

LEADER'S GUIDE



**LIFE STEPS**  
with Michael Pritchard



**Program #3**

**Taking Charge**

## Series Overview

*LifeSteps* is a 12-part series designed to help students build character and develop the social and emotional skills they need to become responsible, caring, and successful adults. With well-developed social and emotional skills, young people will be more aware of their feelings and more capable of managing them. They will be better able to set goals, make decisions, solve problems, and relate to other people effectively. In school, these skills can increase motivation, lessen anxiety, improve study skills and boost academic achievement.

*LifeSteps* uses lively, unrehearsed student-centered discussion, dramatized dilemmas that accurately reflect teen experience, and themed comic interludes that deliver their message through humor. Filmed with actual students in schools across the country, each program is culturally sensitive and multiethnic. The series covers a broad range of skills and attributes: self-knowledge, self-control, resiliency, empathy, problem solving, developing interpersonal relationships, building character, respect, responsibility, and working towards success. Each of these skills and attributes is an important component of social and emotional intelligence.

The underlying structure of the *LifeSteps* curriculum is an eight-step problem-solving strategy. Explored in depth in Program #6, *Creative Problem Solving*, this strategy is demonstrated in each program and provides students with a flexible, practical approach to managing the social and emotional challenges they face every day. The eight steps are:

1. Stop and calm down
2. Name the problem
3. Understand others
4. Brainstorm solutions
5. Evaluate and choose
6. Make a plan
7. Reflect and adjust
8. Reward yourself

Although each program has unique objectives, they all share the goal of providing students with the above important life skills. The *LifeSteps* approach can help teens think through difficult situations and make good choices, during a stage in their development when they are driven by strong emotions.

## How to Use This Program

This program is designed for use in classrooms, community centers, youth organizations, camps, teen groups, libraries, or for children at home. Although teens are the target audience, parents, teachers, school administrators, school support staff, counselors, social workers, youth workers, peer counseling trainers, mentors, and anyone else who has regular contact with, and a commitment to, young people can benefit from the program. This Leader's Guide is aimed at teachers, but it can be used by any group leader who wants to get the most out of *Taking Charge*.

As with the other programs in the *LifeSteps* series, *Taking Charge* is intended for use as part of a learning experience that begins before viewing the program and ends beyond the classroom walls. The discussion questions and activities are intended to focus and enhance this learning experience.

Before showing *Taking Charge* to your students, you may find these steps helpful:

- Screen the program at least once, noting areas where you may want to stop the tape to focus on a particular issue.
- Read this guide through to get a sense of how you can use the program, what discussion questions would work best, and what follow-up activities would be most productive.
- Ask the students questions to get them thinking about some of the key issues presented in this program. You might want to distribute copies of the discussion questions on page 6. Be sure to review the questions in advance to make sure they are clear to you and appropriate for your students. You can then use them to encourage discussion after the screening.

Peer education, rather than frontal teaching, is the technique that underlies the entire *LifeSteps* series. Because we believe that teen viewers will more easily learn the skills and attitudinal changes proposed if they are taught by their peers, the programs are structured around discussions where real teens grapple with tough situations and model positive solutions.

## **Objectives**

- To learn the importance of self-control and practical ways to achieve it
- To recognize personal signs of stress
- To develop positive techniques for responding to pressure
- To strengthen self-discipline and delay of immediate gratification in favor of future benefit
- To use anger management techniques as a way of avoiding violence

## **Synopsis**

Onstage, Michael opens the program with an anecdote that illustrates the need to manage pressure. He points out that all people experience stress, and the key is taking charge and learning to deal with it positively.

As the discussion begins, teens identify common pressures they feel, including school, jobs, and money. One girl notes that she has a job as a restaurant hostess and dealing with customers involves pressure; another mentions the pressure caused by SATs, and the fact that colleges expect certain scores. Michael asks how they calm themselves when they feel pressured, and a girl responds that she tells

herself, "You can do this," and focuses on what she has to do.

