

THE UN THINK ABLE

RESILIENT YOUTH MINISTRY
IN THE FACE OF CRISIS

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We don't wish for disaster, especially one that involves youth, but it seems almost inevitable that at one point or another, crisis will strike. Often in these situations, people are overcome with emotion — shock, fear, confusion, despair — and chaos ensues. This cycle of tragedy, emotion, and chaos doesn't have to continue. We want to break the cycle, to equip youth ministers with the information and tools necessary to respond to emergencies in a confident and strategic manner.

Throughout this resource, you will find information compiled from youth ministers who have experienced tragedy in their communities and responded in a way that aided in the recovery process and brought about healing. Our goal is for you to use this resource as a framework to develop an action plan you can turn to when crisis strikes, be it in the form of a natural disaster, abuse, serious illness, or death.

In order to help walk through this resource, we are going to utilize a narrative of a crisis to start each section. The crises you face at your parish may be different, but this narrative will provide practical examples for the material in each section. At the end of each section, there are actionable items we want you to undertake. These exercises are important as you will need to reference these materials in the event of an actual crisis.

Utilize this book with the pastoral care staff at your parish, with your core team, and take time to pray through it yourself. The preparation inside these pages will bear fruit in a time of tragedy and will help keep your head above water when everything else seems to be falling apart.

Thank you for the work you do in ministry. There are many joys to serving young people and leading them closer to Christ, and while there are challenges, we are confident in Christ who has won the victory over sin, suffering, and death and know there is no crisis beyond His healing and grace.

Safe Environment

As a youth minister, you are entrusted with the formation and safety of the youth in your program. As you create pastoral care action plans, you need to commit to following safe environment guidelines.

The guidelines and processes for protecting minors will vary from diocese to diocese. When establishing the child protection protocol for your action plan, always refer back to your diocesan standards. Specifically, research the requirements and procedure for reporting violation of boundaries and abuse. This is vital information for your action plan.

Although the specific processes vary across the United States, there are some fundamental practices to implement to ensure the safety of minors in your youth group and community. These practices are to be assumed as standards, in addition to your local safe environment guidelines, throughout this book.

- *Define healthy boundaries.* Boundaries are the foundation of ministry, so it is important to establish physical and verbal boundaries within your youth group. To maintain physical boundaries, refrain from any contact that is unwarranted or unwanted, including wrestling, long embraces, massages, piggyback rides,

WHEN CRISIS STRIKES

and full-frontal hugs, to a name a few. Instead, engage youth with high fives, side hugs, handshakes, and pats on the head or back. When speaking with youth, use language that is positive, affirming, and appropriate. Cursing, name calling, racial or sexual insults, derogatory comments, and communication through personal email or social media accounts violate verbal boundaries and should be avoided, as well.

- *Never be alone with youth.* Youth are inclined to confide in adults they trust, and youth ministers are often placed in these situations. Although they may be divulging sensitive information from a place of vulnerability, especially if it is in regard to a tragedy, it is imperative that another trusted adult is present for the conversation. This is to ensure the safety of both the minor and adult.
- *Know your volunteers.* The men and women who constitute your core team are aiding in the formation of the youth. For this reason, it is important to truly know these individuals and verify they are suitable for this type of ministry. Consider implementing an application and interview process prior to accepting volunteers in order to ensure they are a good fit for the program and are capable of maintaining child protection standards.
- *Renew training annually.* Refer to your diocesan standard for training, specifically what training is required and how often it needs to be renewed. If your diocese does not have a standard for renewal, consider making this a yearly habit for yourself and your core team.
- *Know your scope of expertise.* The reality is, we can't do it all, and you may come across situations in ministry that you are not equipped to handle. In these instances, acknowledge your lack of expertise and seek help from qualified individuals in that particular specialty.

**The names of individuals throughout the book have been changed out of respect for their families.*

Imagine a normal day in your office. You arrive at work, start sifting through emails, and think about the upcoming youth night. Right before lunch, your phone rings. It is the counselor at one of the local high schools, and you immediately sense the panic in her voice. A student was killed in car accident that morning. This teen was a part of the youth ministry program at your parish. The counselor is calling to give you the details and asks you to come to the high school when they make the announcement to the student body.

Your head is swimming and emotions are cascading through you. Your mind replays the last conversation you had with the teen and then jumps to images of his parents, followed by the faces of his siblings and all of his friends. It gets hard to breathe as you realize that, as a pastoral leader in the community, you will need to care for the many lives that are going to be hurting. At the same time, you feel broken by the news. You end the call with the counselor and sit in silence. Every email, planning meeting, and lunch now seem inconsequential. You need to step up and serve your community in a time of crisis.

Are you ready?

As youth ministers, we hope we don't have to face crisis in ministry, but crisis is inevitable whenever we serve in a pastoral care role. We are going to face these moments, but they are rarely expected. When we get that phone call, step into that meeting, or have that teen arrive at our office with bad news, we need to know what our next step is going to be. We need to have an action plan.

An action plan is a comprehensive document that outlines the appropriate course of action for specific situations. It is imperative that you develop a comprehensive action plan that is approved by your pastor, shared with your parish staff and core team, and exercised in a time of crisis. Your parish may already have an action plan; ask for it, add any information specific to your ministry, and seek approval from a superior, like a pastor, director of religious education, coordinator of faith formation, etc. Once you have an approved plan, share it with your core team and any other individuals to whom it pertains.

Your action plan for a pastoral care crisis will be different from an action plan for an emergency situation (discussed later on in this book). A pastoral care plan is designed to provide clarity of thought when you may be struggling or when emotions are impacting your ability to make decisions.

An action plan should include:

- A quick overview timeline of when people need to be contacted, when events need to occur, and when follow up is necessary.
- Contact numbers of pastoral care professionals, child protective services, other staff members, and local schools.
- Detailed notes about prayer services, letters to be sent to the community, and other “boilerplate” communication that can be modified as needed.

Your action plan will have steps that take place within minutes, hours, days, weeks, and even months after a crisis occurs.

In the First 60 Minutes

In our story, you receive a call from the school counselor, informing you of what has happened to the student and requesting that you come to the school to provide pastoral care for the students. As you hang up the phone, your first 60 minutes of your action plan should include:

- Notifying your priest and any other senior pastoral staff who need to be aware of the situation. A large communication should not be sent out at this time as the students at the school are not aware of the situation.
- Reserving space in your church sanctuary for a prayer service. Work with other parish organizations to move their events if necessary. Schedule the service within the next two days.
- Contacting additional counselors or pastoral care professionals to be present at your prayer service or the next Life Night.
- Notifying all required ministers for the prayer service of the time and place, and gaining their commitment (priest, music minister, core team, etc.).
- Drafting an email communication to your core team with information about the crisis and details about the prayer service. This should be sent after the students at the school are notified.
- Spending at least five minutes in prayer.
- If appropriate, meeting the family or arriving at the place you have been invited (in this case, the school).

- Scheduling at least two other adults to be present with you at the office or another place where teens can drop in to talk, pray, and cry together. If possible, keep your parish office or youth office open longer than usual.

In the First 24 Hours

The first 24 hours of this crisis will be a blur. Walk through your action plan steps to ensure that you are not missing anything during this critical time:

- Arrive at the school or other designated place and exercise a ministry of presence.
- Do not schedule any other meetings or appointments that do not concern the present crisis. Move or cancel any non-essential appointments or meetings for the next three days.
- After students and all other appropriate parties have been told the news, send the drafted email to your core team.
- Publicize open office hours as a safe place for teens to talk, pray, or just be via appropriate channels (social media, email to parents, parish website, etc.).
- If you are having the prayer service that evening, prepare the space.
- Review your pastoral care strategy for the following week.

In the First Week

Your focus for the next week is going to be almost exclusively on this crisis and walking with teens, families, and parishioners. You may choose to add specific times to these items, but they will vary with circumstance. Consider keeping them in a general time frame and adapting as needed:

- Maintain open office hours with several adults present throughout the week.
- If necessary, schedule a Life Night, Edge Night, or other youth event that addresses suffering and Christ's victory, a night of Eucharistic Adoration, or another prayer service. Work with your core team to implement this event.
- Contact outside counselors to be available for your core team to help process the crisis.
- Include Mass intentions for the crisis for the weekend liturgies.
- Assist with funeral preparations in any way that may be asked of you, but do not intrude on preparations if you are not asked.
- Publicize funeral arrangements through appropriate channels if it is permitted by the family.
- Spend at least one personal day away from the situation.

In the First Month

After the funeral, life will start to return to normal for some, but others will be wrestling with the tragedy for several months and even years. In the case of our scenario, the loss of a child is something that parents never fully heal from, and other family and friends are impacted for years afterward.

- Return to normal youth night programming, mindful that some teens will still be struggling.
- Ask core members to consider staying after youth nights to pray and talk with teens who need continued care.
- Check in with the family and continue to offer prayers for them. If possible, organize a meal train for them.

- Keep open office hours, though at a reduced rate, for teens who need to drop in and talk.
- Be aware of signs of depression and suicide among teens in your youth group, especially those who were close to the teen who passed away.
- Set calendar reminders for the rest of your action plan.
- Schedule counseling for yourself to help process the crisis.
- Encourage core members who are impacted by the crisis to seek counseling to process the tragedy.

In the First Six Months to First Year

By this point, life for all but a few people has returned to normal. Remember that for family and close friends, there is still a whole year of holidays, birthdays, and other special events that will remind them of their loss. Those days, especially in the first year, are difficult.

- Follow up with family and close friends with a note on or before special days, reminding them of your prayers and support.
- Purchase a small memorial for your parish in memory of the deceased. Have a special prayer service to dedicate it.
- On the anniversary of the tragedy, be present to teens and reach out to those who were close to the teen who passed away.

After the first year, you can consider your crisis action plan completed. Remember, even as people seem to move on, there are teens and adults who are going to struggle, so your commitment for the long term is important for them.

EXERCISE

Open a document on your computer and begin to sketch out your action plan using the formula from the previous pages (60 minutes, 24 hours, first week, first month, six to 12 months) and write down your action steps. Include contact information for counselors as well as any other services you may need during a crisis situation. Review this plan with your pastor and receive his approval before sharing it with your core team.

PASTORAL CARE FOR TEENS

You arrive at the school and take a moment to say a prayer in your car. The air feels heavy and you can already see the first wave of students making their way to the auditorium. You get out of your car and everyone can sense that something isn't right. It is likely that the faculty has been informed as you see a couple of teachers trying to hold back tears. For a moment, you get choked up, as well.

