

Causes and effects of adolescent suicide: thirteen reasons why



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In society, many problems are often ignored and stigmatized. Among these are suicide and mental health issues. These dilemmas have become more common to talk about in recent years; however, society as a whole still has a long way to go in understanding these complicated occurrences. Because of this, it is surprising to many that suicide is the third leading cause of death among people aged 10-24 (Pytash). In the popular young adult novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*, a girl named Hannah Baker leaves behind thirteen audio tapes before she commits suicide, with each tape addressed to a specific person and explaining how that individual played a role in her death. The book focuses heavily on why she took her own life, with some of the main reasons being bullying, harassment, and self-hate. It also shows how people are affected by suicide, through the point of view of a boy named Clay Jensen, who had a crush on Hannah and received a tape. *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher brings many issues to light and guides the reader through the causes and effects of suicide. It exemplifies how seemingly harmless situations can spiral out of control and lead to someone's death. All of these issues are extremely relevant and common in today's society, yet exceedingly underestimated.

The cause of suicide is often unclear and debatable. It is a tragic event that leaves friends, family, and the community in shock and disbelief. The definite answer to the question of " why" may never be answered, however, there are many known factors based on research that could cause one to contemplate suicide. According to the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, the leading contributing factors in general terms are depression, conflict with parents, relationship problems, and substance abuse (Sinyor). In the novel,

Hannah Baker was harassed by a “ peeping Tom” named Tyler Down. She suspected that he was spying on her bedroom, and set up an elaborate plan to catch him (Asher 59). This clear invasion of privacy made Hannah feel as if her one safe haven was violated beyond her control. Tyler’s perverted actions started the trend of Hannah’s feelings of objectification, which was ultimately a factor in her taking her own life. It most likely never occurred to him that his harassment would lead to her death. Although Hannah speaks out against harassment in the tapes, the circulation of this story actually led to humiliation and bullying for Tyler and many others mentioned on the tapes. Whether this was justified or not is up to the reader and their moral compass.

A major cause of suicide both in real life and in the novel is inaction. It is a very hard occurrence to monitor, but very deadly. Many people, such as friends, family members, teachers, and other adults, aren’t sure how to spot the signs of an at-risk person. Because it is often very difficult for a suicidal person to reach out for help, people in positions of authority must be vigilant for warning signs. On the last cassette tape, it is revealed that Hannah tried to reach out to her guidance counselor and English teacher, Mr. Porter. She recorded the audio of their entire conversation to include in the tapes, and stated, “ The only thing standing between you and this collection of audiotapes is: Mr. Porter,” (Asher 143). During their taped conversation, Hannah was extremely vague. She frequently dropped hints that she was suicidal, but Mr. Porter did not pick up on them. He told her that moving on from things that hurt her in the past may be her best option, which was not what she wanted to hear. She wanted someone to give her viable advice on

how to overcome pain. He let her leave the room when she showed troubling signs of self-loathing, which was a huge mistake (Asher 151). This single conversation made Hannah feel as if there was no way out of her struggles, and that no one cared. This was obviously far from the truth, but in her state of mind, it was accurate. This happens frequently in the real world as well. In a study included in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, it was found that when preservice teachers read *Thirteen Reasons Why*, “ they recognized how the adults in the story did not support the adolescent characters; this realization provided an almost ‘ trial-error experimentation’ when PSTs considered how they might react in similar situations,” (Potash). Learning from the mistakes made by characters in Asher’s novel is critical to saving the life of struggling students in the future.

Yet another major factor that often causes young people to consider suicide is mental illness, especially depression. Depression does not always lead to suicide, but it does increase the risk. According to the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, depression is the leading risk factor in adolescents. In their study, 38 out of 74 youth suicide deaths were attributed to depression (Sinyor). These statistics are exemplified by the tragic case of Madison Holleran. Madison was a beautiful and intelligent 19-year-old Ivy League track star who committed suicide at University of Pennsylvania in 2014. Although everything seemed to be going right in her life, she battled depression due to the pressure she put on herself to be perfect. In a feature article from ESPN on her story, it was stated that:

Madison was beautiful, talented, successful — very nearly the epitome of what every young girl is supposed to hope she becomes. But she was also a <https://assignbuster.com/causes-and-effects-of-adolescent-suicide-thirteen-reasons-why/>

perfectionist who struggled when she performed poorly. She was a deep thinker, someone who was aware of the image she presented to the world, and someone who often struggled with what that image conveyed about her, with how people superficially read who she was, what her life was like (Fagan).

