

Understanding At-Risk Teens

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People who have never worked with vulnerable and at-risk youth often look at them and think, “These teens may have been through a lot, but they are no different from teens in secure situations.” Wrong! You know differently. You may have been there when the masks are dropped. These young teens may have been deeply hurt—some scarred for life. Yet with God’s help, you are making a difference. Never doubt how much what you are doing matters.

The following characteristics show just how different many at-risk teens are. The list is dark and discouraging. Many of the characteristics overlap, and none of them exist in isolation. This list will help you understand vulnerable and at-risk teens, but do not allow it to discourage you. Never forget: God can touch a teen’s life and rewrite the list with characteristics of joy and hope.

Abandonment—The deep feeling of having no one to turn to for answers or help. The teen has to make his own way because those who should help are not there. Even when people are there, he will not trust them because he believes that they will probably leave too.

Loneliness—The loss of identity in a family that leaves the teen with the feeling of being out of place and isolated, even when surrounded by people. She prefers to be alone in a self-made cocoon rather than be involved with people. She often both hates and enjoys this feeling of loneliness. She hates it because her heart longs to be free to relate and enjoy relationships. She enjoys it because she is able to gain sympathy from people without the tie of strong relationships. At the heart of this emotion is self-protection.

Rejection—The feeling of being unwanted. He feels that his very presence is a burden for those around him and so feels rejected. He thinks, “Why should I even exist if I am such an inconvenience to others?”

Hopelessness—Inability to dream. The present is so unstable that she cannot even imagine what the future will hold. She has no dreams. Life becomes a puzzle of trying to fit pieces together to make sense out of things that make no sense. She exists with no sense of purpose or meaning.

Worthlessness—A strong feeling that rarely stops proclaiming, “I am of no value.” If someone seeks to value him or appreciate him, he denies what he hears and rejects that person.

Loss of Identity—A feeling of not knowing who she is; tied into worthlessness. This often happens when teens have grown up without a father or a male figure who cares about them. In some cultures, children are a priority because a man’s name and identity are continued in them. To die without children is to perish. When a teen loses a father, she may lose the one in whom her identity is found. She may believe, “If I had been worth more, he would have stayed.” Another result of this loss of identity is that the teen cannot fully trust men who want to help her. She worries that they will betray her or disappear like her father did.

Sadness—Tied into loneliness and hurt; deep despair tied to lack of hope. Happiness can come for a moment, but it always gives way to the feeling of sadness. Even in the middle of a conversation, his entire demeanour can suddenly change as his heart emotions reconnect with his deep sadness. The person who is feeling sad cannot explain this, but the sadness is the fruit of pain. Sadness can also be a tool he uses to keep people around him who will bring him comfort. He accepts comfort without the commitment of relationship.

Mistrust—Difficulty believing and trusting what people say and do. Because she is alone, or at least feels alone, without value, and abandoned, she has no confidence that people are truly there to help. She often believes that they are trying to use her for their own benefit. She will continue in the relationship to get out of it what she can, but she is always ready to leave as soon as there is reason to suspect any kind of rejection. She is careful about whom she will allow into her heart. She freezes out anyone who tries to move beyond her comfort zones.

Hiding—Physical and emotional retreat. He does not want to talk about important personal issues, but he will freely talk about things surrounding the real issue. He is careful that he gives no access to the real issue. Authority figures are suspect and kept away because he fears experiencing the pain they might cause. Any correction means rejection, and his heart retreats from the corrector. He finds accountability very difficult to accept because true problems are never dealt with, only surface problems.

Superficiality—Tied to hiding, superficiality becomes the guard of all relationships. She keeps things shallow so she will not get hurt. She can never show her true feelings because she guards and protects them. Relationships are kept at a distance for fear that her true heart will be revealed. When another person pursues the heart and love of the teen intentionally, she may completely end the relationship.

Manipulation—Using a situation to convince people to give you what you want. Emotions, sadness, and loneliness are all used for the advantage of the suffering teen. His life is a drama in which acting becomes the key to gain what he wants or needs.

Deceit—Constant lies are told to make sure the heart remains safe and protected. Truth will hurt, and pain is to be avoided at all costs. The teen's memory becomes selective, and she only exposes what will provide safety in this situation.

Fear—A primary emotion that can drive all interactions; tied to survival; must be avoided. Anything that has the potential of causing pain or the memory of pain is to be fearfully avoided. Fear of what could be or could happen is always on his mind. Fear pushes the heart to pursue safety at all costs. Obedience does not flow out of what is good for the teen or out of love for the person asking the teen to obey, but out of fear of what could happen to him if he fails to obey.

Insecurity—Tied into fear; lack of stability either physically or emotionally. The teen feels unprotected all the time and therefore feels unsafe. She is careful to make sure that her heart is protected. A defence mechanism is always employed. She quickly interprets what people say and do in light of whether she feels like she is in trouble or safe. She often reads intentions into statements and actions that were not there. She easily takes offence where none was meant.

Poverty—Fear of constant scarcity that says there will never be enough, even in the midst of plenty. The goal is therefore to get what he needs now because he has no idea what will happen the next day. The now becomes the focus, and he gives no thought to the future, nor does he have hope for the future. His decisions are based on what he believes is best right now. Hoarding becomes a lifestyle.

Greed—Tied into poverty; feeling that she must hoard because she does not trust that there will be enough to meet her needs. The constant need for more and more is an indication that her heart is never satisfied. It is always driven to get more. She does not care whether others have what they need as long as her individual needs are met. She has no consideration of others, or if she does, it lasts only long enough to get what she wants from other people, at their expense.

Anger—Secondary emotion that can hide primary ones, such as fear or loss of love or identity; can simmer below the surface and then erupt over seemingly insignificant things. Anger is always present in his heart because of what he has experienced in the past. He explodes over even a small thing. It often seems like an eruption has come out of nowhere, but the anger was always there, only suppressed. He will fight at a moment's notice. He will always find someone else to blame for anything bad that happens, another trait tied to anger.

Independence—The heart posture of doing what is desired without being questioned; no one can be trusted so she will do it all alone. If someone questions her, she will show rebellion. She believes that things have to be done “my way,” and anyone who gets in her way is an enemy. She rejects accountability. She lives her life according to what seems best in her own eyes.

Striving—Never satisfied, a life defining characteristic; tied to greed. Since there is no one who cares, he has to do what it takes to make sure things will work out for his good. He will try at all costs to do anything possible to make his life better. He may even overwork, and yet often he finds no satisfaction in work. His identity may be tied into what he is striving for. His need for success may come with an attitude of revenge: “After I have succeeded, those who have rejected me will envy me, and then I will get back at them.” His value is attached to the accumulation of what he has.

Escape—Solution when the heart’s pain cannot be healed; similar to hiding. The teen seeks satisfaction in things that give her temporary value or identity—sports, drugs, sex, and alcohol. In Western countries, entertainment, video games, pornography, and the Internet are added to the list. The false world she has created in her heart can be more real to her than the painful one that is her reality. Therefore, she seeks the false world at all costs and at all times. Though her sinful choices seem more obvious due to her difficult circumstances, her heart is no different than any sinful human heart.

God sent His Son to heal the hurts of all of our hearts, including those of teens who have experienced pain, hurt, and loss. His grace is sufficient for every need!