

The Quick-Reference Guide to
**COUNSELING
TEENAGERS**

**TIM CLINTON
AND CHAP CLARK
WITH JOSHUA STRAUB**



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Introduction

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson observed that the “identity crisis” of adolescence is the most significant conflict a person faces throughout life. During these crucial years, young people have to answer the question, *Who am I?* For many, the question seems overwhelming. The pressures of peers, the new drives of emerging hormones, and the expanding opportunities to experiment with behaviors can combine to create a perfect storm of temptation and self-doubt. Some seek help from mature adults, and many find forgiveness and direction in life through Christ, but some teens try to cope by resorting to self-destructive behaviors.

In today’s world of adolescence, *cutting*, *dusting*, *choking*, and *salvia* don’t refer to cutting vegetables, cleaning your house, or choking on a burger. These terms refer to practices that are more serious—much more serious. Five years ago you wouldn’t have heard these words used with the meanings that are now common in youth culture vernacular. They reveal how desperate for healing many of our youth are. *Cutting* refers to cutting oneself in a desperate attempt to relieve internal pain and depression. *Dust Off* is an aerosol computer keyboard cleaner that contains compressed gas and can be used to get high. *Choking* oneself can cause a euphoric state. And *salvia* is a hallucinogenic herb that is banned in eight states and is more powerful than and considered to be the next marijuana. These new fads among teens are leading to many deaths.

Teens are crying out for connection and looking anywhere to find it. “Rave” parties—large-scale gatherings with fast, electronic music and free-form crowd dancing, often coupled with the use of illegal drugs—have taken the place of family night at home. *Sexual morality* is as broad and relative a term as ever, reckless relationships abound, and parents have never before been so uninvolved or unsure about what to do. Ministering to teens has never been more difficult.

THE TEARS OF A GENERATION

With technological advances and community networks like Twitter and Facebook and immediate communication through text and instant messaging, you’d think we’d be more connected than ever before, have healthier relationships, and be less concerned

with issues of self-esteem, drug abuse, alcoholism, and loneliness. But the reality is quite the contrary. The relational pain and social isolation cuts deeper today than in the past twenty-five years.¹

Take self-esteem. Today 75 percent of girls have wished they could surgically change something about their body.² Twenty years ago models weighed 8 percent less than the average woman; today they weigh 23 percent less.³ The overwhelming messages from television, billboard marketing, the internet, and mainstream magazines have taken a toll. Eighty-one percent of ten-year-olds now worry they're too fat.⁴

And relational gluttony flourishes. Chat rooms, web pages, and “EMO”—the latest music fad with confessional lyrics that invite young people to “be real” and express themselves—have teenagers giving more than they should emotionally and physically to others, even strangers. Gone are the days of courting and dating. Today, teenagers live in a culture of “hooking up,” which could include anything from innocent kissing to oral sex or intercourse, depending on whom you ask. Thirty percent have admitted to hooking up with someone they just met that day. Sixty-four percent have hooked up with someone they considered a friend.⁵ When a generation is taught to do what *feels good*, it seems preposterous to them to think of guarding the heart, as we're taught in Proverbs 4:23.

With meaningless, superficial relationships come increased loneliness, hurt, hopelessness, and tears. Teens are left relationally empty over and over again, and the adults who watch don't know what to do. Teen suicide has become the third-leading cause of death among the age group.⁶ And eight thousand teens a day will contract a sexually transmitted disease.⁷ Relational gluttony is not the answer to emotional emptiness. It only perpetuates it.

The cries of this generation are real. The genesis of the problem, we believe, is found in the breakdown of healthy, meaningful relationships that promise stability and wisdom. Consider that three thousand kids a day will see their parents divorce.⁸ Worse yet, by age eighteen, 33 percent of girls and 17 percent of boys have been sexually abused by someone they loved or trusted.⁹

That's not all. Nearly 40 percent of America's kids do not live with their biological father—and more than half of them haven't seen their dad in the past year.¹⁰ Sixty-three percent of youth suicides occur in homes where there is no father. The same is true of the homes of 90 percent of homeless/runaway children, 85 percent of children with behavior problems, 71 percent of high school dropouts, 85 percent of youths in prison, and well over 50 percent of teen mothers.¹¹ Nearly 73 percent of the U.S. population believes homes without fathers is the most significant family or social problem facing America.¹²

The hole in the hearts of our teens is deep. And it has left them searching for and accepting nearly anything to fill it.

A SEARCHING GENERATION

When you look at what modern kids believe, the confusion is startling.

