

How to Minister to Students Struggling with Depression & Contemplating Suicide

In this guide, we will explore some of the procedures for ministering to students that are depressed and, in particular, are suicidal. This topic may be overwhelming and may cause you to feel “in over your head”. But the Lord has called each of us to minister to students in their mountain-tops and valleys. For some students, the valleys are incredibly deep. And we must venture down there to lift them up and help them get the mental and spiritual help they need.

In particular, we will look at warning signs of depression, myths about teenage depression, practical steps for minister to depressed teens, and what to do if a teen is suicidal. The main source for this material is Dr. Steven Gerali’s “What Do I Do When Teenagers Are Depressed And Contemplate Suicide”. If you would like a more in depth look about how to minister to depressed and suicidal teens, I recommend reading Dr. Gerali’s book. There are several other recommended books in the “Sources” section at the end of this training document.

Let’s start off with the typical symptoms and warning signs of depression

Symptoms and Warning Signs of Depression

As youth workers/ministers, there are some signs that we won’t be able to observe as easily (i.e. sleeping and eating patterns). But there are some warning signs that we can observe, sometimes more easily than parents due to the fact that we cultivate a non-familial relationship with our students. The six main warning signs for us to look for are:

- 1.) **Emotional Disposition** – Depressed teens often have pervasive feelings of sadness, despair, hopelessness, guilt, shame, worthlessness, anger, or fear. They may also feel hurt, unloved, and irritable.
- 2.) **Verbal Cues** – These cues are the ones we need to pay attention to most carefully. Teens may express despair or depression in their prayer requests, during small group discussion, or in conversation with their friends at youth group. Some key phrases to look for are
 - Nobody likes me
 - Something bad is going to happen
 - I’m never going to be happen again
 - Life sucks/I’m a loser
 - I just don’t want to get out of bed anymore

While this is not an exhaustive list, language similar to the statements listed above may indicate trauma or depression in a teenagers’ life.

- 3.) **Shifts in Appearance** – Sudden changes in style and appearance can indicate a feeling of hopelessness or “not having control” over life situations. Some examples are:
 - Sudden lack of self-care/hygiene

- Drastic increase in number of piercings
- Wearing dark clothing, make-up, and accessories
- Consistently wearing clothing items that easily cover the forearms (indication of self-harm)

Obviously some of these styles are perfectly normal, but when they are uncharacteristic of a particular teenager, they may be a warning sign that the student is depressed.

- 4.) **Risky Behavior** – Depressed teens often look for ways to escape from the pain and despair they are feeling by engaging in dangerous and risky behavior. This may include illegal activity (such as reckless driving, shoplifting, and drug/alcohol use), engaging in unprotected sexual activity, or self-harm (such as cutting, burning, pulling hair, etc.)
- 5.) **Anhedonia** – This is the inability to gain any kind of pleasure from anything. You may notice that a depressed teen is no longer excited by a sport or club that they loved. Even things like food, music, video games, and friends are no longer interesting or satisfying. This tends to be more noticeable in teenage guys than in teenage girls. As anhedonia sets in, you may notice teens bingeing on pleasurable activities to keep pleasure alive (i.e. staying up all night to play video games, listening to the same song over and over, or even masturbating/watching porn in unusual excess).
- 6.) **Suicide** – Depression often precedes suicide. The more severe the depression, the closer the teen may come to committing suicide. Depressed teens may show signs of suicide ideation, strategy, and even attempts.

Now that we have looked at some of the warning signs of depression, let's take a minute to dispel some myths about teenage depression. The book, "What Do I Do When Teenagers Are Depressed And Contemplate Suicide" offers more insight about this topic, but for the purpose of this training paper, we will focus on four key myths.

Four Myths About Teenage Depression

- 1.) **Teens will tell you if they're depressed** – While there are some instances where teens will indicate that they are depressed (usually on a prayer request card), many teens will remain silent. This is usually because they may lack the cognitive skills to wrap language around the complexity of negative feelings they are experiencing. This is particularly true for young men, but can also be true for young ladies as well.
- 2.) **Depression is a spiritual deficiency in the teenage** – While we do believe there are demonic spirits that can cause depression and suicidal thoughts, we must understand depression or suicidal thoughts are not a result of a spiritual deficiency. To say that it is can cause discouragement and even deeper depression. It can also cause for their faith to become a works-based faith, which is dangerous for their spiritual well-being.
- 3.) **Depressed teens tend to be loners** – There are no statistics that validate the notion that heavily networked teens experience less depression than those with few or no friends. But the fact is, teenager who are well-networked can experience severe depression. At the same time, withdrawal and isolation can be a symptom of depression, but even then some teens can stay connected to friends and be hiding a lot of emotional pain.
- 4.) **Tough love can make a teenager snap out of depression** – Depression can be taxing on everyone. Many parents and youth workers lose their patience with depressed teens and may resort to "tough love" to try making a teen snap out of their depression. This implies that depression is merely a state of mind and is an act of volition. We must understand that depressed teens do not choose their depression, nor can they just will it away. Tough love can be dangerous to a depressed teen and may be the final variable that pushes them towards suicide.

