

## MAJOR PASTORAL NEEDS WITH YOUTH

### **Small group activity:**

List types of issues experienced by young people that fit into this area of need. What kind of kids are they/

*self harm, suicide ideation, abused, shyness, depression, bi-polar, poor hygiene, less gifted, hearing impaired, minority group, genius kids, undiagnosed weirdness, obnoxious, socially challenged.*

It's getting more difficult to define exactly which kids are in crisis. We can't always just look at students and think that we can define them. Whether they have multiple piercings or are clean-shaven, whether they wear all black or the latest fashion—it isn't always easy to get under the façade and identify which kids need help.

One way of identifying hurting students is to take a slow look around your youth group and really look at them. Look past their façades and their cliques. The ones who demand your constant attention are obvious; it's easier to glance over those who hide in the corner and don't seek out attention. Are Johnny's parents going through a divorce? Does Suzie avoid looking you in the eye? Does Karen always wear long sleeves—even on the hottest days?

Notice your kids and really listen to them. Are there obvious targets in the social group? Is one or more of them constantly marginalized? Are there a few who deliberately marginalize themselves? Pay attention and look deeper than the surface. As you do, the ones who need help will slowly be revealed to you.

Sometimes the best way of noticing and understanding kids in crisis is to remember those we knew while in school. To be truthful, not that much has changed. The clothes have changed and the culture has intensified, but the reality of students living in the clique or on the fringe hasn't. There are still those who are marginalized; there are still those who seek out attention; and there are still those who want to disappear.

### **But I Didn't Like Them Then, and I Don't Like Them Now**

Many of us aren't drawn to "those types of kids." We were uncomfortable around them in our high school days, and we're uncomfortable around them now. We

like the popular kids, the ones who make us laugh, or the ones who like us. The dark ones, the ones with trouble—they seem only to point out our own weaknesses and pain. They come to us with problems that are sometimes too difficult to solve. Our easy answers and pat clichés don't work for the marginalized.

What can we do if we honestly have no desire to befriend hurting kids? How can we find grace where there is none?

### **Finding God's Heart**

There's no magic way to make ourselves like people. Loving the unlovable is especially difficult.

Being different is painful, but even more, it makes us 'invisible'. These kids often don't know how to function in social situations.

They may feel like they are standing beyond the edges of everything else looking in—hardly daring to want to be a part of it all, fully aware that they are separate.

They may think that God couldn't possibly love them. If no one else loves them, why would God?

Recognising the deep love that God has for us allows us to radiate that love out toward our youth group.

We develop a knowledge that we're each made and destined for a purpose, and that we all fit, somehow, inexplicably into God's plan.

Do we look at the hurting kids in our youth groups and know that they're loved? That they fit into God's plan? Or are we too busy trying to redeem them ourselves—to make them fit in—to wait until they straighten up?

We need to acknowledge their reality, even if it is beyond our experience.

We need to acknowledge that God is big enough for them.

We need to have relationships with each other that are authentic. Can we truly look at each other's darkest places and still know we're safe? It's acceptable to be imperfect—if we were as put-together as we pretend to be, we'd have no need for Jesus.

As you let yourself be human, you invite your students to be human, too. That includes the outcasts, the misfits, the ones who intentionally hurt themselves.

### **See Your Students**

Make a point of seeing your students. Notice them. Not just the ones who clamour to be noticed, but even those who go out of their way to hide. You'd be surprised how much your acknowledgement will impact them.

Be curious about what motivates them, why they act how they do. Separate them from the dynamics of the youth group, and try to see them individually. See their passions. See their fears.

### Offer a Big God

Offer them a God who loves them. A God who died for them—just as they are. Give them a big God, a God who knows them intimately and loves them, anyway.

And then love them, too. Even the ones who are unlovable. Even the ones who push your buttons and frustrate you 'til you want to scream. After all, that's why you work with students. Because you know how amazing they are and how much they matter. And you can give them a God and a Christianity that's bigger than they can dare imagine.

### Self Harm

In recent years, much greater attention has been given to the phenomenon of self-harm, particularly amongst adolescents and young adults. Defined as intentional, repeated forms of moderate self-mutilation, unlikely to lead to death, self-harm most commonly consists of repeated cutting, burning or scratching of a person's own body.

As youth workers, how knowledgeable are we about the growing problem of cutting? How do we respond to the harm teenagers inflict on themselves? And most importantly, how do we communicate clearly to these hurting teens?

### Understanding Cutting

Simply defined, self-mutilation is harming oneself by injuring the body. Cutting, the most well known form of self-mutilation, falls under this definition. It is most common on the wrist or forearm, but teens may also cut their legs, feet, abdomen, breasts, or other places.