There is a hushed murmur in the auditorium as you walk in. The counselor who called you meets you at the doorway. She thanks you for coming and asks that, after the announcement, you remain present at the school to talk with students who need someone to talk to and be ready to offer any support, encouragement, or prayer you can. You nod your head, wondering how you are going to have these difficult conversations. You say another prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance as the Dean of Students begins to make the announcement.

The next few minutes are a blur. There is an audible gasp from the student body as the death of the teen is announced and a few people immediately start crying. Most sit in shock for a few minutes as the Dean of Students tells them that morning classes are not going to be held as regularly scheduled. The students may choose to speak to any of the ministers or counselors that are at the school — as he says this, he motions to where you are standing alongside several other adults — and if anyone wishes to return home, they must check out at the office, first. He dismisses the assembly, but few people move right away. After a few minutes, a group of teens from your parish approach you with tears in their eyes.

“Can we talk to you, please?” they say, holding back tears. You nod and sit down in a row of chairs in the auditorium.

Tragic events or difficult situations can cause us to experience a variety of different emotions, from anger to sadness, fear to anxiety, guilt to depression. We may even ask the question, “Why did God allow this to happen?” In these situations, it is important to take time to process what happened in order to begin the healing process. Teens feel the weight of these situations in a variety of ways. For many, this kind of crisis might be the first they have ever faced. Without a frame of reference to contextualize the tragedy, emotions may simply run over and not make a lot of sense.

Some teens who were close to the crisis or tragedy may not react with much emotion at all, to a degree we are even worried or frustrated. Other teens far away from the crisis or tragedy may be highly emotional.

As youth ministers, we need to be prepared to walk with teens, especially those who may not know where to turn, and help them process tragedies they experience in their lives. We must avoid the temptation to want the teens to react in a certain way; we need to take all of their emotions at face value and recognize that teens lack the emotional maturity to process crisis situations the ways adults do.

One of the most important things we can do during a crisis situation is be present to the teen in front of us. If a tragic event affects the community at large, plan to be present as a core team. Have an open-door policy for the youth ministry office and invite core members to be available during specified times. Depending on the situation, there may be a considerable number of teens affected, so having the core team present will ensure that all of the teens will have someone to talk to. Sometimes a crisis or tragedy only affects one particular teen. When that teen shares something he or she is going through, whether it is something personal or an event that affects a larger group of people, take time to listen, even if the crisis seems trivial.

Following a tragedy, communal or personal, some teens may begin to doubt God. They may not understand why He allows bad things to happen, especially why He allows bad things to happen to good people. In these instances, it is important to remember this is not the time to try to convince them not to doubt God. Rather, we need to listen to them, try to understand why they are having doubts, and help them remain strong in their faith while working through their doubts. One of the hardest things for a person to hear in times of tragedy is that God has a plan. Oftentimes, this statement elicits more questions than answers, like “Why would God want this to happen to me?” or “Is my suffering a part of God’s plan?” Instead of saying, “God has a plan,” remind them that God is with them, through the good times and bad, to carry them and give them strength. Remind the teens that God loves them, even when they doubt Him, and He’ll continue to be by their side. Similarly, the expression, “God can bring good out of this” can put the blame back on God, as though God wanted something bad to happen in order to derive some good from it. Certainly, God can bring good out of evil situations, but God never wills something bad just to bring good out of it. (For more on this, read paragraphs 312 to 314 in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.)

Pastoral Care in Action

“A couple of years ago, one of our high school teens passed away in a car accident. He attended the high school closest to our parish, the same school most of our teens attended. People said good things about him, describing him as a well-rounded boy with lots to offer and a bright future ahead of him.

A few days after the accident, a young girl, who was actively involved at our parish through Life Teen and retreats, stopped by the church. She wanted to speak to the pastor, but he was not in the office at the time, so I went to the main office to see if I could help her. When I saw her, tears streaming down

her face, she immediately gave me a hug and continued to cry. After a few minutes, I invited her to step into a semi-private room near the front desk to talk.

We sat for a while until most of her tears subsided and then I listened to her as she shared about the accident, how it happened, and how she was struggling with why God allowed this to happen. When she finished, I explained that God created all of us out of great love and gave us free will as a result of that same love. Sometimes though, we use our free will to make decisions that are not in line with God’s plan. Those decisions don’t make us bad people, but there are consequences for all of our actions. The boy from the high school didn’t want to harm himself or anyone else. He made a reckless choice that resulted in an accident that took his life. As we weep for the loss of his life, God weeps alongside us.

She listened as I spoke and when I finished, I asked her to tell me more about this boy. She didn’t know him very well but had some happy stories about him to share. She told me those stories and focusing on the positive memories seemed to help her cope with her grief. Before she left, we prayed for the boy, his family, and all those who were hurting as a result of his death, especially herself.

As the youth minister, I had the opportunity to get to know this girl over the course of a couple of years and because of that relationship, I was able to speak about the love of God and our free will. If I didn’t know her as well, I would have taken a slightly different approach. In this situation, I would have first thanked her for coming to the church in search of answers and trusting me even though she didn’t know me all that well or at all. Then, I would have asked her about her relationship with God. Regardless of where she stood in that relationship, I would have reminded her of God’s unfailing love for His creation. Next, I would have asked her about her relationship with the boy, to share some stories about him, and if it was alright if we prayed together. Lastly, I would have

invited her to come to Mass and youth group at the parish the following week, emphasizing that they are safe places to ask questions, learn more about God and herself, and build community to journey with her during difficult times.”

Every tragic event will have a different effect on teens. Regardless of the status of the relationship you have with a teen, the best thing to do when ministering is to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide your words. Any time you are going to help a teen who is overcome by grief, pray for the Holy Spirit to be with you. All it takes is three simple words, “Come, Holy Spirit,” and a trust in what God wants to do through you.

There are a few things to keep in mind as you pastorally care for teens in crisis situations:

- *Always remember safe environment practices, guidelines, and policies.* A crisis situation or tragedy does not eliminate these important standards; if anything, we should be all the more diligent in adhering to them. Tragedies are emotionally charged events and we always want to care for the teens’ well-being by creating a safe environment for them. This includes knowing the mandatory reporting laws for your state and strictly adhering to them.
- *Listen, ask clarifying or open questions, and listen more.* This is not a time for a lecture or a prepared talk about suffering in the world, the existence of evil, or God’s existence. If a teen directly asks you about these things, you can begin a pastoral conversation, but don’t inject this information at this time unless asked. Instead, be attentive and listen. If necessary, ask clarifying or open questions so you can better understand what the teen is saying. A clarifying question restates information, “So, what I hear you saying is that...” or “What did you mean when you said...” and an open question allows for a broad range of responses, “How are you feeling about the news this morning,” or “Is there something specific you are struggling with?”
- *Avoid correcting the teen unless a piece of information they are relating about the event is incorrect* (e.g., “I heard that he was driving drunk this morning,” can be countered with, “We don’t know all of the details, so we want to be sure that we wait until we have more information before we form a story of what happened,” or if you are certain the information is incorrect, “No, that is a rumor that we need to let go of. We know that he wasn’t driving drunk, but that another drive ran a red light and hit him.”)
- *Unless you are a trained counselor, don’t give counseling.* It can be tempting to offer advice that falls into the realm of professional counseling, but don’t do that. Not only does it violate the rule of only listening, it also falls outside of your scope of experience. Well-meaning advice may actually be harmful. Leave counseling to people who are professionally trained and, instead, focus on pastorally caring for the teens in front of you.
- *Allow for silence.* Teens may lack the language to express what they are feeling emotionally and may not even be aware of what they are feeling. Silence can feel uncomfortable but resist the temptation to fill the silence.
- *Allow for tears.* Crying is a natural emotional response to stress and can actually help ease tension we are feeling. Don’t try to cut off a teen who is crying but do offer tissues. If a young person begins to sob uncontrollably or in a way that interferes with their ability to breathe normally, you may work to help them calm down.
- *Don’t be afraid to cry, too.* We want to be careful not to become despondent, despairing, or to process our emotions with teens. But it is OK to cry alongside a young person in an empathetic way. Be authentic, though; if you are not a person who cries, don’t force it in an attempt to show empathy.
- *This isn’t your counseling time.* You are listening but not speaking. You probably have a lot of emotions and feelings as well, but a teen who is in distress is not the

person to share them with. The young person in front of you is not a peer; this is not a time for you to process out loud what you are feeling. Listen to the teen and then find another adult or counselor to discuss your feelings with later.

- *Avoid cliché answers but affirm God's love.* Phrases like “God needed a new angel,” “Everything happens for a reason,” and “God has a plan” are all dismissive and generally unhelpful. Even if they seem to bring comfort in the moment, they often lay a path for distrust in God later by blaming God for the tragedy. Instead, affirm that God loves us and walks with us in all circumstances, even suffering. Remind the teen that God does not will bad things on us, nor does He abandon us when they happen.
- *Pray with the teen.* Never let a conversation end without first asking a teen if he or she would like to pray together. Don't be offended if the teen says “no.” If he or she is struggling with God or mad about the tragedy, prayer may be the last thing they want to do. Respect that decision but remind the teen that you will be praying for him or her. If the teen wants to pray, don't make your prayer a time to “teach.” Offer a simple and authentic prayer to close your conversation.
- *Follow up.* If possible, follow up with the teen a few days later to check in.

Pastoral care for teens in a crisis situation will look different for every teen and every situation. For a list of specific situations and how to respond, see chapter six.

EXERCISE

Practice reflective listening with a partner or make it a point to practice it in your daily conversations. The goal is not to offer new information in the conversation but to focus on getting an individual to talk more about him or herself by asking clarifying or open-ended questions. Remember, an open question allows for a broad range of responses and a clarifying question doesn't introduce new information.

If you are working with a partner, each person spends five minutes speaking about their day. The speaker may talk as much or as little as he or she would like. The listener practices asking open and clarifying questions.

If you are implementing this in your daily life, be aware of how often you turn a conversation toward yourself, ask narrow questions, or stop listening while waiting to speak. Practice making conversations about listening to the other person rather than trying to control them yourself.

PASTORAL CARE FOR PARENTS

You leave the school exhausted, but also feeling like you were exactly where you needed to be. You engaged in a lot of conversations with teens you knew and didn't know and felt like you were able to be the hands and feet of Christ in a tragic time.

