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Hopeful or harmful literature?
Teenage suicide as described in the YA novels
Thirteen Reasons Why, by Jay Asher, and
Looking for Alaska, by John Green

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Abstract

Young adult novels about suicide are questioned pieces of literature. Fears of suicide contagion and the perceived unsuitability of such narratives for adolescents lie at the centre of this conflict, which has resulted in the banning of books and other censorship moves. Suicide in literature has been the focus of relatively scarce previous research, and there is a need for further literary criticism. In this essay two such young adult novels, Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* and John Green's *Looking for Alaska*, are analysed and compared with a focus on how suicide is described in them and how teenage readers may respond to them. It is argued that most readers are likely to respond positively to the novels, despite the challenging theme of suicide, and that they are likely to interpret them as hopeful tales that can provide them with examples of the possibility of overcoming grief. Simultaneously, the fact that some readers may have difficulties coping with the theme of suicide is taken into consideration. The essay also deals with how literature can be viewed as a helpful tool for young people to create awareness and discussion about the growing problem of suicide.

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Introduction

Suicide in literature has been a controversial topic ever since the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *The Sufferings of Young Werther* in 1774. This bestselling novel was accused of causing a series of suicides among its readers, something that it is commonly associated with to this day (Battin 446; Thorson and Öberg 69). The novel was eventually used to name a phenomenon where publications about suicide cause imitations, called the "Werther effect" (Philips 341). Roughly 250 years after the publication of the book, suicide in fictional narratives is still being debated and questioned, especially when the stories focus on adolescent characters.

This kind of narrative seems to be a rising trend in young adult (YA) fiction, though. In 2017 the news site Vox.com published an article that stated that "a new kind of story is filling the niche in pop culture that YA dystopias used to occupy: the teen suicide story. Throughout this year, a new obsession has formed around books and TV shows like *13 Reasons Why*" (Grady). The statement was confirmed by a series of online searches that I undertook. Based on a list of young adult novels about suicide, depression and self-harm, published on Goodreads.com (Hoeve), I used the search engine Google to gather information about the plot and the publication date of each novel on the list. This effort revealed that at least 30 titles about teenage suicide have been published in English in the last five years, making it an important area for literary research.

In this essay, I will examine descriptions of suicide in young adult literature of the twenty-first century, focusing my analysis on the novels *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007), written by Jay Asher, and *Looking for Alaska* (2005), written by John Green. These two novels have been among the most disputed and banned books in the U.S.A, and they are consequently involved in an ongoing debate about the unsuitability and danger of aiming stories about suicide at adolescents. Some of the apprehensions revolve around the risk of imitation suicides and the potentially detrimental effects the stories may have on teenagers (Arensman et al.; "Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists"). By contrast, there are others who claim that fictional depictions of real problems may raise awareness about difficult topics and help young people cope with them (Doll and Doll 1, 6; Apseloff 238).

In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the young protagonist Clay Jensen receives a box containing seven audiotapes. The tapes were recorded by Hannah Baker, a girl in Clay's school, who recently committed suicide. The tapes are addressed and sent to the people that Hannah claims impacted her decision to kill herself and Clay is one of them. The novel is constructed in dual

narratives. One is centred on Clay as he struggles to comprehend the causes of Hannah's suicide and his role in it, and the other consists of Hannah's recordings, in which she describes the events leading to her death. One of the novel's most prominent themes is bullying and its impact on the mental health of the victim. John Green's novel *Looking for Alaska* also depicts the events leading up to and the aftermath of a possible adolescent suicide. This is seen from the perspective of the protagonist Miles Halter. He is an awkward and lonely teenage boy who goes off to boarding school in Alabama, where he makes new friends. Among them is a boy nicknamed the Colonel and a girl called Alaska Young. Alaska has a troubled past and when she dies, Miles and the Colonel try to discover if she killed herself and, in that case, why.

While research has been conducted on suicide depictions in the media within the fields of sociology and psychology, the effects of fictional narratives on the audience are less explored (Pirkis and Blood 160-161). Furthermore, depictions of suicide in YA fiction have not been extensively investigated in literary criticism. Kathryn James claims that the reason for the lack of scholarly research about death in children's books may be that the combination is "unsettling" (2). In an attempt to further the field, I will investigate how suicide is described in the two novels mentioned above and how teenage readers might respond to them. They are particularly suited for a comparative analysis, since they both deal with adolescent suicide from the perspective of a teenage boy, who is in love with the girl who dies. Furthermore, the novels were published only two years apart and have both been very successful, winning awards and reaching a large readership of young people.

I will argue that the novels, despite the sensitive topic of suicide, are likely to evoke feelings of hope in most readers as well an understanding of the effects of bullying and the difficulties of mental illness. However, there is a smaller vulnerable group for whom the reading of the suicide narratives may have harmful effects. As a basis for my research, I will use facts from several scientific studies about the "Werther effect" as well as media guidelines for suicide descriptions. These will be discussed in correlation with the novels in the first section. Subsequently, three different aspects of the novels will be examined, taking into account the response of teenage readers: first the causes and effects of the suicides, then the intimate relationship between life and death, and lastly hope.

The Werther Effect and Media Guidelines

The term "Werther effect" was coined by David P. Philips in 1974, when he proved that news articles about suicide can influence readers negatively. The study focused on fluctuations in

suicide rates after real suicides made front-page news in three large American newspapers and a British one. According to Philips, the suicide rates rose after the publications, proving that suicide suggestion is real. The more exposure a report received, the more it caused suicide rates to grow (Philips 340-341, 352). However, it has also been shown that stories about suicide may have a positive influence. When news articles only focus on suicidal thoughts or planning, without also describing attempts or actual deaths by suicide, the number of suicides may decrease (Niederkrötenhaler et al. 241). These two scientific studies highlight that the way a story is publicised, and the information it brings attention to, may influence how readers receive it.