More than any other generation, the present-day culture reflects a postmodern belief in which, generally speaking, a relativistic mindset takes precedence over any

absolutes. In fact, Ron Luce, president and founder of Teen Mania, reported that 91 percent of teens today do not believe in absolute truth.¹³ In another survey, George Barna found that only 6 percent of teens believe in absolute truth. And by the way, these are teens who define themselves as “born-again Christians.”¹⁴

Barna also found that only 22 percent of born-again adults believe in moral absolutes and 64 percent believe truth is relative to a particular situation. Their beliefs will, of course, influence their children, so it’s not surprising that an alarming 83 percent of teens believe moral truth is dependent on a given situation.

Josh McDowell, who has worked extensively with teens, asserts:

Seventy-five percent of all kids coming to Christ today are not coming to Jesus because He’s the way, the truth, and the life. They are coming to Christ because He is the best thing that’s come along so far, that they’ve filtered through their experience. And as soon as something better to them comes along, they’re gone.¹⁵

It’s interesting that in separate surveys both Barna and McDowell found that Christian teenagers are most likely to make moral decisions based on what feels right in the moment. Teenagers today are making decisions out of feeling, not because of an objective truth outside of themselves.

Contrary to what many adults believe about them, teens are usually not “bad kids”; they’re young people searching fervently for something real, something authentic, something divine. All they need is somebody to lead them, someone they can trust.

SEEING THE NEED

Christians are called “to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind” (Luke 4:18), and this includes breaking the relational and spiritual bondage our youth are often enslaved to and helping them see through the cultural lies to the truth of the Word. This *Quick-Reference Guide* is designed to assist professional counselors, pastors, and lay counselors in doing just that!

If you are a professional counselor, you are already very familiar with the topics in this guide. This book will help you:

- accurately determine the client’s problems by using the assessment questions in each section
- see a client’s problem and solutions from a biblical perspective
- give clear guidance to your clients so they can take strong steps forward
- be more aware of resources that can help your client stimulate right thinking, processing, and action

If you are a pastor or lay counselor, we recommend that you take time to read through the entire book, marking key points in each section that stand out to you. As you become familiar with the topics, symptoms, approaches, and resources, you

will want to make a list of referral resources in your community. The guide will help you:

- gain information about the nature of teen stresses, problems, and disorders
- assist you in compiling a list of competent referral resources
- assess the nature and severity of the teen's problem
- remind you that there are limits to a lay caregiver's role
- assist you in making the proper referral to a physician, a professional counselor, or an agency

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This *Quick-Reference Guide* provides insights and resources to help you assess problems and offer effective solutions. The elements in each section are:

- 1. Portraits.** Each topic begins with a number of counseling vignettes that tell a common story about teens struggling with the issue at hand. The portraits show how a specific topic surfaces in an individual's life and relationships. We provide several portraits for each topic because one issue can present itself in different ways in different individuals' lives.
- 2. Definitions and Key Thoughts.** This section covers some of the most current statistical findings and clinical insights for each issue. The research will help you understand the nuances of the problem and provide direction for your conversations with the teen, and perhaps the teen's parents.
- 3. Assessment Interview.** The interview for each topic provides important, probing questions you can use to assess the person's needs and situation. In many cases, you'll need to ask follow-up questions or say to the person, "Tell me more about that." Some of the topics include a separate set of questions for parents.
- 4. Wise Counsel.** This section provides additional insights into the presenting problem, the biblical perspective, the process of healing and restoration, or another issue related to your care for the teen client. Sometimes the insights in this section are clinical, and sometimes they are pastoral, but in every case, they give added perspective to help you meet needs.
- 5. Action Steps.** This is one of the most important sections in the guide because it helps you move the conversation from assessment and problem identification to creating a map and plan for healing, recovery, and growth. Without an action plan, clients are often confused and drift without making progress toward some concrete goals for change. Most Action Steps will be directed to the counselee. In some cases there are Action Steps for the parents as well. Those addressed to the counselor will be in italics.
- 6. Biblical Insights.** Here we provide passages of Scripture that relate to the topic, and we've explained the significance of each one with several important points. You may want to explain the Scripture to the teen or you may choose to study it by yourself to enrich your understanding of how God works to change lives. Many of the passages and insights can be used for virtually all of the topics.

Take some time to look over the insights in each chapter to find passages that apply to the people who come to you for counseling.

7. Prayer Starter. Many Christians welcome—and even expect—prayer as an integral part of the counseling process, but prayer is not an appropriate intervention with every person you see. If a person isn't a believer or has shown resistance to God, you can pray silently during the session or after the appointment is over and the person has left. We realize individual preferences about prayer and the needs of those we help differ greatly, but we recognize that prayer is an essential element in biblical counseling. The Prayer Starter sections provide a few simple lines to begin a prayer that is said out loud or silently, during or after an appointment.

8. Recommended Resources. This guide is not meant to provide an exhaustive look at any of the topics. In each case we provide an overview and a brief template for addressing the needs. Continuing education is very important, so each Recommended Resources section lists a few books and/or multimedia programs we have found to be useful and trustworthy.

