

Destructive Behaviors Policy Quail Holla Youth Ministries

The purpose of this document is to give Quail Holla Youth Ministry leaders, parents, and youth direction on how ministry leaders will respond to situations where a leader learns of or strongly suspects harmful or potentially harmful behavior on the part of a youth. As leaders, we are in the work of fulfilling the vows the congregation made at each youth's baptism to challenge and nurture them in the faith; to do so we must remember that as humans we are body, mind, and soul, so care for one means care for all three. To that end we must be proactive and aware of any behaviors or mentalities that might harm a youth as we walk with them on the journey of discipleship.

If a youth reports suicidal thoughts

Any and all thoughts of suicide related to a leader by a youth **must be taken seriously**. People will, of course, make references to killing themselves as a joke, but if a leader has the sense that there is any degree of intention behind the words, he or she must take action regardless of assumed motives (e.g. wanting attention, acting out, etc.). We will differentiate between two stages of suicidal thoughts: **thinking of suicide** and **intending suicide**:

Thinking of suicide: a youth who is thinking of suicide will mention taking his or her own life, but does not yet have a concrete plan or means to carry out that plan. Nevertheless, this needs to be taken very seriously. If the Youth Director or Pastor is present, feel free to bring them in. If you are in a situation where you are the only adult available to handle the situation, here are the steps to take:

Tell the youth that suicidal thoughts are very concerning and you have a legal obligation to take action. Reassure him or her that your sole motivation is to get him or her the appropriate help so that suicide is not necessary. Notifying his or her parents is the next step that needs to be taken and that is not negotiable. Offer the youth three options: 1) the youth can talk to his or her parents; 2) a leader can talk to the youth's parents; 3) a leader will accompany the youth and they will talk to the parents together. Once the youth has made a decision, set a reasonable deadline for having the conversation with the parents. As soon as possible is preferred, but in this situation it is permissible to wait until convenient (after a trip, when the youth is at a particular parent's house, etc.). If the youth is going to talk to his or her parents, establish with the youth that either the parents need to call the leader after the conversation or the leader will be calling the parents at a certain time to assure the conversation has taken place. Once all of that is clarified, contact the Youth Director as soon as possible and alert him or her of the situation. If the Youth Director is not available, contact the Pastor. Relate the conversation with the youth as best as possible and advise the Youth Director and/or Pastor of when and how the conversation with the parent will take place. If you are uncomfortable talking to the parents, let the Youth

Director and/or Pastor know so they may contact the parents. A meeting between the leader, Youth Director, and Pastor will be arranged as soon as possible to ensure everyone is on the same page. A follow-up meeting will most likely be held again after the conversation with the parents.

Outside of informing parents, Youth Director, and/or Pastor, confidentiality must be maintained.

Intending suicide: a youth who is intending suicide will have a plan to take his or her own life and/or the means to carry out the plan. Specifically, the youth may have picked out a day, written a note, acquired a means of suicide, etc. If any of this is the case, swift intervention must occur and the youth must not be left alone until picked up by the parents or in professional medical care. Steps to take:

Tell the youth that suicidal thoughts are very concerning and you have a legal obligation to take immediate action. Reassure him or her that your sole motivation is to get him or her the appropriate help so that suicide is not necessary. Without leaving the youth alone, find another adult to be with you and the youth until the youth is picked up or in medical care. It would be preferable to locate the Youth Director and/or Pastor if they are available.

If the youth reports an intention to commit suicide when you are communicating by phone, text, instant message, etc., do your best to determine where the youth is and who is with him or her or nearby.

The first call is to the parents and, if they cannot be reached, an emergency contact specified by the parents (the emergency contact will be on the waiver/medical information sheet). If the youth wants to talk with the parents directly, let them know that you will be in the room to hear that side of the conversation because this is a very serious situation. If you talk to the parents, share the conversation you had with the youth and your reason for concern. Recommend that they pick up the youth as soon as possible so that he or she may be evaluated in a psychiatric unit.

If the parent and emergency contact are not available and it is impossible to determine when either will be available, call 911 and request emergency psychiatric services.

Once the youth has been picked up or is in the care of medical professionals, please contact the Youth Director and/or Pastor as soon as possible to notify them of the situation.

Outside of informing parents, Youth Director, and/or Pastor, confidentiality must be maintained.

If a youth reports a friend is having suicidal thoughts

It is a definite sign of trust if a youth confides in a leader that a friend is thinking about suicide, but this is another situation where action *must* be taken on the part of the friend. This situation is a little trickier if there is no direct relationship between the leader and friend and the leader must use his or her best judgement to determine how to proceed. The time frame and swiftness

of action will also be determined by the progress of the friend's suicidal thoughts, but the outcome must be that the friend's parents are informed as soon as possible.

The friend is thinking about suicide: Steps to take:

Assure the youth that he or she has done the right thing by telling an adult and that this is a sure sign of caring for their friend and that the best way to get help for their friend is for the friend's parents to know about the suicidal thoughts. Even though this might feel like a betrayal of the friend's trust, that is not the case. If the friend told the youth about suicide, it is most likely that the friend wants help but doesn't know how to get it so the youth is only simply acting in the friend's best interest.