Whereas the above-mentioned studies focused on non-fictional reporting, the effects of suicide depictions in fictional narratives are less certain. In 2001, Jane Pirkis and R. Warwick Blood published a review of previous studies that had investigated the connection between suicide in fiction and suicidal behaviour. The results of the different studies are varied, and the evidence gathered to corroborate a cause and effect-relationship between fictional media and actual suicides is not conclusive (160-161). When it comes to depictions of suicide in film and television, the evidence is ambiguous regarding the impact on suicidal behaviour. Some studies have been able to establish a link between the two, while others have not. One drawback, identified by Pirkis and Blood, is that several studies did not include investigations into whether or not the persons committing or attempting suicide had watched the TV episodes or films in question (158-159). This is certainly a pivotal point when the evidence is evaluated. Furthermore, the effects of watching a play about suicide were examined by Jackson and Potkay. One group of university students saw a play live, while another group of individuals watched it on TV. A third group listened to a radio production of the drama, while the rest of the participants were not exposed to it at all. The results showed no impact on any of the groups' potential for suicide (17).

Considering the fact that it was an eighteenth-century novel that inspired the "Werther effect", I find it remarkable that so little research seems to have been undertaken concerning the effects of suicide narratives on readers of literature. However, modern day scholars have tried to establish if Goethe's novel about Werther actually caused a suicide epidemic. The conclusion is that a few suicides may have occurred as a direct result of the novel, but there was no epidemic on a grand scale (Thorson and Öberg 71). Still, the fact that there were even a few deaths cannot be disregarded.

The question of whether novels about suicide are harmful or not is made poignant by the very real fact of adolescent suicide. This is probably why this is still such a debated topic. According to the World Health Organisation, suicide is in second place globally when it comes to causes of death among people between the ages of 15 and 29 (“Suicide Data.”). In this light, the fear of worsening the situation through fictitious narratives is understandable. Likewise, the possible positive outcomes of reading about difficult topics become all the more important. When reviewing the current research about the original “Werther effect” in the eighteenth century and the findings from the studies concerning the effects of fictional suicides mentioned above, it is evident that the results are ambiguous and as yet not clear enough to confirm that novels influence readers to kill themselves. Nevertheless, the controversies regarding *Looking for Alaska* and *Thirteen Reasons Why* are ongoing. The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) collects statistics about censorship in American schools and libraries every year. *Looking for Alaska* has appeared on the OIF list of the year’s most challenged and banned books four times, most recently in 2016. It was also the most challenged book in 2015. The novel earned its place on the list because it was deemed unsuitable for young readers. *Thirteen Reasons Why* first appeared on the list in 2012 and in 2017 it held the number one position following the release of a TV adaption of the novel by the streaming service Netflix. There were attempts to remove or restrict the novel as well as actual bans in several school districts because it deals with suicide. The book also appeared on the list in 2018 (“Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists.”).

The TV series *13 Reasons Why* became very successful but also sparked a debate about the dangers of aiming stories with such a sensitive topic as suicide at a teenage audience. The International Association for Suicide Prevention issued a statement where apprehensions about the show’s influence on young and/or suicidal viewers were presented. The criticism centred on the explicit images of Hannah’s suicide and what the association called the description of suicide as “a quasi-rational response to the behaviour of others” (Arensman et al). After the release of the first season, online searches concerning suicide grew to a level of around 20 percent higher than anticipated. The searches included phrases such as “how to kill yourself” and “commit suicide”. Simultaneously, however, Internet searches regarding helplines and suicide prevention also became more popular. From these circumstances, it is possible to discern that the TV series caused both positive and negative effects on viewers, something which the authors of the report commented on by stating that “*13 Reasons Why* elevated suicide awareness, but it is concerning that searches indicating suicidal ideation also rose” (Ayers et al.

1528). Furthermore, a subsequent study showed that the rate of suicide among children between the ages of 10 and 17 years actually did increase notably during the month after the show had aired (Bridge et al.).

Although these effects pertain to the televised drama, I believe that they may give an indication of readers' responses to Jay Asher's novel, which may affect some readers in the same way as the TV series affected some of its viewers. However, it is important to keep in mind that the screen adaptation of a novel often differs from its literary counterpart, making it difficult to draw direct conclusions from one to the other. In this case, the novel does not contain any detailed descriptions of the suicidal act, whereas this scene is drawn out over several minutes on screen. The cameras closely follow the gory details as Hannah slits her wrists and bleeds to death ("Tape 7, Side A."). This kind of detailed description of suicide is something that mental health professionals do not recommend since it is a risk factor for imitation (Arensman et al.). In general, I would also argue that TV is likely to have a stronger emotional impact on viewers when it comes to graphic scenes than a book describing the same event will have on readers. This is not only due to the direct, visual confrontation with frightening images but also because of the emotional amplification provided by the soundtrack.

Since there is a risk of imitation effects concerning suicide stories in the news media, several suicide prevention agencies and other organisations around the world have created media guidelines for how to report on suicide. One aim of the guidelines is to help media producers minimize the risk of copycat suicides. Similar guidelines also exist for fictional depictions of suicide in film and television (Conner and Rosen). Although these guidelines have not been specifically developed for literature, it is possible to use some of them to shed light on the novels in question in this essay. The reason for this is that the guidelines provide appropriate ways to report on, describe or depict suicide both in non-fictional media and in fictional narratives, and they are furthermore very similar for both fictional and non-fictional stories.

The media guidelines that are applicable to the novels in this essay will be described below. These are suitable ways to report on suicide: to describe how to handle stressful events in life and suicidal thoughts, to provide information about suicide and suicide prevention as well as where to find help, to show the influence on family and friends - without making suicide appear as a way to get attention from or revenge on others. On the other hand, there are also unsuitable ways to report on suicide, and they are as follows: to describe suicide in a sensational way or to make it appear as something normal, to romanticise the person who dies by suicide, to describe suicide as an appropriate problem solver, and to describe how the suicide was

performed in detail (World Health Organization and International Association for Suicide Prevention viii; Conner and Rosen 7-10).

