

Somerset Public Schools

Somerset Berkley Regional School District

All Students Achieving Excellence

May 3, 2017

Dear Families,

On May 2, the Somerset Public Schools and Somerset Berkley Regional School District hosted Dr. Nadja Reilly, a clinical psychologist, lecturer at Harvard Medical School, Associate Director of the Freedman Center for Child and Family Development at William James College, and author of *Anxiety and Depression in the Classroom*. Dr. Reilly discussed student stress, anxiety, and depression and ways to promote social-emotional wellness in students to foster self-regulation, reduce anxiety and avoid negative outcomes in order to produce the greatest social, emotional, and academic-based results. Through our Parent Academy series this year, we have invited various speakers to talk with parents about the social and emotional needs of our students. I took this opportunity to ask Dr. Reilly about the latest viral television series, Netflix's *13 Reasons Why*.

If you are unfamiliar with *13 Reasons Why*, the show is based on a 2007 young adult novel by Jay Asher and explores the topic of teen suicide. Hannah Baker, the story's main character, commits suicide and leaves behind thirteen audio tapes, each one containing a message to an individual she considered to have contributed to her suicide. Besides a graphic depiction of suicide, the series also contains scenes of sexual assault and rape and topics including depression, rejection, alcoholism, bullying, and unsuccessful attempts to find help.

Dr. Reilly shared with us important resources for families, such as those found at the [National Association of School Psychologists](#) (NASP). NASP has created an advisory message for educators and parents, including the following cautions:

We do not recommend that vulnerable youth, especially those who have any degree of suicidal ideation, watch this series. Its powerful storytelling may lead impressionable viewers to romanticize the choices made by the characters and/or develop revenge fantasies. They may easily identify with the experiences portrayed and recognize both the intentional and unintentional effects on the central character. Unfortunately, adult characters in the show, including the second school counselor who inadequately addresses Hannah's pleas for help, do not inspire a sense of trust or ability to help. Hannah's parents are also unaware of the events that lead her suicide death.

While many youth are resilient and capable of differentiating between a TV drama and real life, engaging in thoughtful conversations with them about the show is vital. Doing so presents an opportunity to help them process the issues addressed, consider the consequences of certain choices, and reinforce the message that suicide is not a solution to problems and that help is available. This is particularly important for adolescents who are isolated, struggling, or vulnerable to suggestive images and storylines. 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.

What the series does accurately convey is that there is no single cause of suicide. Indeed, there are likely as many different pathways to suicide as there are suicide deaths. However, the series does not emphasize that common among most suicide deaths is the presence of treatable mental illnesses. Suicide is not the simple

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Superintendent Jeffrey Schoonover

Somerset Berkley Regional High School · Somerset Middle School · North Elementary School · South Elementary School · Chace Street School

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consequence of stressors or coping challenges, but rather, it is most typically a combined result of treatable mental illnesses and overwhelming or intolerable stressors.

Resources for Families:

The complete advisory message cited above from NASP can be found [here](#).

[Riverside Trauma Center](#)

- [What Parents Should Know About *13 Reasons Why*](#)
- [Riverside Trauma Center Resources](#)

[JED Foundation](#)

- [Netflix *13 Reasons Why*: What Viewers Should Consider](#)
- [13 Reasons Why: Talking Points](#)

It is critically important for the schools and families to work together on topics such as this. This letter and the above resources provided by Dr. Reilly are intended to provide awareness and information on how to engage in conversations with your children. Dr. Reilly suggested checking with your children to determine if they have seen the show. If so, please consider having conversations with them about the challenging and difficult issues presented in the show.

Sincerely,

Jeff Schoonover