

“Waving Through A Window:” How “Dear Evan Hansen” reflects mental health

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Never-ending news feeds, feelings of isolation, and lives that are taken too quickly.

These issues are intertwined into modern life and the storyline of the musical “Dear Evan Hansen.”

In its opening year, “Dear Evan Hansen” won six Tony Awards (including best musical) and a Grammy. The show is still running on Broadway and has opened in London and Toronto with an additional production touring the United States. Its most recent stop was at the Fox Theatre in St. Louis.

The reason for its success? The story of a teenager with crippling social anxiety who learns no one deserves to be forgotten.

THE STORYLINE OF DEAR EVAN HANSEN

In any musical, song enhances character development and furthers the story. Follow along this story map of “Dear Evan Hansen,” guided by songs from the original Broadway cast recording.

- Does Anybody Have a Map?**
We meet **Evan Hansen**, a teen who struggles with **social anxiety**, on his first day of school. Evan has been going to a therapist who has asked him to write **encouraging letters** to himself.
- Waving Through a Window**
A troubled teen, **Connor Murphy**, finds Evan’s **personal letter** to himself and presses Evan for more details, which his social anxiety keeps him from explaining. Later that night, Connor commits **suicide** with Evan’s stolen note in his pocket.
- You Will Be Found**
As news of Connor and Evan’s friendship spreads quickly around school and on social media, Evan feels an increasing pressure to keep **Connor’s memory** alive. He becomes the co-president of the **Connor Project**.
- Sincerely, Me**
When Connor’s parents find the letter, they assume Connor and Evan are friends. Due to his **overwhelming anxiety**, Evan lies to Connor’s parents and tells them they were **best friends**. He makes up stories and creates **emails** to provide proof.
- Only Us**
Through the stories he tells, Evan builds a strong relationship with **Connor’s family** and eventually ends up **dating** Connor’s sister, **Zoe**. Evan’s popularity is growing at school and he finally has his dream girl.
- Good For You**
People begin asking **questions** about Connor and Evan’s friendship. Evan feels the **pressure** to keep up his fabricated story because he doesn’t want to lose his new relationships. Meanwhile, Evan is **losing the friends** that have been there for him all along.
- Words Fail**
Evan finally cracks under the pressure and **reveals all the lies** he’s told. Connor’s family is left **hurt**, but this breaking point allows Evan to come **clean** about all the lies he’s ever told. Evan strengthens his **support** system with his mom.
- Finale**
A few months later, we see Evan, who appears to be doing **better**. His social anxiety seems lessened and his **confidence** has grown. He **reunites** with Zoe and they get the **closure** they both deserve.

LISTEN TO THE SOUNDTRACK BUY TICKETS TO THE SHOW

DESIGNED BY OLIVIA HANFORD ON CANVA

Despite the interconnectedness and constant activity through social media, young people still struggle with feelings of loneliness. “Dear Evan Hansen” personifies (sometimes dramatically) this anxiety.

“As someone who has had some struggles with anxiety, and someone who had a pretty rough middle school experience, I think ‘Dear Evan Hansen’ was pretty hard to sit through,” said Andrew Wagner, SLU student and theatre enthusiast. “The most important thing when feeling anxious or alone is to rely on those who care about you,” said Wagner.

It appears that the show struck a chord with quite a few students.

“It’s the feeling of being alone and wanting to disappear that felt as though [‘Dear Evan Hansen’] was written for my life,” said Hannah Scheckel, SLU student and host of KSLU radio show “SLUsical Theatre.” According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, “wanting to disappear” is a common theme for 18-24 year olds.



Patrick Cruitt is a doctoral candidate at Washington University in St. Louis who saw the show while it was in town. As someone studying psychology, he was impressed.

“The opening scene...is one of the most powerful depictions of social anxiety disorder I’ve seen,” said Cruitt.

“Evan’s efforts to avoid negative emotions and the uncomfortable truth of his own experience lead him to engage in behaviors that, despite Evan’s best intentions, manipulate others into helping maintain his avoidance,” Cruitt said.

His behaviors are only amplified on social media where his lies quickly travel, forcing his lies to become bigger than Evan ever imagined.



Although typical behaviors of those with social anxiety were well visualized for theatergoers, Cruitt was disappointed with the end. In the end, Evan appears to be better but there is no mention of how he improved.

“A therapeutic relationship would help implement these insights into practice. Even just a passing mention of therapy in the closing scene would have sent the message that working on one’s mental health is an ongoing activity that can be aided by therapy,” said Cruitt.

Nevertheless, Dear Evan Hansen could start a dialogue that is often overlooked.

“Issues of suicide and mental health are incredibly difficult ones to talk about, especially for high school- and college-aged students. Especially as the generation most wrapped up in social media, the show can remind most people of moments in which they felt their most helpless and vulnerable,” Wagner said.

Others have commented on its ability to reflect the digital age.

“No other production quite captures the overwhelming feeling of endless news, twitter feeds and multimedia. It shows a more realistic picture of what life is actually like in 2019,” said Scheckel.

Art and emotion are tied together—a lesson that Dear Evan Hansen seems to have capitalized on.

“Approaching...emotions through art teaches us that it is OK to feel them and that we are capable of managing them, both important lessons that are also taught in therapy,” said Cruitt.

For now, “Dear Evan Hansen” joins a small category of other shows that deal with mental illness. However, with its cultural relevance and the foothold it’s established with young people, the subject material may become more popular.