

Pastoral Counselling of Youth: Specifics and Potential

Doradztwo duszpasterskie dla młodzieży: specyfika i potencjał

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Received: 22 Nov 2024

Revised: 12 Dec 2024

Accepted: 18 Mar 2025

Published: 30 Jun 2025

Abstract: Every young person has their own story, joys, and problems that become particularly prominent during adolescence. Amidst the multitude of changes they experience, young people often do not realize they need help from those around them. In these transformations, it is crucial for them to find someone who understands them and who can create a safe space to better comprehend their internal processes. One method of accompanying young people is professional counselling, which has been accredited since 2022 as a professionally oriented bachelor's degree program in the field of social work at the Faculty of Theology of Trnava University. This specific collaboration between humanities and theology offers future graduates a study and training curriculum based on the foundations of social work, specializing in guiding people through challenging life situations. The aim of this study is to present the specifics of pastoral counselling for young people and to identify the potential of accompaniment during their maturing process.

Keywords: counselling, pastoral care, youth, self-development, theology

Abstrakt: Każdy młody człowiek ma swoją własną historię, radości i problemy, które stają się szczególnie istotne w okresie dojrzewania. Wśród wielu zmian, których doświadczają, młodzi ludzie często nie zdają sobie sprawy, że potrzebują pomocy ze strony otaczających ich osób. W tych przemianach kluczowe jest dla nich znalezienie kogoś, kto ich zrozumie i pomoże stworzyć bezpieczną przestrzeń dla lepszego zrozumienia ich wewnętrznych procesów. Jedną z metod towarzyszenia młodym ludziom jest doradztwo zawodowe, które od 2022 roku jest akredytowane jako profesjonalnie zorientowany program studiów licencjackich w dziedzinie pracy socjalnej na Wydziale Teologicznym Uniwersytetu w Trnawie. Ta szczególna współpraca między naukami humanistycznymi a teologią oferuje przyszłym absolwentom program studiów i szkoleń oparty na podstawach pracy socjalnej, specjalizujący się w udzielaniu wsparcia osobom mierzącym się z trudnymi sytuacjami życiowymi. Celem niniejszego opracowania jest przedstawienie specyfiki doradztwa duszpasterskiego dla młodych ludzi oraz zidentyfikowanie potencjału towarzyszenia im w procesie dojrzewania.

Słowa kluczowe: doradztwo, duszpasterstwo, młodzież, samorozwój, teologia



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INTRODUCTION

Pastoral counselling represents a vital tool for accompanying individuals in various life situations while also opening new perspectives for contemporary pastoral care, especially in work with adolescents. Current research confirms a growing need for professional guidance among people in this age group. According to data from 2023, approximately “1 in 5 children and young people” aged from 8 to 25 had a probable mental disorder, with increasing instances of depression, anxiety, and eating disorders among adolescents. For example, “12.5% of 17- to 19-year-olds” suffered from an eating disorder, with these issues being four times more common in young women than in men. Economic pressures, social isolation, and online bullying contribute to these problems, significantly increasing the psychological burden on young people (NHS England 2023; CDC.gov 2023; Lichner 2013, 135-156). These statistics indicate a critical need to provide and develop more counselling services to address the deteriorating mental health of adolescents, which may include new methods and approaches in pastoral care.

Therefore, it is essential in youth ministry to approach young people not only with sensitivity but also with an understanding of their dynamic development. A key question becomes how we, as adults, approach them and provide support in their present, where their personal and social growth occurs, and in their orientation toward the future. This duality of their experience—present and future—requires special attention because it shapes their personal development, values, and ability to face challenges. In this context, pastoral counselling offers hopeful solutions based on the quality of relationships and communication with young people, reflecting current needs and challenges in their lives. This article will address these challenges by exploring the potential of pastoral counselling in accompanying young people.

1. RESPECT AND SUPPORT IN THE PROCESS OF ADOLESCENCE

Counselling can be defined as a professional activity focused on providing guidance, support, and the development of an individual’s potential. Its primary goal is to promote a proactive approach to life, stimulate decision-making abilities, and enhance self-awareness. It is a process that helps individuals take responsibility for their decisions and strengthen their self-confidence. For young people, especially adolescents, counselling represents important support at a time when their relationships are being tested, and the world around them often appears uncertain.

Despite the growing need for professional help among young people, many do not seek it. Some are unaware that they need assistance, while others come only when their problems have become severe. In this context, counselling provides a unique opportunity to help young people cope with life’s challenges. Counsellors help adolescents feel relaxed and confident, basing their approach on authenticity, sincerity, honesty, and respect. Through these values, they build a personal and trustworthy relationship with the client, which is key to successful counselling work.

