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## Youth Ministry Essentials: 6 Steps to Helping Hurting Students

Written by Greg Wilson, on August 11, 2010  
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You probably didn't get into youth ministry to help teens deal with abuse, addiction, parental divorce, abandonment, premarital sex, cutting, suicidal thoughts, anger issues, and other painful life situations. But it doesn't take long to learn that crises come with the territory. As you build deep relationships with the students and families in your church and your community, pain will inevitably emerge. Your response can help redeem a teen's suffering and mitigate the collateral damage.

Here's a simple guideline to follow when a hurting teen seeks you out:

**Pray**--Start by letting the student know that there is hope, and by reminding yourself and the student that God and God alone is the source of hope for help and healing. You have nothing to offer apart from God's help, so make sure that you take the time to acknowledge your dependence upon Him by praying for wisdom (James 1:5) and intervention (Psalm 32:8). Pray with the expectation that God will heal and deliver, because only He can.

**Listen**--"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame" (Proverbs 18:13, ESV). In order to provide the best help, it's critical that you understand what's going on.

**Be comfortable with silence.** Give the teen the space to tell you about his or her struggle. Ask clarifying questions to help understand all the issues. Often, just processing the situation enough to communicate it to a safe listener gives the student a clearer picture of his own heart.

**Respect**--As a youth pastor, you already know how important respect is to teenagers. Your helping relationship with a hurting teen must also be marked by mutual respect, "with all humility and gentleness, with bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2 ESV). Respect the student's worth as a younger brother or sister in the faith.

**Don't talk down to students or belittle their experiences.** Respect the position of trust you have been granted in their life. Remember, you may not be able to promise complete confidentiality, depending on the situation. But you should always be

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sensitive to the student regarding how confidential information is shared with parents or other authorities. Respect their boundaries, and expect them to respect yours. Never counsel a student behind closed doors; meet in the church office (with someone else there and the door open), or in a public place. Don't manipulate or exploit the student, and don't let yourself be manipulated or exploited either. It's necessary for you to stay objective.

**Guide**--"Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance" (Proverbs 1:5 ESV). Providing spiritual guidance is an art form that both good youth workers and good parents will forever strive to perfect. While the perspective and wisdom you have as an adult make the answers obvious ("quit calling him," "break up with her," "confess your sin to your parents," "tell the truth," etc.), communicating wisdom to a teenager in a way they can both understand and accept is the real challenge.

**Try to draw attention to the underlying issues, not behaviors.** Once the deeper issues are identified, address them with Scripture. Apply the truths of God pertaining to identity, acceptance, guilt, anger and love to the teenager's heart. Pray for the Holy Spirit to open his eyes and enable him to see.

**Challenge**--As you provide guidance and direction, you may need to challenge false beliefs or flawed perceptions. "I understand it may seem like no one cares, but that just isn't true." Is the student's issue directly connected with an incorrect assumption or a false belief? You have been trusted to speak into a teenager's life. Don't be afraid to be direct and speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

**Refer**--You're a youth pastor, and most likely not a licensed professional counselor, social worker, or therapist.

**Know when you're out of your league.** It is crucial to spend time vetting some professional Christian counselors to whom you would want to entrust your students. Ask pastors, other youth pastors and families you trust for names. Do your research and build a referral network. A teenager from your youth group will be more likely to see a therapist that you personally know and recommend. Make a "warm" hand-off, by letting the student (and his parents) know that you trust and respect the counselor, and that you will be praying for them and checking-in on the situation from time to time.

Every hurting student will come with different specific needs and issues, but by remembering to pray, listen, respect, guide, challenge and refer, you can be God's instrument to move each student toward hope and healing in Christ.

Share your thoughts with the youthministry360 community:

- What other words of advice do you have to offer youth workers on helping hurting teens?
- What are the most prevalent issues facing the teenagers you minister to?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### GREG WILSON

Greg Wilson received his bachelor's degree from Baylor University. He holds masters degrees in Marriage and Family Counseling and Christian Education from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and has completed additional graduate study at Dallas Theological Seminary. Greg is a biblical counselor specializing in adolescents, families and men at North Texas Christian Counseling in Flower Mound, Texas. For the past 20 years, he has provided gospel-centered biblical counseling in both individual and group contexts, and has also served churches in Texas and Georgia as a youth pastor and teaching pastor. Greg also blogs regularly at [www.thirstyones.com](http://www.thirstyones.com), writing on issues related to spiritual formation, adolescence, youth ministry and counseling. Greg currently lives in the Dallas, Texas area with his wife and daughter, where they are active members of The Village Church.

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