

"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 high 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 High Schoolers



How to Talk About Crisis

64% of U.S. adults report to having experienced at least one type of Adverse Childhood Event (ACE) before age 18.

→ While common, these painful experiences can create real challenges in high schoolers when it comes to their health, school performance, and ability to make wise choices.¹ So, what is a crisis? 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.

In high school, crisis may look like the death of a grandparent, a change in living arrangement, a really painful breakup, a sibling going away to college, the loss of a scholarship, sexual violence, or even a normal life event (like graduation) that just feels particularly scary.

Our job as leaders is to create a safe place where students can feel safe and valued, and connect with parents to offer support.

In this Phase . . . As a volunteer, your role is to **mobilize their potential**. That means giving them *tools* and *support* to deal with a crisis situation without assuming they can handle it all by themselves (even if they say so).

High schoolers are motivated by freedom. So rather than presenting your plan to move forward, offer ideas or options where they can choose a path of their own. Empower them to choose healthy coping skills while supporting them so they know they are not alone.

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 they 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 support them and their students.

Process your feelings. A conversation about crisis may trigger feelings about experiences in your own life. Spend time processing those feelings 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. Listen to these feelings without judgment.

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. High schoolers feel empowered when they come to their own conclusions. Asking good questions can be more helpful than offering solutions.

Honor parents. When a crisis happens, students may share the ways they are frustrated with their parents. While it can be tempting to agree with your student, instead try to build a bridge between parents and their kids (unless of course, a student is harmed or unsafe).

Don't resolve every tension. Students may have big questions about why God allows things to happen. Don't try 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 to outside support. If a student isn't safe, you must 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.

¹ *Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC.*