Working with adolescents in counselling has specific characteristics. Young people are becoming more independent and changing their relationships with family and adults. Counsellors must respect this need for autonomy and provide space where a young person can make decisions freely (Kulisz et al. 2021, 180-190). At the same time, it is essential to adapt the counsellor's approach to the client's maturity and self-perception, where special skills and communication strategies play a crucial role.

An important starting point in counselling is recognizing the young person as an independent individual with the right to decide about their involvement in the counselling process. This provides them with not only support but also a sense of personal responsibility for the outcome of the process. This respectful approach is the foundation of effective counselling, which assists young people in their development and self-realization.

In adolescent counselling, it is particularly advisable to avoid schematic rigidity and be prepared to use multiple styles and approaches or flexibly combine them. Otherwise, it could easily lead to stagnation of communication. Through comparing and characterizing the most common approaches, we could mention the following advantages.

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is probably one of the most widely used methods when working with adolescents because it focuses on identifying negative thought patterns that may contribute to problematic behaviour. For young people who often struggle with negative thinking patterns, CBT is a method to teach them how to identify and change these patterns, helping them manage stressful situations and improve their overall mental health. Among its advantages, CBT can lead to quicker results. Its focus on solving specific problems can rapidly assist young people in changing their behaviour and thought patterns (Geldard, Geldard and Yin Foo 2016, 125). As a clearly structured and practical approach, it can be effective in addressing adolescent issues such as anxiety and depression (Geldard, Geldard and Yin Foo 2016, 240). CBT provides young people with tools to change their negative thoughts and behaviours, which can lead to long-term positive outcomes.

Narrative therapy helps young people reframe their life stories and gain control over their own narrative. It encourages clients to see their problems from a different perspective and find new ways to cope with life's challenges (Geldard, Geldard and Yin Foo 2017, 190). The main advantage of this approach is that adolescents can easily realize they can rewrite their own life stories, which can be empowering, especially in situations where they often feel helpless.

The ecosystemic approach is based on a model that emphasizes the importance of family and social environment in adolescent development. When used in work with young people, this approach relies on solving problems in the context of their entire environment, namely, school, family, and social relationships. (Geldard, Geldard and Yin Foo 2016, 242). The effectiveness of this approach is particularly evident when working with complex family issues where multiple factors influence the adolescent's behaviour. By considering the broader context of young people's lives, it offers a pathway to more comprehensive solutions.

Pastoral counselling can be considered a specific form of counselling that focuses on the client's spiritual development and often integrates theological and spiritual questions into the counselling process. Its uniqueness and advantage, as noted by Benner, lie in the emphasis it places on the need to connect spiritual growth (Lichner et al. 2022, 51-57) with psychological health (Benner 2000, 27-2). This style is particularly suitable for young people seeking spiritual guidance or experiencing a spiritual crisis. This approach integrates theology and pastoral care, allowing young people to address their problems in the context of their personal faith journey and religion.

Humanistic counselling emphasizes self-actualization and the client's personal freedom. At the centre of this approach is an emphasis on empathy, support, and acceptance of the clients as they are (Geldard, Geldard and Yin Foo 2017, 123). The advantages it provides include helping adolescents who feel isolated or misunderstood to create a strong therapeutic relationship based on trust and empathy. It creates conditions that support self-knowledge and personal growth, which can be crucial during adolescence.

Each of these approaches offers various benefits as regards working with youth. The Cognitive-Behavioural Approach focuses on changing behaviour and thought patterns; Narrative Therapy allows for reframing the life story; the Ecosystemic Approach addresses problems in a broader context; Pastoral Counselling integrates spiritual development; and the Humanistic Approach emphasizes empathy and self-awareness. Because the person with their own story is always at the centre, the situation of this person naturally offers the interweaving and mutual complementarity of the mentioned approaches.

2. EXAMPLES OF APPLYING APPROACHES IN CASE STUDIES

To understand the importance of respect and support in the process of adolescence (Lichner 2023, 71-77), it is useful to look at specific examples from practice. The following model situations illustrate how different approaches in youth ministry can help young people overcome the challenges they face during this critical period of life.