One additional note: to avoid the cumbersome use of “he or she” throughout this guide, we have chosen to alternate the use of the male and female pronouns, using only one in a chapter. In most cases these are alternated from one chapter to the next, unless the topic of a chapter is gender specific.

A VARIETY OF NEEDS

A quick glance at the table of contents shows that some of the problems clients face are primarily *medical* (such as eating disorders or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder); some are *psychological* and are the result of traumatic events, addictions, compulsions, or inordinate fears; and some deal with *communication* between teens and family members. In many (if not most) cases, the problem is actually a combination of these causes.

If there is any question about a medical condition causing or contributing to the problem, the client should be referred to a physician. A wide array of therapeutic approaches have proven effective for teens, from rational emotive therapy, which helps clients identify and replace destructive thought patterns, to behavior therapy and support groups for abuse or addiction.

We appreciate your desire to help people walk with God. Christian counseling is a strong, effective form of discipleship and is often the door to breaking through years of pain, misperceptions, and destructive habits that have kept people from being fully alive to God. We are honored to be partners with you in your work, and we trust that God will continue to use you in powerful ways to touch people's lives.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC) provides training, curricula, books, workshops, and other resources to equip people to care for others. At the

end of each topic in this guide, you'll find specific resources for greater understanding of the issue, and we recommend additional materials and online help for those who want broader input on counseling topics and skills. These include:

The Bible for Hope: Caring for People God's Way by Dr. Tim Clinton and many other leading contributors (Thomas Nelson, 2006).

Caring for People God's Way: Personal and Emotional Issues, Addictions, Grief, and Trauma by Tim Clinton, Arch Hart, and George Ohlschlager (Thomas Nelson, 2005).

Other valuable training resources are offered through the AACC's Light University. Courses include:

- Breaking Free
- Caring for Teens God's Way
- Extraordinary Women
- Healthy Sexuality
- Marriage Works

In addition, the AACC offers many more resources and training on three websites:

- www.aacc.net
- www.ecounseling.com
- www.lightuniversity.com

Continue to sharpen your skills and deepen your understanding of issues that affect the people God puts in your path. These resources can help.

The American Association of Christian Counselors has nearly fifty thousand members throughout the country and around the world. The AACC is dedicated to providing the finest resources to help professional counselors, pastors, and lay counselors care for hurting people. Outstanding training, books, and events augment membership benefits that include the magazine *Christian Counseling Today*. For more information about the AACC, go to www.aacc.net.

Alcoholic and Abusive Parents

1 PORTRAITS

- Rachel was very active in her youth group even though her family was rarely involved in church. She attended regularly, including the evening meetings and services. One Sunday evening Rachel's friends saw that she was distraught. She explained, "My dad wiggled out again in his drunken stupor and tried to hurt me. He's done it before lots of times, but tonight I thought he was going to kill me!"
- A.J., a thirteen-year-old seventh grader, has always been a little shy. More recently at school he has completely withdrawn. His biology teacher goes to his church, knows his youth pastor, and has discussed with him his concern about A.J.'s declining grades. As the two adults talk together in the foyer before the service on Sunday, they see A.J. approach the church with his grandmother. After walking over to greet him, they discover that A.J.'s dad was arrested the night before for beating his mother, as A.J. watched helplessly in horror.

2 DEFINITIONS AND KEY THOUGHTS

- Children and teenagers of alcoholics (COA) or substance abusers (COSA) are *children and teenagers affected by an alcoholic parent or caregiver*. Some of the most common characteristics of these children are:
 - unresolved *hurt, anger, and fear*
 - a *distorted sense of responsibility* (too much about some things, too little about others)
 - *trusting untrustworthy people or refusing to trust* even those who have proven to be trustworthy
 - *manipulating and being manipulated* instead of enjoying respectful relationships
 - pervasive *insecurity* and a desperate desire to be accepted
- Even if the child is no longer living with the alcoholic or substance-abusing parent because of separation, divorce, abandonment, incarceration, or death, or even if the parent is not currently abusing the substance, *the child can still feel the residual effects of the instability or abuse*.