The struggles that Madison faced are similar to how Hannah felt. Many people believed that because she was beautiful and seemed to live a good lifestyle, she had no problems. Even though Madison did reach out for help and started seeing a therapist, it wasn't enough. When Hannah reached out to her guidance counselor, she still felt helpless. This hopelessness and depression is a major cause of suicide.

Suicide often leaves people in shock and disbelief, and can have long term effects on the people left behind. There is often confusion, as people wonder why things played out the way they did. It is often wondered if anything could have been done to prevent this tragic occurrence. Because of this, guilt is a very common effect of suicide. In the novel, the guilt that some people on the tapes felt after Hannah's death continued to haunt them. It is foreshadowed that it will affect them greatly in the future. As Tony, the boy in charge of circulating the tapes, stated to Clay, " We're all to blame, at least a little," (Asher 124). Hannah put this guilt on them purposely because she wanted them to feel responsible for her death and not make the same mistakes again. According to the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy's study on preservice teachers and young adult novels, "...reasons for reading *Thirteen Reasons Why*...were based on prior life experiences; they were searching for answers. Of the 22 PSTs, 10 knew either a friend or a <https://assignbuster.com/causes-and-effects-of-adolescent-suicide-thirteen-reasons-why/>

classmate who committed suicide; one student related that a friend's father committed suicide. PSTs hoped that through reading they would begin to understand why the persons they knew chose to commit suicide. Corinne said, ' I wanted to have a better understanding of his thoughts.' Similarly, Shayla, whose high school classmate committed suicide, stated, ' I often wondered why and what caused him to kill himself,'" (Pytash). Based on these statements alone, it is inferred that people who knew someone who committed suicide are extremely likely to carry guilt for the rest of their lives. They will wonder why the person did it and if there was anything they could've done to stop them. This can lead to other serious problems down the road. Traumatic events have the ability to change the way people think and act. Hannah Baker's suicide caused some people to rethink every interaction they had with her, and be kinder to other people. This is especially apparent in the case of Clay Jensen. He wanted to get to know Hannah, but the rumors that were spread about her deterred him from doing so (Asher 15). After her suicide, he regrets not reaching out to her. Soon after, he changes how he interacts with people. When he notices his middle school crush in the hallway, instead of ignoring her like he usually does, he acknowledges her. He says, " But Skye's walking down the same stretch of hall where I watched Hannah slip away two weeks ago. On that day, Hannah disappeared into a crowd of students, allowing the tapes to say her goodbye. But I can still hear the footsteps of Skye Miller, sounding weaker and weaker the further she gets. And I start walking, toward her. Two steps behind her, I say her name." (Asher 156). Clay never would have done this in the past, which is a clear indicator that Hannah's suicide changed him. He is now more empathetic towards others' struggles, and can sense when someone needs a <https://assignbuster.com/causes-and-effects-of-adolescent-suicide-thirteen-reasons-why/>

friend. These are all effects of the traumatic incident he endured through the tapes.

Presenting a contrast to Clay, some people who receive the tapes are not affected by them. They feel no guilt or remorse, and do not make any major changes in their life. This reaction is best exemplified by the character Marcus Cooley. Marcus is included on the tapes because he tried to take advantage of Hannah during their first date (Asher 75). This caused Hannah to start doubting her decision making skills, and really accelerated her downward spiral. When he crosses paths with Clay at Tyler Down's house after listening to the tapes, he voices that he feels no sorrow for Hannah's death. In response to Clay asking what he thinks, he says, " Nothing. It's ridiculous, I don't belong on those tapes. Hannah just wanted an excuse to kill herself," (Asher 110). These harsh and uncalled for statements reveal that sometimes, people feel no guilt. Perhaps this is a coping mechanism for people who, deep down, know they did something wrong. No matter what, some people are so unsympathetic that they will never see the error of their ways. This makes the vicious cycle of harassment continue. People can have polar opposite reactions to the same situation, which can lead to two totally different outcomes.

