

Dear Stephen Lewis Secondary School families,

Recently, our school experienced the loss of a member of our community, which can affect students and leave them feeling vulnerable and experiencing difficult emotions. At Stephen Lewis Secondary School, we are continuing to support our students and staff as they work through this difficult time. Exposure to dramatic and difficult television and media content can also cause students to experience heightened emotions. A recent example of this type of media would be season two of the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* which became available on May 18, 2018. It explores several difficult topics including bullying, struggles with identity, sexual assault, gun violence, self-harm/cutting which may be emotionally upsetting for students.

Although the creators of the series indicate the intent of the show is to help students recognize how their actions affect others, it does not focus on seeking help and does not present viable alternatives to suicide. There are negative portrayals of the character's interactions with adults while attempting to seek help within the series. This is not a helpful message for youth, and it is not consistent with the activities at our school which aim to encourage use of resources and having helpful conversations about mental health.

Given this may be a more vulnerable time for your child, we want to make sure that you have information about this particular television series so that you can make an informed decision about the series and have resources and information to support your child if needed.

Series like *13 Reasons Why* may promote myths and misinformation about suicide. We hope the information in this letter will help you have open conversations with your child. Discussing important but difficult topics with your child lets them know you are open to talking about these subjects. This may make it more likely they will talk to you if they have any concerns/challenges. If young people do not feel they can talk to adults about these subjects, they are likely to seek advice on the Internet or from friends, or worse they may not talk to anyone.

You may wish to ask your child if they have heard of or seen this series. If your child has not already watched the series but would like to, review it first yourself. Consider watching it together rather than having your child watch it alone. This will help you to know how your child is affected by the content. While many students know the difference between a TV drama and real life, talking with adults about this subject is very important. Adults can help share the message that help is available. You can help your child process their feelings and answer questions about the issues in the series. This is particularly important if you feel your child is isolated, struggling or vulnerable.

The following suggestions may help with the conversation:

- Share that it is normal to experience periods of stress and distress. Offer healthy coping strategies, such as exercise, art, journaling, talking to friends and adults they trust.
- Let them know that there are adults at school who care and can help.
- Talk about where to seek support if they need it from family members, counsellors, coaches, teachers, faith leaders, a crisis line like Kids Help Phone - 1-800-668-6868.
- Talk openly about emotional distress and suicide. Doing so in a fact-based manner does not increase suicide risk.

- If you have concerns about your child's mental health, see your family physician and/or share your concerns with the school.
- If the concern is more urgent, you may call York Region's Crisis Response Service, 1-855-310-COPE (2673), the Mental Health Helpline 1-866-531-2600, or take your child to a hospital emergency department. If there is an emergency, call 911.
- Remind them that the series is fictional.

If you do not want your child to watch this show, Netflix has some resources to help parents. They offer a parental control you can apply individually to this series in the form of a PIN number. You can assign a unique code for both seasons of *13 Reasons Why*. You can set this in the account section of your Netflix account.

As family members it can be difficult to know if a loved one is struggling with thoughts of suicide. The information below offers several important considerations.

Possible signs someone may be having thoughts of suicide:

- Suicide threats, both direct ("I am going to kill myself." "I need life to stop."), and indirect ("I need it to stop." "I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up."). Threats can be verbal or written and are often found in online postings (Instagram, Facebook)
- Preoccupation with death in conversation, writing, drawing and social media
- Changes in behaviour, appearance/hygiene, sleep habits, thoughts and/or feelings. This can include someone who is typically sad who suddenly becomes extremely happy.
- Emotional distress
- Withdrawing from friends and family

Trust yourself as a parent/guardian. If you feel something is not right with your child or notice any of the signs above, do not hesitate to ask directly about thoughts of suicide. This may be a tough conversation to have, however it sends a message that you are open to talking about suicide and increases the chances your child will seek help.

Help is Available:

If you have concerns about your child's mental health or need additional resources, please talk to your family doctor and/or share your concerns with the school. Our staff members are committed to supporting the well-being of every YRDSB learner and can suggest resources for support.

To learn more about safely talking about mental find out more at www.MentalHealthHelpline.ca. For further resources about the Netflix series visit: www.13reasonswhytoolkit.org .

Sincerely,

Ken Shigeishi
Principal

Debbie Ziegler, Patrick Belmonte
Vice-Principals