As you walk out of the school, a hand taps you on the shoulder. You turn around and are facing the parents of the teen who passed away. Their faces are red and solemn. Your heart drops and you immediately feel the weight of grief that has been pressing hard on both of them. The two parents are separated, but today, the history of their marriage is not even in the picture of what has happened. They are supporting one another. The father reaches out his hand to shake yours and says, "Thank you for being here today. Our son loved youth group and I saw you talking with some of his friends. It means a lot to us that you are here in this really difficult time..." his voice trails off as it cracks.

You don't know what to say. The mother steps forward and gives you a hug and, through tears, says, "Thank you," and steps back.

Time seems to stand still. You've just spent an entire morning speaking with teens, but now you are face to face with adults. You want to say the right thing but know that nothing that comes out of your mouth will change the reality of that morning. In your mind you pray, "Come Holy Spirit," again and begin to speak.

As youth ministers, we expect to serve teens. We need to remember, though, that every teen is part of a family. When a tragedy occurs, or a crisis strikes, members of that teen's family are impacted, as well. This includes parents of teens who are directly impacted (in the case of a death or accident) and the parents of that teen's friends. Raising a teen is tough work, and sometimes parents and teens may feel isolated from each other. When tragedy strikes, parents may come to you, asking for advice on how to support their son or daughter or looking for support from you, as well.

While unique, the pastoral care needs of parents bear many similarities with teens. For some parents, the crisis (even if not directly related to them) may produce a crisis of faith. Others have faced similar tragedies before and may have a better grounding when approaching the situation. Like teens, each parent is unique, so our first step must be listening. Beyond that, there are a few considerations we must keep in mind when pastorally caring for parents:

- *Recognize you may have no frame of reference for what they are struggling with.* If a parent has just lost a son or daughter, you may not be able to relate with what they are feeling unless you've experienced similar loss. Always be aware that the situation parents are in is something you cannot understand, but don't let that prevent you from walking with them.
- *Help them find support.* There are many support groups that can help parents who are experiencing tragedy or crisis situations. Have a list of these support groups ready for parents. It helps to keep a list running in your office, so it is accessible when you need it.
- *Parents can use clichés, but you can't.* When we are talking with teens, we want to avoid cliché phrases, but we don't want to correct a parent who uses them (or any person who is grieving). If a mother says, "I trust in God's plan, and He wanted this to happen," the best response is to simply listen rather than refute the statement.

Though it is incorrect, it will be more harmful to take away something that is bringing the parent hope in that moment by contradicting it.

- *Offer help and space.* If a crisis situation involves the loss of a teen, especially one who was known well or at least knew the family well, we may want to immediately charge in and do whatever we can to help. Offer your help, but also respect the space and privacy of the parents. They may not want to speak with you or want any help, or they may simply be preoccupied with other things. Don't take offense at this; simply be available without imposing.
- *Don't make promises.* In the wake of tragedy, parents may want you to make promises. They may be big things like asking for a memorial to be put up in the church or for something specific to be done at youth group. If the situation indirectly involved parents, they may want you to change policies or promise a specific procedure (e.g., "If you even suspect a teen to be addicted to drugs, you need to tell us"). This doesn't mean you won't implement suggestions or honor the requests of the parents, but in an emotional state, parents may be asking for things they haven't thought through and that you don't have time to think through (or have the authority to grant). Respond to requests with, "We will absolutely consider that," rather than, "Yes, I promise we will make that happen."
- *Don't overshare information.* Parents who are indirectly impacted by a tragedy may want information you are privileged to but they are not. If a teen passes away but the circumstances aren't readily known, other parents may start to ask you what you know — and you may in fact know that a particular teen died of a drug overdose, suicide, or drunk driving accident — but you shouldn't share that information. Parents may even get aggressive about this; stand your ground. Follow your youth group and parish's communication plan for sharing this kind of information.

- *Don't feed rumors.* In the lack of information, parents may speculate about a situation or crisis. Shut down rumors and don't feed them. If you hear a rumor, remind the parents (as you remind the teens) that information is not confirmed, and we should be cautious about making assumptions.
- *Connect teens and parents.* Your number one goal should be to help the parents and teens communicate in a time of tragedy. For parents indirectly affected by a crisis, like a teen death, they may want you to do the "heavy lifting" of dealing with the tragedy. This may be because they don't feel prepared, are struggling themselves, or don't feel like they have the kind of relationship with their son or daughter that allows for this kind of sharing. Don't become the primary person pastorally caring for a teen if you don't have to be. Work to connect the parents with their son or daughter and give them the tools they need to have the difficult conversations.
- *Give them time.* Parents who are directly affected by a tragedy need time to heal. Sometimes this means giving the parents time, even if they don't want it. Some parents may want to immediately speak about the tragedy as a testimony mere months after it happened. This might be a way for them to deal with the tragedy and they should speak about it, but not in front of a group. Prevent parent testimonies about tragedies for at least one year and only allow parents to provide testimonies if they've spoken with a counselor and processed the tragedy. Failure to do so may put a parent in a position where they emotionally overload or meltdown in front of a group.
- *Pray with them.* Just as you would with a teen, offer to pray with the parents and continue to intercede for them after your conversation.

EXERCISE

Begin a list of resources and support for parents who are experiencing tragedy. Think of as many possible scenarios as you can and list specific organizations for each. Work with your parish priest for a pastoral care action plan for parents who are directly impacted by a crisis or tragedy. The priest should take a lead role in ministering to them.

PASTORAL CARE FOR CORE MEMBERS

Both parents thank you again for listening to them and for the active role you are taking in the lives of young people in the community. As you sit down in your car, you see several text messages and emails from core members in response to your email about the accident. Many have committed to joining you at the youth office for open hours and all of them can be present at the prayer service the following evening.

It is a good thing so many committed to arriving; you had no idea how trusted the youth ministry at your parish was until you pulled into the parking lot that day. There were already several teens and a few parents waiting there, some crying and praying together. Your parish priest was off to the side speaking to a couple of parents and waves to you as you arrive. You all set out to work and for the next few hours, you process the events of the day. Your parish priest closes the time with an hour of Eucharistic Adoration.

At the end of the evening, all of the teens and parents leave. You and your core team sit in your office, exhausted and quiet. Suddenly, one of your core members starts to cry. Another puts her arm around her and says, "This is really, really hard." There is a heavy weight in the room and you realize that your day is far from over. You have a responsibility to pour into the people who have given so much to the teens.

That familiar prayer comes from your heart, this time out loud, "Come Holy Spirit," and you start to speak, "Let's talk about this."

When crisis or tragedy strikes your community, your core team is on the front lines. It requires a community response to tend to the needs of young people; one youth minister cannot do it alone. Involving these committed and caring adults is necessary for any crisis response.

As youth ministers, we cannot overlook their need to be attended to. Some are parents who may be wondering how to process the situation with their own son or daughter, while others may have been close to the tragedy. When we are serving others, it becomes easy to put our feelings and emotions aside, but we eventually need to wrestle with them.

Draft a plan for how you will care for your core team in the wake of a tragedy. This plan needs to start almost immediately, since these adults will be pouring into young people and bearing the emotional weight of the crisis. Pastoral care for core members actually begins before a tragedy strikes. There are some keys for ongoing care that, if done diligently, will make it easier to guide your core team through a time of crisis.

Ongoing Core Team Care

- *Provide ongoing training and spiritual retreats for your core team.* Bringing all of your volunteers together for training and retreats not only helps them grow but also builds community. A well-trained, spiritually-fed, and connected core team can weather storms well.
- *Socialize and share.* Provide opportunities for your core team to share with each other and socialize in a small group setting. These moments make a big difference when you face a crisis together as they build trust and community.
- *Regularly check in to see how they are doing.* Knowing what is happening in the lives of your core team will help them stay healthy because you can provide them

support as needed. You will also know when you need to ask someone to step back in a time of crisis because they may be struggling with their own grief.

- *Ground them spiritually.* Make sure your core members are grounded spiritually and that their faith is being fed outside of your youth nights. Our faith is the firm foundation on which we stand in times of trial; if your core team is building their faith only on what they are doing at youth nights, it may not be secure in a crisis.

When a time of crisis strikes, there are some steps that you must take with your core team in order to keep them healthy:

- *Do group check ins.* At your next gathering, check in with your core team to see how they are doing. Allow people to share and listen. In this moment, you are acting as a small group leader for your core team and you want them to speak, process, and share.
- *Check in individually.* If you notice a core member is struggling, speak with him or her individually to check in.
- *Pray together.* Set aside time for just the core team to pray together. If you are doing a prayer service or addressing the crisis at a youth night, schedule this time to be before your event. It will ground the core team in grace and give them time to focus on processing rather than serving others.
- *Offer counseling recommendations.* Grief can be complicated, and many people don't have experience navigating their own emotions when it comes to loss, crisis, and tragedy. To help them process, refer them to respected professional counselors.
- *Communicate well, but only communicate what is necessary.* Make sure that your core team stays in the loop and knows all they need to know in order to serve. Be careful not to overshare, though. As a youth minister

and staff member, you may be privileged to information that some people don't need to know out of respect for other individuals. If you are unsure if something is public knowledge or acceptable to share, err on the side of caution.

- *Remind them of safe environment expectations.* In a time of crisis, we want to do whatever we can to help those who are hurting. We must remember to follow safe environment guidelines, though, and your core team should be reminded of this.

It is likely that your core team will be involved in caring for teens who are experiencing the crisis for several weeks, so keep checking in and making sure everyone is staying healthy during that time. If necessary, allow core members to take a youth night off in order to take care of themselves. A healthy core team is going to guide the teens through a crisis well and ultimately be a light of Christ in a time of darkness.

EXERCISE

Plan an evening every other month where you meet as a core team to pray together, discuss a topic, and share with each other. Incorporate a social element to this time, as well. Commit to these gatherings as diligently as you would to scheduling your youth nights and plan them with as much intentionality.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE EMERGENCIES

After your discussion with your core team, you pray together, and the priest of your parish offers a blessing to everyone present. It is a powerful evening and you return home, exhausted. You worry you may have some trouble falling asleep, but you find it much easier than you expected. When you wake up the next morning, you immediately begin making preparations for the prayer service. The day moves by quickly — you are interrupted by teens as they stop by to talk and by staff members who are asking how they can help prepare for the prayer service — and suddenly, it seems, you are welcoming people to the prayer service that evening.

