

## At-Risk Young People

*“Now, crises have no inherent power to cement a teenager’s commitment to Christ. But, like surgery, they do have an unmatched power to open a teenager to deeper healing. The key: When the crisis hits, is there a passionate Christian engaged in the student’s life—not to answer unanswerable questions, but to offer determined love?”*

– Rick Lawrence, “The Tipping Point,” *Group Magazine* 01/02.2003, p. 15.

In general, it should be noted that it is best to be up front with youth about difficulties one is seeing rather than being afraid or treating it as a hidden issue.

### **Crisis #1: Substance Abuse**

**Signs:** There are multiple symptoms that manifest themselves in the young people, who have a problem with substance abuse. But the biggest and most common signs to watch out for are any extreme changes in physical appearance, personality, attitude, or behavior. For example ... increase or decrease in appetite, sweaty or shaky hands, change in friends, chronic dishonesty, difficulty paying attention...

#### **Ideas for Pastoral Care:**

- Refer adolescents to an Alateen group in your area or Teen Addictions Anonymous. Alateen is for teens who have someone with an addiction *in their family*, rather than for a teen who *has an addiction* themselves.
- Work with school and community leaders to develop broad based chemical dependency educational programs.
- Have programs dealing with the issues of self-identity, anxiety, expressing anger, etc. These often contribute to drug abuse.
- Working with teens to develop social skills through involvement in support groups (small groups), and teaching appropriate behavior.
- Be a facilitator in reconciling the teen with his or her family, and friends. This may be introducing the teen into a new peer group or finding a new role or place in a Christian community.

#### **Resources:**

- PRIDE (Parents’ Resource Institute for Drug Education) Youth Programs (<http://www.prideyouthprograms.org>)
- National Families in Action (<http://www.emory.edu/NFIA>)
- National Family Partnership (<http://www.nfp.org>)
- American Council for Drug Education (<http://www.acde.org>)
- National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (<http://www.health.org>)
- Mothers Against Drunk Driving (<http://www.madd.org>)
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (<http://www.ncadd.org>)
- Students Against Drunk Driving (<http://www.saddonline.com>)
- National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral and Routing Service (<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>)
- Teen Addictions Anonymous (<http://www.teenaddictionanonymous.org/the12steps>)

## **Crisis #2: Child Abuse and Neglect (Dating and Family Violence)**

### **Definitions:**

**Physical abuse** = is generally defined as “any non-accidental physical injury to the child” and can include striking, kicking, burning, or biting the child, or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child.<sup>1</sup>

**Neglect** = is frequently defined as the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child’s health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm.

**Sexual abuse** = is defined as acts of sexual assault and sexual exploitation of minors. Sexual abuse encompasses a broad range of behavior (e.g. incest, rape, intercourse, oral-genital contact, fondling of genitals or breasts, sexual propositions or enticement, indecent exposure, child pornography, or child prostitution) and may consist of many acts over a long period of time or a single incident. Sexual abuse is generally perpetrated by someone known to the child and often does not involve physical violence. Both boys and girls are victims of sexual abuse.

**Emotional abuse** = intentional injury to the psychological capacity or emotional stability of the child as evidenced by an observable or substantial change in behavior, emotional response, or cognition including anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behavior

**Signs:** There are many kinds of abuse: Physical, Sexual, and Emotional.

*Physical Abuse* signs for example could be... unexplained injuries (especially burns, bruises, or marks shaped as an object like a belt or fingers), disagreement in parent and child stories of injury, fearful, or withdrawn behavior, or fear of home. *Sexual Abuse* signs for example could be... running away, pregnancy, substance abuse, suicide attempts, and trouble with law, withdrawn, sexual references, or excessive bathing. *Emotional Abuse* types are as follows: 1.) rejecting- lack the ability to bond, make child feel unwanted, 2.) ignoring- unable to respond to emotional needs of the child, sometimes physically there, but not emotionally, 3.) terrorizing- parents single out a child to criticize or punish, have expectation beyond normal abilities, 4.) isolating- not allow a child to participate in appropriate activities with peers, restrict eating, or seclusion to their room, or 5.) corrupting- permit children to use drugs or alcohol, watch pornography, and participate in crime.

