

## A Letter to Parents ...

I care about your teen. Really. When I say that I love working with teens, I mean it. I had the opportunity to work with adolescents in many capacities before settling on the profession of family counseling. As much as I loved mentoring teens, I saw time and time again that my temporary involvement in their life paled in comparison to the power of reconnecting the teen with his or her family. For lasting change, it is crucial to pursue the transformation and healing of the teen's relationship with his or her parents. This reconciliation sets in motion dynamics that adolescents will carry with them for the rest of their lives and into future relationships.

My specialty as a family counselor is working with the teen and family system as a whole. Specifically, I work in the area of relationships. There are many relationships in a teen's life, and I help teens explore their relationships with self, the world around them, and their families during this developmental stage.

Often these relationships can get thrown out of whack for a number of reasons. For example, sometimes the teen and family get lost in patterns of interacting that escalate into conflict or experiences of misunderstanding. It can be frustrating when our good intentions get lost in repeated, destructive patterns that lead us to the statement, "How did we end up here again?" As a family systems counselor, I help the teen and family to identify where these relationships have derailed or experienced any violations in love and trust, walking with the family to repair and revive these relationships. The family can identify and enact small changes in the family cycle that leads to more fulfilling relationships for the teen and family as a whole.

In addition to family relationships, the adolescent is also forming a relationship with self and establishing identity. Self-esteem is a relationship issue. Often teens can get locked in a destructive cycle of relating to self, ruminating on harmful and critical messages, rather than focusing on uplifting, hopeful, and positive messages.

Adolescence is a unique developmental stage, with challenges specific to the teen years. To the adults in their lives, the adolescent behavior can often look dramatic, but there are a number of factors that lead to the teen's interpretation of their experience. Below, I identify five main factors:

- 1 Teens have the newfound ability to think about the future. For the first time, they can see that experiences (good or bad) extend into the future.
- 2 Teens are going through many experiences for the first time. For example, if teens experience a great loss, they do not have past experiences of loss to inform them that "it will get better" and they'll get through it. They evaluate their experience without a personal history to normalize the circumstances. As adults, we know we'll get through it. They don't know that yet.
- 3 Teenagers look, walk, and talk like adults. It is important to remember that teens are just beginning to identify and recognize complex emotions (which they call "the feels"). Just as a child learns to crawl and then walk, a teen will "crawl" with regard to emotional communication and expression before they are able to walk or run.
- 4 Teens are just beginning to discover and establish coping skills for these complex emotions and relationships.
- 5 Teens may feel alone and that no one could possibly understand what they are going through. This developmental belief may perpetuate a cycle of isolation.

In summary, for adults, parents, youth leaders, and counselors, the teen experience may not *look* like a crisis. What is important to understand is that because of these factors, it may *feel* like a crisis for the teen.

When these new experiences hit, adolescents go into crisis mode and can express their pain in a number of different ways. This expression often looks like problem behavior, ie., anger, anxiety, acting out, sexual promiscuity, withdrawal, alcohol and drug use, poor academic performance, and so on. Adults, parents, teachers, and counselors may be tempted to engage with the behavior, rather than the primary emotions and feelings that are underlying these behaviors. The relationship with the teen can begin to center around managing the behavior, rather than communicating at the primary level where the family explores the teen's feelings. For example, when they slam the door in your face, what are they really trying to say?

Often teens will have trouble telling the adults in their lives what's really going on. It's not that they don't want to tell them. It's that they don't know how. That's where I come in. I am passionate about serving as a translator between the worlds of teens and parents, so that the parents can hear the language behind their son's or daughter's behavior and respond to their teen's needs, instead of their aggression. The parent can hear "I need you" instead of "I hate you." The teen may resist learning the language of adults, but as adults we can become bilingual, journey to their land, and interpret what they are trying to tell us so that families can move toward one another in communication, love, and trust.

After all, whether they say it or not, they really, really need you.