The next step is to best figure out how to be in contact with the friend's parents. Are the parents of the youth close with the parents of the friend? Then the youth and/or the leader could talk to the youth's parents to explain the situation and ask them to talk to the friend's parents. Does the youth have a good relationship with the friend's parents? Then maybe he or she could talk to them. If there is no direct connection with the friend's parents, it may be appropriate to contact a counselor at the friend's school and share the situation with him or her.

Again, since the suicidal thoughts have not progressed to intending suicide, there is some time to make sure the contact with the parents is done appropriately but not hastily.

When possible, contact the Youth Director and/or the Pastor to let them know steps taken and any follow up.

The friend is intending suicide: In this situation a youth is reporting that a friend has a plan to kill him or herself and has means to carry out that plan. Steps to take:

It is very likely that a report of a friend intending suicide would not come during regular youth ministry programming and is most likely to occur when the youth and the friend are together or talking by phone or texting. In this case it will be up to the leader to use his or her own best judgement to ensure that:

The parents are notified immediately

The friend sees emergency psychiatric services as soon as possible

The friend is not alone until with parents or under medical care

Because of the unpredictable nature of when this report may come, it is very hard to plan for all of the possible circumstances. Using the principles set forth in the preceding sections and keeping in mind that the parents must be notified immediately, the friend must see psychiatric care soon, and the friend must not be left alone, the rest is up to the leader to do as he or she sees fit.

Advise the Youth Director and/or Pastor as soon as possible of action taken and any follow up.

Cutting/Self-Injury

“Self-injury is the act of deliberately harming your own body, such as cutting or burning yourself. It's not meant as a suicide attempt. Rather, self-injury is an unhealthy way to cope with emotional pain, intense anger and frustration” (www.mayoclinic.com).

Cutting has become more popular as a coping mechanism in recent years among teenagers. While it has the appearance of a suicide attempt (young people often cut their arms and wrists) and can therefore seem very frightening, cutting is not necessarily linked with suicide. However, it is a destructive behavior that can be a sign of serious mental disorder (e.g. depression or bipolar) and it is in the best interest of our youth if we intervene when we are aware of cutting. If the Youth Director or Pastor is present, feel free to bring them in. If you are in a situation where you are the only adult available to handle the situation, here are the steps to take:

- Tell the youth that cutting is very concerning and you have a legal obligation to take action. Reassure him or her that your sole motivation is to get him or her the appropriate help so that suicide is not necessary. Notifying his or her parents is the next step that needs to be taken and that is not negotiable.
- Offer the youth three options: 1) the youth can talk to his or her parents; 2) a leader can talk to the youth's parents; 3) a leader will accompany the youth and they will talk to the parents together. Once the youth has made a decision, set a reasonable deadline for having the conversation with the parents. As soon as possible is preferred, but in this situation it is permissible to wait until convenient (after a trip, when the youth is at a particular parent's house, etc.). If the youth is going to talk to his or her parents, establish with the youth that either the parents need to call the leader after the conversation or the leader will be calling the parents at a certain time to assure the conversation has taken place.
- Once all of that is clarified, contact the Youth Director as soon as possible and alert him or her of the situation. If the Youth Director is not available, contact the Pastor. Relate the conversation with the youth as best as possible and advise the Youth Director and/or Pastor of when and how the conversation with the parent will take place. If you are uncomfortable talking to the parents, let the Youth Director and/or Pastor know so they may contact the parents. A meeting between the leader, Youth Director, and Pastor will be arranged as soon as possible to ensure everyone is on the same page. A follow-up meeting will most likely be held again after the conversation with the parents.
- Outside of informing parents, Youth Director, and/or Pastor, confidentiality must be maintained.

Substance Abuse & Other Delinquent Behavior

Substance abuse is the illegal use of prescription medication, alcohol, or drugs by youth. Because of the addictive nature and legality of their use, it is imperative that leaders intervene if they are aware of a youth caught up in substance abuse. Delinquent behavior includes any other illegal activity that is somehow or potentially destructive to people or property (vandalism, reckless operation of a car, stealing, possession of weapons, etc.).

If you do not believe that the youth is in a life-threatening situation, feel free to contact the Youth Director and/or Pastor. If neither are available, follow these steps:

- Let the youth know that you have a legal obligation to talk to the youth's parents as the youth is in a potentially harmful situation. Give the youth the following options:
The youth can talk to his or her parents

The leader can talk to his or her parents

The youth and a leader can talk to his or her parents

- If the youth opts to talk to his/her parents, arrange some sort of follow-up where you hear from the parents (e.g. the parents call you or you call the parents).
- Notify the Youth Director and/or Pastor when it is possible.

If you believe that the youth is in a situation that is potentially life-threatening, call his or her parents immediately and/or notify the police and other emergency services by calling 911. Then notify the Youth Director and/or Pastor.

A Note on Mental & Eating Disorders

There are a variety of mental and eating disorders that a youth worker may suspect in the youth we lead: depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, bulimia, anorexia, ADD, ADHD, etc. While it is definitely helpful to be aware of the signs and symptoms of these disorders, it is especially important to remember that diagnosis needs to come from a medical professional. If a youth is exhibiting several of the symptoms and you are having suspicions, please talk with the Youth Director and/or Pastor. If there is a consensus of concern among the leadership, the YD or Pastor will approach the parents with our observations and recommend professional diagnosis.

Thank you for taking the time to read and familiarize yourself with this document! If you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns, please contact the Youth Director.