

Lesson plan for

Getting Back to You—Part of Independent Living Is Dealing With Yourself

by Xavier Reyes, *Foster Care Youth United*, May/June 2003, p. 34-35.

Goal: To help students better understand some of the emotional aspects of leaving care, including:

- dealing with anger
- accepting responsibility and dealing with blame
- the importance of developing helpful ways to reflect on their emotions
- discovering how to use time alone in a productive way
- doing a “self-assessment”
- setting goals

OK. That’s a mouthful of goals, and maybe a lifetime of work. However, teens can *begin* to work on those issues right now. Xavier is proof because he’s doing it. Reading his story and reflecting on some of his advice and experiences can be an important first step for your teens.

A bit of background: Though he barely mentions it in this story, Xavier went through some dark days of heavy drug use and deep loneliness before he began to feel emotionally stable and stronger. The techniques he mentions in this story to develop emotional strength and resilience come from his own hard experience.

LESSON (Total Length: about one hour)

Free write (about 10 minutes)

Tell students that you’re going to read a prompt and they have to write for exactly 2 minutes in response to the prompt. The only rule is that they have to keep their pen moving, even if they’re writing “I don’t know what to write.” Grammar and spelling don’t matter. And they can keep their writing private if they like. We also strongly suggest that you write along with them. It builds trust and helps you share the emotions they are feeling. When everyone is ready, read this prompt:

“Imagine that you left care and have your own apartment. You’re sitting alone at home on a Saturday night. You have a job and are getting by. But your friends have to work tonight so they’re not going to call. Your neighborhood temporarily lost electricity, so your TV, computer, etc. do not work. You light a candle. Now, imagine yourself alone in the candlelight. What do you do? Do you read a book? Drink a beer or smoke a joint? Write in your journal? How do you feel? What thoughts come into your mind? How do you deal with them?”

Discussion: Ask volunteers if they’d like to briefly share what they wrote.

Respond to statements by Xavier (10 minutes)

Copy the statements on the next page and hand them out to the teens. Tell the teens to read the statements silently and circle one (or more) that stands out for them.

After they've all circled a statement, go around the room. Ask the teens to comment briefly on why they circled a particular statement. Probe them a bit to get beneath the surface. If no one circled a particular statement, ask the class what they think the writer might have meant by it.

Read Xavier's story (15 minutes) Read aloud "Getting Back to You." You can read it to the class, or have them volunteer to take turns reading. When you get to the statements that you reviewed you can ask the teens if they have anything to add or other thoughts about the statement now that they see it in the context of the article.

Self-Assessment (15 minutes): Xavier says that it's important to do a "self-assessment"—to think about who you are, how you got where you are, and where you want to go. He even gives guidelines for doing it. Have your students complete his self assessment (see worksheet).

Discussion (15 minutes): Go through the worksheet with the group, asking selected students to read from their answers to the questions.

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Copy these statements on a separate sheet of paper and pass out.

1. I wasn't just financially dependent on the foster care system, I was also emotionally dependent. Yes! Emotionally!
2. All the time they were in the system they were angry at other people for holding them back. But now the main thing holding them back is their own anger.
3. Allow yourself to reflect on all that you've been through and feel the emotions of it all.
4. I used all this time alone to work on some of my problems and to set goals for myself.
5. I knew that my drug use had become excessive. I recalled how I felt at those moments and acknowledged my part in what happened.
6. I would wake up really early and go walking along the river [and think].... By the time I walked back home I'd feel full of energy, like I was ready to take on anything.

7. Don't forget to take time out for yourself, too. Take time to plan your future and think about your dreams. Take time to reflect on the things you have experienced and how they have affected you.

Self-Assessment (for preparing to leave care)

(Developed by Xavier Reyes of *Foster Care Youth United* magazine, based on his 8 years in the system.)

1. What have you learned from your experiences in foster care? (Describe at least thing you've learned and how it will be helpful to you in the future.)

2. How have you grown? (Think back to the person you were when you came into the system, or a few years ago. Do you handle anger better? Are you better at relationships? Are you doing better in school? More mature? Compare the person you were then with the person you are now.)

3. What areas of your life do you need to work on? (anger? relationships? honesty? reliability? drug use? saving money?). Describe one thing that's especially important for you to work on between now and when you leave the system.

4. What are your goals and how are you going to achieve them? (Describe at least one important goal, such as getting a job, graduating from high school, finding a roommate, and list a few things you can do that will bring you closer to the goal.)
