

The Anatomy of a HELPER



Young people in crisis rarely approach adults whom they only *hope* will care about their problems. They're drawn to men and women who have already *demonstrated* they are approachable and willing to help no matter what.

Here's what that kind of person looks like:

Humor.

There's obviously nothing funny about the loss of a loved one, nothing comical about terminal disease, sexual abuse, or crisis pregnancy. Laughing at people or the source of their pain is, and will remain, in bad taste. But sometimes, in the middle of life's most difficult moment, funny things happen—and there's something very

therapeutic about a good, hearty laugh at the right time. In fact, when we really laugh (the kind of laughter that results in watering eyes and runny noses), our brains release endorphins that attach to the same receptors as morphine. Holy laughter is a painkiller. Proverbs 17:22 says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."

Empathy.

A sign on a camp nurse's office wall reads: "Empathy is feeling your pain

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in my heart.” Not bad. Young people in crises are drawn to people they sense *understand* or are willing to *work at understanding* what they’re going through. It wouldn’t hurt for us to remember our own experiences in adolescence (well, maybe it would hurt a little, but that’s the point). Remembering helps us identify with the struggles of the kids we serve.

That said, there’s a vast difference between empathy and the arrogant conceit that says, “I know exactly what you’re feeling. When I was your age ...” The empathetic adult shuts her mouth and takes time to listen while a

young person tells his story. Empathy is the heart of coming alongside.

Emotional Focus.

Physical presence demonstrates our care, but it’s not enough by itself. We must be *emotionally* present as well. We all know it’s entirely possible to be physically present but lack emotional focus. A high school girl said, “If my dad really wanted to know how my day was, why didn’t he shut off the TV, put down the paper, look me in the eyes, and then ask the question?”

As much as they long for authentic connection, kids resent (and reject) manipulative techniques. You can’t get away with feigning interest just so you can check it off the list—not for long.

Approachability.

Accessibility is not the same as approachability. We know plenty of youth workers who pride themselves on being accessible to teenagers. They might even claim they’re *available*, but they’re not. They spend lots of time at school and hanging out socially without learning much about the deep hurts, fears, and tough times kids endure. These folks are physically accessible but emotionally unapproachable.

Servant Spirit.

Crisis intervention is seldom glamorous. People in crisis may need help dealing with everyday tasks that have become overwhelming under the weight of unsustainable circumstances. A servant asks, “What needs to be

done? How can I help?”

If at this point, you’re thinking, *This all seems harder than it looked from a distance*, please relax. The good news is that relationship really matters—more than just about anything.

Reviewing the qualities* of effective crisis helpers—humor, empathy, availability, emotional focus, approachability, resourcefulness, training, and a servant spirit—you may feel you possess only a couple of those attributes, and even those not as completely as you wish. Sure, there’s room for growth, but don’t underestimate what you bring to the table right now. You like kids, and kids like you. You can stand by them, support them, and give them a sense of hope. If you want to know how few people there are who render even that basic level of care, just ask a teenager to describe the adults in her life.

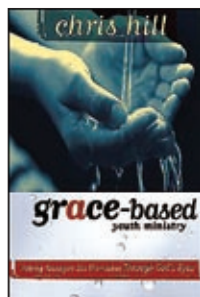
So, on behalf of young people everywhere, thanks for doing what you can. ■

*For a full description of each of the qualities mentioned in this adapted excerpt and those that are not, pick up a copy of *The Youth Worker’s Guide to Helping Teenagers in Crisis*. See below for more information.

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