



## REMEMBER

- We need to help young people recognize that their decisions have more weight than their situations when it comes to a truly good life. Redirecting their thoughts to which choices they *do* have power over in their life and teaching problem-solving skills offers a tangible skill for moving through their reality.
- Many youth feel powerless when they are living in difficult situations and behave in unhealthy ways to find some sense of power. Help them see the power they have to impact others positively by creating opportunities for them to make a difference in the world around them... and in your world as well.
- In difficult situations it's easy to feel angry with God because they feel he's been unfair with them. They have tried prayer and are upset that God didn't fix things. This has shaped their view of God and we need to be willing to listen and recognize how this feels for them. Then we need to introduce them to the heart of the God who has never left them for a moment, and is with them IN their situation (Deut. 31:6,8; Ps. 27:10; Ps. 139).



## RECOGNIZE

- Vulnerable youth are those in need of special care, support or protection because of challenges, trauma or mistreatment.
- All youth are vulnerable because their brains are still learning to respond to life with balanced judgement and awareness of consequences. Those without social supports and coping skills are at higher risk.
- As youth workers, we are often not able to remove youth from challenging situations or environments—so our focus needs to be on equipping them to walk through the tough stuff.
- Youth in situations such as these experience higher vulnerability:
  - ▶ *Chronic poverty, living with a single parent, inconsistent parenting, being in care of the government, past or present abuse*
  - ▶ *Drug use in home or individual drug use*
  - ▶ *Unsupported learning difficulties, social isolation, mental health issues, low self-esteem, inflexibility, low problem solving skills, being bullied*
  - ▶ *Being a sexual/gender minority, recent immigrant or from an indigenous background*
  - ▶ *Living through a life-altering event or trauma*
- One of the most significant protective factors for vulnerable youth is connectedness - a sense of being cared for, supported and invited into belonging - in the home, school and community.



## RESPOND

- **Notice.** Don't assume everything is O.K. because they aren't asking for support or aren't misbehaving. Be specific about things you've seen/words you've heard that may indicate that they are having difficulty coping with a challenging situation or environment.
- **Ask good questions** that are:
  - ▶ *Open-ended - "I've noticed there are difficult things in your life. How do you manage them?"*
  - ▶ *Inviting - "Tell me about how \_\_\_\_\_ is affecting you. I really want to understand what it's like to live in your shoes."*
  - ▶ *Timely - Watch for the right place and right time for these conversations. Emotional safety means guarding them from embarrassment.*
- **Listen.** Push back the urge to correct their perceptions or tell them how to fix things. Make space for them to express their feelings and frustrations. Check back as they are talking to be sure you are understanding their meaning not just their words.
- **Practice empathy.** What is it like to live in their situation? Try to put that into words for them if they aren't able and ask if your words are close to what they are feeling/thinking.
- **Build resiliency.** Equip them with tools to not be pulled under: communication skills, problem solving, sense of identity/significance, coping skills, a sense of purpose/sense they can make a difference, and spiritual connectedness.
- **Walk with them towards help.** Help them find and connect with the supports they need.
- **Pray.** Pray with them. Invite them to pray for their friends in tough places.



## RESOURCES

- cyc-net.org** - Encouragement is key to motivating vulnerable teens. This practical article will show you how.
- ontariomentoringcoalition.ca** - Check out the toolkit for "Mentoring Youth Facing Barriers."
- www.fosteringresilience.com** - Information for teens, parents, and professionals on the essential building blocks of resilience.