The mood is somber and heavy and the sanctuary space in the church is quiet, despite it being filled with people. A few people are crying softly, while others offer comfort and support. Suddenly, a shrill noise cuts the silence, and everyone begins looking around. Lights are flashing, and you realize that the fire alarm is going off. Not only that, but you smell smoke — this may not be a drill. You look around and can't see your pastor, so it is up to you to get everyone out of the building quickly, as a few of the younger teens are starting to panic. An air of confidence rushes over you; you know exactly what to do as you pick up a microphone and give instructions.

Sometimes when a crisis strikes, we have time to put our action plan into place, make calls, and set our game plan. Other times, an emergency situation occurs that requires an immediate reaction where seconds are precious and may be the difference between safety and harm.

You've constructed an action plan for a major crisis situation that will take weeks, if not months, of pastoral care to address. But you also need to have an action plan for immediate emergency events, and it needs to be memorized and practiced in order to be effective.

Your parish may already have an action plan for various emergency situations from fire evacuation to inclement weather; ask for it, add any information specific to your ministry or meeting space, and get it approved by your pastor. Once you have an approved plan, share it with your core team and practice it. How exactly would you evacuate the youth room if there was a fire? Where do you go if there is severe weather? How do you respond to a threat against your parish or to an active shooter?

Spend time explaining the steps and working through various simulations to ensure everyone understands the procedures. A plan that is not understood or practiced will not be nearly as useful in the case of an emergency. Your core team must be aware of this plan so they can help in case of an emergency.

You will want to practice distinct directions for numerous types of emergencies. Some to consider are a fire, gas leak, bomb threat, shooting, trespassing, loss of power, earthquake, tornado, flood, hurricane, and civil unrest. These events may seem obscure or unlikely to happen, but it is better to take the time to develop plans and not need them, rather than not have a plan when a particular crisis strikes.

Three essential aspects to include in an action plan for immediate emergencies are phone numbers, evacuation

and lockdown procedures, and modifications for specific emergencies. These should all be easily accessible when an emergency occurs. Consider creating a folder or document on your phone (both are preferable) with this information that you keep with you at all times at any event.

Phone numbers can be broken down into three communication categories: emergency, internal, and external.

- *Emergency communication* includes, at a minimum, 911, but it should also consist of the phone number for local fire departments, hospitals, urgent care facilities, non-emergency police, and the public health department.
- *Internal communication* refers to your staff. Who is the first staff member you contact in an emergency situation? If he or she isn't available, who do you contact next? Having a phone tree established for your staff will answer these questions and eliminate uncertainty during a crisis.
- *External communication* should encompass the contact information for parents or guardians of the teens, applicable diocesan offices, counselors, and social workers. If the parents or guardians of your teens speak a language other than English, it is important to make a note of this and have a way to communicate information to them.

The evacuation and lockdown procedures should be specific to the buildings at your parish. When compiling this information, be sure to include any and all buildings your ministry uses. Take adequate time to reflect on the spaces you use on a regular basis, as well as those that are sporadically or seldomly used. You will want to include all of them so you can be prepared to act regardless of where you are.

Finally, create plans that are modified for each emergency. This may involve a different set of phone numbers or evacuation routes. Keep them all in one place and commit the basics of each action plan to memory.

Emergency Procedures in Action

“At the end of my first year at the parish, my pastor walked up to me after a youth night and asked me if I could tell him where a fire extinguisher was located. My face probably went as red as a fire extinguisher as I, embarrassed, told him that I didn’t know. After that conversation, we went over basic evacuation procedures, the location of the fire extinguishers, and what to do in a variety of other emergency situations.

The information wasn’t always fun to learn — drills for an active shooter situation are not enjoyable — but it did make everyone feel safer. We ended up having to implement a couple of our safety plans on two different occasions.

After a youth night, we had about 20 teens still hanging out in the youth room when the severe weather siren began blaring. There was a tornado warning issued for our area and I could immediately see the teens were growing uneasy. A couple tried to leave, but our core team practiced and knew that, at that moment, everyone needed to stay inside of the building. We got everyone to a safe area quickly and spent the next 25 minutes playing games and laughing. Our response was calm so the teens stayed calm, too.

The second occasion happened on a retreat. As everyone was gathered by the main meeting room, the fire alarm went off. Since we knew the evacuation plan, we were able to quickly pull everyone out of the building and sent them to their respective men’s and women’s dorms to be accounted for in small groups. The small group leaders led a discussion while we figured out what happened. As it turns out, one of the band members was pumping a bunch of fake fog into the main room and it set off the alarm. The evacuation

happened so smoothly, though, that the teens on the retreat actually thought we faked the alarm as part of the retreat in order to send them to small groups!

In both situations, having a plan kept everyone calm and safe. Thankfully, my parish priest knew enough to expose my lack of knowledge and forced me to think about how to keep the teens safe in an emergency. As an added bonus, I always look for the fire extinguisher in any new building now, and I have him to thank for that.”

EXERCISE

Start a folder with the information from this section. Compile your phone numbers and calling list for internal and external communication. Review evacuation, lockdown, and safety procedures for spaces you commonly use and set a time in the next month to practice those procedures with your core team.

PASTORAL CARE FOR YOU

You are stunned as the memory comes back to you. Earlier in the day, your food prep team from youth nights offered to cook snacks for after the prayer service. You agreed and didn't think much of it. You also didn't think to ask what they would be cooking or to let them know that the ovens in the parish hall hadn't been cleaned since a pizza dropped into one at your last youth night.

You feel ridiculous and quickly calm the volunteer down. You turn to apologize to the crowd, but before you can speak, one of the teen's best friends starts laughing. Everyone looks uneasy as tears well up in his eyes and he laughs harder. Finally, his dad asks, "What is so funny?" The teen responds, "John was an awful cook. We had to cook for a class for school and he completely forgot what he was making in the oven. It burned and set off the alarms in the school. Nobody knew it was him — he was so embarrassed and finally told the teacher after the fire fighters found his charred black bread loaf in the oven. It totally makes sense that this would happen at his prayer service."

A few of the other teens start to chuckle and then begin to share some of their favorite stories, as well. There is more laughter and more tears. Your music minister quietly walks back inside to grab her guitar and walks back out. The prayer service has already started and after people share, your priest says a few words and the music minister leads worship. The night is powerful, more powerful than you could have planned.

On the drive home, you reflect on how good God has been through a tragic process and feel a strange sense of peace. When you arrive home, you go to collapse into bed but something strange happens. Instead, you sit down on the floor and start crying. It is as though every emotion you've held in check is rushing out all at once. What happened? There was peace in your heart a moment ago, but now you are a wreck. You've been present to everyone, but now you are alone with a heavy heart. You wonder, "What happens now?"

When crisis strikes, a pastoral care professional goes into high alert and operates at an unsustainable level out of necessity. As youth ministers, we can certainly push it as needed in times of tragedy, but we can't push it like that forever. Our emotions and even our physiology are not designed to withstand long periods of stress. When faced with a crisis situation and the care of many people outside of ourselves, we can lose sight of self-care and quickly break down.

It is critical to have a pastoral plan for teens, parents, and your core team. It is vital that you have action plans for immediate emergencies and for navigating long-term tragedies. But all of it will fall apart if you don't have a plan for how you will take care of yourself during and after a time of crisis.

Just like an athlete trains before a competition, you need to set your plan for self-care before tragedy strikes. Emotionally, you won't be able to process how to care for yourself in these moments — your inclination will be to serve others until you fall apart. Our inclination, as youth ministers, is to justify this attitude by saying, "Well, if I fall apart, at least other people will be helped."

If there is one statement we need to ingrain in our minds it is this one: We are not Jesus. He does the work of saving and healing; He simply invites us into that work. Jesus wants to save and heal you, too — and in a time of crisis, you need to give Jesus the space to do so.

When you plan out your self-care strategy for crisis situations, there are some key elements you must include:

- *Schedule meal times and eat, even if you don't want to.* Your body doesn't stop needing food just because you are in a stressful situation. It is easy, when managing tragedy, to go an entire day without eating. This isn't good. Set meal times and, if necessary, reminders on your phone for when to eat. Even if you aren't hungry, try to eat something.

- *Drink plenty of water.* Again, our biological needs for some reason go out the door when we are caring for others. Get a large water bottle and keep refilling it throughout the day. Conversations with other people actually dehydrate you (it is gross to think about, but we do lose water through spit when we talk). If you are talking a lot, crying, or sweating as you run from place to place, you are going to get dehydrated. You are no good to anyone if you have to sit in the hospital on an I.V. drip.
- *Get rest.* Power down at the end of each day and try to sleep. Stop using your phone at least 30 minutes before you go to bed. This can be tough if you are fielding messages from parents and core members but disconnect. Turn off your phone if you need to do so. Again, if you aren't well rested, you aren't effective.
- *Pray for 30 minutes each day.* You might need to break it up but get 30 minutes of prayer in each day to stay grounded in hope.
- *Talk to a peer or mentor to process your feelings.* In the discussion about the pastoral care for teens, it was noted that we can't process our response to the crisis or tragedy with a teen. We do need to process it, though. Holding our feelings and emotions inside isn't healthy. Find someone to talk to about the situation.
- *Schedule an appointment with a counselor.* If the teen who passed away or the crisis is close to you, don't wait to schedule an appointment with a counselor — do it right away. You will need someone to talk to, professionally, about the circumstance who can help you through it. This is not an option — it is vital.

As youth ministers, we may be the first ones to care for those who are impacted by a tragedy and feel the brunt of the crisis more than most. A lot of people may be relying on us, but that doesn't give us an excuse to forget about ourselves. Remember: You are not Jesus. When you go to bed at night, you can rest easy knowing that His grace is still working, His

victory is secure, and He will be there to comfort all those who are struggling. You can rest easy.

Pastoral Care in Action

"I met another youth minister and in the course of our discussion, she asked for advice. A year prior, they had a teen named Jeremy pass away. He was a highly involved teen and was loved by his community and the parish. The loss was hard for all of the teens and for the adults who served at the parish. The youth minister was concerned about Jeremy's younger brother, Ben. They wanted Ben to stay involved, but lately Ben had been attending less and less. She found out that he told a friend that he didn't want to just be "another Jeremy." He was worried that the core team was simply replacing Jeremy with Ben, and Ben felt uncomfortable with that. The youth minister asked what she should do to make Ben feel like he was his own person and that the core team wasn't going to try to put him into his brother's shoes.