In response to Michael's question about pressure reaching an unhealthy level, a girl talks about having gotten sick because she was so worn out. Michael asks, "Do you wait until you snap?" and another girl replies, "Sometimes you don't know your own limits until you've broken them." The group agrees that taking an occasional break from pressure can help you feel better.

Michael asks if anyone has ever seen people so pressured that they snapped. A boy tells about a kid in his school who was being teased, and finally just hit one of the teasers with a bunch of rolled-up papers. When Michael disagrees that the kid had "solved his problems," the boy acknowledges that it wasn't the right way to handle the situation, but notes that the kid just didn't know what else to do. A girl shares an incident involving a classmate who lost control and yelled at a teacher. Realizing that she never wanted to act that way, she notes the importance of stepping back and looking at the situation.

The first dramatized segment introduces Brian, a teen who is trying to study in a noisy home environment. Feeling stressed by poor grades, parental pressure, a losing football season, and problems with his girlfriend, Brian loses control and explodes when his little sister asks a simple favor. Michael asks the group about Brian's emotions; group members mention anger, guilt, frustration, and stress. Then Michael asks if anyone in the group has ever had a situation that caused them to snap. One girl has several siblings; sometimes they all get angry and yell at each other and afterward, she feels terrible. Another girl once yelled at a coach who pressured her. Later, she spoke to the coach about what had happened. Michael asks what she learned by taking charge of her life in that situation. She responds that while she could have handled it better initially, it worked out when she talked the problem over.

Michael asks what Brian could have done to keep the pressure from escalating. A boy responds that he should communicate with his parents about his need for quiet when he's studying. Asked what Brian can do to calm himself right at the moment, one girl suggests that he take a deep breath, let everything out, and tell himself to cope with his emotions. A boy shares that when he feels annoyed by his two little sisters' requests for help, he reminds himself that they are asking for something simple and he helps them. Michael asks them how they start the process of calming themselves, and one girl describes the messages she gives herself. Michael sums up their responses, noting that "stress will leave you if you just choose to get control."

Onstage, Michael leads into the next dramatization by telling an amusing story about procrastination. In the dramatization, Brian faces a choice between studying for an important test and going to an all-day concert with his girlfriend.

Michael asks the group what they would do in Brian's situation. One boy explains that academics is more important to him, but he realizes that other people may have different priorities. Some teens would choose social life; one girl says that she would focus on grades and that a boyfriend who cared about her would understand.

Another girl notes, "Your academics are your future." As the group continues to talk about setting priorities, one girl shares that she used to put off doing her chemistry homework and finally realized that she was at fault for the poor grades she got in that subject. Michael asks what she learned by taking control of the situation; she learned that it's easier and less stressful to do what needs to be done, rather than putting it off.

Asked if they ever wait to the last minute, the group generally responds "All the time." One girl adds that typing a paper at 3:00 AM taught her not to put things off to the end. Michael asks about times when teens in the group got work done early. One girl says that getting a paper done in advance because she knew it would be on her mind gave her much more freedom than she had expected.

"Why is it important to take charge of yourself?" Michael asks. A girl explains that teenagers are getting ready to be adults and will have to be responsible. The teens agree with Michael's analogy that they are "in dress rehearsal for the big time." One boy adds that teenagers like to live in the present, but the lessons they are learning now will follow them through the rest of their lives. If you "know who you want to be...you can do it," another boy says.

Pointing out the difficulty of taking charge when you are angry, Michael tells a story that illustrates the use of humor for this purpose.

The program returns to Brian, who is in a potentially dangerous situation. He and his teammates are upset; they lost the last game of the season, and now a guy who is hanging out with Brian's girlfriend is bullying him.

What is Brian feeling? The group says he is angry, jealous, and scared. A boy predicts that Brian's teammates will take their anger out on the bully and his friends, and there will be a brawl. Michael raises the point that Brian should be thinking about what may happen, and the group discusses the implications of Brian's choices. Several teens feel that Brian is only thinking about fighting, not consequences, and that, while it's easy to say he should walk away, stepping down would only make him look bad. One boy, whose father is a police officer, shares that one wrong decision can cause you to lose everything you've worked for. He adds that his dad has seen kids get killed by messing around and doing the wrong thing. A girl stresses the need to think about the future; another says she doesn't want to face consequences and think, "What did I just do?" Michael asks one girl what she would do if another girl pushed her on the basketball court. She responds that her first reaction might be to fight, but realizing that the girl who pushed her was not worth a fight, she would decide to just brush it off.

