



As the rhythms of youth ministry have evolved and the nature of relational ministry has intensified I've learned some important lessons about how to better help hurting teenagers. I've learned most of what I know through trial and error—in my case, most often “error”—and collected my own set of “best practices.”

1. Recognize your role.

This is where good youth ministry has to start. For a lot of us who work with kids, our formal training in “people-helping” amounts to an Intro to Psych course we took back in college and a dose of *Doctor Phil* every couple of weeks. It's no wonder we feel flooded with inadequacy when teenagers share their heavy, tangled, and painful stories with us. The pressure to have the right answers and solve their problems quickly can be overwhelming.

So stop! Take a deep breath. Now, remind yourself that we're not shrinks...we're shepherds. That should be a very freeing reality check.

Our call is to walk with young people on their journey toward personal and spiritual maturity. We thread our way into the details of their adolescent lives and “give what we have to give”—stability, wisdom, and relational connectedness. As we're present in their lives, we pay close attention to their ups and downs—pointing them toward nourishment, protecting them from harm, offering healthy alternatives, and gently tending to the routine wounds that inevitably surface.

Ezekiel 34 focuses on the tragedy of shepherds who fail in their role: “You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick, or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost...So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd and they are easy prey...” (Ezekiel 34:4,5 NLT).

When we position ourselves as therapists we're setting ourselves up to fail. If we think we can do the work of a therapist without formal training or monitored experience, we'll constantly feel

inadequate because we're attempting to provide something we're simply not equipped to give. There is no shame in recognizing our limits and living within them.

2. Learn to listen.

The best way to communicate care to hurting teenagers is to intentionally and actively listen to them. Listening is hard work and most of us aren't very good at it. Good listening takes practice, concentration, and selflessness. There's no skill more basic, yet no gift more profound, than to simply offer our undivided attention to a teenager who's sharing his story of pain, betrayal, or brokenness.

Listening well means we're paying attention to more than words—posture, tone of voice, facial expression, and even silence can speak volumes. When hurting kids know they're being truly heard, they communicate from their hearts. And unless we're tuned into that frequency our understanding will be shallow and our responses will feel trite and clichéd.

How do you know if you're listening well? A few simple questions to ask yourself as you spend time with teenagers:

- Who's doing all the talking? (File that under “D” for Duh!)
- Am I simply hearing words or am I tracking with the young person's emotions?
- Am I personally feeling appropriate emotions as the story unfolds—sadness, anger, helplessness? (That's called empathy, and it's a good thing.)
- Is my mind wandering—am I missing important details because I'm distracted by my own unrelated thoughts?
- Am I racing ahead, thinking about the profound thing I plan to say next (if this person ever stops to take a breath) instead of staying in the moment?
- Do I feel impatient, wishing they could move their story along more quickly?
- How comfortable am I with pauses and even extended times of silence—do I feel the need to fill those gaps with the sound of my own voice?
- Am I mostly asking questions or am I “fixing it” by giving advice?
- Am I making eye contact and is my body language open, inviting, and engaged?

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Most hurting kids need someone who's a listener first. But that doesn't devalue your response. Simple phrases communicate deep care, such as these:

- "I'd love to hear your story..."
- "Tell me more about..."
- "What happened next?"
- "How did that make you feel?"

Most teenagers don't have awake, engaged, alert, and curious adults around them, but it's what they long for—and when we offer these treasures to them we encourage them to take their first steps on a journey toward wholeness and hope.

3. Refer and report responsibly.

What do we do when we don't know what to do next? Because we're shepherds and not therapists we often feel like we're out of our depth (of course, professionals have these same feelings from time to time). We may hear a story that has legal ramifications, or there may be medical or physiological factors that complicate the situation. Perhaps we're hearing a teenager talk about suicide, abuse, or a serious addiction and we know we don't know the next step. Or maybe we're starting to feel overwhelmed by one high-maintenance kid who's consuming all of our time and energy.

The good news is that we always have the option of referring kids to someone who has the expertise, time, training, and experience the situation demands—or at least consulting with that person for advice.

But the key is we have to be honest, and it's not always that easy. Often we're reluctant to refer hurting students to a trained professional even though we know we can't take them much further ourselves. Why are we reluctant? Well, here's my list of answers, starting with a couple of ugly ones:

- My own need to be needed gets in the way—I want to be the hero.
- My pride—I don't want to look like I don't know what I'm doing.
- I haven't taken the time to become familiar with the resources in my community so I don't even know whom to turn to for help.
- Young people sometimes resist involving others (often they're afraid their confidentiality will be compromised) so, for the sake of not damaging my relationship with them, I keep flying solo for too long.
- And, sadly, I've learned from past experience that referring or reporting a complicated matter can sometimes complicate things even more.

Perhaps you can relate to something on my list. It's easy to rationalize our decision to go it alone, but after almost 40 years of walking with hurting teenagers through all kinds of crazy situations I'm more convinced than ever that we can't keep doing this alone. As a general rule we'll do more damage flying solo in a situation we're not equipped to handle than if we choose to involve others who can provide additional perspective and expertise.

