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KAUKAUNA - A growing number of mental health experts are expressing concern after the release of the Netflix series '13 Reasons Why,' which they say is irresponsible in its portrayal of teen suicide and mental health.

"(The series) puts suicide as an option, which every day we work on making sure that it's not an option for somebody," said Barb Bigalke, the executive director and founder of the Center for Suicide Awareness in Kaukauna.

The series, based off a 2007 young adult book, follows the story of a high school student, Hannah, who dies by suicide. Before her death, she leaves behind 13 audio tapes for specific people she says contributed to her death by suicide. The tapes are later found by another high school classmate who seeks to understand why Hannah died.

**Creators** of the series intended the show to create dialogue around suicide and mental health and help at-risk kids. Overall, the series has received **strong acclaim** from teen viewers and critics alike, but leaders in the mental health community say the series does more harm than good.

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Bigalke and other critics contend that the series romanticizes suicide, including the idea of using suicide as revenge, and it depicts youth struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts and not getting the help they need. In particular, they take aim at the series' graphic portrayals of sexual assault and dying by suicide, which can be a trigger for anyone watching, especially those who are vulnerable.

"It just has a wide range of different issues which are good to talk about" like bullying, objectification of girls and substance abuse, said Mike Altekruise, the mental health coordinator for Neenah Joint School District. "But when you have it on the specter of suicide, this is not a turn-around story. This is not a story about someone getting the help they need."

The Center for Suicide Awareness operates the "HOPELINE," a 24/7 texting service for on-the-spot counseling for anyone struggling. Since the series was released March 31, Bigalke said they've received many texts from people saying the series has triggered feelings of depression, anxiety and more.

What's worse, Bigalke argues, is that the series does not offer any resources for viewers to turn to if they too are struggling, nor does the series follow the field's **best practices for suicide prevention**.

"So we have a death by suicide here, and no conversation afterwards," Bigalke said. "... If you're going to have that series, you need to have a discussion about it."

Former Disney Channel star Selena Gomez served as an executive producer on the series. Because of Gomez's pull with youth and **her own struggles with mental health**, Sarah Danahy, a licensed clinical social

worker with ThedaCare in Oshkosh, hoped Gomez would use that to her advantage to send a message to kids watching the series.

"I wish she was there at the end of every episode because I think kids can look up to her, sharing her personal story," Danahy said.

Danahy said she's had multiple parents come to her office asking about the series, or wondering how to talk to their kids who are watching the series.

School officials are also taking action to inform parents about the series and what resources are available, similar to other school districts around the country, including those in [Denver](#) and [Indianapolis](#) that drew media attention in recent days.

The Neenah Joint School District sent a letter on Thursday to parents about the series, writing that it "could raise the risks of suicide for some youth." The letter included guidance for parents, like talking to their child about the series and seeking help if they're concerned for their child's safety or the safety of one of their classmates.

Altekruse said he felt it was necessary to send the letter after conducting presentations on suicide prevention in schools last week. He asked kids in one class whether they had seen the series. Half of their hands went up.

"It's all really irresponsible," Altekruse told USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin of the series. "... I just really encourage parents to ask their kids if they're watching it and make sure parents are aware of what's in the series if they can."

The Little Chute Area School District also has plans to send a letter to parents in the coming days about the series.

In Kimberly, the series made the front page of the [middle school newsletter](#) sent home to parents on Wednesday.

Leaders with the Appleton Area School District and the Kaukauna Area School District both confirmed they plan to discuss the series and determine if something needs to be sent to parents, or if different action will be taken.

Bigalke, Altekruse and Danahy all recommend that parents talk to their kids about the series, or watch the series if their kids want to watch and to discuss it afterward.

"Sit down with them and have those discussions even though they're uncomfortable," Bigalke said. "Have you ever felt this way? What kind of coping skills can you use? ...(Suicide) is not an acceptable option, so explain that because kids need to understand."

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## Mental health resources

"HOPELINE," is a 24/7 texting service through the Center for Suicide Awareness for anyone in need of someone to talk to. Text "hopeline" to 741741 for help.

[The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) can be reached 24/7 at 1-800-273-8255.

To find local resources, contact the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) - Wisconsin at [www.namiwisconsin.org](http://www.namiwisconsin.org)