Looking for Alaska does go against one of the guidelines of how not to describe suicide, as it outlines Alaska's death with some detail. A police officer tells Miles and the Colonel how the girl crashed her car into his police cruiser, without trying to slow down. He then goes on to describe what he saw when he looked into the car: "ah reached in there, thought if ah could git that steerin' wheel loose, but there weren't no gettin' her outta that car alive. It fairly well crushed her chest, see" (Green 195). This relatively detailed description could possibly have adverse effects on readers. However, one mitigating factor might be the fact that the death is not seen from the perspective of a first-person narrator, which makes it indirect and therefore perhaps not as influential. Furthermore, the novel aligns with several other guidelines for how to describe suicide. For one thing, the story provides the reader with information about the warning signs of suicide, which Alaska's friends failed to recognise prior to her death, and it is thereby educating the adolescent readers about suicide and giving them information that they can use in real life. Furthermore, the entire latter half of the novel is a description of the effects that Alaska's death has on her friends. This can be exemplified by the grief that Miles feels when he is riding in a friend's car to Alaska's funeral:

More than anything, I felt the unfairness of it, the inarguable injustice of loving someone who might have loved you back but can't due to deadness, and then I leaned forward, my forehead against the back of Takumi's headrest, and I cried, whimpering, and I didn't even feel sadness so much as pain. It hurt, and that is not a euphemism. It hurt like a beating. (181)

The descriptions of these effects are likely to make the reader sympathise with the people left behind after her death and not with the act of suicide. This kind of portrayal of the emotional impact of suicide on family and friends is also in accordance with the media guidelines.

Unlike Alaska's death, Hannah's suicide in *Thirteen Reasons Why* is, as stated previously, not described in detail. Clay briefly states, "Hannah took the pills" (Asher 11) without going into any further descriptions. Thereby, the story follows the media guidelines of not being too specific as to method of death, which makes the description unlikely to spark imitation among readers. The story also equips the reader with knowledge about some of the warning signs of suicide, such as when individuals change their appearance or give away personal items. This promotes a deeper understanding of suicide and raises the reader's awareness about the issue. In this sense, the novel follows the guidelines laid out for suicide portrayals.

Hannah's recorded story could be interpreted as a means for her to avenge herself on others because she claims other people influenced her decision to kill herself. This is mentioned as an inappropriate way to describe suicide in the guidelines. However, her reasoning is continually contradicted by Clay through the novel's dual narrative, which shifts between the two characters, making it seem almost as if they are having a conversation with each other. Clay ultimately understands that the decision to kill herself rested on Hannah as he states, "It was you who decided" (249). Towards the end of the audiotapes, she blames others for not realising how miserable she felt and not doing something to help her: "*A lot of you cared, just not enough*" (280).¹ This statement is immediately questioned by Clay: "But I didn't know what you were going through, Hannah" (280). I would suggest that this highlights to the reader that Clay could not know what Hannah was thinking and planning since she held it all inside. This could perhaps be helpful for readers who have experienced similar events and have felt guilty for what happened. All the characters in the novel are shown to have faults and to make mistakes, and the entire blame for the suicide cannot be placed on the people named in the tapes. Cindy Lombardo expresses a similar sentiment in a review of the book: "There are no heroes in this novel ... and each character, including Hannah, is guilty of making poor choices" (67). Consequently, what might have been interpreted as a story about a girl who is made hero by her suicide instead becomes a story about the devastating effects of suicide.

A further comparison between the two novels with the media guidelines for suicide reporting reveals that neither Hannah nor Alaska have ways to deal with their suicidal thoughts or know where to find help. The tragedy in the novels is that they die without getting proper support. I believe that these are the instances where vulnerable readers might have difficulties coping with the novels' suicide theme, as the suicidal characters are not offered helpful solutions to their problems. Consequently, the novels do not provide the readers with examples of how to resolve suicidal ideation. At the same time, it is important to remember that the novels are works of fiction and not information brochures about suicide. One alternative would be not to describe death by suicide in fiction at all, but I align myself with Jeffrey Berman in thinking that banning such stories is wrong. He does not believe in censoring books on the grounds of "suicidal correctness", and, like him, I think it is important to analyse suicide in fiction and to discuss, in depth, "its impact on readers and society" (44). It is promising that the novels discussed in this essay actually do align with most of the media guidelines with regard to the effects on adolescent readers. As a consequence, I believe that most readers are likely to

¹ All italics in quotations are in the original

interpret the novels as opposing suicide instead of endorsing or romanticising it. This strong stance is clearly indicated in several scenes in the novels, for instance when Clay agonisingly reflects on Hannah's recorded story in *Thirteen Reasons Why*: "I want to look back. To look over my shoulder and see the Stop sign with huge reflective letters, pleading with Hannah. Stop!" (250). Furthermore, neither of the novels makes suicide appear as something normal or as an appropriate way to solve these young people's problems. The suicides are, in fact, described as shocking and life-altering events for Miles, Clay and the other people who are left behind. These effects of the suicides, as well as the causes, will be further examined in the following section.

Causes and Effects of Suicide in the Novels

The two novels differ somewhat when it comes to the descriptions of the causes of the suicides, but they also have several traits in common. One similarity is that they both take their starting point in factors connected with mental health problems that are common in real life.

Since *Looking for Alaska* is narrated by Miles, the reader has no close insight into Alaska's thoughts or motives. As a consequence, the reader must, like Miles and the Colonel, rely on her statements and actions to try to ascertain if she killed herself and, in that case, why. After her death, the two friends discuss potential warning signs of suicide and try to understand if Alaska exhibited any of these: "She had lost, although not recently, her mother. And her drinking, always pretty steady, had definitely increased in the last month of her life. She did talk about dying, but she always seemed to be at least half kidding" (Green 198-199). This enumeration will most likely awaken the reader's memory of certain clues that are given about Alaska's mental health during the last months before her death. When asked by Miles why she smokes so fast, her reply indicates that ending her life might be on her mind: "Y'all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die" (57). When he suggests to her that she should not drink so much, her response is "what you must understand about me is that I am a deeply unhappy person" (150). The novel thereby links depression to her death, but it also includes the factor of childhood trauma. When Alaska was a child, she witnessed her mother's death. This weighs heavily on Alaska's mind, and she blames herself for not having been able to save her mother. It also affects her relationship with her father, who seems to have initially blamed her for not calling an ambulance. The result is that she avoids her home as much as possible and refers to it as a sort of haunted place: "I'm just scared of ghosts, Pudge. And home is full of them" (99). After

Alaska's death, the reader can have no difficulties in understanding that she was struggling with difficult thoughts about life and death.

