SCREEN AGERS

Teens all over the world are streaming the Netflix series, "13 Reasons Why." The series, based on the young adult novel by Jay Asher, explores hard issues like online bullying, rape, and suicide. Because youth today so often watch shows alone on their personal devices, it is imperative that we engage and have conversations with our teens about these intense subjects.

In her essay for *Teen Vogue*, suicide prevention advocate MollyKate Cline expresses concerns over the series' lack of mental health dialogue and the main character's disregard from a trusted adult when she goes for help. Cline sees these situations as potential triggers for vulnerable viewers. Also, the vast majority of people who take their lives are dealing with mental health issues, yet the girl in the series is not shown to be dealing with such issues—instead the premise is that others caused her to do it. For these and many other reasons, it is time for us to talk to our kids—whether they have seen the show or not.

I know that the content makers hope their show will bring awareness and acceptance to these serious subjects, but I have concerns that the show's graphic portrayal of suicide contributes

to its glamorization. How will these realistic interpretations impact youth dealing with real suicidal thoughts?

The increase in actual suicides after a widely publicized incident is real and extremely concerning. Called the *Werther Effect*, the increase in copycat suicides following an incident publicized without information about alternatives and preventions is based on the 18th-century Goethe novel, The *Sorrows of Young Werther*. Today, doctors and researchers call this suicide contagion.

A [major study](#) that looked at the *Werther Effect* found that **suicide rates decreased when the media offered alternative solutions to suicide**. When we hear of stories of people who were emotionally struggling but then found ways out of their darkness - supportive people, therapy, new community involvement, etc - those stories can help so many people. Why don't we hear more of those stories in the media?

I know as a family member, friend, and doctor that it is hard to have conversations about suicidal thoughts. It is an emotional subject, and so many of us have known people who have tragically taken their lives.

This week I challenge all of us to practice "courageous empathy" by raising issues of mental health and suicidal thoughts - really listening to our teens and asking what they have seen and felt.

1. What things have you seen in TV shows, Youtube videos, social media, etc. about mental health issues and suicide and how did it make you feel?

2. For those who have watched "13 Reasons Why," what was particularly disturbing?

3. What has helped you feel better when you are feeling down? What has helped others?

4. Has your school taught anything about mental health and suicide prevention?