

Introduction

Engaging teens in conversation can be challenging, particularly around such complex issues as dating and tending to one's physical and mental health. This also rings true for discussing faith beliefs and practices. It is vital to approach each topic with an openness to a young person's views while also providing gentle guidance and direction. This series of booklets provides a range of ideas for approaching these topics with sensitivity and openness. The booklets' authors provide helpful information about the topic, along with suggestions for conversation starters and activities that are grounded in faith and rooted in loving concern for a young person's well-being and growth. Prayers for and with the teen conclude each section. Parents as well as youth ministers, catechists, teachers, and confirmation sponsors will find these useful in developing a deeper connection with their teen's life and concerns.



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Using this booklet

As a new parent you did not receive an owner's manual for your son or daughter who is now in the teenage years. As a catechist, you didn't receive a document from your DRE that perfectly spelled out how to teach this class of teens. As a youth ministry leader, how could you have known what experiences with teens lay ahead?

Let's face it—if you are a parent, a catechist, or a youth ministry leader, it can be challenging to navigate the waters of the teenage years with your young persons. What happens when young people come to us with issues of depression or suicide? How do you have a conversation about dealing with loss? How do you break the ice over the topic of health and wholeness?

Through some gentle guidance, prayer, and discussion starters, the following chapters will help you to have meaningful conversations with them.

Remember, not only are there no manuals for raising teenagers; there are also no degrees or certificates awarded for successfully making it through these critical years. Despite this you may need a few reminders as you begin the journey:

1. Remember that conversation is the key. Fruitful discussions with teens are always beneficial. And while we would always prefer that such discussions occur as planned, predetermined occasions, we do not always have that luxury.
2. Before we have meaningful conversations with teenagers it is often necessary to check our own attitudes and beliefs.
3. Keep in mind that no one is perfect. These conversations will not always go as smoothly as you envision. A key is to stay grounded and remember that even Mary and Joseph left Jesus behind in the synagogue when he was twelve. That trip did not seem to have gone as planned either.

Talking to teens about Stress and time management

You have seen this picture before. Your teen lies on the couch watching TV or sleeping. Yet the final exam for biology class looms. Your stress and anxiety rise to new levels. But so do those of your teen. The issue is not whether we have stress in our lives—we all do, no matter our age or calling in life. The key is how, as teens or adults, we structure our time and manage the anxiety and stress so we might thrive.

When talking to a teen about stress and time management, it is important to recognize the preferred work styles that exist in each of us. Some teens like to keep a detailed, structured schedule. Others prefer to take life as it comes, having little desire to keep a calendar, develop a work plan, or schedule a project. One style or preference is not necessarily better or worse than the other.

A key is to notice when the stress and anxiety have moved beyond what is normal for the teen. This differs by person. However, a change in appetite, diminished conversation, change in sleep patterns, increased irritability, or change in personal hygiene may all be signs that the usual stress and anxiety have increased to an unmanageable amount. When this happens, it is time to seek out additional conversation and perhaps get some assistance to work through the issues.

Tips for engagement

- Rather than losing your cool or becoming moody, try to model calm in the midst of stress. But also allow yourself to be human.

Let the teen know that you have stressors, too, and you manage them better at some times than at others.

- Show the teen how to make a list of what needs to be accomplished. Help them to prioritize the list, giving them a sense of how to get started when multiple tasks need to get accomplished at the same time.
- Encourage the teen to break down large tasks into smaller, more manageable activities.
- Invite teens to reward themselves for accomplished tasks.
- Encourage physical activity rather than watching TV as a time away from a task; physical activity will get the brain cells moving.
- Let the teen know that they are not in this alone. You as a trusted adult will walk with them on this journey.

Prayer

God of peace and comfort, sometimes stress and anxiety can be overwhelming, especially in the life of a teen. Please be especially present in the life of our teens during difficult, stressful situations. We ask this all in the name of Jesus, our brother and companion on the journey. Amen.

Resources

National Institute of Mental Health:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>

Talking to teens about Depression and suicidal thoughts

You find your teen in her room, face down on the bed, crying into the pillow. No amount of consolation or comforting words seems to help. You feel helpless. Your teen feels helpless. There seems to be little hope of a better tomorrow. Depression has set in.

Sometimes our reaction is to try to move the teen out of depression with activity. We hope that if we can get them to serve the poor through a community service organization or get involved in another activity at school, this feeling of depression will lift and all will be well. But this is not always the case.

First, we need to recognize that there are various forms of depression. Some depression is fleeting—it can come and go very quickly. The dropped touchdown pass that could have won the big game against the rival school, the F on the geometry quiz after countless hours of studying, the role in the school play that goes to someone else—with a little time and conversations with trusted and caring loved ones, these moments of depression can often pass quickly. Yet, they may also trigger more lasting, long-term depression.

Some depression is more relational and can be triggered with the ending or change of a relationship. The breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend can be a cause of depression. So can the death of a grandparent, parent, or friend. Again, this depression can diminish or lift altogether over time with the help of loved ones. However, relational depression can also evolve into the disease of depression that requires professional help.

There is also seasonal depression. Perhaps being away from friends for an extended period of time over a holiday or summer break from school will cause an onset of depression. Maybe certain relatives cannot return home for the holidays. Of course, the lack of natural light and the darkness of winter can be a cause of depression. Of the types of depression, seasonal depression can be short-lived. However, it may also return year after year.

Another type of depression is long-term, considered a disease, and can only be abated or diminished with professional counseling and, often, medication. No amount of conversation with a parent or other loved one is going to be the cure for this type of depression, known as clinical depression. Professional help is going to be necessary. Of course, as a parent or loved one of a teen, your support, love, and patience will go a long way toward getting the teen the help he or she needs.

So how can you help? Knowing the signs of depression can be a big help. A loss of appetite, loss of sleep, lack of attention to personal hygiene, withdrawn behaviors, diminished communication, and decreased success in the classroom can all be signs that a teen is experiencing depression. One of the best actions you can take as a parent or trusted adult is to engage the teen in conversation. Do not allow isolation, as this can deepen the depression and could lead to suicidal thoughts and actions. Rather, be supportive and involved in the teen's life, encouraging conversation and seeking professional help when necessary.

Finally, reach out to others who you know have shared the same experiences, either with themselves or a son or daughter. Sometimes we believe that we are the only family, the only parents, or the only loved ones who have depression living in our home or community. Yet we are not alone. Millions of Americans suffer from depression. Know that help is available, you are not alone, and, with conversation and assistance, there is hope of brighter days ahead.

Tips for engagement

- Take stock of your teen’s behaviors, trying to notice if anything unusual seems to be present.
- Take time and talk with the teen. What type of depression is being experienced? What seems to be the root cause?
- Schedule time to talk about the issues that the teen is dealing with. Nothing is more important than the teen in your life when he/she is dealing with some heavy issues or feelings.
- Be a listening ear for the teen. Practice active, empathic listening, striving not to make judgments or jump to conclusions.
- Check into local mental health resources if the issues with the teen seem to escalate into a serious problem.

Prayer

God of hope and healing, we know your healing touch is alive and present in our lives and those of our teens. Be with them as they struggle with the reality of depression. We ask this all in the name of Jesus, who shared humanity and all of its challenges with us. Amen.

Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

National Institute of Mental Health: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/teen-depression/index.shtml>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>