

Charlotte's story: A youth leader's dilemma

I'm Charlotte, and I'm 30-years-old and have been working as a youth pastor at my church for the past five years. One thing that I've noticed during that time is much my role involves supporting our youth through mental health issues. At least a couple of times each year, I'm the first person who a young person tells that they are struggling emotionally. I see my role as being to validate them, connect them with appropriate family and professional supports where necessary, continue to walk alongside them, and help them to see where God may be working in their story.

Depression and anxiety are the most common mental health issues that I've noticed our young people struggling with. But I've also encountered some who are experiencing other issues, like eating disorders. I don't feel that I understand or know how to respond to these quite as well as the more common concerns.

For example, Maya was a 15-year-old girl who attended our youth camp last year. I was aware that she was receiving treatment for some type of eating disorder, but it turns out I had no idea how bad it was. Maya's friend let me know that she'd only eaten half a piece of fruit each day for the first two days of camp. I felt that I had a duty of care to raise this with her and to monitor and support her at mealtimes. So, at the next meal, I served a small portion and put it in front of her, and she just froze. Despite my encouragement, she wouldn't eat a single bite, and only seemed to become more distressed. After at least an hour, I realised that I couldn't care for the other campers while providing this level of support, and that it wasn't working anyway. As well as being concerned for Maya, I was worried about the effect of her problem on other campers - I've seen eating disorders seem to spread through social groups before. We had to let Maya's mother know what was going on, and she came and took her home.

I really just don't get it - how can people not eat? Don't they get hungry? How am I supposed to help? And what about when I think there might be a problem - like when I've noticed a young person who seems to go to the most distant bathroom after every meal? Do I raise that with them? If so, how? 'Hey, I've noticed you seem to go to the bathroom a lot after meals, are you making yourself vomit?' seems pretty intrusive. I've done mental health first aid training, but there was no mention of eating disorders. It was more focused on crises - things like suicidality and self-harm, that need to be dealt with right here and now. Eating disorders seem more long term, less urgent. I'm just not sure how to help.