

The Basics of Counseling Youth

Are These Your Kids

The youth of today are living in a complex and rapidly changing world. Many are faced with instability in the home, extreme peer pressure in school, and bombardment by a promiscuous media culture that promotes an “anything goes” worldview. A growing percentage of these young people are angry, confused, disillusioned, lonely, uncertain, and fearful of the future. Many trust no one while at the same time they ache for acceptance and strong relational bonds that are emotionally and physically safe and rewarding. What they want is approval, acceptance and security.

Their life experience, thus far, has taught them that they are often over looked, as having nothing meaningful to contribute or they are ridiculed and characterized as ignorant empty-headed and problematic. In both cases, they have been rejected as having little or no value as people. Is it any wonder that their behavior is often disrespectful, abusive and in all too many cases, destructive.

I know what you are thinking; “this is not true of all teenagers and certainly not of my children!” You may be right. Your family is different. You and your spouse are a loving, peaceful couple. Your children are well-adjusted, compliant kids who love and respect you both. They are all high achievers in school and have numerous friends. Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Clever, on a job well done. May I say that your family is not the norm and in fact, would be the exception in today’s society. But beware, for out of some of our finest homes troubled young people have emerged at the bewilderment of their parents!

Helping Grieving Parents

Counseling troubled teens is not limited to the offending youth. It would be a serious mistake to focus exclusively on the behavioral problems of the troubled teen to the exclusion of the family dynamics. This is a family affair where all members would benefit from a Christ centered counselor.

When a parent is faced with such a dilemma, how should you respond? May I suggest the following for your consideration?

The parent’s first response is usually shock. It may sound something like this. “I’m sorry Officer Dooley; I . . . I can’t believe that my Johnny could possibly be involved in such a thing. You must be mistaken! Tell him Johnny. Tell him! Tell the officer that you didn’t do it. “

Can you sense the tension, the anxiety on the part of the parents? They are experiencing shock, disbelief, confusion and helplessness. This is the normal response associated with grief. As this episode unfolds and the stress continues to mount, the parents may experience crying, anger, irritability, guilt, frustration, shame, sleeplessness and fear. There may also be accompanying physical symptoms: neck, back and muscle pain; upset stomach, diarrhea, constipation; weight loss; feelings of

weakness, fatigue, emptiness or heaviness; restlessness, hyper activity, feeling “wired”, headaches, chills, sweats, chest pain, etc. Assure them that what they are feeling is normal. They are not crazy. Help them to express their pain in a healthy, non-combative way.

The next emotional hurdle will probably be denial. This is the struggle to accept the reality of Johnny’s behavior. There may be attempts to minimize the situation or to shift the blame to someone else. “Don’t cry Mary. It’s not as bad as it looks. I’m sure when the truth comes out . . . You remember dear, that new boy at school, Johnny’s friend Nick. I never did feel good about him. I was sure he was trouble from the start! He’s got to be the one behind all this.”

Encourage them to face the situation honestly and to be proactive in their response. If they express feelings of fear or rejection from friends, family or others, assure them of your support and stand firm in your resolve to walk with the family to the best of your ability. Do what you can to recruit allies in an effort to establish meaningful community. Believe me they will need it.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

As a Christian, it is of the utmost importance to always remember the critical role of the Holy Spirit in counseling youth. “We certainly do need the Holy Spirit’s guidance when counseling someone.”¹ “Counseling is the work of the Holy Spirit. Effective counseling cannot be done apart from him . . . Counseling, to be Christian, must be carried on in harmony with the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Spirit.”²

The ultimate goal in counseling teens is not behavioral modification, but rather a heart change, the renewing of the mind with the Word of God and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. This is a supernatural work of grace that goes beyond the work of human endeavor. The Apostle Paul said “. . . let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.”³ (2 Corinthians 3:18). “The Holy Spirit is the source of all genuine personality changes that involve the sanctification of the believer, just as truly as he alone is the One who brings life to the dead sinner . . . How can counseling that is removed from the means of grace expect to effect the permanent changes that come only by grace?”⁴

While gifting, experience, education, methodology and technique are important aspects of counseling, we must remind ourselves, as Christian counselors that we are in a divine partnership. We do not rely exclusively on our or wisdom and understanding. We are to “Trust GOD from the bottom of your heart; don’t try to figure out everything on your own.”⁵ We have the Lord’s promise of the Holy Spirit, the chief counselor, that he will impress his thoughts upon our minds, giving us needed words of wisdom and knowledge, discernment and prophetic utterance (John 16:7- 8).