As she was speaking, though, she started to replace Ben's name with "Jeremy" without even realizing it. When she finished speaking, I asked her if she realized that she had done that and, as tears welled up in her eyes, she said she had no idea. As it turns out, Ben may have not been too far off the mark.

I asked her if she and her core team had gotten any kind of counseling to help grieve the loss of Jeremy. She said they had not — the year prior had been a whirlwind of helping the community deal with the loss. I encouraged her to find a counselor for her core team who could do some group therapy and to certainly find someone she could talk to, as well. We prayed together for courage and I thanked God for her commitment to her teens, and asked God to give her the grace for that same commitment to herself.

It was an important reminder to me that I also need to be taking care of myself. Nobody is immune to the situation

that youth minister faced; she did what she felt was the best thing to do but, in the process, forgot herself. As a result of not fully grieving, her emotions were starting to manifest in other ways she didn't even realize."

EXERCISE

Write out your self-care plan and put it with your other action plan items. Be specific about when you will commit to eating and sleeping. Then, find another youth minister, peer, or your spouse to hold you accountable. Share your plan with them and invite feedback. If a crisis strikes, make sure that person knows they are responsible for holding you to your plan.

TYPES OF TRAGEDIES

Over the coming weeks, you start to see a counselor to help you as you grieve and bear the weight of grief from other people, but your action planning and team preparation has helped lighten the load tremendously. The funeral for John is hard but also beautiful, and life for the most part seems to have gone back to a routine.

You are approaching the three-month anniversary when a core member stops by your office. She wants to talk about some other situations that she has observed recently that may not seem like high level crisis situations, but for the people involved, they certainly are. You realize there are community crisis situations and individual crisis situations, and you want to continue to prep your core team for as many as possible. You and the core member begin to brainstorm scenarios and mini-action plans for each. After a couple of hours, you are impressed with how much the two of you accomplished and are excited to share the plans and get feedback from your pastor and core team. She thanks you for listening and inviting her into the process. You look down at the sheet and feel a sense of peace. In ministry, crisis is unavoidable, but being prepared not only allows you to respond effectively but in a healthier way that allows for God to be God and you to respond to His call.

It seems as though there are a countless number of tragedies that can affect our lives, each ranging in severity and probability to occur. These various types of tragedies were compiled into a list and, after reflecting on personal experience and performing additional research, were narrowed down to six specific occurrences. This list is not exclusive but does represent potential issues a youth minister is likely to experience at one point or another. Each type of tragedy includes background information, first steps, next steps, and a what not to do section to guide your actions as you enter into a crisis.

BULLYING

Bullying is defined as “unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance” and “is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time” (stopbullying.gov). Verbal, physical, social, and cyber are all types of bullying that a person may experience, and unfortunately, about 21 percent of middle school and high school youth will experience at least one of these forms (stopbullying.gov). If a person confides in you that he or she is being bullied in an environment other than your youth group, follow this list of key dos and don'ts.

First Steps

- *Listen.* If a teen is willing to share a vulnerable and painful detail of his or her life, it is a sign of trust and respect, and one of the most meaningful things you can do in this situation is listen intently. Assure the victim that he or she is not alone and has the full support of the community.
- *Evaluate the situation.* After you hear the teen's rendition of the incident, evaluate the severity based on the type of bullying, frequency, and location where the bullying is taking place.
- *Contact the appropriate authorities.* Once you have the necessary information, respond according to the specific

policies outlined by your diocese. The procedure for reporting bullying may vary from diocese to diocese so it is important to familiarize yourself with the specific protocol for your diocese. Some people you may need to contact are the teen's parents, your parish staff, or the school administrators.

Next Steps

- *Follow up.* After taking the proper steps required by your diocese, it is a good idea to follow up with the individual to reiterate your support. To go the extra mile, write an affirmation letter or organize a group of core members to attend a school game or event the teen is participating in.
- *Foster a community of kindness.* If a member of your youth group is being bullied in another environment, it is imperative that he or she feels welcomed and accepted at your youth group. In order to create this inclusive environment, facilitate a session on bullying. Life Teen has several resources on bullying that are available to subscribing parishes. A list of these resources can be found in the *Additional Resources* section of this book and online at lifeteen.com.
- *Organize a support group.* If several teens are affected by bullying, organize a support group that meets on a regular basis. Consider starting a chapter of Stand for the Silent (standforthesilent.org).

What Not To Do

- *Contact the bully.* Although it may be tempting to intervene, do not contact the bully without express permission from proper authorities and involved parties.
- *Expose names.* If you choose to address bullying in a large group setting, avoid disclosing the names or stories of bullied individuals without permission.

If the bullying is occurring within your group, follow these steps to resolve the situation.

First Steps

- *Listen.* If a teen is willing to share a vulnerable and painful detail of his or her life, it is a sign of trust and respect, and one of the most meaningful things you can do in this situation is listen intently. Assure the victim that he or she is not alone and has the full support of the community.
- *Evaluate the situation.* After you hear the teen's rendition of the incident, evaluate the severity based on the type of bullying, frequency, and individuals involved.
- *Contact the appropriate authorities.* Once you have the necessary information, respond according to the specific policies outlined by your diocese.

Next Steps

- *Plan a meeting.* Since the bullying affects teens in your youth group, it is important to involve the parents of these teens. Schedule a meeting with the parents to discuss the incident(s) and create a plan to resolve the issue.
- *Follow up.* After taking the proper steps required by your diocese and meeting with the parents, it is a good idea to follow up with the individual to reiterate your support. To go the extra mile, write an affirmation letter or organize a group of core members to attend a school game or event the teen is participating in.
- *Foster a community of kindness.* In order to create an inclusive environment and prevent further bullying, facilitate a session on bullying. Life Teen has several resources on bullying that are available to subscribing parishes. A list of these resources can be found in the Additional Resources section of this book and online at lifeteen.com.

- *Organize a support group.* If several teens are affected by bullying, organize a support group that meets on a regular basis. Consider starting a chapter of Stand for the Silent (standforthesilent.org).

What Not To Do

- *Expose names.* If you choose to address bullying in a large group setting, avoid disclosing the names or stories of bullied individuals without permission.

SCHOOL SHOOTING/VIOLENT EVENT AT SCHOOL

Like all tragedies, a school shooting is something we hope to never experience, but it is the unfortunate reality of many people in the United States. Between 2013 and 2015, there were a total of 84 shootings at K-12 schools, with 35 occurring at high schools, 13 at middle schools, 24 at elementary schools, and two at K-12 schools (everytownresearch.org). If your community falls victim to this type of tragedy, here are some guidelines for your response.

First Steps

- *Gather information.* Once you hear about the event, gather information from accurate sources so you can implement an appropriate plan of action.
- *Check-in with teens.* As a youth minister, it is good practice to keep a record of what schools the teens attend, so you can more easily determine who will be directly affected by this event. Reach out to teens who go to the school to ensure they are safe.
- *Create a safe space.* A school is supposed to be a safe place for teens. If their school is attacked, youth will need extra assurance that other places they believe to be secure are indeed safe. One way to do this is to provide the teens an opportunity to share about their experience in a small or large group setting. Reviewing safety procedures with your core team and teens is

another way to reinforce the safe environment of your youth group.

Next Steps

- *Organize a prayer service.* A good way to involve your church community is by organizing a prayer service for those who are affected by the event. Work with your parish priest to plan the event and invite the community to attend. An outline for a prayer service can be found in the *Additional Resources* section of this book.
- *Offer support to parents.* As traumatic as this event is for teens, it can be equally as traumatic for parents, so it is important to support parents as they begin the recovery process. Consider establishing a weekly or monthly support group for parents or providing a list of local counselors who specialize in this area of tragedy and grief.
- *Host a youth night on grief and bereavement.* It may be beneficial for teens who were not directly impacted by the event to process the experience with a large group. For these teens, host a session on the different types of grief and healthy healing practices. If teens were directly impacted by this event, dedicate a night to sharing and healing. Give the teens an opportunity to share how they were impacted by this tragedy in a large or small group setting and consider having counselors present for individuals who would like additional help processing their emotions and beginning the healing process.

What Not To Do

- *Ignore the event.* If a major tragedy occurs at a school where the teens — even just one — attend, it is imperative that you address it. Failing to do so sends a message that it was an irrelevant event in the lives of the teens and youth group.

- *Speculate.* There are a multitude of circumstances that influence an event like this. Avoid spreading rumors about the incident and encourage the teens to do the same. Furthermore, when contacting the teens to see if they are safe, make sure your communication is appropriate and adheres to the specific guidelines outlined by your diocese.

SERIOUS ILLNESS

Illness can strike at any time and affect anyone from teens to parents to core members. The severity of the illness will vary depending on the diagnosis, but regardless of the ailment, if a member of your youth group, parent, or core member is ill, it is important to provide support. The following outlines a few ways to do just that.

First Steps

- *Gather information.* Regardless of how you hear about the illness, it is important to gather further information from proper sources so you can formulate an appropriate and respectful response.
- *Pray.* Prayer is vital in all moments of life, but even more so during difficult times. Take time to pray for the afflicted individual, his or her loved ones, and the community.

Next Steps

- *Start a meal train.* Meals often lose their top spot on the priority list when a family is affected by a serious illness. In order to ensure the family has nutritious meals during a difficult time, organize a meal train among your community. A meal train allows people to volunteer to provide specific meals a family needs on the dates needed. Create a schedule on your own or use mealtrain.com.
- *Visit the hospital.* If a member of your youth group is hospitalized and able to have visitors, reach out to the

family to schedule a time to visit. You can even offer to decorate the hospital room with positive quotes, pictures, and cards of love and support.

- *Write letters.* Organizing a letter writing campaign is a wonderful way to show the family they are supported and loved by their community.
- *Babysit.* If the family has younger children, they may be in dire need of a reprieve from their caretaker duties. Trustworthy and responsible adults can volunteer to babysit the children for an afternoon or evening to give the parents uninterrupted time to run errands or rest.
- *Host a prayer service.* A good way to involve your church community is by organizing a prayer service. Work with your parish priest to plan the event and invite the community to attend. An outline for a prayer service can be found in the *Additional Resources* section of this book.

What Not To Do

- *Impose.* Although you want to be supportive, be cognizant of the wants and needs of the family. Assure the family of your prayers and support, allow them to vocalize their needs, and respond accordingly.
- *Fail to follow-up.* An illness can be short-lived or long-lasting. If it is the latter, continue to show your support throughout the duration of the illness and beyond.