It is important for us to understanding the warning signs and myths surrounding teenage depression before we take any action to address and minister to depressed teens. Once we have evaluated the warning signs that a teenager may be displaying, it is important that we respond in an appropriate way. Below are some healthy ways of ministering to a depressed teenager.

Practical Actions for Ministering to Depressed Teenagers

The first thing that we must do is make sure that our youth group and individual small groups are marked by love. Jesus tells us in John 13:34-35 that our mark as Christians is our love for one another. It is this Christ-like love that brings hope to teenagers that are depressed and hurting. As adult leaders, we must model healthy love responses and behaviors. We must show teens how to console each other in healthy ways, how to seek out effective resources, and maybe even how to seek out professional help if the consolation is insufficient. Model and teach how to live in hope.

It is also important that we love unlovable teens all the time. Talk about this with your small group, model it from your leadership, and expect it as a hallmark of your ministry. If loving the unlovable becomes the norm in our youth ministry, it minimizes the need for dramatic attention seeking.

We must understand that depressed teens often times do seek out dramatic attention. They can create drama by making their feelings and hurts continually central in conversations, causing burnout in their friends and in adult leaders. Many times, teenagers will then turn to new people to share their plights in order to gain more sympathy and attention. The best way to control this cycle is to create strong, loving, and clear boundaries for depressed teens, including a network of professionals and caregivers outside of the youth ministry. The teens' parents, counselors, doctors, and (only) one youth leader should be part of this network. That one youth leader becomes the point person between the needy teens and the other leaders. When the teenager is in "high-need mode", they should be directed to the leader in charge of their care who can often stay abreast of their treatment plans through the family.

Finally, we should make sure to validate hurting teens' feelings, but dampen the drama. Sorry and pain shouldn't be dismissed or treated lightly, but common sense and an understanding of adolescent development can give parents and youth workers the discernment to understand when hurt and pain are appropriate or attention-seeking.

There may be cases in your ministry when a teenager becomes suicidal. During those moments of ministry, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and inadequate. However, if you follow the guidelines below, you can effectively handle the situation and share the hope of Christ!

What If A Teenager Is Suicidal?

These steps are meant to be taken in sequential order.

- 1.) **Know The Warning Signs** – Understanding the warning signs is paramount to preventing depressed teens from spiraling into suicide. Many times, teenagers will not tell you they are feeling suicidal so it is up to you to notice the warning signs.
- 2.) **Remain Calm** – Your steady sense of calm can bring a stabilizing peace to the situation. As long as the teen is with someone, they are much less likely to carry out their plans.
- 3.) **Don't Ever Take Suicide Talk Lightly** – Always confront teens in a timely and appropriate manner; even if you're sure they were joking, always informally pull them to the side and ask them about the suicidal talk.
- 4.) **Verbalize Your Thoughts and Concerns by Asking Straightforward Questions** – Don't be afraid to ask questions or make direct statements along the lines of what you're wondering, such as:
 - a. You haven't been yourself lately, and that concerns me. Is something wrong?
 - b. I've noticed you've been withdrawing from your friends and I'm concerned for you.
 - c. Do you ever feel like nobody cares? Do you think no one notices that sometimes you feel bad?
 - d. Are you feeling so bad that you want to kill yourself?
 - e. Have you thought about how you would commit suicide?
 - f. Do you have access to the weapon/pills?
 - g. Have you thought about when you would do it?

These questions will help you to gauge how serious the teen is about suicide, while simultaneously letting the teen know that you care about them.

- 5.) **Always Report Any Suicide Talk to the Youth Pastor** – A teen may want you to promise that you won't tell anyone about their suicidal talk. In those cases, only promise the teen that you will only act in their best interest. Immediately report it to the youth pastor. If the teenager is in immediate danger, bring the teen along with you.

Final Thoughts

Although suicide and depression are formidable foes, we must remember that God has equipped His church to prevail against the forces of sin and death. In Matthew 16, Jesus tells His disciples that the gates of Hell will not prevail against the church! So when you encounter a situation that feels overwhelming (such as depressed or suicidal teens), remember that victory is already yours. It is also important that when we are faced with such challenges in ministry, that we trust in the Holy Spirit. Training is important and helps us understand some tried and true ways of dealing with depressed and suicidal teens; but even more important than being well trained is having a sensitivity to guidance of the Holy Spirit.

When we follow the Holy Spirit's lead, we can trust that God will be glorified and the person we are ministering to is edified. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Displaying these characteristics when ministering to a hurting teenager will speak volumes, even if you don't have all the right words to say.

Sources

- Adventures in Ministry – The YM Podcast - <http://adventuresinministry.com/ympodcast/024>
- Gerali, Steve. *What do I do when-- teenagers are depressed and contemplate suicide?* Youth Specialties, 2009.
- Hancock, Jim. *The Youth Worker's Guide to Helping Teenagers in Crisis*. Youth Specialties, 2007.