According to an article by K.R. Juzwin, Psy.D. entitled "Self-Injury: A Growing Epidemic Problem," cutting is widespread. "The problem of self-injury is not confined to any one demographic, ethnic or socioeconomic group. Although women/girls seek treatment more frequently and for different problems than do men/boys, self-injury appears to not be selective with who engages in it. Both sexes tend to use cutting as the most frequent form of self-injury." Due to the secrecy of cutting, and because many teens do not seek help, exact numbers of teens who cut are hard to come by. "Since cutting is generally done in private, no one really knows how widespread it is, however experts say upward of three million Americans hurt themselves on a regular basis." ("Cutting to Cope" by Ken Mueller, CPYU.) The Journal of Abnormal Psychology estimates that

anywhere from 14 to 39 percent of adolescents have engaged in self-mutilating behaviors.

It is imperative for youth workers to understand that the act of cutting is a symptom of a greater problem—abuse, mental illness, loneliness, family problems, etc. All of these issues generally generate deep pain in the individual, and cutting becomes a coping mechanism. One of the basic premises behind cutting is that it is used to alleviate emotional distress in an effort to enhance psychological adjustment. This seems to happen in one of two ways. For some teens the act of cutting takes away pain. In a sense, the physical pain dulls the emotional pain. The physical pain is easier to deal with than emotional pain. On the other hand, cutting allows some teens to feel again. There is also the control factor teens experience when cutting—when the emotional pain is too hard to handle, a cutter can regain control by causing physical pain to themselves instead of dealing with the emotional pain someone else may have caused.

For some teens, the attention received as a result of the cutting becomes as important as the pain relief that cutting originally provided. In general, adults freak out when a child is wounded. This is especially true if the injury is self-inflicted. A teenager feeling alone and isolated may appreciate the sudden interest in her life that others are now exhibiting. There's also the issue of cutting becoming contagious or the "cool" thing to do. In the article by Juzwin, there's mention of teens involved in "cutting clubs." For some teens, this social cutting plays into the need for attention. In various high schools it may be the newest fad, the popular way of dealing with pain.

Cutting is usually a solitary activity and shrouded in secrecy so it can be extremely difficult for youth workers to know if a student is harming him or herself, but there are indicators. Girls go to extreme measures to keep their wounds hidden, including wearing numerous bracelets, wearing wristbands, or only wearing long-sleeve shirts even on the hottest summer days. During the winter months scars are easier to hide, but as the temperature rises and clothes decrease it takes more creativity to hide the problem. Always wearing long sleeves or pants may be an indication that a teen is trying to hide wounds or scars. Also, habitual cutters will often keep a supply of bandages readily available. If you see such a supply, or if a student is always asking for a band-aid and you never see a wound, there may be cause for concern. If a student seems to be down or in a bad mood, disappears for a little while, and comes back seeming fine, it may be a red flag. However, mood swings are a part of adolescence and it may not indicate anything except that the teenager is acting like a teenager!

When cutting is a struggle for a kid, it would be nice to be able to remove all sharp objects from the environment, but it is neither logical nor feasible. Although most teens have a preference, they will use whatever is available to cut their skin. Common cutting instruments include paper clips, staples, broken glass, broken plastic, safety pins, knives, scissors and razor blades.

## **Responding**

A youth worker needs to care for the wound immediately. It may be a superficial scratch that just needs a bandage, or it may be a deeper wound requiring more care. Remaining calm is also essential. Remember, in most cases the cutter does not think the wound is that big of a deal. The more worked up you get, the more likely the teen is to shut down all communication, and may regret coming to you in the first place.

The way in which you first respond will set the tone for future communication with the student. For a kid to even acknowledge his self-mutilation is a huge step.

It is more likely that a youth worker will find out that a student is cutting long after the actual incident. Usually the wounds have healed and only the scars remain. It is important to listen and to ask thought-provoking questions.

Regardless of how the cutting is discovered, youth workers need to be discreet and professional in their handling of the situation. Drawing public attention to the issue can hurt a student deeply. At the same time though, we need to be able to discuss the issue with our students in a general matter. The longer it remains hidden, the greater the shame may be for students who do struggle.

Obviously, a band-aid and a one-time discussion will not fix the problem. The reasons a teen is cutting are complex, and working through the issues will take time and hard work. Because youth workers are not professional counselors, the best thing we can do is refer the student to a professional. Therapists are increasingly more aware of self-mutilation and can help the student identify underlying issues. A teenager may be able to stop cutting on her own, but for most teens it's not that easy: Therapists may take various approaches including medication, behavior modification, inpatient treatment, or counseling.