Identity and Self-Perception

A 16-year-old boy is experiencing an identity crisis. He has problems with school obligations and begins to isolate himself from friends and family because he is unsure of who he is and what his goals are. Counsellors use a combination of the Cognitive-Behavioural Approach (CBT) and Narrative Therapy. They help him identify negative thoughts about himself and reframe his story to focus on his strengths and growth opportunities. Discussing his vision for the future helps reduce anxiety and develop a new positive relationship with himself. The boy gradually begins to open up and talks about his interests and talents. This process allows him to find new balance and an identity he begins to value and develop.

School Pressure and Self-Esteem

A 17-year-old girl suffers from stress due to pressure from school and parents. She feels she must achieve excellent grades to meet expectations, but this pressure leads to emotional exhaustion and low self-esteem. Counsellors in this case use the Ecosystemic Model, focusing not only on the girl but also on her relationships with her parents and school. During sessions, they help her, and her parents understand the negative impact pressure has on her mental health. Therapy also includes mindfulness and relaxation techniques that help her manage stress. Through systematic support and open dialogue with her parents, the pressure on the girl decreased. Her self-confidence and ability to handle school obligations improved, and she learned that her value is not only in academic success but also in her personal qualities.

Spiritual Crisis

A 15-year-old boy is experiencing a spiritual crisis. He stops attending church and doubts his faith, causing conflicts with his parents and internal turmoil. In this case, pastoral counselling focused on spiritual growth plays a key role. Counsellors use existential and spiritual approaches. Through open dialogue about his doubts, they help the boy discover his own spiritual needs and support him in finding answers that are personally relevant to him. They help him understand that faith is not static and can evolve. The boy begins to build a personal relationship with faith, which allows him to find new forms of spiritual expression. This approach alleviates his internal conflicts and restores his relationship with his family.

Relationships and Communication

An 18-year-old girl has problems with communication in a romantic relationship. She is very emotional, has trust issues, and often argues with her partner. Counsellors use the Humanistic Approach, which is based on empathy and unconditional acceptance. They help the girl identify her emotional needs and improve her effective communication skills. During therapy, they focus on creating a safe space where she can openly talk about her feelings. The girl learns to recognize her emotions and express them better. She begins to understand that arguments are a way to avoid deeper feelings of vulnerability and gradually learns how to resolve issues in her relationship without conflicts.

These examples demonstrate how different counselling approaches can effectively respond to the specific needs of adolescents. Integrating various methods allows addressing problems ranging from identity, school pressure, to spiritual crises, with each model providing effective support tools tailored to the situation and story of the young person.

3. COUNSELLING AMONG CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Adolescence is a multidimensional process that involves the gradual transformation of a child into a mature adult (Geldard and Geldard 2009, 10). This process is

complex and not always consciously perceived by all young people. While some challenges of adolescence are less demanding for adolescents, others can present serious difficulties they must cope with.

During adolescence, we often notice physiological changes, emotional fluctuations, questions of identity, social expectations, and moral and spiritual challenges. Biological changes occurring during this period have a fundamental impact on the physiology, sexuality, and emotional development of the adolescent. These changes can be a source of uncertainty, confusion, and the feeling that the young person differs from their peers who are developing at a different pace. On the other hand, cognitive development, such as the development of abstract thinking and the ability to critically reflect, provides the adolescent with new possibilities to process information, solve relationship problems, and think creatively (Geldard and Geldard 2009, 13).

This period is also characterized by egocentrism, which manifests in young people feeling constantly observed, as if they are the centre of others' attention. This trait is part of development that leads to the search for one's own identity. Adolescents try out new poses and behaviours to create their self-image. At the same time, they learn how to separate from the family and integrate into society through relationships with peers and new adults. This socialization process requires the adolescent to find a balance between the need for identification and personal individualization.

On this journey to adulthood, adolescents often face personal crises arising from encounters with changes and new challenges. The transition from childhood to adulthood is not only physical but it also includes psychological, social, and emotional changes. Failure to successfully manage these changes can lead to the development of mental difficulties such as depression, anxiety, or even suicidal thoughts. In such cases, counselling appears as an important tool for providing support and accompaniment on this journey (Geldard and Geldard 2009, 26).

Self-discovery, which the adolescent undergoes, is accompanied by the exploration of the meaning of life, new relationships, and a value system. This process is essential for building stable foundations that the young person needs to successfully reach adulthood. As Marcello Semeraro states, those who embark on this adventure of growth need guides who will listen without prejudice and moralizing. This relationship, based on trust, can ignite the desire to search for the meaning of life and provide the adolescent with the strength to handle the challenges that adolescence brings (Semeraro and Soreca 2016, 15).

