



# Connection Strategies Cheat Sheet

Practical Tools to Build Deeper  
Relationships with Youth

**UNseminary** 

Based on the episode *"From Despair to Connection: Helping Youth Overcome Mental Health Challenges with Will Hutcherson"* on the unSeminary podcast

In the episode *From Despair to Connection: Helping Youth Overcome Mental Health Challenges*, Will Hutcherson emphasized the critical role of connection in the lives of young people, describing it as "vitamins for the brain." He explains that connection is not just a nice-to-have but a necessity for emotional and mental well-being. In this Connection Strategies Cheat Sheet, we've distilled the most unique

and powerful strategies discussed in the episode, alongside insights from Will's work, to help youth leaders and workers build meaningful connections with the young people they serve. These strategies are designed to foster deeper relationships and provide support that can genuinely impact the next generation's mental health and spiritual growth.



## The Power of Proximity: Being Physically Present

**What it means:** Being physically near someone creates a powerful sense of connection and trust. Will emphasizes the importance of physical proximity when working with youth. Sometimes, it's not about saying the right thing but just being there.

### Practical Steps:

- Sit beside someone rather than across from them in casual or deep conversations.
- Show up consistently for important events in their lives—games, performances, or even tough moments.
- Create opportunities for non-verbal connection, like shared activities, walks, or casual hangouts where talking isn't necessary.

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## Validation Before Fixing: Listen Without the Agenda

**What it means:** Teens often don't need their problems solved immediately—they need to feel heard and validated first. Will points out that when we validate their feelings, it helps them open up and trust us more.

### Practical Steps:

- Start by acknowledging their emotions: "I can see why you'd feel that way."
- Avoid jumping into advice mode or fixing the problem. Instead, focus on active listening and empathizing.
- If appropriate, ask, "Do you want advice, or do you just need someone to listen?"



## Harness the Power of Small Wins

**What it means:** Will discussed the idea of focusing on small wins to build momentum and connection. Celebrating even the smallest achievements in a young person's life can lead to greater confidence and deeper relationships.

### Practical Steps:

- Celebrate everyday victories, like completing homework, showing kindness, or attending youth group consistently.
- Create a recognition system in your youth group that highlights small, often overlooked successes.
- Encourage youth to set small, achievable goals and celebrate their progress together.

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## Use the “3-Second Rule” for Engagement

**What it means:** In moments of hesitation, it’s often easy to let fear prevent you from engaging. Will introduced the concept of a “3-second rule,” where you give yourself three seconds to decide to act—whether it’s to greet someone, approach a group, or initiate a conversation.

### Practical Steps:

- Teach youth leaders and volunteers to use the 3-second rule to break down barriers to connection.
- Encourage youth to apply this in their own social interactions, helping them step out of their comfort zones.
- Use this rule during group activities to foster better integration and participation.



## Lean into Silence: Non-Verbal Connection

**What it means:** Silence doesn’t have to be uncomfortable—sometimes, it’s an opportunity for deeper, non-verbal connection. Will emphasizes that being comfortable with silence can open doors to meaningful engagement.

### Practical Steps:

- During one-on-one conversations, allow for pauses and silence without rushing to fill the space.
- Use body language, such as a reassuring nod, a hand on the shoulder, or sitting side by side, to convey empathy without words.
- Encourage moments of quiet reflection in group settings, creating a safe space for introspection and connection.

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