

TOUGH TALK

PARENTS URGED TO QUESTION KIDS ABOUT '13 REASONS WHY'

By Danielle Letenyei

The Netflix drama "13 Reasons Why" might be must-see viewing, but it sends the wrong message to teens about suicide, says Lindsay Stevens, executive director National Alliance on Mental Illness Rock County, also known as NAMI.

The popular series, which is based on a young adult novel of the same name, revolves around 17-year-old Hannah Baker, who takes her own life and leaves behind a series of audio tapes to the 13 people she thought were to blame for her suicide.

"Overall, the show never really talked about Hannah's mental health," Stevens said. "Ninety percent of people who die by suicide have a mental illness."

The way the show portrays Hannah's suicide as a way to get revenge is irresponsible, said Shari Faber, project coordinator with Janesville Mobilizing 4 Change.

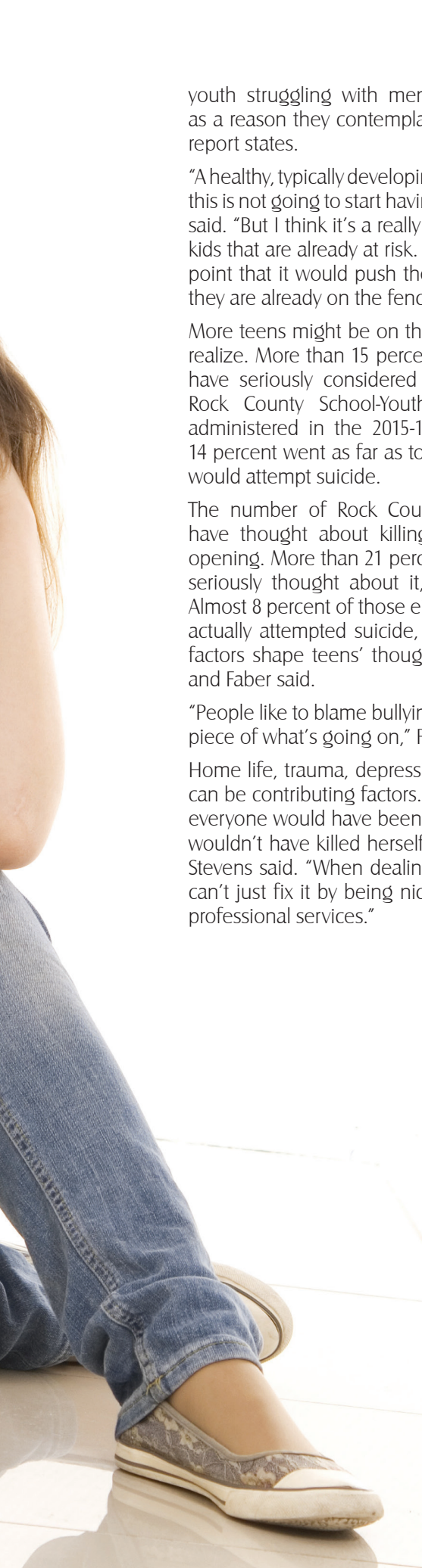
"In reality, she would never know the outcome," Faber said. "That is how adolescents think, and they don't understand the permanency of suicide. They aren't going to see the ramifications if they're dead."

Both Stevens and Faber have watched the entire series. Faber was surprised to find out her 13-year-old daughter had watched several episodes of the show without her knowledge. She is thankful her daughter didn't get far enough into the series to see the last couple of episodes, which are graphic.

They aren't the only ones concerned about the misrepresentations the show presents about teens and suicide. The National Association of School Psychologists issued a special report on how educators should approach issues brought up by the show. The association, along with the American School Counselor Association and American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, also released a webinar in response to the show: "A Teachable Moment: Using '13 Reasons Why' to Initiate a Helpful Conversation About Suicide Prevention and Mental Health." The school psychologists group recommends that teens avoid the show, especially those who might be at risk for suicidal behavior.

"Research shows that exposure to another person's suicide, or to graphic or sensationalized accounts of death, can be one of the many risk factors that





youth struggling with mental health conditions cite as a reason they contemplate or attempt suicide,” the report states.

“A healthy, typically developing adolescent who watches this is not going to start having suicidal thoughts,” Faber said. “But I think it’s a really dangerous show for those kids that are already at risk. It romanticizes suicide to a point that it would push those kids in that direction if they are already on the fence.”

More teens might be on the fence than many people realize. More than 15 percent of high school students have seriously considered suicide, according to the Rock County School-Youth Risk Behavioral Survey administered in the 2015-16 school year. More than 14 percent went as far as to make a plan on how they would attempt suicide.

The number of Rock County middle-schoolers who have thought about killing themselves is also eye-opening. More than 21 percent of eighth-graders have seriously thought about it, according to the survey. Almost 8 percent of those eighth-graders say they have actually attempted suicide, the survey reveals. Many factors shape teens’ thoughts about suicide, Stevens and Faber said.

“People like to blame bullying, but I think that is a small piece of what’s going on,” Faber said.

Home life, trauma, depression and mental illness also can be contributing factors. “The show portrays that, if everyone would have been nicer to Hannah, then she wouldn’t have killed herself. But we don’t know that,” Stevens said. “When dealing with mental illness, you can’t just fix it by being nice to someone. They need professional services.”

However, the show has its positives, Stevens and Faber said. After it aired, calls to suicide helplines and hospitalizations increased, perhaps indicating that teens who watched the series were prompted to reach out if they thought they needed help, Faber said.

“It brings up a lot of important issues that people should be talking about, like bullying, sexual assault, drunk driving and slut shaming,” Stevens said. “I think it is a good eye-opener for parents that these things are happening with teens and they are trying to handle it on their own. But they are not mentally developed enough to handle these issues on their own.”

Parents should educate themselves about the show and the issues it raises, Stevens said. She also encourages parents to learn about the programs schools have in place to address suicide awareness and prevention.

“If your teen is going to watch it, try to watch it with them,” Faber said. “If you can’t, watch it on your own so you can see what it’s about. The main thing is to keep the lines of communication open.”

In honor of Suicide Awareness Month in September, NAMI Rock County will sponsor its Paint the Town Yellow for Mental Health and Suicide Awareness 5K and Fun Run on Saturday, Sept. 30, at Palmer Park in Janesville. The closing ceremony will include a balloon release honoring loved ones lost to suicide. For more information or to register, call 608-743-9828 or visit www.NAMIRock5K.ezregister.com.

Janesville Mobilizing 4 Change will offer a Summit on Mental Health from 8 a.m. to noon Friday, Jan. 19, at the Janesville Performing Arts Center. The event is free and open to the public.

WHO TO CALL:

- Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255, suicidepreventionlifeline.org
- Rock County Crisis Intervention: 608-757-5025
- Text “HOPELINE” to 741741

GUIDANCE FOR PARENTS:

- Ask your child if they have seen ‘13 Reasons Why’. Discuss their thoughts.
- Don’t be afraid to ask if they have thought about suicide or if someone is hurting them. Raising the issue of suicide does not increase the risk or plant the idea. It creates opportunity to help.
- Listen to your child’s comments without judgement. Concentrate, understand, and respond. Put your own agenda aside.
- Get help from a school-employed or community-based mental health professional if you were concerned for your child’s safety or the safety of one of their peers.

Source: National Association of School Psychologists