

# Navigating Crisis Tip Sheet



For Middle and High School  
Parents/Caregivers

**We've all been there.** As parents and caregivers, we have encountered struggles that felt bigger than us. Struggles or situations that have reached the point of a crisis. A crisis is a real or perceived threat that disrupts your child's normal degree of functioning (e.g., physically, emotionally, and/or mentally), thereby requiring an immediate response and support from you.

When it comes to navigating a crisis, whether it be the loss of a loved one, a divorce, a natural disaster, or a mental or physical health crisis, on the following pages are some tips that can help you and your child navigate a crisis.

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## 5 Tips to Help You

① **Recognize the signs.** Some signs your middle or high schooler may be experiencing a crisis include:

- Becoming withdrawn or isolating from friends and family.
- Rapid mood swings, extreme agitation, or becoming increasingly fearful or avoidant.
- Physical symptoms/psychosomatic (headaches, stomach pains, etc.).
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns.
- Decline in school or work performance.
- Self-harming or risky, deviant behaviors.
- Suicidal thoughts and statements.

Sometimes, these changes happen suddenly. Often, behavior changes come about gradually and over time.

② **Acknowledge your own big emotions.** Children, in large part, respond to what they see from the adults around them. They are taking it *all* in, even when it seems like they aren't. In times of crisis, our discomfort with uncertainty can lead to resistance to face our own strong emotions.

Before reassuring your teen, first acknowledge what *you* are feeling. If you find that you are in your head a lot, try to reframe negative thoughts when they start to overtake or overwhelm you.

③ **Take care of yourself in the moment.** When facing a crisis, it's normal to feel the urge to freak out and spiral beyond your control. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, pause, take three deep breaths, take a break if needed, and refocus on what you're trying to achieve—a safe space to support your child during crisis.

④ **Take care of yourself over time.** When your teen is in crisis, you may be in crisis as well. It's important to engage in healthy habits. Practice regular self-care which includes eating healthy foods, exercising, getting enough rest, and reminding yourself of what is good and true. Practice self-reflection to regularly examine and reframe anxious and unhelpful thoughts.

⑤ **Seek community.** During times of crisis, it's important to be part of a community that offers a safe and consistent space to be vulnerable. Stay accountable to a trusted friend or mentor who can offer guidance and support. Reach out to a family ministry leader for prayer. Seek professional care, if needed. It's acceptable—and even essential—to take care of yourself. This may be the best thing you can do to help your child.

## 5 Tips to Help You Help Them

① **Start the conversation.** Open communication is important within a family, and even more so during times of crisis. But it isn't always easy to get your teen to share what's really going on in their head.

One tip is to start the conversation while doing an activity together—driving to practice, walking the dog, or shopping. Sometimes, it's easier to open up when direct eye contact can be avoided. Or at bedtime, ask your teen a question about how they're really doing.

② **Create a sense of emotional safety.** Create a safe space for your teen to talk openly about their thoughts and feelings. Body language is essential for emotional safety. Try to maintain gentle eye contact and a warm vocal tone. Stay calm, and do more listening than talking. Resist the urge to “fix” the problem, instead aim to actively listen.

One way to demonstrate active listening is to set aside distractions and paraphrase what was shared. Actively listening helps your teen feel seen and heard. It's okay to ask questions, but most importantly, remind your teen that you are there to support them.

③ **Validate their emotions.** Emotional validation involves accepting your teen's thoughts and feelings as valid and understandable. Validation can sound like: *“I can see that you are really upset.”* Keep in mind that validating your teen's feelings does not necessarily mean that you agree with what they are saying or doing.

Be sure to periodically follow up: If you notice your child engaging in overly negative self-talk, inspire healthy thinking by encouraging positive self-talk and future-forward thinking. Say things like, *“I know it's hard right now, but we will get through this together.”*

④ **Respect their boundaries.** It may be helpful to offer your teen the involvement of another caring adult or simply offer your affection. However, when doing so, respect their boundaries by always inquiring about their preferences.

For example, you could ask, *“Would you be okay if I shared this with your coach/school counselor/youth pastor for some additional support?”* Or *“I can see this is really tough for you. Would you like a hug?”* Your teen may choose to decline the help because they need a safe space alone to process their emotions first. Once a healthy boundary has been set, it's important that the boundary be respected.

⑤ **Recognize the need for outside help.** Consider if your teen is being hurt by someone, hurting others, or hurting themselves, or if you are also struggling emotionally and not currently able to provide support.

If your teen is not in immediate danger, consult your pediatrician or a mental health professional trained to work with teenagers. If you feel your child is at immediate risk, do not leave them alone. If you are unsure what to do, it can be helpful to call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988**. They have trained professionals who can help you and your child 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.