¹ Assessment in Counseling, by Dr. Stan DeKoven pg. 4

² Competent to Counsel, by Jay Adams pg. 20

³ Romans 12:2 (NLT)

⁴ Competent to Counsel by Jay Adams pg. 21, 22

⁵ Proverbs 3:5 (The Message)

We need his counsel as we endeavor to guide our youthful counselee through his or her pain into meaningful and lasting change. In this way, we are able to bring the hope that is in Christ into the counseling session.

Where There Is Life There Is Hope

One of the key components that must also be considered in counseling youth is hope. From beginning to end, the counselor must be the champion of hope. With empathy and prayer, you must try to instill a legitimate sense of expectation regarding the future. In the book of Proverbs, we read that “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when dreams come true, there is life and joy.”⁶

I am not talking about promoting hyperactive spirituality but a balanced approach between our honest expressions of grief and our secure hope in God. I know that grief work is an important phase of recovery, but there are too many young people and parents who get stuck here and never move on in their visible lives. The prophet Jeremiah expresses the balance of grieving and focused hope.

“He has made me grind my teeth on gravel. He has rolled me in the dust. Peace has been stripped away, and I have forgotten what prosperity is. I cry out, ‘My splendor is gone! Everything I had hoped for from the LORD is lost!’ The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss.”⁷

We must help them see the truth beyond the pain and recognize that there is hope in Christ Jesus. Notice again the prophet Jeremiah as he now looks to God.

“Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The unfailing love of the LORD never ends! By his mercies we have been kept from complete destruction. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each day. I say to myself, ‘The LORD is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!’⁸

Never cease to be a champion of hope. You and those you desire to help will both benefit.

Promise Less, Give More

Always keep your word. The troubled teen you are counseling must come to understand that you can be trusted. There is a high probability that his or her life is filled with a succession of broken promises. The Psalmist writes, “We keep our promises even when it hurts.”⁹ Never promise anything you cannot deliver. Error on the side of caution, it is always better to promise less and give more.

⁶ Proverbs 13:12 (NLT)

⁷ Lamentations 3:16-20

⁸ Lamentations 3:21-24

⁹ Psalm 15:4

Authenticity

To build trust you must be authentic, genuine, not false. You must be true to your own personality, spirit, and character. There are times when, because of our own desire to be accepted, we may be tempted to present ourselves in a way that is artificial. The Apostle Paul said it so well, “But by the grace of God I am what I am.”¹⁰ One of the needed messages for troubled youth today is that they are God’s creation, unique, acceptable and loved by Him as they are. If we believe this message to be true, then we need to model that truth with confidence. You are who you are by His grace! You don’t have to dress down, speak the language or learn the secret hand shake to be able to relate in a relevant way.

Being authentic also implies sincerity of intention. We are in a “caring profession.” The young person before you and his/her family expect that you are genuinely concerned. This is a legitimate expectation. Why else would you agree to work with them? Pastor Charles Swindoll reminds us “Fragile and delicate are the feelings of most who seek our help. They need to sense we are there because we care . . . not just because it’s our job.”¹¹

Remember that you are dealing with youth that have been hurt by falsehood, deception, manipulation etc. While they may be very confused about who they are and how they fit in this crazy, upside down world, they can also be very discerning about your motive for seeing them.

The Role of Empathy

When Bob came to see me for the first time he was discouraged and broken over his recent behavior. His father and grandfather before him were both ministers and he himself knows that the call of God is on his life. “I love the Lord and I am ashamed of my recent behavior. I’ve been drinking, smoking, visiting pornographic internet sites and masturbating. I have disappointed everyone who loves me.”