Dating Violence signs could be... one partner has extreme mood swings, one partner embarrasses the other in public, is controlling regarding friends, attire, or decision making, and there is tendency for one partner to talk to people in sexual ways.

### **Duty to Report:**

Anyone can report suspected child abuse or neglect, but if you are identified in the Code of Virginia as a mandated reporter or you have received training in recognizing and reporting suspected child abuse and neglect, you are required by law to immediately report your concerns to the local department of social services or to the Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline.

n.b.: Mandated Reporters include: *Administrators or employees, 18 years of age or older, of public or private day camps, youth centers and youth recreation programs*<sup>2</sup>

### **Ideas for Pastoral Care:**

#### ***Ministry to the Victim:***

Programming in this case is not as easy...But the victim does need 6 things:

- 1.) *Protection*, help in disclosing a vulnerable secret and getting away from immediate danger (if present).
- 2.) *Support*, this means being by their side and following up with them frequently.
- 3.) *Ventilation*, there is a need to create a safe space for the victim at the church offering your personal time to hang out, maybe grab a cup of coffee to talk.

- 4.) *Reassurance*, the teen needs to hear repeatedly that he or she “is not alone, and that abuse happens to many people.” Let the teen know that healing is possible and many people who are abused go on to have happy, holy, successful lives.
- 5.) *Consistency*, abused adolescents need someone who can tolerate their low self-esteem, and you need to be a person who keeps your promises, your word, is responsible, steady and faithful.
- 6.) *Appropriate intervention*, a teen who has been abused absolutely needs professional help by an objective professional who is specifically trained in dealing with abused teens.

### ***Ministry to the Parents***

The parents are also going to need ministering to, to help the young person. They also need 4 things from you and a pastoral care agent.

- 1.) *Support*, you need to express faith in the parent’s ability to care for their child and make decisions and about what must be done.
- 2.) *Ventilation*, many times parents are very angry at God and filled with rage. Non-judgmental listening allows for a non- violent outlet for this anger. Being there to listen and taking time to talk are very important.
- 3.) *Faith*, helping parents examine suffering and violence in this world, maybe connecting them to another family who has survived dealing with abuse. While we do not know *why* particular suffering and trials occur, we can be confident that Jesus suffers with us and wants to redeem our wounds.
- 4.) *Stress Reduction*, many times these parents will be dealing with the stress of the legal system you can help with maintaining structure, and stress reduction techniques.

### **Resources:**

- Virginia Department of Social Services  
([https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/dfs/cps/intro\\_page/publications/general/B032-02-0280-00-eng.pdf](https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/dfs/cps/intro_page/publications/general/B032-02-0280-00-eng.pdf))

### **Crisis #3: Stress and Anxiety**

**Signs:** There are many changes and stressors in a teen’s life. Some of these problems can be as simple as school demands, or frustrations, to negative thoughts about themselves, changes in their bodies, divorce of parents, moving, being over committed, or struggling with family financial problems. Stress that is unattended to can turn into anxiety, cause withdrawal, aggression, physical illness, or poor coping skills like drug and alcohol use.

#### **Ideas for Pastoral Care:**

- Do some programming on skills such as
  - Time Management
  - Coping with loss
  - Prayer (Letting go, trustful surrender to God’s loving providence in every circumstance)
  - Stress relievers
- Also be aware of overloaded schedules.
  - Address F.O.M.O. (Fear of Missing Out) – by establishing healthy boundaries and being able to say ‘no’ even to good opportunities that would overburden one’s schedule; and by focusing on what really matters in life.
- Be a model yourself of stress management skills.
- Creating good community within your youth ministry- to have a network of support in each other.

#### **Crisis #4: Grief and Loss** (Death, Disasters, and Divorce)

**Signs:** There are different signs and ways of dealing with a loss. Expect anything in the process of a teen in grief. The five stage model (i.e. denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) is not the only way to grieve. Grief will be different according to the age of the teen, the relationship to the deceased, unexpectedness of the loss, circumstance surrounding the loss, need for forgiveness of self or the deceased, and the teen's previous experience with loss. They have the right to grieve in whatever way they want, if not harming themselves or others.

