



13 Reasons Why Not - #ShameonyouNetfix

Every year nearly one million lives are lost to suicide worldwide, according to the World Health Organisation. As egregious as that sounds, it gets even worse – among 15-29 year olds suicide is the second leading cause of death globally, meaning that societies are losing young, bright prospects who should take over the mantle of leadership of this epidemic. When framed within a global context, statistics like these can seem distant, far away. Somebody else's problem. But consider this: with over 800 people dying by suicide in Ireland each year, suicide is very much an Irish problem, as is the fact that, like the rest of the world, some of Ireland's youngest are its most frequent victims. Sadly, Ireland has the [fourth highest teen suicide rate in the EU/OECD region](#).

That sobering statistic hit you square between the eyes, didn't it? Suddenly, that distant problem is not so distant any more, which is why organisations like Cycle Against Suicide work tirelessly to create awareness around suicide and de-stigmatise mental health issues which, more often than not, are the main drivers behind suicide and suicidal thoughts.

But what do you do when an influential organisation like Netflix undermines such efforts through its programming? I am of course talking about Netflix's controversial *13 Reasons Why*. You've probably seen it or heard of it. This is a show about a teenage girl Hannah, who died by suicide after recording a series of 13 tapes, blaming various people for her death. The show's creators say the intention behind the show was to raise awareness about suicide, bullying, mental health and sexual assault. In watching the show however, it's quite clear that the medium they have chosen is ill thought out. For one, the show goes against every sound principle of suicide prevention advocated by mental health professionals.

While guidelines from credible, evidence-based organisations like the Irish Association of Suicidology, and others such as the Samaritans warn that the likelihood of copycat suicides increases when digital media explicitly describe the suicide method or uses dramatic or graphic images, *13 Reasons Why* blatantly disregards that. Not only does it depict Hannah's suicide in graphic detail, the suicide scene is shot in such beautiful cinematography that her death is portrayed as something beautiful. How could someone with suicidal ideation view such a glamorous take on suicide without thinking that suicide is an option?

The show goes on to undermine the concerted efforts of organisations to help people talk about their mental health issues. Cycle Against Suicide's schools programme focuses on building resilience in young people, and one of the pillars of such resilience: **It's OK not to feel OK; and it is absolutely OK to ask for help** is making it easy and acceptable for young people to open up to parents, families and professionals about their mental health struggles. *13 Reasons Why* portrays such a step as useless. In the only scene where Hannah actually seeks help from the school



counsellor, the counsellor is dismissive of her problems, offering no help whatsoever. What does that tell young, impressionable minds watching the show? That talking to someone is useless because they're not going to listen? The sheer irresponsibility of such a story line beggars belief.

As terrible as these missteps are, the way the show glamorises and romanticises suicide is perhaps its worst part. In portraying suicide as a form of revenge, blaming everyone for Hannah's actions, the show only succeeds in feeding into stereotypes of suicide as a form of attention seeking, a way for young teenagers to receive the kind of attention they otherwise would not get if they remained alive. And of course, in treating suicide as an 'easy way out' for those who struggle with depression, bullying or other issues, it overshadows the more important message that needs to get out there: mental health issues are diagnosable, and hence, treatable conditions.

This brings me back to my earlier question: what do you do when an influential organisation like Netflix undermines credible, evidence-based efforts to reduce and put a stop to teen suicide?

Parents, school, mental health professionals and organisations like Cycle Against Suicide speak out and point out the ways in which the show damages suicide prevention efforts. And that's exactly what has been happening. To tone-deaf Netflix however, such complaints only require placing warnings at the beginning of each episode – and then proceeding to commission a Season 2. Ultimately, we get the sense that we, as a society, cannot rely on profit-driven media organisations to behave responsibly. We have to lead the way by taking concrete, effective steps to counteract such reckless and irresponsible programming.

One way in which Cycle Against Suicide is doing this is through our schools programme, in which we focus on changing the perception of mental illness and making it OK for young people to talk about it. If we are to reverse the trend which has seen Ireland become the country with the 4th highest suicide rates in the EU, this is a task we must take seriously. In this way, we can help those who are struggling to see suicide for what it truly is, rather than what Netflix says it is. #ShameonyouNetflix.