MISSING PERSON/ABDUCTION OF A MINOR

Abduction is a tragic event that can leave your community in a very vulnerable place. If this type of tragedy strikes, use the following steps to help the community process the event and begin healing.

First Steps

- *Pray.* Prayer is an essential part of life, especially during difficult times. Take time to pray for the safe return of the missing individual, his or her loved ones, and all those who are participating in the search efforts.
- *Offer support to the family.* In times of extreme distress, it can be hard for people to vocalize their exact needs. In these types of situations, it is best to offer your support and allow them to determine a response. They may not need anything specific but will be comforted knowing they are supported.

Next Steps

- *Help in the search.* If there is an organized search for the missing teen that is open to the public, participate. To go a step further, encourage other members of your parish community to help, as well.
- *Organize a prayer service.* A good way to involve your church community is by organizing a service to pray for the missing person, family, and all those who are involved in the search. Work with your parish priest to plan the event and invite the community to attend. An outline for a prayer service can be found in the *Additional Resources* section of this book.
- *Help the teens in the community process the event.* Abduction is a tragic event for your youth group as whole. Most likely, the teens will have formed a friendship with the missing person and as a result, they may be feeling confused, scared, angry, or anxious. It is important for the teens to recognize and process these feelings. To help, dedicate one of your normal gatherings to this event, giving the teens an opportunity to share their feelings and pray for the missing person. Consider having licensed counselors and parents present, as well.

What Not To Do

- *Share information without the family's permission.* Before publicizing any information, it is imperative that you have the permission of the parents. If they do not want to have the details about the event shared, be respectful of their wishes and keep the information private.
- *Speculate.* An array of circumstances influences this type of event, so avoid spreading rumors about the incident and encourage the teens to do the same.

FAMILY ISSUES

Although your primary ministry and interaction is with teens, it is important to recognize the influence of family and be aware of situations affecting a teen's home life. If a teen is experiencing a hardship at home, such as a parent's divorce, relative being arrested, negligent parenting, a sibling who makes bad choices, etc., it may surface at youth group. If you become aware of a situation like this, follow these steps to best minister to the teens during this time.

First Steps

- *Gather pertinent information.* Regardless of how you heard about the situation, gather further information from credible sources so you can formulate an appropriate response.
- *Reach out to the family.* If one of the families in your youth group is in the midst of a tumultuous time, express your support in a respectful manner. Always refer to your diocesan policies before proceeding with any actions, like calling the parents or sending a card.

Next Steps

- *Host a youth night on gossip.* When scandal hits, gossip usually follows. In order to stop this cycle, address gossip with your youth group. Consider planning a session

on gossip that emphasizes the hurtful nature of this action but avoids explicitly mentioning the nature of the situation prompting the night.

- *Host a youth night on forgiveness.* Forgiveness is a foundational element of our faith, and it is important to remind the teens of its essential place in times of scandal. To convey this message, lead a session on forgiveness and give the teens an opportunity to contemplate who in their life is in need of this grace.

What Not To Do

- *Participate in gossip.* Just as you remind the teens not to participate in gossip, the same standard applies to yourself. Refrain from sharing information with other staff members or adults who do not need to be involved, and do not participate in unnecessary conversations about the situation.
- *Ostracize individuals.* Ostracizing someone can take form in many different ways. For instance, excluding a family undergoing difficult times from certain activities or using a teen's personal experience as an example for the large group without expressed permission are two examples of ostracism. Instead, reinforce the idea that everyone is welcome in your youth group and community.

NATURAL DISASTER

It seems as though at least once a year our world and country are affected by a natural disaster, be it a hurricane, tornado, tsunami, earthquake, etc. In the wake of this type of tragedy, it is important to remain level-headed, pastoral, and positive. The following are some suggestions to help your community recover.

First Steps

- *Implement an action plan.* If your community is struck by a natural disaster, like a tornado, hurricane, fire,

earthquake, etc., it is a critical time to implement your action plan. The response will vary depending on the type of disaster so refer back to your plan and take the appropriate steps.

Next Steps

- *Help others.* After you have completed the steps of your action plan, focus on long-term recovery. Ideas for restoration include coordinating a clothing or food drive, hosting a bake sale to raise money for a relief organization, or volunteering to repair or rebuild homes that were damaged.

What Not To Do

- *Ignore the action plan.* Your action plan was created for situations like this; don't toss it to the wayside in times of crisis when it should be used.

NAVIGATING DEATH AND SUICIDE

Death in Community

The death of someone close to you — a family member, friend, coworker, acquaintance — is one of the most tragic and stressful events in life. For that reason, this section is structured differently than the previous ones.

For teens, the death of a loved one is quite possibly the toughest challenge they will face up to that point in their lives. The death of a parent is particularly traumatic and, if the parent is also an active member of the church community, the waters become significantly choppy for a youth minister to navigate. There are two stories from youth ministers that illustrate this reality.

BILL'S STORY

Bill was 49 years old. He had a son in Edge and two daughters in Life Teen, and he was a core member for both programs. As I was preparing for our weekly Edge Night, Bill's wife came into the social hall to tell me that Bill would not be at Edge that evening due to back pain. At the end of that week, the family was stunned to learn that Bill was diagnosed with an advanced form of cancer. Less than three months later, following a valiant battle and eventual acceptance of his impending death, Bill was called to heaven. In the time leading up to his death, be it brief, those who were involved in youth ministry were able to walk beside his wife, children, members of his small group, and youth group community.

STEVE'S STORY

Steve was 45 years old. He had a son in Edge and a daughter in Life Teen, and he was a core member for Edge. Steve's

sudden death, just five months following Bill's, stunned the entire community. He was present one Monday night for Edge and the next Monday he was gone. Steve's wife passed away a mere 18 months prior to his death. The loss of not only one but two parents is a plight most people can't even imagine, but it became the sobering reality of three resilient youth in the community.

Bill and Steve's stories are just two examples of how suddenly death can impact your community. If your community is struck by a similar tragedy, there are some important things to keep in mind as you find yourself trying to minister to grieving teens.

- *Grief is a natural reaction to death.* Grieving may not feel natural to a teen because it is difficult to control the emotions, thoughts, expectations, and feelings associated with death. The sense of being out of control that many teens experience during the grieving process may overwhelm or frighten them, causing them to resist or reject their grief. Helping teens accept the reality that they are, in fact, grieving allows them to begin the healing process.
- *There is no "right" way to grieve.* There is no correct way to grieve; coping with death does not follow a certain pattern. The way each teen grieves will be unique. It will vary according to age, experience, temperament, personality, and the type of relationship the teen had with the deceased. Teens respond best to adults who choose to walk beside them — adults who are companions on their grief journey, rather than ones who try to direct the path or determine a right way to grieve.
- *Love all you can.* Teens need authentic, trustworthy, and honest adults in their lives; when grieving, they need them more than ever. Most of all, teens need adults who will help them know they are loved and not alone. Be that adult for them. Remember there is no quick fix for grief; it is an ongoing process with no set end date. It's crucial that you continue to communicate with and support

the teens and families who are directly impacted by the loss, core members, and the parish staff and community throughout the grieving process.

- *Remember who you know.* This is the time for you to turn to God and ask for the gifts you need to minister and to be ministered to. Recognize your feelings and emotions regarding the loss and pray that God begins healing the hearts of all those who are affected.
- *Death ends an earthly life, not a relationship.* The relationships we formed with the deceased do not cease to exist when he or she dies. The relationship changes, but the bond formed while on Earth remains.

Suicide in Community

Suicide is one of the most tragic and difficult pastoral situations to navigate. It is difficult to talk and think about and, as a result, many communities do not want to put a plan in place to deal with this dark reality. Unfortunately, as rates of attempted and successful suicide rise, it is necessary that we become aware of this issue.

As you begin a pastoral plan for the suicide of a community member, you must also look at what preventative networks exist (or do not exist) that will help avoid such a tragedy. While we cannot control many pastoral situations, we can put safeguards in place to help reach teens who are at risk for suicide and provide them with help and care before tragedy occurs.

Inquire about suicide prevention programs and what suicide help lines exist in your community. The public and private schools may have such a system set up, and many communities have a "yellow ribbon program" that allows educators, pastoral care professionals, and counselors to put a yellow ribbon on their door, indicating they are trained to talk to a teen who is dealing with thoughts of suicide.

Additionally, it is important to know the potential signs of mental illness that indicate someone may attempt suicide:

- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose
- Talking about feeling trapped or being in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Acting anxious, agitated, or reckless
- Withdrawing or giving away personal items of value (e.g., “I won’t need this anymore”)
- Displaying extreme mood swings, especially a swing from being depressed and isolated to very happy (this may indicate a decision has been made to attempt suicide)

These signs may not indicate a person is at risk for attempting suicide, but they should not be ignored. Likewise, a teen who is thinking about committing suicide may not display any of the above signs. If you believe a teen is at risk, talk to them as well as their parents.

If you believe a teen is in immediate danger — they are posting on social media that they are about to commit suicide, are searching for lethal means to commit suicide, or are making threats about attempting suicide — call emergency services immediately.

Unfortunately, sometimes we miss a sign or there aren’t any present and a teen or another member of our community commits suicide. The wake of a tragedy often leaves people wondering what more they could have done. They may feel guilty and helpless, along with all of the other feelings of grief that accompany the death of a loved one or community member.

In the event of a suicide, there are some important action steps to take:

- *Follow all necessary communication steps and procedures in your normal action plan.* Communication is critical in

this situation as there is a higher likelihood of rumors and false information circulating.

- *Immediately secure counseling for you and your core team if the teen was a part of the youth ministry program.* When a suicide occurs, it is normal for those who were caring for the person who passed away to feel a heavy sense of guilt. Addressing this feeling and working through it early is important for long-term healing.
- *Be aware of warning signs for suicide in other teens.* A suicide in the community can embolden or encourage other teens to attempt suicide as well, especially as they see the kind of support and recognition a teen who has passed away may receive.
- *Remember to be balanced in your message.* Suicide is tragic. We want to affirm the good parts of a young person’s life, but we want to avoid glorifying what has happened. Statements like “He or she is in a better place” are well intentioned but may signal to surviving teens who are struggling with suicide that by taking their life they will be free from pain.
- *Catechize your core team on the Church’s teaching on suicide.* The Church does not teach that a person who commits suicide goes immediately to hell. This thinking revolves around the idea that, by committing suicide, a person has committed a mortal sin and immediately ended their life, thereby removing any chance of repentance for the sin. Suicide, however, may not fit the definition of a mortal sin. While it is certainly a grave matter, it is highly unlikely that a person is mentally able to give their full consent to the action due to a diminished mental capacity because of mental illness. To say a person who commits suicide is “not in their right mind” is a massive understatement. In fact, to reach a point where a person is comfortable and resolved to kill oneself is contrary to our psychological and biological drive for survival and represents a seriously compromised mental state where one is unable to fully consent to the action. We never

want to give even a hint that a person who committed suicide is in hell. We always want to be hopeful and point toward God's mercy for the teen who has passed away.

