

Comforting the Broken-Hearted

Bible Study for Youth Grieving Ambiguous Loss

By Kristin Schmidt

Teenagers often earn a reputation for drama and moodiness. Sometimes adults ignore or discount genuine pain youth experience, considering it to be just another adolescent attitude. We know, however, that middle and high school students experience a wide range of emotions, and that those feelings must be validated and addressed. When young people are grieving, it is essential that they know a reliable support system exists to comfort and encourage them.

When a group of teenagers experiences the same event or similar events, they can often help one another cope as they empathize and mourn together. It is important to gently guide them through this grieving process and to offer consolation, hope, and appropriate Scripture.

Grief is an expected result of tragedy like death or sudden illness. However, there are other events that might not seem as significant, but can still cause a sense of mourning. Loss is not always connected to tangible things. Sometimes it encompasses the disappointment of missing out on a long-awaited event or opportunity.

This study will focus on helping youth who might be grieving ambiguous loss. This might include missing out on performances, sporting events, graduation ceremonies, concerts, birthday parties, weddings, or vacations. Such opportunities might be lost due to illness, accident, weather, or crisis. Everyone encounters such things in life, but it can be especially challenging for teens to understand and grow from such events, when crushing disappointment weighs heavily and the future is tough to view optimistically.

There are a few critical things to keep in mind when dealing with youth who are grieving:

- Acknowledge that grief is normal and acceptable, and experiencing a range of emotions is healthy and appropriate.
- Understand that expressing grief is as unique as we are. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve.
- Check in regularly on teens, and demonstrate genuine care.
- Avoid providing trite answers like "just look at the positive," or "you'll be fine; you can get through it." Teens need space to experience emotions. They might be open to public prayer or Bible verse suggestions, but do not merely toss those things out casually as a quick fix. Let them know you are experiencing true feelings *with* them.
- Be present and ready to listen. You don't have to "fix" anything. Just be willing to be there for students.

The recommended format for a Bible Study on grief is somewhat different than a typical youth group meeting. While laughter can be a helpful distraction, students in mourning might not benefit from a round of sock fighting or a shaving cream battle. It's important to allow space for teens to share and participate as much or as little as they prefer. Give them time to talk through feelings and to explore the comfort of God's word, but don't force them to do more than they might want to.

**Remote Note: If possible, it is helpful to meet grieving teens in person. However, there are times that require meeting from a distance. This study includes suggestions to adapt activities for such conditions.*

Begin the study with an opportunity for expression. Allow students to gather and chat as desired, perhaps with some snacks or music in the background. Prepare a wall with two large sections: perhaps long sheets of paper, poster boards, or whiteboards. Provide several notecards, post-it notes, or small pieces of paper and writing utensils. Invite teens to use the papers to write down a recent ambiguous loss they've experienced. Explain that this could be an event or opportunity they missed out on, or something they were looking forward to that didn't happen. Have students place those papers on one section of the wall. On the other section, have them post papers with words of emotions that describe how they are feeling about the loss. Encourage them to write whatever comes to mind. There are no right or wrong responses, and all answers will remain anonymous. Students can take turns approaching the wall to post their losses and emotional reactions. Once they are complete, prompt everyone to look over both walls, to see that others might be experiencing similar things. Depending on the size of the group and how willing kids might be to share, this activity should take about 5-10 minutes. When finished, provide a bit of introduction before launching into Scripture study.

**Remote Recommendation: If conducting this study through a web conference, invite students to write their answers on a piece of paper. If they are comfortable sharing, they can do so, or type a response within a chat bar. You may even be able to share several potential losses and have students "stamp" which ones might apply to them.*

Bible Exploration: (Approximately 20 minutes)

Explain clearly to students that it is perfectly normal and acceptable to grieve the loss of events or opportunities. Grief is a part of life, and it isn't reserved exclusively to when Grandpa Joe passes away. Let teens know that their emotions are valid, and that everyone reacts differently to disappointment and loss. Remind students that their identity is in Christ. It's natural to be upset over breaking a finger and missing a baseball game. It is okay to cry about getting sick and not going to a friend's party. It's fine to feel wronged that snow prevented travel plans. Yet none of those activities or events makes us who we are. We can feel sad and dejected, but there is hope.

Allow time for students to review some Scripture passages. Provide a list, and allow them to find a quiet space to be alone, or with one other person, if preferred (use best judgment on the students and needs of your group). Invite them to look through all of the verses, or just select a few to focus on. Encourage them to pray before and while reading.

**If conducting the study remotely, provide the list of verses ahead of time, and then ask students which passages stood out to them in particular or what they gained from them. You can select a few to review together as a group.*

Be available to monitor and to answer questions if needed, but allow kids to look at the passages on their own. A few suggestions include:

- Psalms 18:1-3 (The Lord is a rock and refuge; He will be with us)
- Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd; He will comfort and provide)
- Psalms 34:17-22 (The Lord is close to the broken-hearted; He will bring the righteous deliverance)
- Isaiah 40:28-31 (Put hope in God; one day strength will be renewed)
- Matthew 28:20 (Christ is present with us ALWAYS)

- John 16:22-23 (We sorrow now, but one day mourning will be finished)
- Romans 8:28 (God is working things for our good, even when we don't understand)
- Philippians 4:6-7 (Present requests to God and receive His peace)
- 1 Peter 5:10-11 (suffering will not last; God will deliver us)

Follow-up and Fellowship: (10-15 minutes)

Bring students back together as a group. Allow a few minutes for students to share any thoughts or emotions that came up during their alone time, or any reflections on verses that stood out to them. Do not push or pressure conversation if students are hesitant to verbally share. Provide a couple of options in following up with the Scripture study:

-Invite students to select one of the verses that was meaningful (or another noteworthy verse), and write it out as a positive reminder. Provide paper and writing tools such as markers, pastels, or pens. Encourage them to use creativity in writing the verse decoratively, if that is helpful to them.

-For the less artistically inclined, have something more tactile on hand. It might be bubble wrap to pop and stomp, something to throw, or even a large box to crush. Let students vent frustration through physical exertion.

**If you are web-based, you could invite students to do these things together, if they have the resources around; or you may choose to spend more time on the discussion elements, and provide the other options as suggestions to do at home.*

Depending on students and timing, you might have everyone do one or both of these activities, or perhaps neither. Afterwards, have students describe something coming up that they are looking forward to. Grieving a loss is natural, and it will likely be something that sticks with them. They don't have to forget about what was missed in order to move on. Encourage them to think of a positive thing that lies ahead, in the near or even distant future.

Remind teens of your genuine care for them. Let them know you are available to talk and connect, providing specific details of when and how, if necessary.

Close with a prayer. If time and willingness allow, have students share prayer requests and pray for one another. Otherwise, offer a general prayer asking for God's comfort and peace.

If space and time offer availability, let students have a few minutes to chat and fellowship before they depart. (Close: 2-5 minutes)