- Quite often children and teens who grow up in these families *become addicts and abusers* themselves. For more information about teens who are abusing drugs or alcohol, see the section Drugs and Alcohol.
- Often alcoholic and drug-abusing parents exhibit these characteristics:
 - *a pattern of out-of-control alcohol usage or drug addiction for a year or more*
 - *mood swings*
 - *feelings of shame or worthlessness*
 - *impulse control problems* regarding alcohol or drug use
 - *using alcohol or drugs to reduce anxiety*
 - *obsessing about alcohol or drug use*
 - *failed efforts to control* the use of alcohol or drugs
 - *negative consequences* at home or work
- For children and teenagers who witness substance abuse and domestic violence in the home, symptoms are very similar to those who have been the target of physical abuse. *Feelings of anger, guilt, shame, fear, confusion, and helplessness are common* in these teens. They may experience *a variety of emotional, behavioral, and physical symptoms*, such as bed-wetting, insomnia, diarrhea, lowered immune system, nightmares, aggressive behaviors, regressive behaviors, low self-worth, and emotional withdrawal. Learning disabilities are also linked to teenagers living in an abusive environment.
- For teenagers who have grown up in homes where abuse and domestic violence are prevalent, *unpredictability is completely predictable*, and routine is rarely the norm. In fact most teenagers in these circumstances have been moved around with the parent who leaves the abuser. They have been in and out of numerous schools, pulled out of peer groups and forced to enter new ones, and likely living with limited finances. These factors *multiply the existing stress* in the teen's life.
- Often a teen's behavior is shaped by the beliefs she develops about the victim and abuser, those in authority, and even herself. Often children older than *six lose respect for the victim and begin to respect and defend the abuser*. When this happens, the child learns that anger and violence are effective weapons to control others. Research has shown that most adult abusers have either been abused or witnessed abuse as a child.
- Aggression in teenagers who have witnessed domestic violence is *a key predictor of future aggression* in their own intimate relationships.

Roughly 1 in 8 American adult drinkers is alcoholic or experiences problems due to the use of alcohol. The cost to society is estimated to be in excess of 166 billion dollars each year.

National Center for Health Statistics and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

ASSESSMENT INTERVIEW 3

1. What is your relationship like with your father/stepfather/male caregiver? Describe your best experiences together. When are/were they? What do you like best about your dad? What is it you have the most trouble with?

2. What is your relationship like with your mother/stepmother/female caregiver? Describe your best experiences together. When are/were they? What do you like best about your mom? What is it you have the most trouble with?

3. Tell me about what is going on at home. You can choose to start from the most recent event that made you decide to come talk to me or you can start from your earliest memory.

Give the teenager an opportunity to tell her story. Ask clarifying questions and help her process what it is like to live the way she does. Just listen to her. Hear her vantage point. Use common mirroring techniques to repeat back to her what she says so she can hear herself as well. This is important for children who have experienced such trauma.

4. How often do you see your father [mother] drunk? Have you ever seen him [her] high on drugs? How often? Describe your parent's behavior during this time.

5. Has your father [mother] ever physically abused you? Was he [she] sober or drunk? When did this happen?

Note: If physical abuse is taking place now, you have a duty to report it. Every state has a hotline for reporting abuse or neglect. Under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, child abuse is "any recent act or failure to act: resulting in imminent risk of serious harm, death, serious physical, or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation of a child (usually a person under the age of eighteen, but a younger age may be specified in cases not involving sexual abuse), by a parent or caretaker who is responsible for the child's welfare."

4 WISE COUNSEL

One of the tragedies of counseling a teen who has been the victim of a strained relationship with an alcoholic or abusive parent is that *the parents often refuse to get help for their problems*. If they are willing to take steps toward sobriety and peace, the whole family can experience love and rebuild trust. If they aren't willing, *the teen needs to be supported and equipped to deal with the painful reality of the family*.

Consider an intervention but don't try it without a competent professional to guide the process. Often the family members have been intimidated by the addict or abuser for so long they have given up hope that change is possible. Perhaps the other parent is willing to take courageous steps. Work with this parent, other authority figures, and the teen children to *create an intervention* requiring the addicted or abusive parent to get help.

Helping the Teen Deal with Emotions

Invite the teen to express deep, sometimes explosive feelings. Often teens in these families are like volcanoes: they keep the lid on for a long time, but sooner or later *the internal pressure is so great that they explode*. In the first conversations about their family, they may seem completely numb, but the emotions are there. *When they feel*

safe, they'll take the risk of sharing a little of their fear, hurt, and anger. Often male teens are able to communicate their anger most easily, but under the anger is a reservoir of hurt and fear that they may not have admitted to themselves.

To make progress, teens (and anyone in relationships like these) need to *learn to forgive, grieve, and acquire new relational skills.* These are the traits learned in a healthy home environment, but these teens will have to learn them in spite of their home environment. *Forgiveness and grief go together* because they both focus on the loss the teen has experienced.

Forgiveness is a choice and must include *emotional forgiving*, the process of letting go of deep, internal pain and allowing God to heal your heart. Emotional forgiveness does not happen overnight and requires social support and genuine, caring relationships. The process won't be rapid because often it involves *the progressive realization of how deep the wounds have been inflicted.* Each realization of wounds requires the *grieving of losses.*

Helping the Teen Acquire New Skills

The teen needs plenty of insight and support during these difficult times of healing and growth. In addition, *the teen will need to acquire new skills* of speaking truth, resolving conflict, being strong in the face of manipulation, and setting healthy boundaries.

