Tips for Looking after Your Mental Health and Wellbeing and to seek support from friends, family and/or professional services if things don’t improve (a list of services is provided below). • Remind young people that any feelings of distress are valid and warrant support, whether there is a specific reason for these feelings or not. • Acknowledge the range of factors that may increase a person’s risk of suicide, including mental health issues.
<p>2</p> <p>The show doesn’t encourage young people to seek help for their problems. Adults are portrayed as incapable or unwilling to help, and the only experience of help seeking in the series is negative.</p>	<p>Research shows that young people can often be reluctant to seek professional help and need to be encouraged to seek support from appropriate sources. Failure to seek help can significantly delay a person’s recovery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind young people that support is available to them for any type of issue. • Explain that the way the guidance counsellor responds to the main character’s thoughts of suicide is not appropriate and not typical. Counsellors are trained to listen and provide support. • Encourage young people not to give up if their first experience of seeking help is not effective – it’s important that they find someone they trust and feel comfortable with. • Point out the range of supports available to them, whether it be friends and family, a trusted adult (e.g., a teacher, school counsellor or family doctor) or a mental health service (see list below). • Support them to seek help, if necessary.

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<p>3</p> <p>The show exposes viewers to a highly graphic and confronting suicide scene, inclusive of the method and means of suicide.</p>	<p>Research clearly shows that exposure to detailed descriptions of suicide can be overwhelming and distressing for young people, and can increase the risk of imitation by vulnerable young people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge that young people may be distressed by the show and that these feelings are normal. • Give young people the opportunity to talk through their emotional responses to the show and how they can manage these feelings. Be alert to at risk young people that might need additional support. • Remind young people to be sensitive to the feelings of others when discussing suicide, including on social media, given the impact that detailed descriptions of suicide can have on at risk young people. • Encourage continued participation in enjoyable activities (such as sports or hobbies) and contact with supportive family and friends.
<p>4</p> <p>By citing people's behaviour as 'reasons' for the suicide, the main character makes others feel responsible for her death.</p>	<p>Research shows that people who have been affected by suicide frequently experience blame and guilt, and this can complicate their ability to recover.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassure young people that suicide is never the fault of others, and there are resources and support groups for survivors of suicide. • Explain that suicide is complex and that many people who suicide experience mental health difficulties, such as depression, at the time of their death. This can make them feel hopeless and impact on their ability to think clearly and rationally. • Remind young people to seek support from a trusted adult if they think that someone is at risk of suicide.
<p>5</p> <p>The show portrays suicide as a way to 'teach people a lesson'. This can trigger a debate about whether the suicide was a 'heroic' or a 'selfish' act.</p>	<p>These judgements are neither accurate nor safe representations of suicide for young people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasise that suicide is never a heroic or romantic act – it is a tragedy and has a devastating and far-reaching impact on others. • Avoid judgemental language that may glamorise or sensationalise the suicide, or reinforce negative stereotypes about the suicide as a 'selfish' or 'immoral' act.
<p>6</p> <p>The series gives the impression that main character able to witness people's reactions to her death and achieve her desired outcome.</p>	<p>This approach fails to demonstrate the permanence of suicide.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind young people that suicide is final and that people who suicide do not get to witness other's reactions or experience a sense of resolution.

For more information or support, talk to **headspace** School Support staff or visit [headspace School Support](#).

These links provide further information about how to support young people:

- [Grief – How a Young Person Might Respond to a Suicide](#)
- [How to Talk about Suicide with a Young Person](#)
- [If Your Friend is Not Okay](#)
- [Managing Social Media following a Suicide](#)

These services provide immediate support for distressed young people:

- [Lifeline](#): 13 11 14 or [lifeline.org.au](#)
- [Kids Helpline](#): 1800 551 800 or [kidshelpline.org.au](#)
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#): 1300 659 467 or [suicidecallbackservice.org.au](#)
- [ehespace](#): 1800 650 890 or [ehespace.org.au](#)