4. KEY FACTORS OF INTEGRATING COUNSELLING INTO PASTORAL CARE

Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, emphasizes that youth cannot be perceived as an abstract entity but as a group of concrete young people living their unique lives. "Youth is not something to be analysed in the abstract. Indeed, 'youth' does not exist: there exist only young people, each with the reality of his or her own life" (Francesco 2019, 71). This leads us to an important challenge, i.e., to approach young people individually, listen to their needs, and examine the

context of their lives. In youth ministry, this becomes the foundation for effectively accompanying young people, where counselling with its approach can play a key role in their personal and spiritual growth.

In pastoral accompaniment of young people, it is important not to ignore a life phase specifically marked by growth, maturation, and decision-making. Pope Francis speaks of youth as “a time of generous commitment, whole-hearted dedication” (Francesco 2019, 108), but also as a time of risk-taking and a strong desire to live the present as good as possible (Francesco 2019, 144). These qualities of young people provide us with a deep insight into how important it is to be close to them not only as ‘shepherds’ but also as ‘guides’ in their process of self-discovery and finding their own path in life.

Implementing counselling in pastoral care means more than just applying theoretical knowledge. As Rossano Sala states, effective youth ministry for young people must combine theory and practice to provide inspiring and practical tools for the service of accompaniment. This approach, like seasoning in cooking, gives the whole process the right flavour and meaning. The following key factors for integrating counselling into youth ministry are based on a combination of the authors’ proposals and references to prior research cited in the text.

Safety

The first and fundamental element is mutual interconnectedness and a sense of closeness that takes place in a safe space. In pastoral counselling of young people, it is important not only to be present but also to create space for genuine encounters and solidarity. Closeness and safety are the foundation of a culture of encounter, where everyday life provides an opportunity to meet God through human relationships (Sala et al. 2017, 213). In counselling, closeness means the presence of a counsellor who can listen without moralizing, creating an atmosphere of trust and providing a safe space for sharing and self-reflection.

Learning

Another important aspect is discipleship. This dynamic and multifaceted process is not linear, but it is characterized by ups and downs, enthusiasm and disappointment (Martini 2016, 619). In the counselling context, discipleship means creating a relationship based on trust and friendship, helping young people navigate their own path with full awareness that they can grow through their experiences and relationships.

Identity

Within pastoral care, counselling also supports the process of seeking a vocation—that is, developing personal identity and the meaning of life. This search for identity often accompanies questions like “Who am I?” and “For whom am I?” (Francesco 2019, 286). Counselling offers a space for young people to explore these questions in the context of their own experiences, providing support in finding their authentic path and vocation (Francesco and Spadaro 2017, 38).

Selflessness

Pastoral care, like counselling, includes the aspect of self-giving. Self-giving to young people is more than just the presence of an adult – it is active dedication of time, attention, and support (Sala et al. 2017, 221). The counsellor acts as a guide willing to sacrifice their time and energy to help the young person discover and develop their own potential.

Well-being

Contemporary Western society builds a “dream of freedom through a strategy and culture of rights,” which is a significant achievement, but which also includes vulnerabilities (Lichner 2024, 78-85). Inner well-being, or in biblical language, the Beatitudes, offer an alternative to this logic—they are Jesus’ self-portrait and show a way of life based on solidarity, not power, reward, or exchange (Barcellona 2010, 63). Jesus identifies with those who suffer, and His life path criticizes the will to power. The Beatitudes offer a fundamental change in understanding individual and communal life, shaping new values and attitudes. As Pope Francis emphasized to young people in Rio de Janeiro: “Read the Beatitudes; they will do you good” (Francesco 2013). This challenge shows that the Beatitudes are a valuable tool in pastoral care, especially when working with young people.

Community

Finally, a key element of effective pastoral care is building community. The Church is not just a hierarchical institution but primarily a community of believers that wants to create space for sharing and support (Theobald 2011, 422). Counselling helps young people find their place in this community, supports them in the process of socialization, and helps them develop healthy relationships.

Implementing counselling in pastoral care thus requires more than just theoretical knowledge—it needs active presence, closeness, discipleship, and support in seeking the vocation and identity of young people. It is a complex process that bears fruit when carried out competently, with sincere interest and willingness to be a guide on the journey of young people to adulthood.

Possibilities for Integrating New Approaches

It is evident that it is not only young people who grow and mature as, in a certain metaphorical sense, counselling itself also evolves. Besides the above-mentioned approaches, we could also discuss new “modern” ones whose potential has begun to unfold and develop in recent years.