Teens need to understand that *healthy conflict resolution never involves violence.* Because the teenager has grown up seeing violence used to deal with anger and conflict, she must learn *alternative ways* of dealing with the abuse and violence she experiences.

Help teens establish a sense of stability by helping them *develop a routine for their lives.* Teens who can drive and have access to a car can escape when they need to leave the house. They can also create a stable routine for school, youth group activities, studying at the library, sports activities, and work to ensure some sense of predictability.

Create *a list of resources* for the teen, including:

- professional counselors
- support groups
- treatment centers
- women's shelters

Establish a "safe house" that the teen can go to should a crisis arise. Communicate that if the teen feels endangered at any time, she should leave her parents' home, go to the safe location (friend's house, school, or other safe place), and call 911. Help the teen realize that *it is okay to leave for her protection*—this is not running away or being a bad kid.

Teens with addicted or abusive parents must realize that wishful thinking or excuses about their parents only further enable their parents' problems. *Excusing, minimizing, and denying the reality of the problem hasn't worked* in the past and it won't work in

the future. Teens desperately need *your support and patience* for them to take steps toward emotional healing and developing new relational skills.

They need to learn not to blame themselves for their parents' addictions but, rather, realize that they cannot change their parents or magically "fix" their family. *Teens from abusive families need to be provided opportunities to discover who they are as individuals and develop a healthy sense of self-esteem.*

5 ACTION STEPS

The following steps are to be taken by the counselor in an effort to help the teen victim of abuse and/or violence.

1. Be a Safe Haven

- The most important role for a caregiver working with troubled teens is to be a safe person—perhaps the only safe person in the teen's life. Provide empathy, but don't overreact emotionally to the teen's problems. Invite honesty, and when appropriate, share your own story of hurt, hope, and healing.
- The teen is under tremendous pressure to remain quiet and compliant and not to take bold steps of change. Realize the enormity of the teen's challenge and provide the encouragement the teen needs to move forward.

2. Invite the Teen to Begin Grieving, Forgiving, and Learning New Skills

- Help the teen understand the connection between grieving and forgiving, as well as the process of both. Quite often people in deeply troubled families don't have any context for grief and forgiveness, so you'll have to start at the beginning.
- When we mention forgiveness, many teens react in anger, refusing to forgive the ones who have hurt them so much. Explain that forgiveness isn't excusing the offense and it doesn't condone the offender's behavior. It is a way of unhooking from the wounds of the past and is accompanied by the process of grieving those wounds.
- Help the teen develop new relational skills to avoid manipulation and carve out healthy ways of relating to others.

3. Help the Teen Regain a Sense of Stability

- Teens in addictive or abusive homes feel that their lives are out of control. Help the teen develop a sense of stability by implementing a routine and escaping the most destructive times in the family.

4. Consider an Intervention

- A teen's cry for help may be the beginning of change for the whole family. Quite often at least one of the parents is willing to come in and start the process, but the family system won't progress until the primary addict or abuser is willing to participate.
- Interventions always include an element of risk and should never be done without the help of a competent professional. It first requires all involved to make a commitment to change and severe consequences for refusal. When used effectively, interventions offer a clear path forward for the most hardened addict or abuser. Whatever the outcome, they clarify the truth for the whole family when they see the addict or abuser's response.

5. Enlist Support

- A teen in an addictive or abusive family needs plenty of support and encouragement. With the teen's permission, talk to those who can offer help in this pivotal time. Consider a teacher, principal, pastor, youth leader, or relative such as an aunt or uncle.

6. Watch for the Risk of Suicide

- Some teens assume they are the reason their parent drinks or abuses, and they may conclude that they shouldn't go on living. Be alert to any assertions the teen makes of hopelessness and/or plans to end her life. Take immediate action to get the help the teen needs. (For more information, see the section Suicide.)

7. Remind the Teen of God's Love

- Help the teen look to God for protection and guidance.
- Recommend that she join a youth group or other small group that will encourage her to trust God for her needs.
- Show her Scriptures that speak of God's great love for us and His ability to protect us (see Biblical Insights in this chapter).

8. Take Care of Yourself

- Caring for teens and children of addicts or those who witness domestic violence is stressful and exhausting for caregivers. Caregivers may suffer "compassion fatigue," a persistent emotional strain that comes from working with traumatized people. In fact this strain can cause caregivers to acquire symptoms much like the ones the teens experience, such as despair, isolation, anger, sadness, and difficulty sleeping and eating.
- Caregivers need to be aware of the stress they experience so they can actively seek the support they need. They may want to meet regularly with peers who also

help families in crisis. Too often compassionate caregivers become consumed with the enormity of the pain in their clients' lives. They need to find emotional outlets and maintain their physical health so they can continue to work effectively with teens and their families. They need plenty of rest, good nutrition, exercise, and hobbies to give them a sense of balance.¹

6 BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalm 34:18

Deeply wounded people can feel helpless, hopeless, and alone, but the Lord assures them that He understands, He cares, and He is near to them. As we trust in God's goodness and grace, He revives our crushed spirits.