The account of Alaska's risk factors, as enumerated by Miles and the Colonel, align with those that exist in real life. There are numerous circumstances that may influence a person to contemplate suicide. Among those are depression, alcohol and drug abuse, difficult relationships, traumatic events early in life and stressful circumstances, such as the loss of a loved one ("Risk factors and warning signs"). All of these fit the character of Alaska. The merits of describing suicide in this realistic way are that it may raise awareness among the readers about depression and the risk factors for suicide. Berman claims that "fantasies about suicide" have a strong alluring quality and he does not think it is right to "glorify a subject in literature that produces so much suffering in life" (44). The fact that *Looking for Alaska* does not put forward only one reason, or unrealistic and sensational causes of the suicide, reduces the risk of it being interpreted as a romantic or heroic act by readers.

The title of *Thirteen Reasons Why* gives a clear indication of the novel's strong focus on the causes of Hannah Baker's suicide. Unlike *Looking for Alaska*, the character that kills herself is here given a voice of her own as a narrator. This makes the story different because the causes of the suicide are not mysteries for Clay to solve. Hannah clearly dedicates one side of each cassette tape to one influencing person and event, speaking directly to Clay and the reader. The theme of bullying is at the centre of her reasons, which are described as creating a "snowball effect" (Asher 273), eventually accumulating to the point where they push her over the edge. The reasons include rumours at school of Hannah's alleged promiscuity, depression, betrayal by friends, sexual abuse and feelings of guilt over the death and rape of other teenagers. This clear enumeration of causes has received criticism for being unrealistic: "the message that suicide can have simple, or a simple set, of causes, ... is unfortunate. There is never one reason why, or even thirteen" (Devitt). However, just like in *Looking for Alaska*, the causes of the suicide described in *Thirteen Reasons Why* can be found among the risk factors present in real life. Bullying is one environmental factor which may influence a person to try to take their own life ("Risk factors and warning signs"). In this sense, the novel does have a basis in reality, even though the causes are described in a very clear-cut and simplistic manner.

Despite the somewhat realistic foundation, one thing is likely to come across as unrealistic to readers, and that is the sheer number of serious events to befall one individual. Everything bad that can happen seems to happen to Hannah Baker. Lynne Rosenthal criticises the common use of what she calls "overly sensational themes" in YA novels about suicide:

While these themes point to the overwhelming number of problems concerning adolescents today, they detract attention from the seriousness of the intra-psychic dilemmas faced by the suicide and his survivors, dilemmas which are directly related to the commission of the act, and at the same time they fail to treat issues related to homosexuality, drugs, rape or adoption in a realistically helpful manner. (Rosenthal 25-26)

While *Thirteen Reasons Why* does not fail to explore the dilemmas connected with suicide, the themes of rape and sexual abuse are not extensively explored as causes of the suicide. Instead, they are simply treated as additional factors that are contributing to the snowball that is starting to roll. This is problematic with regard to teenage readers because sexual abuse is a real-life problem, faced by numerous young people. Indeed, the acts of sexual abuse described in the novel are not strongly connected with consequences, either for the perpetrator or for the victims, whose feelings and experiences are largely overlooked. Hannah's own experience of a sexual assault is only fleetingly recorded and, just like Rosenthal writes, not described in any way which could be perceived as helpful to the reader.

Aside from the sexual abuse, Hannah implicates the psychological persecution instigated by other students as the reason for her mental decline. This makes the story likely to be perceived by readers as taking a stand against bullying, a fact that is emphasised by Hannah's suggestion that her tragic end could have been avoided if other teenagers had treated her better. In one instance, she describes the impact other people have had on her: "*when you mess with one part of a person's life, you're not messing with just that part. Unfortunately, you can't be that precise and selective (...) Everything...affects everything*" (Asher 201). This strong emphasis on the effect people have on each other is present throughout *Thirteen Reasons Why* and gives the impression of this point being a lesson to be learnt by the reader. The Razorbill edition of the novel, published in 2017, includes reader comments connected to this theme. One of them is written by a reader called Molly, who states, "I related to Hannah in many ways. I actually felt like I was in her shoes, experiencing everything that happened to her. This book has inspired me to be a nicer person" (Asher [VI]). Several other comments contain similar thoughts from readers who have realised the importance of caring for others after reading the book. One of them, called Jessie, writes, "Thanks for making me a better person and for helping me understand the way I affect other people's lives" (Asher [V]). These comments indicate that this is a response that is not limited to one single reader. In fact, Jay Asher himself has claimed that this was one of the most important points that he wanted to convey in his book: "People

talk about walking down a hallway and smiling at someone. It's a small gesture but you never know what it could mean to them" (Sheehan).

Before proceeding to examine the effects of the suicides, one other point deserves to be recognized in connection with the causes, and this is the role of parents and other adults in the novels. Since *Looking for Alaska* is set in a boarding school, the young characters are physically removed from their parents and most other adults, and they are also emotionally removed from them. Miles's parents certainly love him, but they are not greatly involved in his life and he tells them nothing about his troubles at school. This is partly due to his own reluctance to talk to them, and he is not the only student feeling in this same way. In fact, the unofficial school motto could be summed up with the words: don't tell the adults. Students who do tell are seen as traitors and are subjected to vengeful pranks. The teacher who has the job of overseeing the grounds after school hours is a character that the students do their best to outwit and evade because he has the power to punish and expel students who misbehave. As a consequence, there are real obstacles hindering the young characters from turning to adults for support. The grownups in *Thirteen Reasons Why* have similarly distant roles in the young characters' lives. Clay escapes his mother's worried questions and looks by staying out all night to listen to Hannah's audiotapes, and he does not seriously consider telling her about them. Hannah's parents are described as being too busy to notice the changes in their daughter. In addition to that, one teacher fails in his responsibilities as an adult when Hannah reaches out to him and tells him about her suicidal thoughts. As it stands in the novels, the adults can be seen as contributing to, or at least not improving, the tragic outcomes.

This sort of exclusion of grown-up role models, to whom the teenage characters can turn, is not uncommon in young adult fiction. According to Marilyn Fain Apseoff, insufficient communication between parents and teenagers is a common theme, and she disapproves of how parents are often described in a superficial manner "almost as grotesques or caricatures" (234-235). This kind of flat adult characters is present in both of the novels. As seen by the above-mentioned examples, they are portrayed as characters who are preferably avoided. This is probably not an unrealistic way to describe the relationships between adults and teenagers in some cases or instances. The inability or unwillingness to speak to adults about problems is most likely a shared experience by many of the novels' young readers, and the books do not provide solutions for how to deal with the difficulties of communicating with adults, which could be seen as shortcomings. However, just because most of the characters in the novels do not reach out to adults, it does not mean that teenage readers cannot see the advantages of doing

so in real life. In fact, the serious problems presented in *Looking for Alaska* may lead readers to draw the conclusion that it is wise to seek help from adults when faced with similarly difficult situations as the characters in the novels. In the case of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah's silence about her mental health issues might make readers, who are struggling with similar problems, realise the potentially serious consequences of such a choice and decide to seek help from adults.

