



GIVING COMFORT TO HURTING TEENS

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Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He is the Father who is compassionate and the God who gives comfort. He comforts us whenever we suffer. That is why whenever other people suffer, we are able to comfort them by using the same comfort we have received from God.
2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (GOD'S WORD Translation)

Chances are, if you've been in youth work for any period of time, one of your youth has come to you asking to talk. They view you as a supportive adult, someone they can trust, whether it's a question of how to handle something with their parents or friends, an internal struggle they are having, or a frustration with their faith life. **What a huge blessing it is to walk alongside these teens as they navigate through life's challenges.** They have chosen to invite you into their worlds and share their hearts because you have shown that you care about them. What a blessing, yet what a responsibility!

Youth ministry means diving in to the amazing yet complex world of teens and navigating this space should be handled with the utmost amount of humility, patience, and care. **The goal is always to seek first to listen and understand as you walk alongside your youth.** Most teens just want to be heard. They need a space to process their thoughts and feelings as they become more and more aware of the world around them.

So, what does that look like in practical terms?

1. **Listen – truly listen.** Resist the urge to interrupt and correct them, no matter how distorted their thoughts sound to you. At this point, you are there as a safe place for them to just be able to talk. If you don't understand something, ask for clarification, perhaps by just saying "Tell me about that...". This shows you truly want to understand and hear what's going on in their hearts and minds.
2. **Reflect –** Repeat what you heard to make sure you are understanding what they are trying to communicate. Use phrases such as, "I want to make sure I'm understanding you. You're feeling... because..."



3. **Validate** – This is not necessarily agreeing with what they have said. You’re simply acknowledging how their feelings make sense with what they’re perceiving from their point of understanding. This is critical empathy where you are truly sitting in their feelings with them at this point. Consider phrases such as, “wow, I can understand why you are feeling ...”
4. **Reframe** – This is where your teen can begin processing their feelings as you help them shift their perspective and feel empowered to act. You’re not there to “give advice” (after all, you don’t have to deal with the consequences of the choice), but to help them process ways they can handle the situation. Don’t be surprised if you encounter silence or “I don’t know” in this stage. After all, if they knew what to do, they probably wouldn’t be coming to you. The part of their brain that figures this out (the prefrontal cortex) hasn’t fully developed yet, so it takes them a bit longer to process. Get comfortable with the silence – if you give them time, they’ll be able to work through it.
5. **Listen, again** – Encourage them to take a deep breath here. Then, prompt with “How are you feeling right now?”
6. **Pray/Share Scripture** – Once they feel truly seen, and their emotions and bodies are regulated, they will be more open to the truths of Scripture and can see a clearer connection. Let your prayer be open and thoughtful; this is not a time to “preach.”

So how do you continue to provide a safe space for youth while also making sure you clearly understand when to involve a professional? The truth is, rates of anxiety and depression are increasing in our teenagers, and trusted adults need to know these young believers need the help of a professional to process their more intense thoughts and feelings. In these instances, we need to ask the hard questions:

- Are they hurting themselves?
- Have they ever thought of hurting themselves?
- Is someone hurting them?
- Are they hurting [or have they hurt] someone else?
- Are they thinking about suicide?
- Have they ever attempted suicide?



Do not be afraid to ask these questions clearly. If they answer yes to any of them, thank them for trusting you enough to tell you. Assure them you want to help them talk with someone who can help them work through these difficult feelings. Then, with your teen present, **contact the Crisis Team on the Gathering Helpline**. You may even offer sit with them as they talk with the Crisis Team on the Gathering Helpline if they would like.

Pay attention to your state's laws on mandatory reporting. Discuss this with your ministry team to ensure everyone is clear and on the same page. Along with instances of self-harm and suicidal ideation, a direct referral to the crisis team should be made if there is substance abuse or any other kind of abuse present.

When they share these things, monitor your own emotions. Teens watch how we react to see if we will continue to be trustworthy. Continue to reassure them of your love for them, as well as God's. It can also be challenging for you as an adult so do not forget to also care for your own mental and spiritual health.

As you transition your group back home, there is a greater network of people you can follow up with to help support teens. Give teens and the pastor special time to connect after the Gathering, especially if he did not attend. This helps the pastor to hear about the Gathering, but also to answer theological questions and help support struggling teens. You can also partner with parents and guardians after the event to ensure teens are able to get to professional care, if necessary, and for serious issues to be addressed.

Is it gut-wrenching to join our youth in these difficult times? Yes. As Paul reminded us through the power of the Holy Spirit in Second Corinthians, we can enter difficult times with youth to give comfort because we ourselves have received comfort from God. Lest we feel ill-equipped, let us remember that it is the Holy Spirit that gives the comfort through us. We are but the vessel for God's treasure of grace and healing!