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Isaiah 41:10

Even when we feel most helpless, without hope and without strength, God reminds us that He will give us the support we need.

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4:31-32

Unresolved anger inevitably turns to bitterness, which poisons every desire, goal, and relationship we have. We can choose to forgive those who hurt us. Our forgiveness of others is based on our own deep experience of God's cleansing of our hearts.

7 PRAYER STARTER

Gracious Father, You aren't surprised that my friend is suffering at home. You understand completely, and You care deeply. And Jesus, You know what it's like to be abandoned and abused. I pray that You will convince my young friend that You are there every step of the way, and You will lead her down a path toward hope and peace. Give wisdom, Lord, about how to handle all the turmoil in the home and all of the confusion, hurt, and anger in my friend's heart. Thank You that You will give peace and a new way of handling the problems. Others in the family may not ever change, but my friend is committed to learn, grow, and change through all of this . . .

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES 8

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Anger

1 PORTRAITS

- David and his parents fight constantly. Last week David got so angry that he smashed a glass vase against the wall.
- At sixteen Sarah feels she is just a burden to her busy mom. So Sarah locks herself in her bedroom with the stereo at maximum volume.
- Brian's coach has been pushing him all week. In a bid to shut out the world, he goes home and drinks himself into a stupor.
- Jenny has had it with her sister who has once again left the room they share in disarray. This time she is throwing all of her sister's belongings out into the yard.

2 DEFINITIONS AND KEY THOUGHTS

- Anger is a *powerful emotion* with intensity that ranges from frustration to severe rage. It can last from a few seconds to a lifetime. *The feeling of anger isn't a sin*; however, what we *do* in our anger determines whether or not we sin.
- Anger is best understood as a *state of readiness*. It is a natural response to a real or perceived threat or injustice, inspiring a *powerful alertness that heightens our emotions*. Even Jesus experienced and expressed anger (see Mark 3:5).
- Anger is *mentioned more than five hundred times in the Bible*. In fact the only emotion cited more often is love. Anger first appears in Genesis 4:5 and last appears in Revelation 19:15.
- Anger can *lead to healthy or unhealthy behavior*. Assertiveness that involves problem solving and compassion is a healthy response to anger. Aggression that involves hurting or controlling others, revenge, or hatred is an *unhealthy response* to anger.
- When anger is an automatic response to a situation, it is considered a *primary emotion*. Anger can also be a secondary emotion as a reaction to another feeling, such as fear, hurt, or sadness.
- During adolescence a wide range of *social and hormonal changes* may contribute to a teen's moodiness or short temper. In many ways this is normal, in the same way that the "terrible twos" are a normal phase of development. *Setting strong*

boundaries, while maintaining understanding and flexibility, helps when dealing with an adolescent struggling with anger.

- A *deep sense of anger* is often at the core of many of our most violent and prevalent social problems, like rape, domestic violence, substance abuse, and suicide.

Reasons We Get Angry

Anger is a *response* . . .

- to a person, situation, or event; to an imaginary or anticipated event; or to memories of traumatic or enraging situations
- to a real or perceived injustice or hurt—in the form of frustration, betrayal, deprivation, injustice, exploitation, manipulation, criticism, violence, disapproval, humiliation, intimidation, threats, and so on
- when someone has violated a boundary in our lives and invaded our physical or emotional space

How We Handle Anger

Anger always finds a way out. Teens, like adults, handle anger in one of three ways:

- *Repression*—denying anger’s presence. This is *unhealthy* because even though it may not be observable, the anger is still present—turned inward on the teen. Repressed anger can lead to numerous emotional and physical problems, including volcanic outbursts of hostility, depression, anxiety, headaches, and gastrointestinal problems.
- *Suppression*—acknowledging anger and then stuffing it. With this approach to coping, the person redirects anger-driven energy into activity that *may be healthy or unhealthy*.
- *Expression*—ventilating the angry feeling. *Healthy expression* of anger generally involves gentle and/or respectful assertiveness; *unhealthy expression* can involve an aggressiveness that hurts others. Teens expressing anger with aggression might be seeking revenge. They might say, “At least you know where I’m coming from!” yet, they may be too emotionally engaged to acknowledge the potential destructive force of their expression.