As mentioned earlier, the suicides are described as traumatic and life-altering events for the friends and family of the girls who die. Their grief takes different forms and expressions, and initially, it is the shock of an absolute absence never to be filled again that leaves Miles reeling: "*I cannot find it and I need it. It is fear like if someone lost his glasses and went to the glasses store and they told him that the world had run out of glasses and he would just have to do without*" (Green 173). The reader is forced to contemplate the frailty of life as Miles struggles with the idea that Alaska is gone for good. This is contrasted with the fact that life goes on through simple everyday activities, such as classes and lunch in the school cafeteria. The descriptions of the effects of the death may resonate with readers who have also dealt with loss, not only caused by an intentional death but also by disease or old age, as one of the first instances of contact with death in a young person's life often is the loss of a grandparent or other relatives.

The descriptions in *Looking for Alaska* of the continuation of life despite traumatic loss, can lead the reader to draw different conclusions, but conveyed most strongly by the text is the idea that there is hope for overcoming grief. This can be discerned when Miles and his friend Takumi eventually have the realisation that death is a part of life. Takumi says, "It's natural. I mean, it must be natural", to which Miles replies, "It always shocked me when I realised that I wasn't the only person in the world who thought and felt such strange and awful things" (253). This realisation is tinged with fear because death is final, and the boys grapple with the idea of it coming even to the young.

Apart from sheer grief, one effect that both novels describe is feelings of guilt held by the people who were closest to Hannah and Alaska. Many of these characters feel that they could have somehow prevented the death by acting in a different way than they did. Initially, this is described as an all-encompassing feeling for both Miles and Clay, and it is the driving force behind the unfolding events of the plot. It makes Miles decide to find out if Alaska killed herself and Clay to decide to listen to the tapes to see how he is implicated. These are points of suspense in the novels that encourage the readers to continue to the end. The male protagonists' feelings

of guilt are accompanied by vastly different emotions such as anger, sadness and glimpses of happiness. One example of this is that Clay's grief and the shock of hearing what Hannah had to go through are mingled with his love for her: "To miss her each time I pull in a breath of air. To miss her with a heart that feels cold by itself, but warm when thoughts of her flow through me" (Asher 219). This illustrates that the loss of a loved one is a complex experience and that the author intended for the effects of the suicide to be taken seriously by the reader.

The inclusion of the emotional effects of suicide on family and friends is not a new feature of novels about teenage suicide. Paula S. Berger found similar descriptions of grief, guilt and heartbreak as in *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Looking for Alaska* in two novels that were published in the 1980s: *Tunnel Vision* (1980), written by Fran Arrick, and *Remembering the Good Times* (1985), written by Richard Peck. Berger believes that it is essential for teenagers to realise the chaos created by suicide for relatives and friends, as "these feelings will never completely be eradicated" (15). Through the inclusion of such emotional effects, *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Looking for Alaska* provide the readers with reminders of the devastating aftermath of a suicide and act as strong statements against the deadly decision taken by Hannah and Alaska.

In the next section, the role of death and its portrayal in the novels will be discussed in further detail.

Life and Death

During adolescence, a person goes through both physical and psychological changes in the development towards adulthood. These formative years are often a period when profound questions about life are centred in the mind. Perhaps this is why death has what James calls an "especially powerful appeal to teen audiences" (3), as it is both the definite opposite as well as the inescapable companion of life. This could also be the reason why philosophical and existential questions are commonly included in literature aimed at readers of this age group and prominent in *Looking for Alaska* and *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Existential quandaries are at the core of both novels, as the deaths of the female characters force the protagonists to reflect on what it is to exist and to cease to exist. This correlates closely with what Roberta Seelinger Trites states about the young adult novel, namely that death is an essential condition for the genre and what makes it different from fiction intended for other age groups. The distinctive feature is the link often made between death and growing up to accept the finality of life (118-

119). In *Looking for Alaska*, this strong focus on death is, among other things, reflected in the fact that Miles has a fascination for the last words of famous people even before Alaska dies.

Questions about life and death define the novel from beginning to end since they are preoccupations for Miles, Alaska and the Colonel. The characters' existential thoughts are represented by references that they make to a metaphorical labyrinth. The origin of it is the freedom fighter Simon Bolivar and his last words: "How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?" (Green 27). Alaska reads this in a book and refers to the philosophical dilemma several times, suggesting to the reader that she is herself caught in a maze, which she is struggling to find the end of or a way out of. The labyrinth can in this instance be interpreted by readers as representing life, death or suffering. The quotation gains further relevance after Alaska's death, as it seems to indicate that she might have killed herself to escape mental pain. Miles discovers that she has commented on Bolivar's question by writing "*Straight & Fast*" (186) in the margin of the book, a phrase that correlates with how her car drives into the police cruiser. Further on in the novel, it is Miles who poses the same question to the Colonel with regard to both of them. The Colonel replies, "it still seems to me like straight and fast is the only way out – but I choose the labyrinth. The labyrinth blows, but I choose it" (257). His reply signals something critical when it comes to the reader's interpretation of the text. It shows that there is a different solution to suffering and pain than ending your life, and that this is the choice of remaining in it and trying to deal with problems, which could be interpreted by readers as portraying hope for life despite adversity.

Death's central role in the plot is signalled from the very first page of *Looking for Alaska*. The reader is given a clue that something of importance is going to happen, as the first part of the novel is called "Before". Furthermore, the title of each chapter is a countdown to a specific day: "One Hundred and Thirty-six Days Before" (9), and so on. After the fatal event the chapter headings start to count upwards instead: "The Day After" (165), and so forth. Initially, it is unclear to the reader where the countdown is heading, but it serves as an ominous foreshadowing of events to come. Eventually, it becomes clearer that the end of the countdown will not be defined as a happy day, since Alaska's self-destructive behaviour increases in the days before the appointed day, and her apparent psychological pain also seems to be more acute than previously. For instance, she drinks heavily and tells her friends about the traumatic way in which her mother died. The trope of counting downwards and upwards focalises Alaska's death as the main event of the novel. It also indicates the profound impact that her death has on Miles and the other characters, as it defines everything that happens in relation to it.

