

by Lauren Surprenant

SHATTERED

Entering into grief with teenagers

When tragedy struck our community the shock waves rippled through the kids in our ministry—we realized that everything we said and did could have a long-term and profound impact, for good or for ill. Here's how we helped kids express and move through their grief.



"Helpful Things to Say to Grieving Teenagers," "Harmful Things to Say to Grieving Teenagers" and "How to Start a Discussion About Grief"

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On Friday night there was a car accident in my town. Two girls went for a ride—it was the driver's 17th birthday, and the passenger was her best friend. We don't really know what happened inside that car that night, but we do know that the birthday girl floored the accelerator on a slick road. And, as her friends watched from a car following behind, the driver lost control of her car, veered into a drainage ditch, went airborne, and slammed into a grain bin. The best friend was not wearing a seatbelt—she died later that evening. The birthday girl was pulled from the wreckage in a coma and rushed to an out-of-town trauma hospital.

I was returning from a sports event when I got the call. I rushed home and opened my Facebook—multiple chats popped up, with kids wrestling to express their shock and pain. I knew, in that moment, the youth workers in my town needed to get these kids together to grieve and comfort each other. The first stage of processing a grief is denial and isolation—but teenagers are wholly social beings, and we needed to give them a way to gather and mourn.

So, between 11p.m. and 1a.m., we pulled together an event for the next day that drew more than 200 teenagers. To set the agenda and expectations for the gathering, I mined ideas from a Youth Pastor Facebook group and combined them with insights and strategies I'd gleaned from my Masters in Crisis Management program. The gathering turned out to be a great "success," if we define that word as "helping them process their grief in a Christ-centered environment." I hope we never have to do this again in our community, but I know the odds are that we will. I offer up our story—our journey into the grief of our community's teenagers—as a gift and a light on the path for your own journey.¹

COLLABORATE

I work with Youth For Christ, and one of our core values is partnering with area churches—we call it "Collaborative Community Partnership." This was a huge added bonus in organizing this citywide event. After I sent my late-night plea, a youth pastor from a large church in town responded and we began planning. Early on we knew it wouldn't be best to hold the gathering in a church—kids who never go to church might feel uncomfortable, and we wanted to remove that from their list of mixed emotions. The large-church youth pastor got permission to use The Lodge, a comfy and large community space that resembles a ski-chalet—most kids in the community had been there before.

We set up a Facebook event to notify everyone, and so kids could start making connections and sharing their grief. And I selected a photo to serve as an icon for the gathering—a broken heart. Then I emailed a wide swath of people in our community, asking for contributions of tissue boxes, finger foods, drinks, and paper products. People answered the call providing more than we needed, no matter how many teenagers showed up.

Then I emailed youth pastors and pastors at all our "Collaborative Community" churches, and five churches joined the effort. We wanted kids to know that the faith community in our town was there for them, in a very visible way. At the event, most teenagers gathered with the kids and adults they knew, but it was a powerful and memorable "visual" to see so many adult leaders from so many churches ready to connect with them. Many seeds were planted that night.

GREET, HUG, AND GIVE PERMISSION

Because YFC runs a community-wide pancake breakfast and a pizza lunch, and I serve as a substitute teacher, I've met many of the students in our community. So my job at the gathering was to serve as official greeter and hug-dispenser at our "Mandatory Hug Station" (my nickname is "Momma Soup," so I can get away with dorky stuff like that). I told every person who walked through the door: "It's okay to say, 'This sucks', because it does. It is also okay to cry your heart out and be sad, because everyone in the room is. Please don't say, 'I'm okay,' because you're not—I'm not, and no one else is either." Kids need to know, right off the bat, that they have permission to be as sad as they feel.

BE AVAILABLE, BUT FROM AFAR

I made special nametags for every adult who showed up, so kids would know who they were and that they were available to

talk. I used the Facebook icon (broken heart) on the nametags to make a visual connection. Each tag read: "Let's talk. My name is..." We had leaders write only their first name on their tag, and no reference to their organization.

STRATEGICALLY LOCATE YOUR SUPPLIES

We placed tissue boxes everywhere, so they'd be readily accessible no matter where kids congregated. I also mingled around, passing out tissues and hugs as needed. Also, we scattered little piles of mints around the room, because crying dries out your mouth and sometimes kids need an excuse to break away from a conversation.