Levels of Anger

- *Irritation*—a feeling of discomfort that someone or something has caused
- *Indignation*—a sometimes powerful feeling that something must be answered; some wrong must be corrected
- *Wrath*—a strong desire to avenge a wrong
- *Fury*—the partial loss of emotional control
- *Rage*—a loss of control involving aggression or an act of violence

- *Hostility*—a persistent form of anger and enmity toward others that becomes deeply ingrained in the individual’s personality and affects his entire outlook on the world and life

Causes of Anger

- *External causes*—anger can be a response to harm that someone has inflicted (a physical attack, insult, abandonment) or to a circumstance where there is no person at fault (100-degree days, physical illness, highway traffic).
- *Internal causes*—anger is sometimes caused exclusively by an individual’s misperceptions of reality or destructive thinking about normal life issues (“I should not have to take this test!”), memories of traumatic past events, medications, or health issues.

3 ASSESSMENT INTERVIEW

The nature of your questions will be tailored to fit the teen’s demeanor at the beginning of the interview. Some are quick to express their anger, but many feel dragged to the meeting by a parent or school counselor, and the last thing they want to do is disclose their true feelings and perceptions. They may be defensive, so it will take your best efforts to create an environment of trust and warmth.

1. Tell me what brings you in today. How can I help?
2. What are some situations (or people) that bother you?
3. When you are bothered or annoyed, what are your initial feelings and reactions?
4. What do you do with those feelings? Do you express them, stuff them down, or redirect them in some way?
5. Do your feelings affect you in other ways, like keeping you awake at night, causing stomach problems, causing you to eat too much or not enough, and things like that?
6. How do your feelings affect your relationships at home, with your friends, and at work (if appropriate)?
7. Who are some people who understand what really bothers you? How do they help you deal with your anger?
8. Do you think your feelings of anger might be connected to other feelings, like hurt or fear? If they are, tell me about those feelings and what might cause them.
9. How would your life be different if you could resolve some of the issues that bother you?
10. Are you willing to work with me to find some solutions to the problem situations, relationships, and feelings?

WISE COUNSEL 4

The emotion of *anger isn't sin*. However, this emotion needs to be expressed and dealt with in constructive ways. *Unresolved anger* can lead to a host of personal and interpersonal problems. Often those who repress their anger are depressed, anxious, or hostile or they have other psychological and biological problems. Those who express their anger in unhelpful ways will devastate their relationships with others. Usually *anger leads to resentment* (resentment is anger with a history), which, left unresolved, turns to *bitterness or hostility*.

Help the teen understand what makes him mad. There is a difference between inconveniences and genuine reasons for anger, such as the betrayal of a friend or somebody gossiping about you. Identifying what triggers angry reactions will help the teen recognize right away how he needs to respond and control it.

If the person gets *physiologically worked up* over minor annoyances, he needs to step back from the situation and ask himself what's going on inside. Sometimes these small triggers can be the signal that something deeper is involved. Teach the teen to do a *quick self-check of recent situations* with loved ones or others who may have angered him.

Explain to the teen the practice of *self-talk*. Many times a person can calm himself down with simple and truthful statements about a situation. Phrases like “calm down,” “respond; don't react,” “get a grip,” or “in your anger, do not sin,” can *remind him to slow down when anger has been triggered*.

Exercise is another way to reduce anger. Many teens and adults admit that going to the gym, working out, running, or playing a sport helps them reduce feelings of anger. Exercising also gives a person *time away from the situation* when he can properly think it through.

Relaxation techniques, such as rhythmic deep breathing, counting, or stretching, can help calm emotional and physiological arousal.

Making a habit of time in solitude and prayer is helpful. Memorizing Bible verses to use in self-talk can also provide an important filter for anger.

Fools vent their anger, but the wise quietly hold it back.

Proverbs 29:11 NLT

ACTION STEPS 5

For any of us, the goal isn't to be anger free but to control our response to the powerful feelings of anger.

1. See It

- Focus on the source of the anger:
 - List the triggers
 - Until you can control the anger, avoid the triggers as much as possible.
 - With your counselor, explore your history of anger (and suppressed anger) and how you typically express your anger. You may begin to see patterns in your behavior.

Note: *It is possible that the anger a person feels today isn't due to a "trigger" but is instead rooted in anger from past experiences. For example, a teen may become angry at a teacher for being demanding. He might be thinking, This man is heartless—the same as my dad. Such anger is misdirected toward the teacher, who may not be heartless at all.*

- Learn to identify anger before it is out of control. Identify how you feel physically when experiencing anger:
 - Identify angry feelings while they are still minor.
 - State out loud, "I'm feeling angry right now."
 - Learn to become aware of the first warning signs of anger, which may be physical changes. Anger promotes a sympathetic nervous-system response (a physical state of readiness) and biological changes, such as rising heart rate and blood pressure, amplified alertness, tensed muscles, dilated pupils, digestion problems, clenched fists, flared nostrils, and bulging veins.