Regardless of what type of treatment an individual is receiving, issues will arise outside of the therapy setting and the youth worker may be the one the teen turns to. In such cases, find out what the teen is doing as part of his therapy. If he's supposed to journal each time he feels sad, encourage him to journal. The relationship you have with the teen may be vital in his healing process. Also, one of the greatest ways we can help students is by helping them create alternatives to cutting. Our students are gifted in incredible ways, and we can encourage them to use those gifts as alternatives to hurting themselves.

## **Spiritual Ramifications**

We need to remember that teens who cut have problems feeling and expressing emotions. If events and programs are designed to give students emotional and spiritual highs, a teenager who cuts may not experience the high and therefore not "feel" spiritual enough. This has the potential to do great damage to a student's faith. We all go through dry times when we don't feel like we experience God's presence, but we know those days are temporary. A kid struggling with cutting may not.

## **Identifying and Addressing Domestic Abuse**

The majority of Christians who are not abuse survivors would like to believe that the evil of domestic abuse isn't in our midst. They'd like to believe that it's only kids in outreach programs who have abusive homes, not any of the kids in our churches. And for those other kids, if we can just bring them—and possibly their families—to Jesus, redemption and rescue will follow, and the abuse will cease. If Christian parents are periodically abusive, God will solve the problem if they're coming to church and hearing the Gospel.

## **Who abuses children?**

### **Whole group activity: Who are the abusers?**

*Parents, teachers, family, friends, babysitters, Sunday school teachers, police officers, ministers, youth workers—domestic abuse crosses all socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, educational, age, gender, and religious lines. It's just as likely to occur in wealthy homes as in blue-collar homes; just as likely to occur in Christian homes as it is in non-Christian, Jewish, atheist, Muslim, or Mormon homes.*

95% of victims are women or children. But by no means are men always the perpetrators, nor are husbands exempt from suffering domestic abuse. It does happen in reverse—usually emotional or verbal abuse (which is the hardest to spot and address)—though sometimes physical abuse as well. And children experience the full spectrum of abuse from mothers as well as from fathers.

Some of the doctrines and beliefs we frequently address have actually perpetuated the cycle of domestic abuse among us. In most evangelical churches, there is a strong emphasis on obedience to God. In more fundamentalist churches, obedience, authority, and headship are interconnected: God is the ultimate authority; the husband is the spiritual head of the home; the wife and children are to defer to the authority of the

husband/father; and as the spiritual head of the household, the husband/father speaks for God.

Implications of hierarchy have kept more women and children in life-threatening situations than almost any other doctrinal teaching. It reinforces the notion that abuse by the husband/father is caused by wrongdoings of the wife and/or children who provoked his anger and discipline. This is precisely how abusers, and many Christians who don't understand the dynamics of abuse, portray it. Scriptural misrepresentation and selective use of Scriptures by abusers further reinforce this scenario. Abusers make the rules and proclaim the rules to be God's, so questioning the rules or the abuser's authority equals questioning God. Victims don't want to be out of God's will, so they submit...as they are told the Scriptures require of them.

Obedience to—and compliance with—this hierarchy of authority also serve to make victims vulnerable to abuse from authority figures outside the family (teachers, policemen, clergy, etc.). Remember: domestic abuse is never about anger or discipline. It's always about power and control.

### Forgiveness

Forgiveness is vital in its proper context, but somehow the message of forgiveness has been horribly distorted. We're overly focused on praying for our enemies and forgiving those who hurt us whether or not there is any change in actions or behavior. This teaching causes abuse victims to believe the apologies of their abusers and their professions that the abuse won't happen anymore. With abused children, it reinforces that they're powerless and that God requires them to love and forgive the people who are hurting them, regardless of whether there has been intervention or justice. Christians too frequently want to hurry forgiveness along. For abuse victims, forgiveness may take a lifetime...if it happens at all.

When abuse victims are made to feel that the only way they can experience healing is to forgive their abusers, and when well-meaning Christians try to usher that process through, the damage to the abuse victim's relationship with God is devastating. Rather than preaching forgiveness to the abuse victim, we should leave that process up to Jesus.

Young women are still taught (at the very least, it's implied) that men have uncontrollable sexual desires, and that Christian females are not to dress or act in a way that would cause their Christian brothers to stumble—i.e. to inspire lust. This means, of course, that if advances are made, young women have brought it on themselves. The truth is that at some point during or after the abuse, all

abuse victims have been made to believe that abuse is their fault at some point during or after the abuse. With female sexual abuse victims, this teaching about lust, implied or stated, strongly underscores the belief that they've somehow brought about their own abuse.

