

Behavior Issues: Counseling Teens in Crisis

What do you do in moments that demand instant response? How do you react when a kid is in crisis? Who can you tell? Who do you have to tell?

Once, before a Wednesday night gathering, a young lady approached me and said she needed to talk. We went into my office, and she told me that she had been cutting herself, and she was very scared. I saw no signs of this, so I asked a couple more questions. She rolled up her pant leg to reveal a shin that was red with blood...

If you work with students for very long, eventually you will be called upon to help out a student who has suffered a tragedy, endured a hardship, or struggled with a big let down.

Here are Seven Counseling Tips:

1. If Danger is Imminent, Report it

If a student threatens to hurt themselves or someone else, you are required, by law, to report it if you are a paid minister. If you are not employed by your church, then telling a pastor who is on staff or another church leader may be the first move. If a student is threatening suicide, murder, or other life-threatening situation, it is never acceptable to keep that a secret.

2. Don't Forget Parents

If you had your own children, wouldn't you want to know if they were in trouble? If a student is struggling with a particular sin and comes to you grief-stricken, encourage him or her to tell his or her parents. Encourage students by offering to go along for support. We are called to minister with parents, not around them.

3. The Snorkel Rule

Sometimes you just get in over your head—neck deep in a situation that you're not sure you know how to handle. It is better to simply listen to and pray with a student and then help him or her contact a more experienced counselor than it is to give bad counsel. Imagine the problem is water. Are you wading around, helping the student find his or her way? Are you waist deep but managing? Are you struggling to keep your head above water? A simple rule—if you require a snorkel to continue in the conversation, it might be good to pass that student lovingly along to someone with better insights and more counseling experience.

4. Listen & Pray

That said, many crises are sudden but not particularly severe. Many kids simply need a shoulder to cry on. And don't forget to pray with the student, even covenanting with him or her that you will pray in the days that follow.

5. Follow Up

When you are counseling a student, let him or her know that you'll be following up in a day or two to see how he or she is doing. Make sure you have a way to do that—via Internet, phone, or in person. Then make sure you do it. When your student realizes you meant what you said, it will mean a ton to him or her.

6. Be the Adult

If students really wanted an easy way out of their crisis, they would talk to a friend. They came to you because you are an adult—don't let them down by simply being a buddy. If they need to hear something difficult (like breaking up with a boyfriend with whom they've recently sinned, or to obey their parents instead of running away from home), tell them what they need to hear in a loving way. It may be good to give them 24 hours to sleep on a decision. Mark that time by saying, "tomorrow night I'm going to call your parents to see if you've talked to them yet." This will motivate them to do it, and at the same time let your students know they are not alone.

7. Be Gender Sensitive

A man is probably not the best counselor to a young lady with image issues. A woman cannot understand

a young man's struggles with lust. It is awkward and unwise to try to counsel a student of the opposite sex, particularly in an ongoing way. While you sometimes might not have the choice, you should pass students on to a counselor of the same gender whenever possible.

With that young lady in my office I only had a couple of minutes to react. I immediately found a volunteer in our building who was a nurse (and a female) and got the student some medical attention. I then told her that we would need to talk to her mom, which we did the following day. I prayed with her and connected her with some women with whom she developed a relationship.

There are always crises to handle—divorce, self-abuse, confession of sin, tragedies of loss, etc.—by being wise in our approach we can help students through these times to grow deeper in their trust of Jesus.

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