

Letter 6: YRT1_Y3.F.17

Dear professionals working with youth,

As someone who was regularly hospitalized for my mental health in my early teen years, I'm able to say that you guys play an integral role in determining both the near and far outcomes for mentally ill children and youth. I've personally had numerous interactions with mental health professionals, some of which have helped save my life, whereas others have done the exact opposite. With that being said, here are a few important things that I would recommend be kept in mind when working with youth who are struggling:

1) Many of us struggle to put words to our emotions, feelings and thoughts. Sometimes when we say something is 'wrong', we aren't able to provide you with further information when you ask more questions because we genuinely don't know how to articulate what we're experiencing. If we're not responding, it doesn't necessarily mean that we're trying to be 'dramatic' or 'attention seeking', it might just mean that we literally have no proper way of asking for help or explaining what's going on. In my experience, parents and professionals tend to drop or ignore the subject all together either out of impatience in retaliation for their child's silence, or simply because they don't think they can help if the children themselves are unable to explain the problem. Personally though, this is one of the worst possible things an adult could have done when I was struggling. While it's definitely true that not all of us have the same needs, wants or expectations, for me, being left alone was both a sign that my feelings weren't being heard or taken seriously, and that there was nothing at all that could be done to help me. Being abandoned by professionals and parents when your emotions are too complex to explain creates a sense of hopelessness and solitude that can hopefully be avoided with a little extra patience and understanding from adults.

2) For children struggling with depression and anxiety, not all of our feelings and emotions have identifiable causes, meaning they won't always have easy fixes. I've encountered many adults who will try to identify a specific trigger for my emotional lows, and many times I couldn't think of one. When this would happen, I used to feel like the adults around me would give up trying to help as they felt they were unable to 'make me better'. We don't always need you to have a solution though, sometimes we just need someone who's willing to sit with us, listen and not leave even if they're unsure of how to 'fix' a situation.

3) This ties into the previous point about trying to fix all of our problems, but I've also had a lot of mental health professionals and other adults try to verbally encourage me when they find out that I'm not doing fantastic. Sometimes this can be helpful, but I've also heard a lot of things that can make a situation so much worse. When expressing suicidal ideation, I've been told things like 'you have so much to offer the world', "Jesus loves you", "the planet is better with you here", "your family and friends will all miss you", "you have too much potential to end your life so young" etc., and while all of those things were said with good intentions, in the moment all I could hear was that no one was

understanding my feelings and the rest of what I was explaining to them. I felt unheard and misunderstood which just made me feel even more alone than before.

These are just a few of the things I've noticed that I personally would have found helpful, however once again, every child's situation and needs will be different. Although these things are what would have helped me, they won't be applicable in all situations for all youth. The appropriate response for dealing with children who are struggling is always going to be on a case-by-case basis. With that being said, thank you to all of you who are doing your best to help those of us who need it. You all play such an important role in keeping us alive and well, and most of us can recognize that your job is very far from easy. Dealing with mental health in general can be very draining to those involved, so I want to reiterate the fact that you're all greatly appreciated and even when we're unable to express gratitude in specific moments, your positive actions and compassion can stay with us for the rest of our lives.