

Ten Ways to Counter *13 Reasons Why*

By Julie Krakora

It was a Sunday evening in January and the lesson of the day with 8th graders is on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I used something I have done many times before and which has been effective, a 'choose a corner' activity.

The scenario: You've noticed that someone you care about (guy or girl) has changed their behavior. They've stopped eating as much as they used, don't seem happy, and confide that they don't care about anything in life. While your friend is always on the dramatic side, you both know these are signs for depression and possible suicidal behavior. They ask you not to say anything, especially to an adult. What do you do?

- a) Talk to your friend and see what is really wrong and promise not to tell.
- b) Talk to your friend, but then also tell them you are going to talk to the school counselor.
- c) Don't worry too much. With your friend's dramatic response, they'll eventually handle it all on their own. You don't think your friend would follow through on anything they are saying.
- d) Talk to your friend and then betray them and go talk to an adult anyway.

The teens' response: "NO WAY would I go to an authority or someone at school..." Trust for this particular group of teens and their particular school had been eliminated, but neither did many of them want to go to a parent. They wanted to deal with it on their own.

Fast-forward a few months to my discovery from a few parents asking me if I had heard of, or watched a new show trending on Netflix called *13 Reasons Why*. I had only seen promos but not the series, so my research into the show began. What I have learned explains what I saw from our teens in January – which only partly is a lack of trust in adults. The series has generated prolific conversation among counselors, school, coaches, and ministers for multiple reasons.

If you aren't aware of the show, or the book of the same name, here is a synopsis. *13 Reasons Why* follows the story of Hannah, a high school student who commits suicide and leaves behind 13 cassette tapes talking to a person who she ultimately places blame for her taking her life. At the end of each tape, her voice is heard saying, "If you are listening to this, then you killed me."

A series following a teen and her rationale for suicide is harmful in and of itself. Its themes are cause for concern and show a need for us to embrace compassionate wisdom. What makes this show even more disturbing is the apparent graphic depictions of sexual assault, rape, bullying, drugs, underage drinking, extreme dissatisfaction with physical appearance, and Hannah's actual suicide. Throughout the series it paints a picture of blame that includes the inference that counselors are inept and parents are unavailable. No healthy options are considered anywhere in this show. The blame factor of making such a painful and drastic choice to end one's life is also harsh and unhealthy. Those left behind then are forced to deal with what they may have done wrong, which while it may reveal the necessity for self-evaluation, can also cause deep harm and more trauma.

Popular presenter Roy Pettifils, <http://www.roypetitfils.com> gave a recent Facebook Live presentation about what makes this show so triggering. He mentioned the psychological concept called "picture superiority effect." He said, "A video puts this on steroids...concepts become so visual with auditory that it makes it more impactful. Viewers then might over-identify with the characters, beliefs, ideals, and values. It's why teens connect so much better [to video/graphic things] but this can also cause more triggering points!"

Research has already proven that media is the lens by which teens are best reached. We use this in ministry to make points and engage them differently. A show on themes of such traumatic levels is unsettling, most especially for minds emotionally unstable due to their psychological stage in life, as many are truly unable to handle what is being imprinted upon them. Roy said it this way: "For any teen, ones who are even more resilient in their personality and can cope and deal with difficult life events, watching graphic moments that trigger deep emotions is still hard. For those adolescents who don't have strong coping skills, the triggering nature of this content can be harmful." In short, Roy believes video delivery of such material will affect those who are already extra vulnerable and weak, especially many adolescents already contemplating suicide, and having any one of the scenarios of trauma presented, could then be

triggering.

You don't need to watch "13 Reasons Why" to understand the impact of the show. The collective wisdom of many professionals speak to how harmful this show is to our teen's precious young souls. We as ministers in the Church do need to be aware and know how to respond first to the content and ramifications of the show, and then know how to be more aware of this in our ministries.

I encourage you to read any one of these links to read more details about the show and see talking points about how to include the show in conversation (more specifically with high school teens.)