The fact that this last day actually signifies Alaska's death may come as a surprise to the readers because it is preceded by extreme happiness for Miles. He and Alaska have just had their first intimate moment, before she drives off in her car, never to return. This sexual encounter is the height of Miles's wishes and a sign of his maturation. The promise of life, vitality and budding love in the form of the living girl, is starkly contrasted with the finality of her death as he thinks of what she might look like in the morgue: "I could only see her lying naked on a metal table, a small trickle of blood falling out of her half-teardrop nose, her green eyes open, staring off into the distance, her mouth turned up just enough to suggest the idea of a smile, and she had felt so warm against me, her mouth soft and warm on mine" (170). This is an example of how death is portrayed as being intimately linked with life in the text. There is seemingly no distinct line between the two, as a single moment can change one in to the other. It is this realisation that Miles struggles to comprehend and accept, as indeed many people do in real life when faced with the loss of a loved one. Trites claims that in young adult novels "death is often depicted in terms of maturation when the protagonist accepts the permeance of mortality, when s/he accepts herself as Being-towards-death" (119). This acceptance is clearly demonstrated by Miles's thoughts about Alaska's death and his subsequent development in the novel. The experience of losing a close friend becomes a journey that leads him to conclude that death is the end that everyone must face: "*We are all going*, I thought, and it applies to turtles and turtlenecks, Alaska the girl and Alaska the place, because nothing can last, not even the earth itself (Green 233). Most readers will probably acquire an understanding of the intimate relationship between life and death, when they follow Miles's journey of acceptance. It is promoted by the fact that the first half of the book acquaints the reader with the main characters and allows them to develop sympathy for them. Furthermore, it describes the promise of life and the excitement of the first experiences of love, sex and friendship, whereas the shock of the loss of one of the main characters, forces the reader to contemplate the frailty of life and the importance of making the most of it, since death is always close at hand. Miles's final acceptance of Alaska's death signals his growth into adulthood and can be interpreted by the reader as a hopeful tale of life's way of going on despite tragic losses.

As shown earlier, there is a close link between life, love, sex and death in the novel. James also discusses the connection between sexuality and death, and she thinks that *Looking for Alaska* is a prime example of the YA genre where "knowledge about carnality and its limits provides the agenda" (4). The same can be said about the descriptions of death in *Thirteen Reasons Why* since Clay's relationship with Hannah mirrors Miles's relationship with Alaska

in many ways. First, Hannah is a friend with whom Clay wishes to have a romantic relationship. Second, shortly after they start to acknowledge their feelings for each other and have a sexual encounter, she dies. Third, just like Miles, Clay has to face the reality of unfulfilled feelings, thoughts of what could have been as well as life, love, and indeed sex, cut short by death.

While the similarities between the novels are striking, Clay's story also differs from Miles's in several ways. One of the differences has to do with the aspect of time, which impacts the role that death plays in the novels. While *Looking for Alaska* tracks Miles's life and development during the entire academic year, the majority of *Thirteen Reasons Why* takes place during one night. Only two short chapters contain the events of the following day. During the night, Clay's time is largely taken up with trying to understand what Hannah tells him in the audiotapes. This does not allow him to develop or to question life and death on such a deep level as Miles does, which can be demonstrated by the following excerpt where Clay describes his reasons for returning to Hannah's parents' store several times after her suicide: "Maybe I was searching for a connection to her, some connection outside of school, and it's the only one I could think of. Looking for answers to questions I didn't know how to ask. About her life. About everything" (Asher 72). Clay's thoughts about life and death are, as exemplified here, more indistinct and fleeting than Miles's, as he does not even know what to ask questions about.

Clay's shallower way of thinking about life and death can also be explained by the social stigma surrounding suicide, a topic that is touched upon several times in the novel. At first, Hannah cannot bring herself to use the word in relation to what she is considering doing to herself. She also comments on it not being a subject that they ever talk about in the Peer Communications class, which is dedicated to group discussions about sensitive topics such as relationships, drugs and bullying. When she secretly suggests the topic for discussion, the other high school students fail to take it seriously.

James's claim that death is "systematically represented in Western cultures as something to be feared – in particular, when it is associated with, or occurs as a result of, violence and pain" (25) is applicable to the characters' reactions to death in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. It is evident that both Hannah and Clay, as well as teachers and other students in the school, tend to shy away from the topic. Clay himself calls suicide "a disgusting word" (164) and acknowledges the fear he associates with the wish to die: "I've thought those words many times. But it's a hard thing to say out loud. It's even scarier to feel you might mean it" (254). His reluctance to think about the subject in depth reflects the real-life social stigma associated with suicidal behaviour. Simultaneously, his acknowledgement of having had similar thoughts

himself may give the readers an understanding of the fact that difficult feelings and thoughts are common among teenagers. Thereby, the book may help alleviate the stigma associated with suicide and mental health problems.

By contrast, the Netflix version of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and other suicide narratives that are part of the current trend for young adults, have been described as “downright nihilistic. It wallows in feelings of despair and self-loathing. It cannot imagine the world ever getting any better” (Grady). While I would argue that the first two claims also partly apply to Jay Asher’s novel, I interpret their value in the narrative in a different way than Grady does. If suicide and death are to be touched upon at all in literature and other fictional narratives, which I believe they should, it would be odd not to dwell on the negative feelings and thoughts that accompany them. This could perhaps be described as nihilistic, but loss of hope and purpose in life are common feelings among people who are depressed or are contemplating suicide, and I believe that they should not be ignored in fiction. Furthermore, the possible beneficial effects of describing and discussing suicide and mental health problems would be non-existent if the subject was not dealt with in a realistic manner. In all likelihood, readers would spot the illusion and reject it as made up. For this reason, the darker sides of existence are essential parts of such stories. Grady’s third claim, that the current suicide stories cannot imagine an improvement, does not apply to *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Clay shows the reader that in spite of the irreversible tragedy of Hannah’s death, there is hope for improvement for the survivors, and, consequently, there is a way out of the darkness. The existence of hope in the two novels will be further discussed in the section below.

