

Middle School Guidance Officer Article



Supporting Young People in Crisis

It is not uncommon for young people to feel overwhelmed and like they are unable to cope with what life has thrown at them. This is when they often come to the attention of teachers, school counsellors or health professionals – when they are in some sort of crisis. The crisis can be precipitated by any number of things: a relationship breakdown, problems at home, issues with peers, school or work problems, feeling down, loss of a pet, moving house, media stories and many others.

So what does a young person need when they are in crisis?

1. A listening ear.
2. A safety check.
3. Options for further support.

1. A listening ear: When teens are in crisis, the young person needs to feel truly heard. This means suspending our own judgments (positive or negative) about the situation and seeking to understand it from their point of view. Utilise active listening and let the young person unload. The power of taking time to listen cannot be underestimated. Sometimes, this act of listening can be enough for the young person to feel that they can cope with whatever is going on.

2. A safety check: When a young person is feeling overwhelmed, it's important to check for safety. Are they suicidal? Are they engaging in risky behaviour? Are they at risk of harm from others? Often, listening will give you some information regarding these issues, but don't be afraid to ask directly, particularly about suicidal thoughts. Summarise what they have told you, and say "Sometimes when people are feeling like this, they start thinking about suicide. Are you thinking about suicide?" If safety is an issue, you will need to seek further support and work on a plan to help them to stay safe.

3. Options for further support: Once a young person feels truly heard, they will be more ready to seek support. That's why it is very important not to move to this step too soon – unless there are immediate safety issues. Help the young person to identify what support they need – don't do it for them. This way they will have ownership of any next steps and will be more

likely to follow through. Options might include family and friends, clinical services, helplines or online information/services. Ensure they have a number of people and services to call upon, so that if one is not available, there are other options. Also, it's important to work with the young person to identify any barriers to seeking help, so that these can be addressed (e.g. cost, transport, concern about what might happen). Supporting a young person through crisis is not always easy, but if you have listened to them, affirmed their ability to cope and helped them to find any ongoing support they might need, you are building their capacity to cope for the future. Evidence indicates that crisis intervention is in effect, suicide prevention.

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For more information: go to www.lifeline.org.au/get-help

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