Resources:

<http://lifeteen.com/blog/watch-13-reasons/>

<https://www.weareteachers.com/discussion-questions-13-reasons-why/>

nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/13-reasons-why-netflix-series-considerations-for-educators

scientificamerican.com/article/13-reasons-why-and-suicide-contagion1

Roy talking to teens about the show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWZZqxjLm0Q> (20 min)

<http://www.roypetitfilms.com/understanding-teenagers-podcast/> Look for **052: Religion As A Coping Resource For Teens**

Is it possible that the show impacted teens in Naperville? Recently students at Naperville North High School gathered over 2,000 signatures on a petition on Change.org. The point? To express their concern, to administration for the "Naperville North way" for why "this keeps happening." The 'this' they refer to is yet another suicide. Our youth have a target on their back to be the best. Their parents have the same target. Both for similar yet different reasons. The question then, is how do we respond to the reality of a pressure-filled society leading to more suicides at younger ages, and anxiety disorders on the rise across the county? How do we teach about something unseen and future-oriented (heaven) in an age dominated by **instant gratification**? This is partially what pushes teens to seek a quick— albeit deadly — fix for problems and turn away from a God who doesn't answer their prayers in an immediate fashion or in the way they ask.

I reached out to a high school friend, Sue English, MSW, LCSW, CADC, a counselor at Timberline Knolls, a residential treatment center for women with eating disorders, addictions, mood disorders, and trauma. Our conversation centered around what she does and sees as a counselor to help in trauma cases, including suicide ideation and suicide attempts. My goal was to turn her language into our faith language. We are all called to be a life witness/mentor in our ways of faith, and this most certainly includes how we teach, preach, and share the rationale for why following Jesus Christ and practicing Catholicism is not only a great gift, but can too be a tool in life.

Sue spoke about using strength-based theory as part of counseling, that they start with a something intrinsically good and strong within a client and build upon this to lead them to the ultimate goal of healing. For some people this will be their spirituality. In fact, there are four parts to their intake form to understand the nature of the trauma and how to heal; the fourth one is spiritual – needing to know about a basis for hope as tool! She also shared a counseling technique called DBT – Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. It consists of 4 steps and looked at from a different angle, these are ministry tools.

1. **Mindfulness:** be present to the moment
2. **Emotional Regulation:** when emotions are getting out of control, be aware of body sensations, start to think when emotions are revved, what can I do to regulate myself rather do something harmful?
3. **Distress Tolerance:** when feeling stressed, how do you de-stress? Focus on the five senses which includes breathing techniques, using tactile objects or even essential oils to calm down.

- 4. Interpersonal Effectiveness:** when feeling left out/depressed, relationships are vital to healing. Similarly, unhealthy relationship can push someone over edge. How do I effectively speak my needs?

10 ways to counter “13 Reasons”

Gift of Wonder and Awe – aka Mindfulness. How do we effectively teach our youth how to have a prayer life and a personal spirituality that allows them to find God in all things, or at least connect to God and have a relationship that is personal in some small way? If we are effective in our catechesis to form disciples in the way of Jesus Christ, this gift of God’s love, wonder and awe in everything, will then color the rest of their lives. How effective are we as ministers to offer multiple styles of prayer opportunities so that students/teens gravitate to one that most touches their soul?

Gift of Reverence – The topics of “13 Reasons Why” all revolve around a lack of respect, or reverence, for one’s own life and also another’s. Utilizing a resource such as “Theology of the Body,” which is more than just a lesson on chastity, can be helpful to teach students to truly care for themselves. If one truly cares from themselves, then emotional regulation will be more likely because a person is aware of their inner needs and has value in God first. Then, the societal attack may not be as harmful.

Gift of Courage - What is our distress tolerance? There is a massive epidemic in our society of complete and total disconnect from ourselves and each other. We have a responsibility for “love of neighbor and love of self”; of putting the parable of the Good Samaritan into action on a daily basis. Teaching students to be counter cultural, a result of living their faith in the world, means that they will value the gift of life at ALL times. They won’t be afraid to do what is right and will hopefully be aware when one of their peers’ has reached their limit and have the courage to kindly and calmly do something small to alleviate the pressure of the moment. Asking constantly for real-life examples from teens to connect with the topic at hand, or knowing which ones to use to get them talking, can close this gap of disconnect between life and faith. We need to overabundantly and loudly preach their intrinsic value in God’s eyes. One of them might actually be listening that day!

Gift of Wisdom in Small Group Sharing – What is effective in counseling, need to focus on interpersonal relationships, is effective for us! Youth Ministers understand well that in a small group teens may be more willing to share and be honest. Smaller groups accentuate each teen’s persona so that while it may be uncomfortable for some, true colors can also be noted. DRE’s can share with catechists that even in a larger classroom setting, to be aware of the student who never answers, keeps their head down, or always seeks attention is helpful and to keep notes of these students. For either setting, checking in with the youth, and then possibly the parent could be helpful to open doors for needed communication.