Hope and Growth

While musings on life and death take up a large part of both novels, there is also room for hope. In *Looking for Alaska*, this is clearly illustrated by Miles’s aim to search for what he calls the “Great Perhaps” (Green 11) when he moves to Alabama. For Miles, it represents all the unknown possibilities that life has to offer that he cannot find in his hometown, such as doing exciting things and having real friends. His search suffers a setback, and he begins to question it when Alaska dies, as she has become a symbol of this Perhaps, and there is a certain amount of anger towards her as Miles states, “You left me Perhapsless, stuck in your goddamned labyrinth” (206). This expresses his sense of losing hope and direction as well as his feelings of profound sadness. In the last chapter of the novel, however, he finds a way out of the

labyrinth of pain by writing his final exam paper. In the paper, he expresses that he chooses not to give up and become lost in himself like Alaska did because “I saw where it led for her. So I still believe in the Great Perhaps, and I can believe in it in spite of having lost her” (260). With this statement, Miles shows the reader that there is an alternative to holding depression inside and keeping it secret like Alaska did. He also reveals that he has found a way through his grief and that he has regained hope for life despite the tragic event. Alaska’s traumatic death has affected him deeply, but he has been able to regain his strength and learn something about life.

This type of positive development, where the protagonist evolves into someone who is able to withstand the pressures of life, is common in books about teenage suicide, according to Rosenthal. She claims that “the ultimate aim appears to be to help the reader separate himself from the suicide by encouraging him to identify with the main survivor, who, by the end of the book, comes to see himself as fundamentally different, stronger, more connected to others than the suicide” (22). The focus given to Miles’s positive development could consequently create a distance between the reader and the character of Alaska and promote a closer identification with Miles. Furthermore, the fact that the suicidal act is performed by someone other than the protagonist, probably lessens the risk that the readers will identify with the self-destructive character and the suicide. The text emphasises Miles’s feelings and reactions to the death, making it likely that readers will align themselves with him rather than with Alaska. The case is similar for *Thirteen Reasons Why*, where even though Hannah is one of the narrators, more space and emphasis is given to Clay’s reactions and feelings since it is his point of view that is focalised. The reader has access to his interior monologue but not to Hannah’s.

There may still be a risk that some readers might identify with the suicidal characters in the novels. However, readers of fiction have the ability to distance themselves from suicidal characters, which has been proven by Berman. He taught a university class about suicidal literature and asked his students if they experienced “serious conflicts or disturbances” (64), such as feeling suicidal or more emotionally sensitive, when reading and discussing a novel that ended with the protagonist Edna’s suicide. One fifth of the students claimed that they did have conflicts but further explained that it did not cause them to have suicidal thoughts or to experience increased sensitivity. Some of them stated that they felt that they had to “read oppositionally in order to distance themselves from Edna’s movement toward self-destruction” (64). Although this is only one example of reader response to a suicide narrative, it illustrates that even though a novel may cause readers to experience strong emotions, it does not necessarily affect their risk for suicide. Berman’s students demonstrated the power to resist the

protagonist's suicidal feelings and behaviour. This is also a possibility for the readers of the novels in question in this essay.

One part of the process of overcoming grief in *Looking for Alaska* has to do with Miles's and the Colonel's acceptance of the fact that they will never know if Alaska actually killed herself or not. When they stop their search for answers, they also put their guilt to rest because there is simply no way of discovering her motives. The boys' journey towards accepting the intimate relationship between life and death, which takes place in the latter half of the novel, is both metaphorical and real when they recreate Alaska's final trip down the highway and pass the place where she crashed her car: "And *POOF* we are through the moment of her death. We are driving through the place that she could not drive through, passing on to asphalt she never saw, and we are not dead. We are not dead! We are breathing and we are crying and now slowing down and moving back into the right lane" (Green 254). There is a sense of hope in Miles's thoughts. The car trip can be interpreted by the reader as a metaphor for moving beyond death and grief. Furthermore, "the right lane" can be interpreted not only in the literal sense but also as in finding your way in life.

Clay is on a similar path of growth towards the end of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. After listening to Hannah's tapes during the night, he goes to school the following day, although he is reluctant to return to his classroom and to see Hannah's empty seat because "today, for me, is profoundly different than yesterday" (Asher 284). This change in him is evident when he happens to see a girl he recognises in the hallway. Her name is Skye and just like Hannah, Clay has previously been in love with her. Skye is always wearing boring, baggy clothes, which seem to hide her, and Clay sees her as an "outcast" and as someone who "stopped wanting to be a part of anything" (105), which suggests that she is also depressed and lonely like Hannah was. In an earlier scene in the novel, Clay has considered talking to Skye but decided not to do it and felt relieved about the decision, just as he avoided talking to the unpopular Hannah in a similar fashion, for fear of what others might think of him. It is evident that the circumstances surrounding Skye closely resemble Clay's relationship with Hannah. This puts Skye both in parallel with and in contrast to Hannah, which is highlighted by Clay's changed behaviour on this day. The events of the previous night have altered his outlook on life and as Skye begins to walk away down the hallway, he does not ignore her again but follows her. The closing words of the novel describe the emotions he is feeling: "Pain and anger. Sadness and pity. But most surprising of all, hope ... the closer I get to her, the faster I walk, and the lighter I feel. My throat

begins to relax. Two steps behind her, I say her name. Skye” (288). As he goes after her, he purposefully turns away from one of the more popular students in the school.

These closing paragraphs of *Thirteen Reasons Why* provide a powerful end to the emotional story. Clay expresses the relief he is feeling about finally doing the right thing, which is reaching out to someone who is ostracised and in pain. Through this act, he demonstrates to the reader that listening to Hannah’s story has changed him into a more empathetic person, one who can defy the strong social pressure of being cool in high school. I would claim that this last scene of the novel expresses a strong sense of hope that readers are likely to respond positively to, as even though Hannah’s life ended tragically the following events influenced Clay to change and to behave in better ways towards others. The importance of being kind to other people is the meaning that readers are most likely to create during the reading process. The assertion that “there is no hope and no redemption at the end of the suicide story” (Grady) is thus inaccurate, since the closing scene demonstrates Clay’s hope of being a friend to the lonely Skye, something he failed to be to Hannah.