##### **Ideas for Pastoral Care:**

- This is a delicate *programming piece*, although good to address if there is a local disaster or loss that affects multiple teen's in the youth ministry program. Other programs that can be done throughout the year to help with loss are: reaching out to God, dealing with your feelings, being responsible for themselves- learning how to let others know what they need and want.
- *One-on-one*: Dealing with a teen in the grief process, simply walking with them in however they deal with the loss can be exactly what they need. Never act like you know what they are going through, or that they should move on, do set limits and follow routines.

#### **Crisis #5: School Violence and Gangs**

**Signs:** Any kinds of threats are a red flag for violence or gang participation. A threat to killing someone, themselves, of running away, or of destroying property are to be taken very seriously. Gang involvement signs are as follows: abrupt changes in a child's friends, changes in dress- same color combo all the time, gang symbols on books or clothing, secretive about activities, unexplained large sums of money, sudden behavioral changes, and problems with the police.

##### **Ideas for Pastoral Care:**

- Get to know their friends, talk to them about how they spend their free time, and make an effort to get to know their parents.
- Implement supervised group activities, after school programs, social weekend activities, athletics, or volunteering.
- Connect teens to positive peer and mentor relationships in order to meet their desire for belonging in a healthy manner.
- Have a program on good communication skills. (Good to have a parent-teen communication night). Also include other family activities.
- Be aware yourself of gangs in your community, as well as the symbols and signs associated with each individual group.

#### **Crisis #6: Depression and Suicide**

**Signs:** Some warning signs of Depression or Suicide can be: frequent sadness or crying, decreased interest in activities, low energy, social isolation, low-self esteem and guilt, extreme sensitivity, increased irritability, and difficulty with relationships and many others. If suicide is in the picture, there can be talk of killing oneself, poems or writings about death, self-injury, and giving away belongings.

##### **Ideas for Pastoral Care:**

- *Programming* about suicide and depression can be tricky. Maybe have a program on how to help your friends with depression or suicide, (a little less direct). Have a program focusing on the future; discuss it in a positive manner. Having a program on God as all-powerful and able to handle anything may be comforting to those who feel alone and helpless.
  - It is especially important to address the topic when suicides occur within the community or when one's idols/role models (e.g. rock stars, actors and actresses) commit suicide. There are such things as "Copycat" suicides, in which one is influenced by the negative model provided by someone important in their life.
- *One-on-one*: offer help, and listen, never lecture. Trust your instincts when dealing with a possibly suicidal teen and seek immediate help. Pay attention to talk about suicide even small

comments, make sure you investigate. Suicidal thoughts can occur even at young ages and should be taken at face value – seriously.

**Resources:**

- Suicide Hotline (1-800-SUICIDE) (<http://suicidehotlines.com>)
- American Association of Suicidology (<http://www.suicidology.org>)
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (<http://www.afsp.org>)
- National Institute of Mental Health (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>)
- National Mental Health Association (<http://www.nmha.org>)

**Crisis #7: Eating Disorders**

**Signs:** Are to be looked for in both boys and girls. Although the highest demographic of eating disorders are found in middle-upper class, white and Asian girls, that is not the only group it hits. Eating disorders are most of the time control issues. Signs to look for in someone suffering from an eating disorder are: *anorexia*- intense fear of weight gain or being fat, feeling fat although dramatic weight loss, loss of menstrual cycles. *Bulimia*- repeated episodes of bingeing and purging, feeling out of control when eating, eating beyond comfortable fullness, frequent dieting, extreme concern with body weight and shape, as well as hiding one's eating patterns.

**Ideas for Pastoral Care:**

- Programming is something that indirectly can help with the causes of eating disorders. Some programs you might include are: nutrition, taking care of yourself (body), God is in control, God is constant, Self-Esteem or self-image, Created in God's Image.
- One-on-one is where you can be supportive of the individual, especially when the disorder is revealed. Do not ever over-simplify an eating disorder, do not ever be judgmental, do not confront the person as a part of a group, do not diagnose the person, do not argue if the person denies the problem just calmly repeat what you have seen, and lastly do not be inactive during an emergency if it is severe seek professional help.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/define.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/dfs/cps/intro\\_page/publications/general/B032-02-0280-00-eng.pdf](https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/dfs/cps/intro_page/publications/general/B032-02-0280-00-eng.pdf)