2. Delay It

- *Brainstorm ways to delay the expression of anger. You and the teen will think of several, but you might offer some suggestions, such as:*
 - Take a "time-out"; temporarily disengage from the situation if possible (a minimum of twenty minutes).
 - Do light exercise until the intensity of anger is manageable.
 - "Write, don't fight"; jot down troubling thoughts. This exercise is personal and writings should be kept private, possibly destroyed, not sent to anyone.
- Talk with a trusted friend who is unrelated to the anger-provoking situation. Don't just vent—ask for constructive advice.
- Pray about the anger and ask God to give you insight.
- Learn the value of calming. A teen in a state of fury isn't equipped to deal appropriately with an anger-provoking situation. Calming will help you let some of your angry feelings subside before expressing anger in a healthy way.

3. Control It

- *Brainstorm some ways to express anger in a healthy way and offer suggestions, such as:*
 - Respond, don't react.
 - Maintain a healthy distance until you can speak constructively (see James 1:19).
 - Confront to restore, not to destroy.
 - Empathize (yelling is a failure to empathize). Speak slowly and quietly (makes yelling difficult).
 - Surrender the right to seek revenge (see Rom. 12:19).

- If anger begins to escalate to rage, don't interact with others. Instead, temporarily redirect your energy to solo activities or reestablish calm in some other way before confronting others.

4. Own It

- *Help the teen develop a plan of action:*
 - Find an accountability partner.
 - Join an anger-management group.
 - Consider follow-up with a professional counselor.

Note: Underlying issues such as deep emotional wounds that have been identified in counseling need to be considered. Make plans to work on such issues through additional counseling (with you or by referral to another professional) and/or support group.

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS 6

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.

Genesis 4:7 NKJV

Cain's problem with anger wasn't that he became angry. It was that he remained angry and acted out of his anger. Cain's anger could have led him to insights about himself and his situation, but it missed the mark. Instead, Cain's anger turned to deadly jealousy.

Anger must be ruled or it will rule. Uncontrolled anger quickly becomes destructive. When we invite God to help us identify our anger and we take positive action, anger becomes a servant rather than a master.

“Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.

Ephesians 4:26–27 NKJV

It's interesting that this passage doesn't say, “Never be angry.” Anger is a natural emotion—it's part of being human. No matter how “perfect” life may seem, feelings of frustration and anger can pop up in an instant when a person feels his rights have been violated. Actually, anger is only the sign of a much deeper issue—usually when someone feels betrayed, unvalued, or belittled. Feelings of anger show that an individual has hope that things *can* get better. If handled properly, anger can actually lead to positive change.

When you are angry, it's important to take a step back from the situation and ask why. Rather than lashing out in hurtful ways or stuffing the anger inside and pretending everything is fine, learn to confront your feelings honestly

Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city.

*Proverbs 16:32
NLT*

and seek to resolve differences with others in loving, respectful ways, as God would want.

Satan loves nothing more than using anger to divide and destroy relationships. That's the reason the Bible emphasizes the importance of confronting the cause of anger, rather than being ruled by our changing emotions.

And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.

Nehemiah 5:6 NKJV

Nehemiah's anger was righteous indignation because many Jews were suffering at the hands of rich countrymen who had lent them money. Expressing his anger in a healthy way, Nehemiah called a meeting of the moneylenders, who agreed to his firm requests.

When we feel anger burning beneath the surface, we can ask God to guide us toward a productive way of resolving the conflict.

Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.

Proverbs 22:24–25

People may not be able to change the anger others express, but they can avoid close ties with “furious” people. Such people are ready to explode, and anyone around will either catch the brunt of their fury or become similarly furious.

Choose carefully those who will be your closest friends, business partners, and spouse.

*God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”
“I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.”*

Jonah 4:9

When Jonah learned that God would spare the Ninevites, instead of rejoicing in their repentance, Jonah became angry. His anger at Nineveh's sinfulness was justified, though his selfish anger at God's mercy was not.

Perhaps, with selfish motivation, Jonah was concerned that his reputation had been ruined with the false forecast of the city's destruction. Or he may have desired a front-row seat at Nineveh's demise—after all, Assyria was Israel's enemy.

We must consider honestly the source of our anger.

PRAYER STARTER 7

Lord, we all get angry. Anger is a powerful emotion that You have given us, and Your Word teaches us clearly about the constructive and destructive force that anger is. Help us to follow Your Word, Lord, by teaching us to control our anger when we have been threatened and wronged. Bless this young person, God. Help him control his anger and not hurt others . . .

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES 8

Anderson, Neil T., and Rich Miller. *Getting Anger under Control*. Harvest House, 2002.

Carter, Les. *Getting the Best of Your Anger: Before It Gets the Best of You*. 2nd ed. Revell, 2007.

Carter, Les, and Dr. Frank Minirth. *The Anger Workbook*. Thomas Nelson, 1992.

Chapman, Gary. *Anger: Handling a Powerful Emotion in a Healthy Way*. Northfield, 2007.