As I sat and listened to Bob, strong emotion began to well up inside me. I could sense the genuineness of his pain! He was in anguish and desperate for hope of change. “Bob, what do you think God wants you to do at this time?” “I don’t know, pray more, try harder . . . (crying) I have resisted the Holy Spirit . . . I have been prideful . . .” “I can understand Bob. I have had similar issues of pride and self will. The good news is that God loves you and with His help, change is possible. Let me share with you some of my own struggles and how I found hope in Christ.”

I shared some of my struggles and the biblical principles, which in time brought me lasting freedom. As I shared some of the intimate details of my life, Bob knew that I identified with his pain. I was able to affirm his personhood without compromising the biblical standard regarding his response to Christ’s authority in his life. I assured Bob that he too could find forgiveness and reconciliation with God and his family. By this time, we both had tears in our eyes as we humbly went to God in prayer. It was a great

¹⁰ 1Corinthians 15:10a NIV

¹¹ Illustrations Unlimited

session. Bob was ready to invest himself and was genuinely hopeful about the days ahead.

“A little girl was sent on an errand by her mother. She took much too long in coming back. Mother, therefore, demanded an explanation when she finally did return. The little girl explained that on her way she had met a little friend who was crying because she had broken her doll. “Oh,” said the. Mother, “then you stopped to help her fix her doll?” “Oh, no,” replied the little girl. “I stopped to help her cry.”¹²

Clinical Neutrality vs. Honest Engagement

May I voice a personal bias here? How can we hope to be God’s hand extended into the lives of troubled youth, to instill hope, and bring about meaningful change, if all we do is parrot their responses back to them in an attempt to remain neutral? As Christian counselors how can we remain true to God and hope to help troubled teens if we take a position of disengagement? If we hope to effectively serve our young client, we will have to choose where we will be aligned. We must enter into their lives with empathy and speak the truth of God as revealed in scripture. In doing so we will have plowed the field of their hearts and sown the seed of His word in preparation for the Holy Spirit to perform his miracles of grace.

“God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love--like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do.”¹³

“To be in touch with God’s truth is to be in touch with reality and to live in accord with that reality makes for a better life . . . There is always safety in the truth, whether it be knowing God’s truth or knowing the truth about yourself.”¹⁴

Appropriate Confrontation

As we engage teenagers in counseling, we must be very careful about our attitude and avoid any air of superiority by being gentle and respectful in our demeanor and in our speech.

“BRETHREN, IF any person is overtaken in misconduct or sin of any sort, you who are spiritual [who are responsive to and controlled by the Spirit] should set him right and restore and reinstate him, without any sense of superiority and with all gentleness, keeping an attentive eye on yourself, lest you should be tempted also.”¹⁵

Appropriate confrontation is constructive not hurtful. Our attitudes and words should always prove to be beneficial, aiding in the emotional and spiritual development of the counselee. This necessitates a measured response on our part, choosing our words

¹² Illustrations Unlimited

¹³ Ephesians 4:15 (The Message)

¹⁴ Boundaries, by Cloud & Townsend, pg.35

¹⁵ Galatians 6:1 (AMP)

carefully. If we use truth recklessly like a club we will irritate and provoke the troubled youth whose emotional state may already be unstable.

“Let no foul or polluting language, nor evil word nor unwholesome or worthless talk [ever] come out of your mouth, but only such [speech] as is good and beneficial to the spiritual progress of others, as is fitting to the need and the occasion, that it may be a blessing and give grace (God's favor) to those who hear it.”¹⁶

Don't Give Up On Troubled Youth

“Who dares to say that the God whose only work is love cannot redeem even the tragedy of one's current circumstance or the terrible abandonment of troubled youth? Who knows what adventure of self God yet holds in store? . . . Pastoral caregivers and other concerned adults must, by their own intentional initiatives, court relationships with troubled youth in order to effect needed change. We must steel our courage to penetrate young people's seemingly impervious facades and thereby elicit their concerns and stories.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Ephesians 4:29 (AMP)

¹⁷ Counseling Troubled Youth, by Robert Dykstra pg. 123