Paschal Mystery – This is part two of interpersonal relationships. Broken, blessed and shared our lives and witness should resemble the depth of this mystery. Our relationship with Jesus is a compass that guides our everyday lives and how we make it through a crisis time. The Paschal Mystery isn’t a onetime event. We have to teach the truth of this and then extrapolate out to the common day connection in honest sharing. Catechists and ministers who are willing to be vulnerable in life, aware of healthy boundaries, open the door for students to be real. While this is easier in youth group settings, it’s effective in story telling among catechists when a story relates the topic at hand. Youth seek authenticity from others, even if they can’t yet do it for themselves.

Gift of Right Judgement – Original Sin exists and the complicated stories of the Old Testament show us that we come from a flawed line of believers who made many mistakes and yet were found by God and chose a different route even after they disobeyed. Teaching about Sacred Scripture in light of current day events is a necessity. And, we need to positively invite students into the gifts of the Catholic faith, be it our healing sacraments or the reality of free will. We are responsible for our choices and can make better choices. Blame isn’t helpful. Ownership of choices, and feelings, are needed to survive and thrive as a healthy person. This applies to the person who bullies and the one struggling with seeing value to their life. The more real life sceneries we can offer, age appropriate of course, asking them to apply their faith,

will develop their sense of right judgement with the trying time comes.

Gift of Knowledge – Teach our adolescents not only the facts about God and our faith, but how to personalize this and use them beyond the words in a textbook. Youth ministry does not belong only to those titled with the role of youth minister, it belongs to each person working with a youth.

Gift of Understanding – Active Listening is the goal, even in a classroom setting students may say things that if tuned into can reveal so much more and can lead to transforming or even saving a life in the future. During prayer time, make it a practice to have your students or teens share intentions. I have heard all too often, even in 6th grade RE classes: “For my friend who is considering suicide. Or, for someone I know who committed suicide.”

Fruits of Patience & Long-Suffering: When all else seems to fail, speaking what is yet unknown might seem futile to an adolescent. However, we prepare them to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation and the fruits of the Holy Spirit can be leaned upon for the times when life just isn’t right. After my friend and I spoke she texted a thought that perfectly matched this. As adults, we may all have read “Man’s Search for Meaning”. As she is called to bring light to souls in darkness, her strength to be a beacon of hope and healing remains. She witnesses the theme of the book to these suffering souls, that everything can be taken from a person, except for their will and their faith. Those we send our teens to for counseling need prayers of patience, as much as we do trying to teach what doesn’t make sense: walking by faith and not by sight. Watching two 6th graders share their journey with a family member with cancer could crush their spirit, and yet watching their sorrow and presence to show up to class offered the opportunity for them to teach their peers each week. Patience in God’s love along the road of what doesn’t make sense of doesn’t end – long suffering.

I want to conclude with what may have been my favorite moment of this year. It was a rare day when tornado sirens blared and thus students at the second RE session were scarce. I was subbing for the 6th grade class. Our conversation was about Lent and I used John Angotti’s song “Return To God” as the opening prayer and teaching point. Somehow our conversation became amazingly real as these 6th graders talked about anxieties, fears, dreams – including real ones with interesting images – and even how many in this small group had some experience with friends considering suicide and helped stopped them. Aware of the time and the “feel” in the room, I heard the Holy Spirit tell me what to do.

I walked the group to the chapel and led them in an impromptu meditation. I don’t remember every word said but I remember well the ending and how powerful that special hour was for all of us present. Prayer changes us. I know what the students shared about dreams and images and I saw the “in awe faces” of especially two 6th grade boys when I brought them back to the classroom. One had a smile on his face and he told me he felt Jesus hug him “like this” as he imitated exactly what I had done with eyes closed leading the prayer, The other boy’s mother called the following day and in happy tears thanking me for giving her son a spiritual moment that will affect him the rest of his life and proceeded to share his story. This was God’s doing, not mine. But, it was a gift for me in many ways! It was a time to be real in a moment when depth, fear, and faith could meet.

Yet isn’t this what we are called to do, to the best of our ability, all the time? God and our Catholic faith are our most powerful tools. No matter the lesson, we need to counter the reality of a TV series that glorifies pain and harmful ways of living, and doesn’t offer hope or speak of God. As we make sure to be aware of the reality of media and events affecting our youth, and keep at hand resources to help families in crisis, let us be strengthened in all we are called to be: a witness of preaching the Gospel with our life so that we plant seeds of hope to maybe save lives both physically and spiritually!

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