Often, overly provocative attire or behavior in females may be an indicator of having been inappropriately sexualized at an early age or at the present time. The opposite is also true; a female going out of her way to be dowdy and unattractive may be trying to desexualize herself because she's internalized that being sexually attractive is what caused her violation.

Victims often internalize that they have "fornicated" and are no longer able to proclaim their devotion to God, and therefore when the abuse continues or another abuser comes along, they think they deserve it. Childhood sexual abuse victims have extreme guilt over their "participation" in the abuse. Often they're carrying tremendous shame over the fact that there were some aspects of it that they enjoyed. Some of it (especially with young children) felt pleasurable or made them feel loved and special, which only heightens their shame and sense of God's rejection once they're old enough to understand what's been happening and come face to face with their abuse. A young teen who's beginning to explore his or her sexuality and sexual attractiveness may feel severe guilt when an adult comes along who exploits those feelings, and perhaps the teen enjoys some of his or her own response (i.e., feeling grown up, perhaps experiencing orgasm, perhaps even thinking he or she is "choosing" to have sexual relations with an adult).

When abuse gets reframed as something the victims caused, participated in by "choice," or enjoyed on some level—and then they hear that their virginity is synonymous with their devotion to God—the implications to a victim's current and future faith are staggering. It's not that we shouldn't encourage sexual purity and abstinence, but we must be aware that there are kids in our groups who are hearing this with different ears, and the concept of "secondary virginity" doesn't cut it—especially if they're in active sexually abusive situations, and often even if the sexual abuse is "in their past."

### Omnipotence

We're taught that God is bigger than every problem; there's nothing outside of God's power; Jesus can fix all that's broken and awry in our lives; a loving God cares deeply for us, about every hair on our heads.

The ramification of this is the ultimate source of abuse victims' deepest spiritual brokenness and rage. Why doesn't God protect or rescue me? Why didn't God hear my prayers; weren't they good enough? Maybe there is no God. I guess my

faith isn't strong enough. Maybe I've already gone to hell. Where was God when this happened to me? God obviously didn't or doesn't care enough about me, otherwise why would this be allowed to happen to me and to my family? For abuse victims, these questions are never answered.

### Grace

When abuse victims/survivors hear "It doesn't matter what you've done..." it immediately gets translated into "It doesn't matter what your abuser has done." Be careful. Grace can be a powerful ally in helping abuse victims, or it can be just another stone around their necks.

**The emotional, behavioral, and spiritual outcomes of the misrepresentation of these tenets can be dire.** They include depressive or dissociative disorders, suicide or murder, substance abuse, promiscuity, other high-risk behavior, ultra-conservative religious beliefs, or simply walking away from God.

### **Small Group Activity:**

What are the 'typical' ways that youth leaders may respond to difficult pastoral needs?

- *We ignore it.*
- *We make uninformed or naïve assumptions. (We assume that the best help for families in trouble must come from Christian counselors, Christian books, and Christian education; otherwise, essential elements of faith may be compromised. The hard truth is that it's much more important for people to get good counseling than it is for them to get Christian counseling.)*
- *We confront. Don't make the fatal (and it really could be) mistake of trying to "talk to" suspected abusers yourself. Abuse gets worse if the victim tells. The abuse goes further underground, and victims are driven to recant. If you confront abusers, they'll cut you off from their children. They may even get you fired. Or they'll withdraw, disappear, and take their families with them. And their children will be worse off than before.*
- *We're simplistic or superficial. We nobly "respect confidentiality" and try to help the people deal with the problem in secrecy. Sometimes we give both victims and their abusers simplistic answers: claim the victory, accept Jesus, and turn your life over to him; you're a new person in Christ; it's all under the blood; the slate is washed clean; you're born again; you can start again today.*
- *We jump in too easily. Abuse victims are terribly needy and often very draining. If we're not careful, before we know it, we burn out and abandon ship. Ultimately, this can be worse than if we'd done nothing at all.*

## **More Appropriate Responses**

Stop shying away from the issue. We have to find opportunities to raise the issue in our sermons, lessons, conversations, and group prayer times. Abuse victims aren't likely to trust someone enough to share their situations unless the issue has been raised repeatedly. It has to become part of the regular topics you're already teaching and addressing, such as: sex, love, dating, marriage, sin, forgiveness, divorce, parents and family, self esteem, and the will of God. You can also help this along by appealing to your senior pastor to address the issue from the pulpit, and by finding out if there are opportunities for your youth group to volunteer at shelters or crisis centers. If not (and there are usually safety and confidentiality reasons for this), then incorporate domestic violence shelters into your food/clothing/toiletries drives. In any way possible, let your kids know that this is a very real issue, and one with which you are concerned.

