

"I am really sorry that you are going through this."

"I've noticed some changes in you recently, and I am worried about you."

"Can you tell me about the person/thing you lost?"

"On a scale of 1-10, how are you feeling right now?"

"Sometimes it's hard for me to trust God in painful situations."

"This must be so hard for you. What can I do to help?"

"I don't know why this happened."

"How can your friends care for you? What do you need from other middle schoolers around you?"

"You are not alone. We can take the next step together."

"When you're ready, I'm here to provide whatever support you may need."

## A Volunteer's Guide to . . .

# Talking About Crisis



with Middle Schoolers



# How to Talk About Crisis

64% of kids experience an Adverse Childhood Event (or ACE), many of which occur during or before middle school years.<sup>1</sup>

→ What actually is a crisis? After all, if you've spent much time with a middle schooler, you know that even normal experiences can feel dramatic. Big (and new) emotions can be challenging to manage during this phase, but an emotional moment is different than a crisis situation. Crisis may look like the loss of a family member, a change in living arrangements, sexual or physical abuse, being bullied, or even a developmental change (like puberty) that feels really scary. By definition, a crisis is a real or perceived threat that disrupts a child's normal degree of functioning (e.g., physically, emotionally, and/or mentally), thereby requiring immediate support.

While we can't prevent negative experiences, as volunteers, we can create a safe place where students feel valued and supported.

**In this Phase . . .** As a volunteer, your role is to **affirm their personal journey** by reminding them that they are not bad or broken if they have negative thoughts in response to what they are experiencing. You can also remind them that they are capable of finding healthy coping skills and can make wise decisions.

**Middle schoolers are motivated by acceptance.** Middle schoolers may struggle to articulate what they are feeling, and since they want to be accepted, they may give answers they think you are looking for. It's important for you to be a question-asker and validate their feelings.

## In Your Conversations . . .

### BEFORE

**Connect with your leadership.** Know what policies your church has as far as reporting if a teenager is in danger and what resources you can point families to if children need extra support.

**Check-in with parents.** Ask how their student is doing and how you might encourage them. Let parents know you are here to be another voice of encouragement in their and their children's lives.

**Process your feelings.** A conversation about crisis may trigger feelings about experiences in your own life. Spend time reflecting on how you feel and process those feelings with other adults, if necessary, so you can engage students in a healthy way.

**Reflect on student behavior.** Think about how your student(s) behaves regularly so you can be aware of any changes, such as withdrawal, dark humor, or disinterest in their usual activities.

### DURING

**Identify and validate feelings.** Use a feelings wheel to help them name their emotions. Just being able to identify their feelings can actually help students decrease anxiety because it normalizes the emotion. Acceptance is very important at this age, so they need to feel that it is safe to have these heavy feelings.

**Follow their lead.** For some students, tragedy may bring up other struggles they are wrestling with, and you may need to help them process those situations, too. Other students may not feel as affected by the tragedy; don't try to force those students to feel something they don't.

**Ask questions.** Remember, your role is to listen and help students feel seen and valued.

**Don't resolve every tension.** Students may have big feelings or questions about why God allows things to happen. You don't need to talk them out of those feelings or rush to resolve the tension. Sometimes the best answer is, "I don't know" or "This must be really hard."

### AFTER

**Follow up with parents/guardians.** If a student shares something their parent needs to be aware of, connect with them to offer your support and point them to helpful resources.

**Connect students with resources.** If a student isn't safe, you will need to contact the appropriate people and agencies according to your church and community policies.

**Have fun together.** After difficult conversations and situations, it's important to engage in normal interactions so students feel safe. Schedule time for fun and encourage them frequently.

<sup>1</sup> Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC.