Survivors Explain What Was Wrong With the "13 Reasons Why" Suicide Scene

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By Lily Herman   June 15, 2017

Content warning: This piece discusses suicide-related content.

In the weeks and months following the release of 13 Reasons Why on Netflix, much has been written about the scene in the series' final episode depicting the main character Hannah's death by suicide. However, suicide attempt survivors as well as an expert in the field believe that the scene's explicit depiction of suicide has a number of huge problems that are more complex than the scene just being labeled as "bad"; they think the scene is both too realistic and completely unrealistic at the same time.

Dese'Rae L. Stage, a survivor as well as the creator of photo series Live Through This, brings up that the scene's "realism" is actually a central issue with it. "Given my own experiences as a suicide attempt survivor, I think it was a little too hyper-realistic," she tells Teen Vogue. "It violates all of the guidelines set out by suicide prevention organizations about how to portray [and] report on suicide. It's scary, it's gory, and it's very violent. It's filmed close up; it never cuts away. The creators wanted to, essentially, scare young people away from suicide." The problem, Stage explains, is that fear campaigns don't work, and the show may have done more harm than good in
showing people, particularly young people, how to use a specific method to take their own lives.

A survivor named Ashley also believes that the series could've shown less in the scene while still creating a meaningful moment. "You could’ve shown her get the razor; you could’ve shown her get in the bathtub; you could’ve shown the blood. You didn’t have to show her getting the blade and cutting into her wrist," she explains. "And you know what? It still would’ve made just as severe an impact." Instead, she says, the show gave viewers a "step-by-step guide" for how to attempt suicide using a specific method.

On the flip side, survivor Caitlin believes that the scene wasn't depicted with enough realism, as not much was shown about what goes on mentally before or after a suicide attempt. "The scene of her death was romanticized and not gritty enough," she says to *Teen Vogue*. "This is not some dark, beautiful thing. This is somebody at their lowest moment, choosing to end their life."

Moreover, Julie Cerel, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist, a professor at the University of Kentucky, and the president of the American Association of Suicidology, says that one of her biggest problems with the series is that the idea that main character Hannah's "quirky" tapes are part of a "typical" experience of someone experiencing suicidal thoughts. "It’s just not a realistic portrayal; it’s a portrayal built for entertainment," she explains. "The worry is kids will see it and think these issues aren’t that serious." Ashley also adds that Hannah's story, one about taking her own life as a means of revenge, is incredibly rare, and the show doesn't dig into the numerous other mental health reasons that lead someone to consider an attempt and act on those thoughts.

As *13 Reasons Why* begins working on its second season, survivors have advice for producers who want to better the show. "Look at the research. Talk
to preventionists and researchers in the field," survivor and mental health advocate Alyse Ruriani says. "Learn from people with lived experience. And then listen to them; don't ignore it because you don't like the answer or think that your vision is above it. Instead, find ways to express your artistic vision without compromising on the guidelines set forth on best practices, because they are there for a reason."

Additionally, Ashley hopes the series does more to discuss mental health. "If [they're] going to do a second season, the thing I hope they do and I would personally do is use that second season to go back and point out all the signs of Hannah’s mental illness," she explains. A suicide attempt, Ashley says, isn't an isolated incident, and digging into Hannah's issues with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression could go a long way.

Ruriani also hopes the series' producers will reconsider how they advertise it to viewers. "One of the things that bothered me the most about 13 Reasons Why wasn't even in the show, it was the way they used Hannah's suicide as an advertising gimmick, baiting the audience to guess 'who killed her' is extremely inappropriate," she says. "Having her reappear over and over makes the impact of the fact that she is dead get lost. When you die by suicide there is no coming back. You don't get to hear the apologies and the things people wish they said when you were alive. You're gone."

If you or someone you know was trigged by 13 Reasons Why, you can check out this list of resources for getting help. If you need immediate assistance, you can call the Trevor Project's 24/7 Trevor Lifeline at 1-866-488-7386 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

Related: Where to Find Help If You Are Triggered by 13 Reasons Why

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