We have to get educated enough to recognize abuse's subtle symptoms in our kids and their families. Educate yourselves as thoroughly as possible. It would be disastrous to get you fired up to address this issue before you have a network in place. Contact your local social services and domestic violence agencies. Find out what kind of training is available.

Check out your local Child Protective Services agency. Find out which therapists are particularly skilled at dealing with abuse victims and go talk to them. Introduce yourself to your service agencies and begin a dialogue. Begin building a bridge between your church and social services. Offer to be on call for kids in shelters who have questions about God. Consider starting a foster program or a shelter within your church. Buy books on the subject, read up on abuse wherever you can, learn the dynamics of the cycle, and go online and research. Learn what the laws are in your state about mandated reporting and what happens when you do. Also find out what happens if an abuser is reported to law enforcement. What are the criteria for arrest?

## **Helping Teens through Grief**

Teens deal with grief differently than adults—and aren't as equipped to deal with it.

The grieving process is among the least understood subjects today. We're constantly barraged with death and violence in the news, movies, and on television, but when was the last time a grieving character received focused attention?

It's not surprising, as our society reflects these attitudes, that we don't know how to grieve. And few will escape this life without having to endure some degree of grief.

Teens are especially vulnerable in these times because they aren't nearly as equipped to deal with grief as adults, and they tend to deal with grief differently. The combination of adolescence, trauma, and crisis is difficult for teens to understand and endure. So it's important that youth workers become aware of how teens grieve—and how they can help them through the grieving process.

**Small Group Activity:**

What kind of life experiences may result in a grief response?

*Loss takes many forms, not just the death of loved ones. It can include divorce, leaving home, moving, changing a job, losing a job, childhood regrets, addictions, physical and mental abuse, retirement—even the death of a pet.*

One of the ways we can help the pain to get worked out is by giving ourselves permission to grieve (known as grief work). The grief process is a choice, and making that choice will go a long way to help grieving individuals recover and better understand their pain.

Understanding the grief process and what occurs during it is especially helpful at anniversaries. Some of the most common grief-triggering anniversaries are Father's Day, Mother's Day, birthdays, wedding anniversaries, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and especially the annual date of the event that caused the grief. Anniversary dates are so powerful they can trigger memories of taste, sound, and sight. These memories often spark reactions such as emotional outbursts, disorganization, loneliness, depression, anguish, anger, sleep disorders, and physical changes.

**The grieving process** doesn't necessarily follow in precise order and, in fact, the stages may overlap. Intensity, emphasis, and duration will vary according to the grieving person and the circumstance of the loss. An important thing to keep in mind is that the grieving process is very real to the person in grief—and sometimes isn't understandable to those of us trying to help. Grief isn't something we manufacture, it just happens. We have no control over our subconscious that brings about these memories.

Dealing with grief isn't pleasant—especially when teens are in the middle of it. The grieving process is full of pain; it's hard work. As much as we'd like to take

away our students' pain when loss occurs in their lives, we know all we can do is offer support.

We can empower our young people by giving them knowledge of the grieving process.

- Grief recovery is a choice.
- Grief recovery is a growth process.
- Use available resources, such as grief-recovery support groups.
- Teens in grief must realize they need to take a stance in facing their future, both on a short-term and long-term basis.
- They often have little physical or emotional energy to do anything but grieve. Encourage people helping teens in grief to assist in even the most minute tasks—but especially in making decisions.
- Let grieving teens know recovery isn't a place, a destination to be reached; it's a continual journey. A journey of hope, healing, and peace.
- Help them acknowledge their need for support from loved ones.
- They must invest themselves in practical, meaningful activities in order to bring about emotional healing.
- Encourage teens in grief to reach out to others so they put their hurt in perspective.
- They must not hurt themselves through bitterness. Encourage hope and release of their anger, pain, and frustrations.

Teens in grief must keep in mind that many others have experienced grief as well. This is the grievers' common thread with humanity: They walk a lonely path, but they don't walk it alone.

### **What to do if someone is suicidal**

If someone is in the process of attempting suicide get help urgently. Ring 000 for either the ambulance or the police. On the phone keep calm, explain the situation, give the address and relevant directions while at the same time staying to comfort and protect the person who is in danger.

If you suspect that someone is feeling suicidal, ask them about it. If they say 'yes', find out what they are planning to do, when and how. Assure them that they are not alone, that you are there and that you care and want to help them. If the means they have of committing suicide is easily accessible and/or they have a clear plan, get professional help quickly. Contact a twenty-four hour counselling service such as [Lifeline](#).