SET UP STATIONS

To give kids momentum and purpose to their grief, we set up stations around our meeting place. Each station had a small table-tent description of its purpose, and offered suggestions of what they could do (including "whatever you want").

Memorial Wall—Near the entry to our gathering place we posted two sheets of butcher paper for each girl involved in the accident. One sheet read: "If you were here right now, I would tell you..." The second read: "Something I never got to tell you was..." You could choose other headers as well, including: "When I heard you died, I..." or "My head feels..." or "My heart feels..."

¹This strategy is designed for those who died due to circumstances beyond their control, not for one who chose to take his or her own life. Adolescent psychiatrist Richard James reminds us: "A suicide absolutely must not be glorified or made heroic." We must be hyper-sensitive to the possibility for "contagious suicides."

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This "Memorial Wall" gave students a "passive" opportunity to move toward closure—they filled up the pages. And there was an added blessing to this idea: afterward, we gave these sheets to the victims' families. The mother of the deceased was very moved by what the students shared, and the mother of the injured girl could post it for her daughter so she'd know that others care about her.

Cards—We set up a table with blank cards for students to decorate and write notes of condolence and support. They created cards for the girl who was injured, both girls' families, and each other.

Journaling—We set up a table with lined paper and pens for kids to journal about anything that was on their hearts. Because these journal pages were private, I don't know what they wrote, but I do know that they wrote.

Art—We also set up a table with markers and a stack of paper so students could express themselves in ways other than writing. Some drew pictures as an expression of their grief—some were for personal use, and some were for the families. Some just doodled.

Games—One of the youth pastors brought some board games for those who wanted to do something to give them a break from the intensity.

Food—There's a reason some things we like to eat are called "comfort foods." We set an area for snacks and drinks—just chips and finger foods, nothing fancy.

CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR SHARING

During the event, we gathered those kids who were interested in praying or sharing their thoughts into one room. Some kids really wanted to speak up or pray for specific concerns. We ended this large-group time with a "share a laugh-your-butt-off memory." While the large-group time was valuable, the real challenge came when we entered into one-to-one or one-to-three side conversations. Here are a few imperatives that helped us have more impactful and redemptive interactions.

Lean toward hope—Sometimes we simply don't know what to say to someone who's grieving—our paralysis is exacerbated when the focus of our grief is a person who has an uncertain "spiritual position." So

I've decided to help students by using language that allows for my ignorance and the mystery of God's movement and grace in another's life. So instead of saying, "She's gone," I say, "Until we meet again."

Help them channel their grief—To help students deal with the upcoming pain of returning to school without their classmate, I offer them this advice:

Every time you start to miss him or her, tell yourself: "Til we meet again."

Every time your heart feels like it's breaking, think of a favorite memory. While it won't cure the pain, it will help make it more bearable.


Encourage them to write it out—To help kids express the inexpressable, I suggest they write out everything they want to say to the deceased friend. Scripture neither confirms nor denies the ability of our loved ones to "look down from heaven." So I honor that mystery by suggesting that their loved one may be able to read what they wish they had said while they were living—this often brings a sense of peace and closure.

Don't move them along too fast—Youth ministry is a marathon, not a sprint. And no one, regardless of age, can process deep thoughts during intense grief. John 11:35 is the shortest verse in the Bible, and a powerful template for walking with kids through their grief: "Jesus wept." When he entered into others' grief, he didn't launch into a sermon and try to explain everything. He wept. Then he offered a simple reminder: "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" (11:40). It's tempting to "use" a tragedy to direct kids to a conversation about salvation, but beware of flooring the accelerator on this kind of interaction. After the initial shock and grief have passed, you could appropriately enter into these kinds of conversations with these "on-ramps":

- Has this changed the perspective you have of your life?

- What do you think about when you think about dying?

- Have you ever considered what happens when you die? What are your thoughts?

I love what American Idol winner Scotty McCreery says about moving through grief: "Sometimes God sends people into your life that he uses to show you that there is a deeper place than you have ever been. Sometimes they stay, and sometimes they go. As for the ones who stay, well, amen. As for the ones who leave, you have to look through the pain and sadness and grab hold of the place that God allowed you to go to with them...Trust that God will hold out his hands and hold your heart like the most delicate of his creations that it is. Fear of loving is lack of trust in God. Trust God, and leave your heart in his hands, that he would allow that person to take it for what it is. A treasure from Heaven." 



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