When hurting kids know they're being truly heard, they communicate from their hearts.

Here are a few practical things to keep in mind.

- There are certain situations that *require* you to refer or report what you learn when you come alongside a teenager. Make sure you're familiar with the laws in your region and your own church's policies and err on the side of caution in applying those laws and policies. (For more in-depth information, go to the Web site of the Christian Legal Society at clsnet.org—run your cursor over the "Legal Aid" button, then click on "Find a Clinic" for a list of offices in your region.)
- Never go behind your kids' back to invite someone else into their story. Let them know whom you are involving, the reason you feel it's necessary, and the details of what can and should be shared.
- If it's appropriate, give them the option of being involved in the referral process. Ask them to tell their own story to the person you're referring them to, or invite them to be present when you take things to the next level.
- Don't abandon them once they've been referred. Remember that they chose to involve you in the first place because they trusted you. Even though a professional may be working with them now, what you have to offer them relationally is still very important.
- Referral is *not* failure on your part. Almost always, referral represents a humble and loving step you're taking on behalf of a teenager you care deeply about.

4. Build healthy boundaries.

Teenagers crave availability, acceptance, and authenticity in adults. In our desire to offer them these treasures we can be tempted to blur the boundaries that protect us from damaging our relationships, and our ministry.

- Your kids should know when you're available and when you're not. It's not healthy, or even tenable, to plant in kids an expectation that you're there for them 24/7/365. Unboundaried access leads to unhealthy co-dependence and will ultimately fuel resentment toward the very kids you once loved to serve. In the end burnout is inevitable.
- Spending time with teenagers is our job description, but we can't afford to choke off our adult relationships. We must maintain our adult connections to continue growing personally and spiritually. Do you spend at least as much social time with your adult friends as with the teenagers you work with?

FOUR VALUABLE LESSONS

—By Megan Hutchinson

What are the first steps to take when you're face-to-face with a hurting teenager? Here are my best "triage" guidelines:

- 1 Sometimes kids experience church best when they're away from the church itself. Go to neutral territory—aka Starbucks or Taco Bell—and use food or beverage to pave the way for a conversation.
- 2 Sometimes the greatest prayer is a silent one. When you don't have a clue what to say next, trust that God will show you what to do. Ask. Listen. Speak.
- 3 Teenagers need tangible, practical, regular, and ongoing care. This is exactly why we developed the Life Hurts-God Heals program—to give hurting kids life-long tools to help them through their pain (for more information, go to simplyyouthministry.com/life-hurts-god-heals).
- 4 Every hurting teenager needs to hear these six phrases, often:
 - I believe in you.
 - I am here for you.
 - You are going to get through this.
 - You can make good choices.
 - You are talented, gifted, and rare.
 - You matter.



Megan Hutchinson is a high school pastor at Saddleback Church in California, and she developed the *Life Hurts, God Heals* 12-step program that is helping free teenagers from damage and addiction in their lives.

WEB CONNECT

Read more of Megan's insights by going to: simplyyouthministry.com. Run your cursor over the "community" button, then click on the "articles" link.

- We're accepting, but not blindly accepting. We accept each teenager exactly where they're at in life—that's what Jesus did with the people he met. But like Jesus, we're not content to leave them where they are. Offering kids "mere" acceptance, with no intention of spurring growth in them, tells them that how they live means nothing to us. We offer our acceptance within appropriate boundaries of behavior and expectations.
- Uncensored self-disclosure is not true authenticity. Use wisdom in what you choose to show your kids in the spirit of authenticity—you can damage your relationships if you don't. Let Ephesians 4:29 guide you: "Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them" (NLT).

5. Don't be stupid.

Working with hurting kids can feel like walking in a minefield—it's often emotional, intense, and consuming. It's easy to lose perspective and react without forethought rather than responding in wisdom. So, in the interests of wisdom, a four closing imperatives:

- Avoid any situation that could appear to be compromising or cause suspicion or doubt. This means being careful about where and when you meet with teenagers, how you interact with them online, and even how you touch them. I'm not, of course, suggesting paranoia—we simply need an eyes-wide-open recognition of just how easy it is to be misunderstood.
- If you know you have a built-in vulnerability to slip into inappropriate patterns of relationship with kids, choose to step away from ministry. Make this choice yourself—don't wait for circumstances to choose for you, because you'll have already caused irreparable damage. Your choice to be responsible in this area will be a first step toward your own healing and a huge gift to the people you work with.
- Guard your primary relationships from intrusion. Simply, you'll hamstring your ability to do effective ministry if your marriage, your family, or your adult friendships are damaged or lost.
- Know your legal obligations and follow them without compromise.

It's a profound privilege to be a conduit for God's voice to a hurting generation—with this privilege comes profound responsibility. Jesus referenced a well-known prophecy by Isaiah when he explained the purpose of his ministry: "...Bring good news to the poor, comfort the brokenhearted, proclaim release to captives, and freedom for prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1-3). This is also a pretty fair description of our counseling ministry with teenagers—I can't think of a more significant way for us to invest our lives. ■



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WEB CONNECT

The Christian Legal Society is at clsnet.org.