Eclectic Counselling Model

Certainly, the Eclectic Counselling Model is worth mentioning, combining various theoretical frameworks and techniques according to the individual’s needs, which is particularly important when working with adolescents who often go through various emotional and social challenges. Its uniqueness lies in its focus on flexibility.

The counsellor is not bound by one theory but selects tools based on what suits the specific client. For example, for an adolescent suffering from anxiety and depressive states, the counsellor can combine the Cognitive-Behavioural Approach (CBT) to address negative thought patterns with Narrative Therapy, which helps the adolescent reassess and change their personal story. Since the Eclectic Approach is highly adaptable to individual needs, it allows to respond to different stages of adolescent development. The counsellor can simultaneously utilize elements of mindfulness to help calm the mind and manage stress, along with art therapy, enabling the young person to creatively express their inner emotions.

Online Counselling

Modern technology offers the possibility of online counselling (Geldard, Geldard and Yin Foo 2017, 317), which became popular especially during the pandemic. It is evident that adolescents often prefer communication through digital platforms. Online counselling can be a suitable alternative for those who have limited access to personal meetings or feel more comfortable in a more anonymous and flexible environment. One important advantage is that for young people accustomed to technology, online counselling can create a safe space for open communication. It also reduces barriers such as geographical distance. This approach also allows counsellors to respond flexibly to clients' needs through text messages, video calls, or emails, which can be very effective for adolescents with busy schedules.

Art Therapy

Another method that should not be overlooked here is Art Therapy, which is also developing in numerous innovative ways. For adolescents, it is often appealing because it provides them with a way to express their feelings and internal conflicts without having to use words. This is particularly useful for young people who have trouble expressing themselves or are experiencing emotional fluctuations. This approach helps young people express emotions they might not otherwise be able to verbalize. Art Therapy is also very effective when working with traumatized adolescents or those undergoing difficult emotional experiences, such as the divorce of parents or the loss of a loved one.

Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques

Finally, we can mention Mindfulness and relaxation techniques. Mindfulness focuses on the present moment and is a technique that helps adolescents manage stress and improve self-confidence (Geldard, Geldard and Yin Foo 2017, 231). This technique can also be integrated into pastoral counselling to help young people maintain focus on spiritual exercises, meditation, and inner peace. Among the advantages it offers, we can specifically mention that it teaches adolescents how to focus on the present and calm the mind in stressful situations. It is a very effective tool for those suffering from anxiety, hyperactivity, or emotional fluctuations. This approach is also very beneficial in connection with spiritual development, which can support deeper reflections and connections with oneself and the world around.

The potential that theological faculties can bring to the area of utilizing new counselling techniques lies mainly in the fact that, thanks to expert personnel who are engaged in both research and practical application, they can provide accredited courses focused on modern counselling approaches. Moreover, their mission coincides with their pedagogical efforts to ensure that future spiritual “shepherds” and counsellors can work effectively with youth in pastoral care.

CONCLUSION

Pastoral counselling has significant potential in accompanying adolescents, especially when it considers their developmental stage and provides them with guidance and support in seeking their own identity. A key element of this process is active listening and acceptance, but it is equally important to encourage young people to abandon outdated and often copied thinking patterns that hinder their growth. For adolescents, this step represents an important transition from childhood to adulthood.

The role of the counsellor is dynamic and requires an active approach. Given that adolescents often suffer from restlessness and impatience, the counsellor must be creative, prompt, and prepared to seize every opportunity to engage them in their own growth process. Creativity and flexibility are essential for maintaining adolescents’ interest and creating a space where they can feel safe and motivated.

As fragile beings, we need the support of others, and this is especially true for young people who are shaping their future. The closeness, time, and experiences we provide them through counselling have a significant impact on their development and represent an act of humanity and a gift that can help them find their place in life.

Theological faculties (Lichner et al. 2020, 73-85), which are engaged in research and connected with practice, have great potential in popularizing and developing modern counselling techniques. Their mission lies not only in academic education but also in preparing future spiritual “shepherds” who will be able to work effectively with youth in pastoral care.

Church communities can play an important role in creating networks of trustworthy adults who regularly meet with young people, support open communication, and empathy. These networks can serve as bridges between youth and the community, strengthening the sense of belonging and mutual support.

The potential of pastoral counselling thus lies not only in individual support of adolescents but also in the broader development of community spirit and the formation of future leaders who will be prepared to lead young people to maturity and a fulfilling life.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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