Toward the end of the program, Michael asks the group how they can get control in impulsive situations. Various teens respond: stop, look around, and get your composure back; and get in the habit of thinking before you act. Michael agrees, reminding the group of the need to check themselves.

Michael concludes the program onstage, pointing out that taking charge means acting positively, not just reacting, and learning to handle positive choices.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the main pressures in your life? Which of these pressures have eased and which seem to have worsened, as you've gotten older?
2. Do you think stress can be positive? Was there ever a time when feeling stressed affected you in a good way?
3. People usually have physical reactions that signal their anger, such as clenched fists or a red face. How does your body react when you are angry? When you see signs of anger in other people, how do you react? What other signs of stress are you aware of in yourself?
4. What technique do you find most helpful for calming yourself down when you are angry? Why do you think this technique works?
5. Humor can help to calm down an angry situation. Have you ever seen humor used this way? Describe what happened. How does humor work for you when you are under stress or very angry?
6. Schoolwork is often a source of stress for teens. If you were responsible for your school, what would you do to help students manage their stress?
7. Parents often feel the need to check up on their children's schoolwork, while teens are likely to resent having their parents involved in this way. How can parents and teens come to a balance that works for both of them?
8. How do you set priorities for yourself? How do your goals affect your priorities? How do your priorities reflect your character and your sense of who you are?
9. What personal qualities are important in helping you reach your goals?
10. Adults and teens live with a different set of rights and responsibilities. What are some rights adults have but teens don't? What are some responsibilities? What changes would you like to see in this area? Would you be willing to accept more responsibilities in order to have more rights?

### **Activities**

1. Brian describes a situation that triggers his anger. His team has lost, and his girlfriend is hanging out with another guy whose group is challenging him. Role-

play this situation, focusing on identifying Brian's strong emotions and presenting ways he can manage his reactions without ending up in a fight.

2. Choose an issue that is a source of stress between you and an adult. Meet with that adult and agree on steps you can both take to ease the stress, and write a contract specifying what you will each do. After a month, meet again to talk about how you have done. Share your experiences in a class-wide discussion.

3. People procrastinate for many reasons. Think about a task that you have avoided doing. What is it about this task that makes it hard for you to do? What would make it easier? List four steps you can take to help you get past the roadblocks.

4. In this program, teens describe situations that cause them to snap. Invite an expert on anger management to talk to your class and suggest ways to handle situations like these.

5. Write an essay about a person you know who usually seems to be in control of him or herself. Describe their characteristics, how they manage difficult situations, and what you admire about this person.





### **About Michael Pritchard**

Youth educator, humorist, actor, former probation officer, and PBS host, Michael Pritchard is known across the United States for his ability to help young people gain self-awareness. He has a unique ability to get teens to listen and open up, and uses his distinctive style of humor to share serious messages with his audience—messages about making good choices, personal responsibility, and respect for others.

Michael's award-winning series include: *SOS: Saving Our Schools*; *PeaceTalks*; *You Can Choose*; *The Power of Choice*; and *Big Changes, Big Choices*. A nationally acclaimed motivational speaker, Michael serves on the boards of directors for The Guardsmen, The Giants Community Fund, the Special Olympics, the California Association of Peer Programs, the Chinese-American Educational Institute, Ronald McDonald House, and the Salvation Army.



### **Program Titles**

- Program #1 The ABCs of Emotional Intelligence
- Program #2 Knowing Who You Are
- Program #3 Taking Charge
- Program #4 Bouncing Back
- Program #5 Empathy, Caring and Compassion
- Program #6 Creative Problem Solving
- Program #7 Getting Along with Others
- Program #8 Building Character
- Program #9 Respect
- Program #10 Responsibility
- Program #11 Developing Healthy Relationships
- Program #12 Doing Your Best

*Each program is approximately 30 minutes long.*

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