

Borgman, D. (1988). Counseling African Youth. S. Hamilton, MA: Center for Youth Studies.

OVERVIEW

WHO IS A TROUBLED YOUNG PERSON?

A troubled youth is someone desperately needing special attention and help. He or she is in danger of seriously hurting himself or someone else—through drugs, reckless behavior, suicide, or crime.

In the United States, many experts estimate that 20% of America's 25 million teenagers are seriously troubled. In most African countries, that percentage is considerably lower. Consider how many youth in your country quit school, are unemployed, and cause trouble. Think also of the many upper class youth involved in drugs and alcohol. From juvenile delinquents to those considering risky abortions and suicide, there are many types of troubled youth.

HELPING TROUBLED YOUTH

- How do you personally define a troubled youth?
- Who do you think can best help a young person from getting into serious trouble?
- What qualities does a youth leader need to be an effective helper to troubled kids?
- What should a youth counselor know?
- What problems will a youth counselor most often encounter?
- How do you see a youth leader counseling young people?
 - Where does it happen?
 - How does it happen?
 - How long does it take?
 - What advice would you give men counseling girls and women counseling boys?
 - What should a youth leader do when sensing that a depressed young person is thinking of suicide?
 - How does one follow up an informal counseling session with a teenager?

PRINCIPLES OF COUNSELING

- A young person will talk freely about personal problems only to someone he or she trusts and respects. Respect involves understanding both the teen and the larger world; trust relates to wisdom and keeping confidentiality.
- The counselor of teens must be a good listener, open and non-judgmental. Adolescents feel the adult world evaluating them, their attitudes, opinions, plans, and behavior. The young person in trouble needs a listener who is very understanding and accepting.
- The qualities of a good counselor are important when counseling youth. An effective counselor is warm, genuine, in touch with feelings and self-conflict, and empathetic.
- The effective counselor of teenagers must manifest "tough love." This is the ability to display an extraordinary amount of concern for an individual—even more than they have for themselves. When a teen begins to manipulate you and break away, you must be tough in a loving way.
- The counselor of African youth must understand both traditional and Western principles and methods of counseling. Traditional counseling generally derives from the elders and from certain relatives. In the Yoruba society of Nigeria, for example, problems are taken to the Babalawa—men trained for community counseling and divining.
- Traditional counseling helps individuals fit into extended families and communal groups. Western counseling attempts to be scientific, working with individuals whose goal is relative autonomy and healthy personal relationships. Expect African counseling to be more objective and situational. Western counseling tends to be more subjective and personal.
- Circumcision and initiation—or the absence of these transitional rites—are very important to African youth. Understand how this is so.
- Counseling in Africa should be holistic, complemented with the help of family, relatives, friends, and community. As perspectives and relationships surrounding the troubled person join the therapeutic process, the person can heal whole.
- Adolescence, by definition, is transition from childhood to adulthood. African youth often find themselves also in another transition—a difficult change from traditional to urban society. These transitions contain ambiguities and challenges that the counselor must understand and to which he or she must be sensitive.

- The counselor of African youth must know the developmental differences between youth in Africa and in Western countries. In particular, the youth counselor should understand the importance and nature of identity crisis among youth. Healthy self-image and functioning emerge through an identity based upon a positive reflection of one's past, positive interaction with peers and significant others in the present, and a clear understanding of one's role in the future.
- The youth counselor must be aware of situational differences among young people. In African countries today, one may encounter refugee youth who have undergone traumatic experiences. Around the world, we find young people from seemingly ideal situations—who nonetheless are experiencing severe difficulties within. The context of counseling is the total life experience of a young person.
- Any lay (without professional degree and license) counselor should realize her or his limitations and be quick to refer serious problems to those qualified—medical doctors and psychiatrists. It is also good for those working with troubled young people to have supervision—at least occasionally—from a professionally trained person.
- There are no great monetary or social rewards from helping young people. But, occasionally, people notice—especially the parents of a young person in desperate need of help. The real reward, of course, comes later from a young person who returns to say thanks.

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