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Family Sunshine Center addresses '13 Reasons Why' controversy

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By Kacey Drescher, Reporter / Anchor CONNECT

MONTGOMERY CO., AL (WSFA) - It's a taboo topic that's often swept under the rug, but the new Netflix series "13 Reasons Why" has started a discussion about suicide that's raising some concerns. As millions tune in around the world, a Montgomery group has seen an uptick in requests for suicide prevention training since the popular show debuted.

According to Variety, it's the most tweeted about show of 2017.

"Netflix hit all the right notes in terms of its show content, show demographic with the understanding that it would do extremely well on social media because that's where the conversation is taking place," said Rich Hanley, Associate Professor of Journalism at Quinnipiac.

But some mental health professionals say the conversation surrounding "13 Reasons Why" is romanticizing suicide.

"We know that young people like to mimic other young people, glamorizing it, making it ok, almost being a hero or heroine after the fact," said Jennifer Hartley, Suicide Prevention Coordinator at Montgomery's Family Sunshine Center.

Hartley says the Netflix hit about a teen trying to unravel the reason his classmate ended her life could be a trigger.

"The suicide hotline numbers are ringing off the hook," Hartley confirmed. Some of those calls get routed to the Crisis Center in Birmingham.

"Anytime you're talking about suicide you want to be careful on how you're talking about it and making sure a message of hope if being presented," cautioned Abbey Litovsky with the Crisis Center.

Hartley just returned from a suicide awareness conference in Dallas this week where the show was a topic of discussion.

"There was a parent that was at the conference, actually a couple, whose 13-year-old daughter had gone in her bedroom and watched this movie alone and she did take her life a couple of days later. So it leaves so many unanswered questions for parents," Hartley explained.

As schools in Canada work to ban the show and Netflix adds trigger warning slides before sensitive episodes, experts urge parents to watch the show with their kids and, if in doubt, ask the 'S' question.

"A lot of people think if you asked the question you're planting it in someone's head, but evidence shows that once a person has been asked that is suicidal their anxiety levels lower tremendously and that secret is no longer with them anymore," Hartley said.

The Alabama Department of Public Health awarded the Family Sunshine Center a grant this year to expand their suicide prevention training. Hartley teaches what's called QDR training which stands for Question, Persuade, and Refer.

Training geared toward young people is scheduled to come this summer.

If you or someone you know needs help, you're urged to call The National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 1-800-273-TALK.

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