- *Avoid speculation about intent, even if you think you know it.* There may have been a “triggering event” that caused the teen to finally commit suicide, but suicide is always much more complex than a single event. Any speculation or statement of what may have finally caused the suicide must be avoided, as this can indirectly (or directly) place blame on a person or group of people. (E.g., “His girlfriend broke up with him and the next day he took his life. I heard that he even wrote that in his note — it was her fault.”) If you hear teens or other individuals speculating about “cause,” step in and pastorally redirect the conversation.
- *Connect the parents with support.* The parents of a teen who commits suicide will feel the heaviest guilt and burden. The parish needs to function as a safe space for them to heal, while connecting them with mental health professionals and counselors who can help them through the long grieving process.
- *Recognize no words, teaching, or action will bring immediate healing.* You are going to walk with your community and the teens through the grieving process for several months. There is no “magic word” that will suddenly make things better — you need to sit in the tragedy with those who are grieving and commit to a long-term pastoral care action plan to care for all those who are impacted.

Pastoral Care in Action

“We had a young man named Brett take his life at our Catholic school over a weekend. Several of his friends came to the Sunday evening Mass and sat in the choir loft. I went up to say hello to them, not realizing that they were his friends but as soon as I got up the stairs, I saw they were all crying. I sat with them for several minutes to let them know

they were welcome to cry, be mad, or to not feel anything while they were at Mass and that we would be there for them in any way that we could. Our core team committed especially to those teens over the coming weeks. It was not an easy process — almost a year later I sat with one of Brett's best friends outside of a youth conference hall talking to him about how much he missed his friend.

As the funeral was being planned, the priest who was working with the family pulled me aside to ask a question. Brett had a particular song he told his girlfriend he wanted played at his funeral if he ever passed away. She hadn't thought much of it at the time but remembered it during the funeral planning process. The priest asked me if we should honor the request. After we spoke about it, we discerned that we would not. The parish and family planned a beautiful funeral liturgy and we made sure that the music, homily, and environment were welcoming and pastoral. We felt that by placing the song in the liturgy, however, we would be inadvertently glorifying the action, rather than grieving the sad reality of what happened. It was a tough pastoral decision but a necessary one. Those are the challenges of a suicide; healing takes time and we have to walk a balanced line between honoring the life that has been lost so tragically, while not glorifying or in any way honoring the way in which it was lost and at the same time not coming anywhere close to condemning the teen, even implicitly.”

GRIEF AND THE HEALING PROCESS

Grief

Grief is a natural response to loss, tragedy, or suffering. It is almost guaranteed that every person will experience grief at one point or another. As a youth minister, you will likely be called to minister to a grieving teen, parent, or core member. Your role will often be aiding with spiritual and emotional healing, providing people with an opportunity to process difficult situations of loss and/or tragedy in a healthy way. In order to minister effectively, familiarize yourself with the types and symptoms of grief as well as the healing process.

There are many different types of grief, such as normal, traumatic, delayed, masked, disenfranchised, inhibited, anticipatory, and chronic.

- *Normal grief* is not truly normal because there is not an average grieving process. Rather, this classification encompasses individuals who experience common symptoms of grief, continue with daily activities and responsibilities, and work to accept the loss.
- *Traumatic grief* is similar to normal grief but is marked by a loss that was unexpected, violent, or horrific. This type of grief often greatly impairs mundane behaviors and tasks.
- *Delayed grief* occurs when grieving has been put off for an extended period of time after a loss.
- *Masked grief* is highly symptomatic, but the individual does not identify that the symptoms and behaviors are related to the loss.

- *Disenfranchised grief* occurs when an individual feels that his or her loss is not significant. This is due to societal and cultural influences that attach a stigma to the dead individual, deem a relationship insignificant, or solely define loss as the death of a person.
- *Inhibited grief* does not present any outward signs that are typical to loss; eventually the individual will present signs, but these are usually physical and take a long time to manifest.
- *Anticipatory grief* is experienced prior to a loss, often for an individual who is suffering from a long-term illness.
- *Chronic grief* is differentiated from other types of grief; it is deep-rooted, persistent, and lasts for an extended period of time without significant improvements in mood or activity level.

(Adapted from whatsyourgrief.com.)

Grief is multifaceted, meaning it can consist of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects. It will manifest itself in different ways depending on which form and type a person is experiencing. For example, someone experiencing physical symptoms may be struck by a loss of appetite, increased appetite, trouble sleeping, insomnia, or hormonal changes. In comparison, emotional grief may reveal itself as anger, despair, sadness, loneliness, shock, numbness, or guilt. Components of mental grief include depression, anxiety, confusion, and difficulty concentrating, while spiritual grief tends to be characterized by a loss of spiritual zeal, lack of trust in God, and questioning of the faith.

(Adapted from whatsyourgrief.com.)

Healing

If we reflect upon the mystery of Jesus and His ministry, we see that He healed. He healed the blind man, the paralytic, and the leper (John 9, Mark 2, Matthew 8). He even healed His friend, Lazarus, bringing him back to life, but only after experiencing a great deal of grief, Himself, over his death

(John 11). Like these individuals, we are in need of healing, and Jesus is our divine healer. Although healing ultimately comes from God, we can support one another through this natural and necessary process, using the following ideas as a framework:

- *Provide them opportunities to receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist.*
 - This is a great time to involve your pastor by organizing a healing Mass or penance service for the community. You could also invite the parishioners to pray a rosary after your youth Mass or create a video of encouraging messages to share with those who are suffering from a loss.
- *Help them vocalize their feelings through prayer and journaling.*
 - The *Ignatian Examen* is a prayerful reflection that helps us see God's presence in our daily life and discern His plan. This type of prayer can help us give words to emotions and, if done consistently, offer a glimpse into the active healing process.
 - The *rosary* unites us with Mary and provides a structured meditation on the life of Jesus. Alternating between the sorrowful mysteries, which unite our grief to Christ and Mary's, and the glorious mysteries, which remind us of the Resurrection and eternal life, is a great way to pray the rosary during times of turmoil and uncertainty.
 - *Lectio divina* is a way to pray with Scripture that allows us to draw out the deeper meaning of a passage. This prayer offers a greater understanding of who Christ is and brings us closer to Him, alive in the Word.
 - Praying with art, a tradition also known as *visio divina*, focuses on the practice of contemplation. Reflection on spiritual images can allow buried

emotions to surface and be processed as well as help us deepen our faith.

- *Spend time in the Word with them.*
 - So much of our human suffering is outlined and expressed within the Scriptures. A few verses to pray through are Jonah 2:2, Psalm 61:2, 1 Peter 5:10, Philippians 4:6, Psalm 73:26, Isaiah 53:4-6, and Romans 8:28.
- *Pray for and with them.*
 - It is important to offer an intercession for teens during your personal prayer, but it is just as important to spend time praying with them. The prayer can be formal or informal, depending on your comfort level. Consider using Thomas Merton's prayer from *Thoughts in Solitude*, which can be found in the *Additional Resources* section of this book.
- *Encourage them to seek professional help.*
 - Your support and prayers are meaningful, but you should refer teens, parents, and core members to counselors for additional help.

As you journey with someone in the midst of healing, it is important to remind the griever:

- *You can experience healing.* Although it may feel like the grief is never-ending, you will move through the healing process. You will not return to the person you were before your loss or trauma, but that's OK. We are always learning, growing, and adapting to life, and this situation is no different.
- *Healing includes your body, mind, and soul.* Since grief is multifaceted, it makes sense that healing is also multifaceted. It is beneficial to create a comprehensive plan that includes all wellness categories (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual) for comprehensive

healing. Avoid “quick fixes,” as these will hinder true, long-term healing.

- *It's OK to ask for help.* Grief is not a journey that needs to be completed alone. If you are in need of support, ask. There are people who want to help you; your youth minister, core team, parents, friends, etc. In fact, talking to others is a great way to process the different stages of grief and begin the healing process.

In ministry, if a teen turns to you for help with the healing process, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- *Abide by diocesan safe environment guidelines.* It is imperative that you never begin a supportive grief journey without the presence of at least one other adult. The sensitive nature of the situation may inspire a teen to want to speak to you alone, but make sure you review your diocesan safe environment guidelines before proceeding in conversation with a grieving teen.
- *Report suicidal thoughts.* If a teen reveals to you thoughts of suicide or self-harm, immediately report them to the appropriate staff member and/or authorities.
- *Leave the diagnosing and treatment to a professional.* In ministry, your role is to provide support and prayer throughout the healing process. Refrain from diagnosing teens or recommending treatment options. Instead, offer to pray for them and lend a listening ear when needed.
- *Communicate with parents.* Maintaining an open line of communication with parents during the healing process is invaluable. Make sure to include parents and keep them informed of any concerns and progress.
- *Follow up is essential.* The healing process takes time, so it is necessary to follow up. Remember, teens are often experiencing this type or level of grief for the first time, so it is uncharted territory. Be open and supportive, and emphasize that they are not alone in their grief.

If you remain in ministry, chances are you will encounter many grieving teens, parents, or core members. Rather than shying away from this responsibility, rejoice that the Lord has entrusted them to you in this season of pain, point them back to Christ, and remind them of His loving and healing nature.

ANSWERING TOUGH QUESTIONS

Why is there suffering in the world?

God never intended for there to be suffering in His perfect world, but He did choose to create us with free will, an essential part of our humanity. If we did not have free will, we would simply be God's puppets. This gift proves He loves us because He did not force us to love Him in return. But, this gift forces us to make the same choice as Adam and Eve: be obedient to God or turn away from Him and sin.

Suffering exists because of the Fall of Man (Genesis 3). Adam and Eve had a choice and they chose sin. In that moment when they disobeyed God and ate the fruit, sin entered the world. When sin entered the world, so did suffering.