A person may have suicidal thoughts but no definite plan. Assure them of your support and care. Allowing a person to talk about a distressing situation will often reduce their distress. Should you believe that a person is suicidal even though they deny it, share your concern with them and reassure them that you

are available should they need help. Your support in assisting them to get professional help is crucial as suicidal people often feel alienated and alone. Your support starts to break down the feelings of isolation. If you need advice as to how best to support them, ring a twenty-four hour counselling service.

Suicidal people often feel ambivalent. They are in a state of confusion. Part of them desperately wants to end the emotional pain, while another part pulls them back towards life. Be there for them. Support them. Show them you care. Remember whenever anyone talks, writes or hints about suicide, take them seriously, listen and find professional help. Individuals who have attempted suicide in the past are at serious risk.

### **Myths about suicide**

- ▶ People who think or plan to commit suicide keep their thoughts to themselves. Wrong: Eight out of ten people give warning signs.
- ▶ Those who talk about suicide won't do it. Wrong: Suicide, contemplated or attempted is a cry for help.
- ▶ People who talk about suicide are attention-seeking. Wrong: All cries for help must be listened to and responded to.
- ▶ Suicidal people are intent on dying. Wrong: The majority of suicidal people give warning signs. If they were intent on dying they wouldn't communicate any intention. The vast majority don't want to die. They want their intense emotional pain to end.
- ▶ Talking openly about suicide may cause a suicidal person to end their life. Wrong: Talking about suicidal feelings gives the suicidal person permission to communicate. By responding to them you show them that you care and that you're there to help.
- ▶ All suicidal people are crazy. Wrong: The majority of people who commit suicide do not have a mental illness. They are everyday people who are feeling isolated, desperately unhappy and alone at that time.
- ▶ Only certain types of people commit suicide. Wrong: Suicidal thoughts, feelings, actions can affect anyone from any social class, religion or strata of society.

#### *Websites*

[American Association of Suicidology](#)

[Australian Institute of Family Studies](#)

[Beyond Blue](#)

[DepressionNet](#)

[JustLook](#)

[Kids Help Line](#)

[LifeForce](#)

[Linkz02](#)

[MoodGYM](#)

[Out of the Blues](#)

[Reach Out](#)

[YBBLUE](#)

[Youth Suicide Prevention New](#)

[Zealand](#)

[Lifeline](#)

## **The Inescapable Privilege** *by Tony Campolo*

### **.Opening Pandora's Box**

Good personal evangelism relates the gospel to the needs of individuals. In talking to their kids about these needs, youth workers will find themselves deeply involved with the social-psychological problems of the teenagers they counsel. Listening to young people in personal counseling situations can open Pandora's box. Youth workers frequently discover that what they thought would be nothing more than a simple presentation of the Four Spiritual Laws ends up in a discussion of deep-seated social and psychological maladjustments. Often without realizing what they are getting into, youth workers who try to share Christ with teenagers find themselves in sessions that require that they function as much like amateur psychologists as messengers of the word of God. As youth workers become friends with the kids they serve, those young people will more than likely share their deep problems with them.

However youth workers are involved with their teenagers, there is little doubt that what is told to them in personal counseling will be more than they had bargained for. Recent studies have revealed that nearly 15 percent of all children have been sexually molested, and that 20 percent of all teenage females have had to endure rapes. Such trauma can lead to severe psychological maladjustments that can surface quickly in the context of loving conversation.

Like it or not, we may be forced to listen to painful descriptions of things which young people are desperate to reveal. Youth workers who are readily available find themselves inundated with teenagers, anxious to unburden themselves of problems too heavy for them to handle alone. The pressures that come from being an available counselor may be more than the average youth worker can handle.

Youth workers, especially those who feel driven by some theological imperative to meet the needs of every teenager, are soon burned out and become vulnerable to self-destruction.

### **The Dependency Syndrome**

We must be aware that those who need counseling often can appear to be psychologically unable to survive without constant attention. Often youth workers will find that one or two young people, if permitted to do so, will eat up their entire work week. The dependency syndrome which can develop through counseling is even more dangerous. Too often counseling can psychologically enslave teenagers so that they feel they cannot survive without the constant involvement of their youth worker. This may be ego gratifying for us, but it

usually results in very sick relationships. Dependent teenagers often fall in love with their youth workers and can become quite sexually seductive in pursuing an ongoing relationship. Youth workers, particularly those who have inordinate needs for self-importance, have a hard time resisting such adoration. The results can be disastrous.

Along with the dangers youth workers face due to the pressures inherent to counseling, some therapeutic professionals argue that counseling is too dangerous to be left in the hands of amateurs clothed in the garb of youth workers. These critics claim that youth workers who do not have the insights and the professional skills of trained, certified counselors ought not to be messing in the complex lives of young people. They feel that amateurs can do more harm than good.