There is one cause of adolescent suicide that stands out among the rest. Above all, it is the most preventable. This cause is bullying. Approximately 3.2 million children in grades 6-10 get bullied annually, with even more cases going unreported (Pytash). There are two different types of bullying: direct and indirect. In the novel, Hannah Baker references how she was bullied by a group of boys when an inappropriate list including her name was circulated <https://assignbuster.com/causes-and-effects-of-adolescent-suicide-thirteen-reasons-why/>

around school. This is classified as direct bullying. It all started when Alex Standall created a “hot or not” type list and included her name on it (Asher 19). This led to jealousy, sexual harassment, and bullying for Hannah. Her self-confidence and self-worth gradually decreased as a result. This is a perfect example of how a “joke” can spiral out of control. In a study done by psychiatrists in Toronto, it was found that bullying was the only cause of suicide in 6.4% of their cases (Sinyor). Although this may seem like a small percentage, it shows the profound impact that bullying can have on one’s mental health

The next type of bullying is indirect bullying. It is often less obvious than direct bullying. For example, in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah is often excluded and used for the benefit of others. This is hard to recognize from the outside looking in, however, it has detrimental effects on the person being targeted. After reading the novel, preservice teachers realized that, “It is bullying when Courtney Crimson used Hannah for a ride to the party and then spreads rumors about her,” (Pytash). Another example of indirect bullying is when Zach Dempsey stole Hannah’s kind notes out of her Peer Communications class box. On the tapes, she responded to this by saying, “It might not seem like a big deal to you, Zach. But now, I hope you understand. I needed those notes. I needed any hope those notes might have offered,” (Asher 87). His actions made Hannah feel completely worthless, and even more attacked. Just like in this situation, bullying is often a sly action, not necessarily a physical altercation. Bullying can have a profound effect on young people, especially if they already have other stressors in their life. Hannah struggled with many stressors in addition to bullying, which

is very similar to what many adolescents deal with in real life. According to the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, “vulnerability to stress and stress factors mix together to create a ‘risk factor’ in young people that leaves them susceptible to depression and suicidal thoughts,” (Breton). The additional stress of being bullied can certainly push people that are considered “atrisk” over the edge. That is what happened to Hannah; she began to view herself as worthless only after others treated her that way. No matter how many people tried to support her, her thoughts always came back to the people who did not.

Thirteen Reasons Why has definitely had a colossal effect on how young people and adults alike think about suicide. Being told a story from such a personal perspective definitely hit home for a lot of people. A review of the novel by Kristine Pytash certainly backs up this statement. Pytash, who is an assistant psychology professor at Kent University, believes that talking about these sensitive topics through literature is the best way to start a difficult discussion. She states, “Young adult literature focused on issues considered sensitive, taboo, or provocative, such as bullying and suicide, may offer powerful reading experiences; however, it is necessary to offer a time and a safe place for readers to talk about these issues. Readers will need opportunities to express their experiences with the texts and how these experiences influence their current understandings of the text. These conversations can happen through literature circles or voluntary book clubs,” (Pytash). Asher’s representation of teens struggling through personal issues has become a tool for people, adults in particular, to learn how to prevent and detect problems before they get out of control.

Although the issues mentioned are definitely hard to discuss and deal with, the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* shows the major causes and effects of suicide. It exemplifies how seemingly simple situations can lead to a drastic outcome. The matters discussed in the book are ones that young people face daily. Based on the book and research, the causes of suicide are versatile and include harassment, inaction by family/friends/authorities, and depression. The effects are definitely more concrete, and include guilt, lifestyle changes, and denial. Bullying is an overarching cause of suicide in general, since it can lead to the other causes. The reasoning behind suicide and the aftermath are very different but can stem from the same place. Suicide, especially among adolescents, is a daunting issue that most likely will never be completely figured out. It is up to everyone to be vigilant about the warning signs and possible causes, to ensure that no one has to endure the effects.

Works Cited

Asher, Jay. *Thirteen Reasons Why*. New York: Random House, 2007. Print.

Breton, Jean-Jacques, et al. "Protective Factors Against Depression And Suicidal Behaviour In

Adolescence." *Canadian Journal Of Psychiatry* 60.(2015): S5-S15. Academic Search

Premier. Web. 22 May 2015.

Fagan, Kate. "Split Image." ESPN. ESPN, 7 May 2015. Web. 22 May 2015.

<https://assignbuster.com/causes-and-effects-of-adolescent-suicide-thirteen-reasons-why/>

Pytash, Kristine E. " Using YA Literature To Help Preservice Teachers Deal With Bullying And

Suicide." *Journal Of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 56. 6 (2013): 470-479. ERIC. Web. 22

May 2015.

Sinyor, Mark, Ayal Schaffer, and Amy H. Cheung. " An Observational Study Of Bullying As A

Contributing Factor In Youth Suicide In Toronto." *Canadian Journal Of Psychiatry*

59. 12

(2014): 632-638. Academic Search Premier. Web. 22 May 2015.