The impact of the novel’s ultimately hopeful message can be discerned among the reader comments in the Razorbill 2017 edition of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. One of them states, “the truth is that this book saved my life. It gave me the hope I needed to get where I am today” (Asher [V]). This comment gives an inkling of the positive effects that reading about suicide may have, and it shows that literature can indeed be used as a potential healer. In bibliotherapy, books are used as tools to help young people cope with real-life problems. According to Beth Doll and Carol Ann Doll, mental health professionals and librarians can guide young people to books that can help them overcome their own personal difficulties. The reading process can also help them let go of psychological strain, an effect that is achieved when they read and take part of the characters’ emotions (2-3, 8). Similar ideas are expressed by Bruno Bettelheim, who claims that literature can provide children with access to meaning in their life. He also believes that books should contain “that which is meaningful to [a child] at his stage of development” (4), something that is similar to what I have discussed regarding the novels in this essay. Furthermore, Bettelheim argues strongly against the common adult notion of only showing children the positive aspects of life, as neither life nor children themselves are constantly good. He believes that when a child does not live up to the ideal of goodness it “makes the child a monster in his own eyes” (7). The author’s claims can be applied as further arguments for the existence of realistic young adult fiction, such as the novels in this essay, since they deal with the dark sides of existence and bring up problems that are important to readers at their stage of

life, while they also provide hope. The novels could then help reduce the feeling among young readers that they are bad or deficient because they have behaved or thought in ways that could be perceived as wrong. This potential lies in the fact that the novels describe characters who are not always good and who are not consistently doing the right thing.

Another important point to discuss in connection with realistic young adult fiction about suicide, is that the concerns about it seem to be expressed exclusively by adults. It is in fact possible that the responses of well-meaning adults may differ from those of teenagers. A recent study by Brooklyn Walter and Ashley S. Boyd, which focused on reactions to *Thirteen Reasons Why*, supports this idea. The study examined responses to the novel as expressed by teenagers, parents and students in a teacher education program, and it concluded that the groups had different opinions about the influence of the story on readers. The parents' viewpoints were heavily influenced by their roles as protective adults, strongly expressing the need to shield their children from "harsh realities" (618), while at the same time seeing the benefits the novel may have in bringing difficult topics, such as mental health, rape and suicide, up for discussion. The teenagers themselves, contrarily, expressed that they saw the novel as a realistic portrayal of teenage life that they could easily connect with their own personal experiences. They also thought that the story included "challenging, yet accurate, themes of great import to young adults". When the teenagers and the preservice teachers came together in a group discussion, they focused on "themes such as bullying and suicide within the framework of the story as a piece of literature" (619) and went into the style of narration, the development of the characters throughout the story as well as the use of literary devices, among other things. I believe that this is interesting, as it seems to suggest that the adolescents connected with the story on a personal level but that they were still able to distance themselves from it since they saw it merely as a piece of realistic fiction. When it came to the question if the novel could be harmful in influencing young readers to kill themselves, the group expressed the opinion that they did not believe in this common notion (620). As this, albeit relatively small, study shows, the fears expressed by adults about the novel's negative impact on young readers seem to be exaggerated.

Furthermore, the possibility to use *Thirteen Reason Why* as a helpful tool for teenagers is demonstrated by the fact that it has formed the basis of a nation-wide tour against bullying. During the tour, the author Jay Asher himself visited high schools in all 50 states of the U.S.A to talk about the effects of bullying with students (Burling 24). In addition to this, lesson plans have been created for both *Looking for Alaska* and *Thirteen Reasons Why*, which indicates that they can have an educational value in schools when used to discuss suicide, bullying, and

mental health problems with adolescents. This serves to further strengthen my claim that the two novels can be seen as hopeful and helpful resources for young readers rather than potentially harmful books. While hopelessness and death certainly affect the characters in the novels, this is balanced and surpassed by expressions of hope, and this is the lasting impression that most readers are likely to retain from the reading process.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have demonstrated that the suicides in *Looking for Alaska* and *Thirteen Reasons Why* are portrayed as significant events that ultimately change the protagonists' views on life and death. The causes and effects of the deaths are described in predominantly realistic manners, making the novels likely to enhance the readers' knowledge about warning signs of suicide as well as giving them a deeper understanding of mental health issues. *Thirteen Reasons Why* also provides the reader with a description of the possible effects of bullying. The novels conform to several characteristics that other books in the same genre exhibit, such as the main character's growth into a stronger, more enlightened person on the verge of adulthood. The narratives clearly oppose suicide as a solution to problems, which is mainly shown through the effects the deaths have on Miles and Clay and other people with close relationships to the two girls.

I have argued that the sensitive theme of the novels, which is the cause of controversy and censorship, will most likely instil most readers with a sense of hope because of the way in which suicide and its aftermath are handled. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the main points brought forward in the text are the importance of being kind to others and the belief that it is possible to make life better, even when things look desperate. *Looking for Alaska* concentrates on the close relationship between life and death and the possibility to move beyond a traumatic loss. I have claimed that these hopeful messages are what most readers will take to heart. Consequently, there are no reasons to ban or censor these novels. Instead, adults should take young readers seriously by giving them access to literature that can help them broaden their horizons and their knowledge about life. Many teenagers are harbouring existential thoughts, and the books they read must reflect this to be relevant to them. I would also like to emphasize that I think it is important to break the taboo surrounding issues like suicide and mental health problems, and that literature can be an important part of this process. I believe that complete silence regarding suicide and mental health is far worse than bringing these topics up for discussion because

silence can create stigma. With suicide rates among young people already climbing worldwide, this would be highly regrettable.

Nevertheless, a certain degree of prudence is warranted since books about suicide may not be appropriate reads for all. However much hope may be interpreted in the novels discussed in this essay, there is no way to be certain of how sensitive readers might react to stories about suicide and death. As I have outlined, previous research has been able to show that there are risks connected with suicide stories in the media. For readers who are already experiencing suicidal thoughts, the theme of the novels could be problematic and possibly even damaging. These readers may interpret the novels differently than in the hopeful sense. For the majority of young readers, however, the novels' abilities to deal with real-life problems are likely to be counted as strengths, making them feel that they are not alone in dealing with difficult feelings and that it is possible to get through a crisis.

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