### **Acknowledge Your Limits**

There are dangers to both counselor and counselee any time one human being seeks to help another at a significant psycho-spiritual level. What we in youth work must do is to understand both our potential, and our limits, as they relate to counseling. We must both seek to gain as much knowledge and help from the professional therapeutic field as we possibly can and learn to ascertain what types of situations and problems are outside the limits of our abilities and need to be referred to trained, licensed professionals.

What might those limits look like? First of all, we amateurs are usually out of our depth when the people that we're counseling are dangerous to others or to themselves. A working knowledge of the symptoms of suicidal tendencies is essential. We should also strive to be able to recognize the symptoms of sociopaths who pose violent threats to the health and well-being of those around them. Secondly, we need to develop a better understanding of the unique characteristics which establish the differences between psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and psychiatry. A knowledge of who can do what is crucial if we are to make truly helpful referrals. We could mistakenly assume, for example, that the ongoing depression of a particular teenager is due to psychological causes, when, in reality, the depression may be biophysically based. If we know enough to figure out that the latter is the case, a referral could be made to a psychiatrist who would be able to prescribe the necessary medication.

Believe it or not, we don't need a graduate degree to be able to determine which kind of help is needed, and it's worth the effort to learn how to do this. We can read some authoritative textbooks on abnormal psychology and attend counseling seminars. There is a place for amateur counselors in youth ministry,

but there is no excuse for uninformed amateurs—especially when so many good resources are available.

If referrals are necessary, we should be able to direct troubled teenagers to professional counselors who have views of personhood that are in harmony with the Christian orientation which we ourselves espouse. The concept of the nature of the self held by a therapist determines how they will work with and direct their client. There are many horror stories of young people whose lives have been messed up because well-meaning pastors and youth workers have referred them to therapists whose understanding of human nature was at odds with the Christian faith.

What is our potential as counselors? We can have a vital role with youth who come to us for counseling. If we have a firm grasp of how the Bible relates to personal problems, we can assist troubled kids to discover how God wants them to change. When young people go to church leaders for counsel, it is partly because they really want to learn what God has to say about their problems.

What about me?

Most people involved in the helping professions are remarkably resistant to seeking help for themselves, and youth workers are no exception. But whether we seek help within our own denominations or outside them, it is imperative that we are open to seeking the help that we need before we consider ourselves ready to reach out to our young people.

### **Maintain Strong Boundaries**

Boundaries eliminate possible confusion in students' minds as to what's acceptable and what's not. Boundaries also help students feel some sense of normalcy—and give you control over your life.

Don't give students your mobile phone number. If you make yourself too accessible, you teach them to rely on you, not God. And if you fail to return their calls, you'll reinforce their sense of abandonment. If you tell them they can call anytime, they'll take that literally, expecting that you're waiting by the phone to answer.

Don't arrange to meet outside of set contact times or in isolated places. If a young person appears deeply upset, don't be drawn in, but ask for advice from senior staff. Let the young person know that you will be available to meet them at an appropriate time and place chosen by you.

## **Don't Compromise Authority at the Expense of Rapport**

You may not want to confront students too strongly because they're afraid the exchange will hinder students from confiding in them—that their authority will compromise their rapport with students.

This is false and destructive to students, especially parentless students. They're desperate for security—and they don't know where the lines are. They need the assurance that comes with the authority of parents. So don't look the other way when they do something or say something inappropriate. When youth workers are perceived by students as peers, those youth workers will never be perceived as authoritative role models. Besides, if you're just like their friends, they won't trust that you can offer them anything they aren't already getting from their insufficient network.

**Affirm their value.** Your students are so valuable to God that they cost the life of his son, Jesus. While we're not worthy of that sacrifice, we certainly are not worthless. So treat your students with respect and honor. Don't be afraid to verbalize your love and care. You must tell hurting students they are loved. Let them know when they're doing good things—and lovingly tell them when they're not. There is healing and power in truthful, spoken words (Proverbs 16:24).

**Recognize their potential.** Look for anything and everything positive about your hurting students. Help them cultivate their talents, gifts, and abilities. Give them realistic dreams of what they can accomplish (i.e., you can see them being effective in business or working well with little children).

But don't just recognize their outward abilities—note their inner qualities as well. Tell them when they're relationally engaging, compassionate, patient, thoughtful, et cetera.

Listen to them. Be intense about hearing what they are saying. Ask clarifying questions. Always check the emotions of the conversation as well as the content of the conversation. Ask them what they're feeling about the things they're saying. This will help you connect with and understand them. And it'll also affirm to students that you understand them.

