



Helping Youth in High-Risk Situations

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Youth today are at risk because of a host of family, personality, and situational factors. Most adolescents face the stresses of rapid developmental changes and challenging life events constructively. But significant numbers of others rely on passive, withdrawing, aggressive, or other destructive or negative behaviors in their attempts to deal with their problems.

Often adults, or even the adolescent's friends, are not readily available to help when needed. The troubled adolescent may have broken off friendships or alienated others because of irritability and short temper; may have difficulty in talking about problems; may be abusing alcohol or street drugs; may come from a family in which parents are divorced or separated or are unavailable because of personal or job worries, mental health problems, or substance abuse; and may have great conflicts with possible helping adults.

How can we help youth in high-risk situations?

Take them seriously

Some adults tend to dismiss or underestimate the significance of young people's pressure and problems. All too often, the teen's efforts to communicate intense feelings are minimized, denied, rationalized, or ignored by parents, school personnel, and other adults. Teens are facing many challenges for the first time and don't know how to handle them.

Be aware of a teen's feelings

Try to understand and be alert to your teen's percep-

tions of self, unattractiveness, failure, or guilt. Try to judge any problem through your teen's eyes, not by an adult standard. Show by words that you care.

Provide crisis intervention and hotline telephone numbers

Let young people know there is no shame in asking for help when they have problems. Tell them that open talking about problems is much better than keeping the problems inside.

Teach young people the coping skills to deal with problems

Many life skills have to be learned along with self-responsibility. Teens need to learn decision making and nondestructive ways of conflict management and problem solving.

Teach young people communication skills

With good communication, it becomes easier for teens to express their feelings and openly share their concerns. Try to be a good listener. Most of us do not listen to teens very well because we are too busy or we think it is not important to be aware of events in their lives.

Help teens build self-esteem.

Let them know you recognize their positive strengths and behaviors. Encourage them to express their opinions. Encourage them to talk about their feelings of loss, sadness, or frustration. Don't blame or criticize them. Support their decisions and let them accept the consequences when possible.

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Try to help them re-establish faith in themselves

Don't give false assurances. Comments such as "Don't worry," "Things will be better when you're older," and "Keep your chin up" are not helpful. Try to help teens dissolve their problems, not protect them. Also, let them know you care they are alive, that you care about them and would like to help them. Provide them with a caring, supportive environment through words and actions.

Help them understand the cause of their distress

Understanding the source of distress is one of the best means of freeing ourselves of its effects. To do that, you must create an environment that will encourage the adolescent to look at what's bothering him or her. You must listen without judging, criticizing, or blaming. With such awareness, there are a number of active options that can be exercised rather than just surrendering to the depression or violently acting out.

Encourage adolescents to attend activities they normally enjoy or can learn to do well

They need to have at least one activity they thoroughly enjoy doing and one activity that they feel competent when doing. Teens have to learn and practice coping skills that emphasize self-responsibility and finding positive, nondestructive ways of dealing with problems. If they seem to have given up hope, or have threatened self-harm, professional help must be arranged.

To help youth in high risk situations, you need to have four interrelated qualities: trustworthiness, genuineness, empathy, and honesty. If young people do not see all four qualities in you, they will not be inclined to accept your help.

Stress quiz for your teens

Read the following statements and check those that apply to you. Remember, this is a checklist for you to use in determining your level of stress. There are no right answers or wrong answers.

- I often feel tense, anxious, or upset.
- I have a "nervous stomach."
- People in my family often make me feel upset.
- I get headaches a lot.
- I often have trouble sleeping.
- I worry about school, even at night and on week-ends.
- I find myself eating a lot when I get nervous.
- People at school often make me feel angry or upset.
- I find myself smoking a lot when I get nervous.
- I have trouble concentrating on things because I'm worrying about something else.
- I have a lot of things that have to be done by certain times at school or at home.
- I worry about getting in trouble because of the behavior of my friends or because of the things I do.
- I find myself drinking alcohol or taking drugs when things get tough and I feel stressed out.

If you checked six or more items, your tension level is probably quite high. If you checked two to five items, your tension level is probably average. If you checked one item, your tension level is low. Lucky you!