There are two kinds of suffering: natural evil and created evil. When we talk about "natural evil," we mean natural processes that bring about death. They aren't in and of themselves evil, but they do bring about human suffering. Natural disasters, illness, and the gradual decline of our bodies are all a result of natural evil. This "evil" exists because this world is fallen; it is not our home. We are created for heaven, so the existence of natural endings signals that this world is not all there is for us. We are made to move on, but that doesn't diminish how difficult it can be when we suffer from a natural evil.

Suffering from created evil entered the world because of the choice Adam and Eve made in the garden, but it continues to exist because of the choice we make to turn away from God, the choice we make to sin. God does not force suffering upon us; He does not punish us with disasters or illness. Our choices bring about that suffering in our world, and our choice to turn back toward God and away from sin will be what brings about the end of suffering.

Why would God allow this to happen to me/us?

Put simply, there is no real answer to this question. This is something you are going to wrestle with the rest of your life. God allows suffering, but He doesn't cause suffering. Our broken, sinful, and scary world causes suffering. Yes, God allows it. And, sometimes, God miraculously heals someone from cancer but allows someone else to continue to suffer with cancer (or insert any type of suffering).

You have a choice: You can cling to the cross in times of suffering or you can turn away. Our God is a God who knows suffering. He took on the ultimate suffering for you and me. He knew fear, loneliness, and pain. God didn't prove His love for us by taking away suffering; He proved it by embracing suffering for our sake, by the Incarnation.

We have to believe in redemption. We have to remember the story doesn't end with the Crucifixion, with suffering. Jesus experienced great suffering and was overcome by grief when His friend, Lazarus, died, and yet, He didn't lose hope in the power and glory of the Father. No matter the suffering, God's love is bigger and stronger. In times of unspeakable pain, we need to remain hopeful and trust in the unceasing love and glory of our heavenly Father.

I feel helpless; what can I do?

It's in our nature to help people. When someone we love is suffering, we want to fix it.

But, we can't.

The best thing you can do in the midst of any tragedy, crisis, or death is simply be present. You do not need to have all of the answers and you certainly do not need to fix it. Journey with your loved ones; hold their hands and show them the love, mercy, and hope of our Savior.

But, take care of yourself, as well. It's easy to get swept up when those we care about are suffering, but you can't help others if you aren't taking care of yourself. Remember to eat, sleep, and pray.

I don't feel anything; what is wrong with me?

There is nothing wrong with you if you don't feel anything. Grief is scary and messy and unpredictable. There is no normal way to grieve, and the process and emotions felt are different for every person. But, it is important to feel what you feel when you feel it. When you're mad, be mad. When you're sad, be sad. Do not be afraid to tell God your feelings; He has big shoulders and can take it. You can even be mad at God for not stopping the tragedy/death. Just be ready for His response.

This has shaken my faith; what do I do to find it?

When you arrive at such a juncture such as this, realize it is an opportunity for growth. Your faith has not disappeared but, instead, is in a state of transition, a state of searching for a deeper level of understanding. During this shift, consider ways you have grown closer to God in the past; they may be the same means to grow deeper now. Also seek new opportunities to improve your relationship with God.

If you are searching for Him, you will find Him present in the Eucharist, Scripture, and those around you. Make a concerted effort to receive His body and blood in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Challenge yourself to attend Mass more than once a week on Sunday. Open your Bible — God is present in His Word, in Scripture. Begin reading, or re-reading, the Bible and spend time reflecting on His promises. Finally, pray for eyes to see God in the people you encounter every day. Christ is present in each and everyone one of us — we just need to have open eyes and hearts to see Him.

How long will it take to find healing?

We live in a world that wants, and often is rewarded with, immediate gratification. If you are hungry, you get a snack. If you are cold, you put on a jacket. If you are bored, you go see a movie. So naturally, when we are broken, we want to be healed — immediately. Unfortunately, healing does not work this way; there is no quick fix or magic elixir.

Healing is complex and involved; it is a process that takes time. So, give it time. Actively pursue physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual healing on a daily basis. Find a regiment that will work for you, one that allows you to process your feelings and move toward acceptance. Identify any factors that may be hindering your healing — environment, pace, perspective, habits, individuals, etc. — and work to eliminate these unfavorable circumstances. Let go of what you cannot control and, ultimately, trust that God is with you through it all — “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you” (2 Kings 20:5).

What happens to a person who commits suicide?

You may have heard before that a person who commits suicide goes directly to hell. This is not the teaching of the Church.

The Church does teach that if a person commits a mortal sin and dies before repenting and confessing that sin (if they are able), they have willfully chosen to cut themselves off from God and God honors that choice by allowing that person to exist in hell. A mortal sin must have three elements present: a grave (or really serious) action, full knowledge that the action is grave, and full consent to the action.

When a person commits suicide, they have engaged in a grave act. They made a choice to end their life and, in doing so, caused great hurt and pain to those who loved them.

However, they may not really have full knowledge that the action is grave. In their mind, they may truly believe they are doing the right thing and the action isn't going to bring harm to anyone. They may even believe that their suicide will benefit people (even though they are objectively wrong). The individual also does not have full consent of their will. Since a person's mental capacity is diminished when choosing to commit suicide, we cannot say they are able to give their full consent to the action.

Since a person cannot give full consent to the action and does not have full knowledge of the gravity of the action, we cannot say they committed a mortal sin. We do need to

offer prayers for God's healing for those who are left behind and mercy for the person who took their life as well as be mindful that God's mercy is bigger than the decisions a person made, however tragic they may be. Ultimately, we do not know what happens to any person after they pass away, but we hope in the Resurrection and know that, even if a person commits suicide, they do not necessarily exclude themselves from that reality.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

LIFE TEEN RESOURCES FOR SUBSCRIBING PARISHES

Edge Support Middle School Resources

Dealing with Divorce: An Issue Night on Divorce

He Says/She Says: An Issue Night on Gossip

Loving Our Enemies: An Issue Night on Bullying

Rest: An Issue Night on Death and Grief

Stand Together: An Issue Night on Bullying

The Golden Rule: An Issue Night on Bullying

Life Support High School Resources

Fears vs. Dreams: An Issue Night on Suicide and Depression

Guarantee of Storms: A Life Night on Hurricane Harvey, Irma, and Natural Disasters

Hope: An Issue Night on Response to Tragedy

There's an Elephant in the Room: Parent and Teen Night

When It's Dark: An Issue Night Addressing Crisis

ONLINE RESOURCES

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

afsp.org

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

schoolcrisiscenter.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center

pacer.org/bullying

StopBullying.gov

stopbullying.gov

PRAYER SERVICE

SCRIPTURE RESOURCES

Your faith may be shaken in times of tragedy, but those are the very times when you need to remain steadfast to God’s promises. If you begin to doubt God in the midst of suffering, turn to the following Scripture passages for a renewal of hope in His unfailing love:

- 1 Corinthians 15:58
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-4
- Deuteronomy 31:6
- Isaiah 41:10; 43:1-3; 46:4
- James 1:2-4
- Jeremiah 29:11
- Joshua 1:9
- Matthew 5:1-12, 38-48
- Philippians 4:6, 13
- Proverbs 18:10
- Psalm 23:4; 27:1; 46:1; 56:4
- 1 Peter 5:10
- Revelation 21:4
- Romans 8:38-39; 15:13

Thomas Merton’s Prayer from “Thoughts in Solitude”

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
 I do not see the road ahead of me.
 I cannot know for certain where it will end.
 Nor do I really know myself,
 and the fact that I think I am following your will
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.
 But I believe that the desire to please you
 does in fact please you.
 And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
 I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
 And I know that, if I do this, you will lead me by the right road,
 though I may know nothing about it.
 Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost
 and in the shadow of death.
 I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
 and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

OPENING SONG

The music minister leads the community in song, using one of the following suggestions:

- It Is Well by Bethel Music*
- Great Are You Lord by All Sons and Daughters*
- Lord I Need You by Matt Maher*
- Love Is Here by Tenth Avenue North*

THE PRIEST OR LEADER BEGINS:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All make the Sign of the Cross and reply:

Amen.

The priest or leader continues:

May God, the source of all comfort and strength, be with you.

Response:

And with your spirit.

The priest or leader prepares the assembly to listen to God’s Word in Scripture, using the following:

Brothers and sisters, in this time of great need, we turn to our loving God, who is always present to comfort and strengthen us. Even though we may not fully understand His plan, we trust our Father, knowing He works all things for the good of those who love Him. Let us now turn and listen to the Word of God.

FIRST READING

A Reading from the Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians: *2 Corinthians 1:3-7*

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

The Word of the Lord.

Response: Thanks be to God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 23

Response: The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for His name's sake.

Response: The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death,
I fear no evil;
for thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff,
they comfort me.

Response: The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
thou anointest my head with oil,
my cup overflows.

Response: The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for ever.

Response: The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

GOSPEL

A Reading from the Gospel According to St. Matthew:
Matthew 5:1-12

Seeing the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and when He sat down His disciples came to Him. And He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you

and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Response: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ

REFLECTION

The priest or leader offers a brief reflection on the Scripture readings, using the following as an example:

When we are affected in such a profound way by tragedy, we often experience a variety of emotions, such as anger, sadness, confusion, fear, anxiety, resentment, and despair. In these trying times, we may even begin to doubt. We may begin to doubt God’s presence in our lives, God’s ability to keep His promises, God’s love and goodness.

Although these emotions are valid, it is important in the midst of these trials and tribulations, in the midst of the emotion and doubt, to remain steadfast in our faith. It is in these times that we need to remember that God is always with us, ready to comfort and strengthen us.

God is our ultimate source of comfort, our ultimate source of strength. When we experience tragedy in our lives, we need to turn to Him and open our hearts to His comforting love. When we are in need of strength, we need to turn to Him and open our hearts to His strengthening grace. It is only when we are comforted and strengthened by our heavenly Father that we can then comfort others in their affliction.

Here, as a community, we unite our suffering to the suffering of Christ. Here, as a community, we receive and share the comfort given freely to us by our God. Here, as a community, we offer our prayers to our heavenly Father, trusting that He hears and answers them according to His will.

I invite each of you to take a few moments to reflect on the struggles in your life and the struggles of our community and offer a silent prayer to the Lord.

After a few moments of silence, the priest or leader invites the community to pray the Our Father.

CLOSING SONG

Following the prayer, the music minister leads the community in song, using one of the following suggestions:

Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone) by Chris Tomlin
How He Loves by David Crowder Band
Our God by Chris Tomlin
You Never Let Go by Matt Redman



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