**Don't be afraid to use meaningful touch.** This is often missing from emotionally abandoned students' lives. But we live in a litigation-happy society that's impaired our ability to be Christ's hands to students. We need to combat this by building healthy, intimate, parenting relationships for students reinforced by appropriate, parent-reflective touch. In other words, as the relationship deepens, show the appropriate affection that loving parents would show.

**Share dreams for their spiritual lives.** Show them how God rescued abandoned teens. Give them a vision of Joseph and Daniel, two teens in Scripture who were abandoned and then prospered because they were plugged

into God. Let them know that God desires intimate relationships with them, and then be the conduit through which he can accomplish that in their lives. Help them to see that in Christ, "Old things pass away and all things become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

**The emerging role of youth workers:** Most child and youth development researchers concur that millennial kids are exposed to more experiences and information once available only to adults—and at the same time are protected less by the adults and communities that surround them. Because our kids are exposed to more and protected less, we need to help rebuild the walls of protection that ought to surround them, while at the same time, tear down the walls of division and hostility.

### **A new set of questions:**

Are our kids—

- experiencing love and support from their parents, along with clear boundaries, enforced consequences, positive communication, and parental involvement in school?
- relating to several caring adults who model positive behavior and who encourage them to do well and aim high?
- participating consistently in healthy and positive activities, community service, creative arts, and extracurricular programs?
- engaging meaningfully in their education and with their schools, doing their homework, and reading for pleasure regularly?
- choosing their friends wisely, spending time with peers who model positive behavior, and nurturing cross-cultural friendships?
- building a clear sense of identity and hopeful views of their futures, making wise decisions, and feeling safe at home, school, and in their communities?
- applying what they believe to their daily lives, modeling restraint, taking responsibility for their actions, and caring for others?

The kids who are doing these things are almost never involved in high-risk behavior.

These questions can form the basis for a cycle of youth ministry programs.

These are also "Lordship" questions that reflect truly Christian world views in which Jesus is allowed access to all dimensions of life without any reservation, hesitation, qualification, or restriction.

### **Where do we go?**

- Become familiar with the research.
- Reflect on your own journey. Mentally and emotionally, walk back into your own ninth-grade experience. Enter your classroom, remember your

teachers, recall your friends, relive your memories, and allow yourself to feel again the joy and the fear of being a kid. Revisit your home, your parents, your siblings, your bedroom, and your memories.

- Reflect on those who had an influence on you, for better or for worse. Examine your choices, actions, decisions, and priorities. Get reacquainted with your past.
- Evaluate your own assets as a youth worker and their impact on your choices. Determine which of the 40 assets you're able to provide your students—and which might be available to them through your colleagues, church, neighbours, parents, and other resources. Ascertain which ones are available to your kids through other resources besides those that exist within your own circle. Discern which ones your kids lack.
- Define a comprehensive strategy that meets your kids where they are and provides the assets they need. Design two plans—one for the high-risk/low-asset student and one for the high-asset/ low-risk student. Commit yourself to remaining focused on this plan for as long as possible. Evaluate it regularly. Refine it as you see the need to.
- And finally, trust God. He is, after all, the chief cornerstone and the chief architect. Give your kids, their families, your church—and yourself—plenty of grace and time. "The One who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

### **Dealing with Rumours**

Rumors are a sticky issue, because we just don't know when they're true and when they're not. I hear statements like, "Everybody knows that Tammy smokes pot every weekend." My response is, "Have you or one of Tammy's friends talked to her about it?" If someone is genuinely concerned about Tammy, then that concern should lead the person to ascertain the rumour's authenticity.

We can cause more problems by taking every rumour at face value and taking action based on it. If the rumour isn't true and you call Tammy's parents, they get upset and Tammy gets in trouble for no reason.

### **When Confidentiality Must Be Broken**

There are times when the gray area becomes black and white. In such a situation, swift action must be taken. For instance, if you're certain that a student has moved beyond experimentation and is using an illegal drug regularly or engaging in the sale of drugs, parents should be notified. In this situation, depending on your relationship with the student, you may want to let him know you're going to the parents, especially if he'll likely find out anyway. Or you could offer him 24 hours to tell his parents himself, or offer for him to go with you.

If a student's talking seriously about taking her own life, it's also time for action. Remember that parents will always forgive you for erring on the side of caution. In the case of a student who you know or strongly suspect is being abused by his parents, huddle with a trusted church leader who can help you report it. Defending the defenseless must be a priority.

Unfortunately, there are few hard and fast rules. Crisis situations are complicated and must be navigated with prayer, wisdom, and the help of trusted advisers. Though one of the most important parts of the job of a youth worker, it's also one of the least tidy.

<http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/index.php>