

Reflection

How comfortable do you feel talking about crisis? Why do you think that is?

What worked or didn't work in your conversation?

What is one action step you don't want to forget?

Next Steps

Practical Steps for After the Conversation

- 1 When appropriate, look for ways they can make a difference, either by helping address problems related to the tragedy or through serving the community in another way.
- 2 While high schoolers may insist they're fine, remember to watch out for signs of distress like changes in eating habits, sleeping too much or too little, loss of interest in hobbies, or self-harm.
- 3 At some point, your high schooler may need support from someone with specific training. Don't hesitate to reach out to a therapist who specializes in adolescents.



Resources

For additional resources to help you navigate conversations about crisis, check out parentcue.org for the following:

Listen

Parent Cue Live Podcast: Episode 72

How to Recognize Signs of Teen Depression and Suicide

Download

Preparing For the Unexpected Worksheets

Learn

Parenting With Mental Health in Mind Course

Read

4 Ways to Maintain Mental and Emotional Wellness During a Crisis

Article by Dr. Chinwé Williams

Find a Therapist

who specializes in high schoolers in crisis at goodtherapy.org or psychologytoday.com

Conversation Guide

For Parents

Crisis

High School



Why is it important to talk with your high schooler about crisis?

By the time they're in high school, 64% of kids report having experienced an Adverse Childhood Event (ACE). While common, these painful experiences can create real challenges in high schoolers when it comes to their health, school performance, and ability to make wise choices.¹

We've all been there: As parents and caregivers, we have encountered struggles that felt bigger than us. Struggles or situations that have reached the point of a crisis. A crisis

is a real or perceived threat that disrupts your child's normal degree of functioning (e.g., physically, emotionally, and/or mentally), thereby requiring an immediate response and support from you.

In high school, crisis may look like the death of a grandparent, a change in living arrangement, a really painful breakup, a sibling going away to college, the loss of a scholarship, sexual violence, or even a normal life event (like graduation) that just feels particularly scary.

While we can't prevent all negative experiences, as parents, our job is to help our teenagers feel safe, in control, and connected. The truth is, much of what they learn during their high school years will carry over into adulthood and become the toolbox they reach for when life gets hard years from now. So our role is to help them develop those skills and gather the support of other trusted voices to guide them in difficult times.

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¹ Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC
² Williams, C., & Hutcherson, W. (2020). *Seen: Healing Despair in kids and teenagers through the power of connection*. Orange Books.

Tips to Help High Schoolers Navigate Crisis

When to Have the Conversation

For high schoolers, sometimes crisis is personal. Events like the death of a friend, sexual violence, the loss of a parent or grandparent, homelessness, or a struggle with addiction can be obvious signs. Other times, crisis is global—like a school shooting, pandemic, or terrorist attack.

Before the Conversation

1. Understand this phase: Your role during this phase is to mobilize their potential.

In high school, teenagers think like philosophers. That means they are trying to figure out *why* something happened, *why* they feel the way they do, and *why* everyone else is responding in the ways they are. Of course, as a parent, it can be difficult when we don't know the answer to their most burning question: *why*?

At this phase, your role is to mobilize their potential. So even if you don't have all the answers, help them develop the skill of seeking support, asking for what they need, and providing support for their friends.

2. Sit with this question: What is my end goal for this conversation?

As a parent, one of the hardest things you'll face is seeing your child in pain. And even when the situation is tragic or

unfixable, it can be tempting to *try* to “fix” grief by offering simple answers or age-old phrases like, “They’re in a better place” or “Time heals all wounds.” Even when we’re sharing something true, we know from our own experiences that oversimplified answers aren’t helpful—and they can often make it more difficult for a teenager to process the very real painful feelings they’re facing.

As a parent, the bullseye for you is connection and support—not answers. In fact, parents and caregivers have the unique ability to have a significant impact on anxiety and despair simply by offering connection.² And you are uniquely positioned to notice your teenager’s needs, offer your own comfort, *and* find the support of other caring, trusted (and sometimes professionally trained) adults.

Think About This

1. What do you want your kid to know?
2. What phrase or sentence do you **most** want them to hear?
3. Who is a safe person you can call before and/or after the conversation to say all the things you shouldn't say to your high schooler?



Tips to Having the Conversation

Validate their feelings. Crisis causes uncomfortable emotions, such as anger, fear, anxiety, grief, confusion, regret, guilt, despair, or loneliness. Listen to these feelings without judgment.

Acceptance is very important at this age, so they need to feel that it is safe to have these heavy feelings.

It's okay to acknowledge your own feelings of anger, grief, or confusion. Doing so will model healthy ways to name emotions.

Follow their lead. For some students, a local or global crisis may bring up other struggles they are wrestling with personally, and you may need to help them process those situations, too.

Until puberty is complete, it can be difficult for a teenager to imagine life will ever look or feel different than it does right now. Offer perspective by saying something like, “Even though this hurts, you can heal.” Or, “Even though the situation won't change, there will be good days in the future.”

While it's tempting, resist the urge to move too quickly to good news or “everything will be okay.” Your high schooler needs to acknowledge their pain before moving on too quickly.

Make this the beginning of a conversation, not the end. Let them know you're available to talk whenever they are ready and that you will be checking in again.

Get the Conversation Started

“You can talk to me anytime.”

“You are not alone.”

“It seems you're feeling _____. Is that right?”

“This seems really hard. How are you doing?”

“How are your friends coping?”

“What can I do to help?”

“You will not always feel this way.”

“Who else can you talk to about this?”

“I really don't know why. But I want to be here for you.”

“What are some questions you have?”