

Weep with Those Who Weep

A Bible Study on Comforting Those Who Grieve

By Kristin Schmidt

We all fear awkward moments. Whether they come about through uncertain pauses, wardrobe malfunctions, or poorly chosen words, nobody wants to be responsible for making another person feel odd. This can be particularly noticeable when working with middle and high school students, who are already trying desperately to avoid the awkward sensations that life seems to be putting them through. We seek to instill a sense of empathy and awareness in teens, hoping to encourage their relational skills and confidence. They are developing personal identity as well as communication dexterity.

At some point in middle or high school (if not sooner), kids will know someone who is faced with a loss or tragedy. When a friend or loved one is hurting, it can be difficult for adolescents to understand how they should best respond. If someone they care for is experiencing grief, they'll naturally want to help, but might be nervous about how to do so. It may feel awkward and even scary. Teens might wonder what to say or do. They might tiptoe on eggshells or avoid the situation altogether. They might be overly sensitive or utterly insensitive. Let's face it, even adults struggle with managing care for a friend who is mourning. It can be even more challenging for an adolescent who is trying to react to a situation they may not understand.

The purpose of this Bible study is to provide helpful ideas for teens to reach out to others who are experiencing grief. There is no "one size fits all" method. One of the key challenges of youth ministry is reaching out to students who are diverse in experiences, situations, and personalities. Teens process and react to life in unique ways, and they encounter a range of events and challenges as they move through middle and high school. As leaders, we must be aware of this in terms of how we interact with students. However, it is also important when we consider how students engage with one another. We can assist them in their relationships while also growing in our understanding of their personalities. We can offer suggestions, but admit that we don't have all of the answers, and that's okay.

There are a few critical things to keep in mind when dealing with youth who are grieving in any way. These principles should be shared with teens who wish to demonstrate concern with one another. You may even provide a hand-out of some of these elements, for students to reference as needed.

- Acknowledge that grief is normal and acceptable, and experiencing a range of emotions is healthy and appropriate.

- Understand that the way we express grief is as unique as we are. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve. Their friend may be going through a hard time, and reacting to it in unexpected ways.
- It's important to sensitively check in regularly on grieving loved ones, and demonstrate genuine care.
- Recognize that grief lingers. It may look different over time, but likely will still be present years after a tough loss.
- Avoid providing trite answers like "just look at the positive" or "you'll be fine; you can get through it." Everyone needs 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 them. Sometimes that's all we can do, and it's the best we can do.
- Provide gentle, but specific opportunities for loved ones to share. Rather than broad statements like "let me know if you need something," or "how are you feeling?", try something like "who else can you talk to about this?" or "I am praying that God's peace and presence overwhelm you tonight."
- Pray for and with the mourning person, if you are comfortable enough to do so.
- Genuinely admit that you do not have all the answers or understanding, but you are willing to listen and to pray.

**Remote Note: If possible, the exercises and discussions here would best be done in person. However, there are times that require meeting from a distance. This study includes suggestions to adapt activities for such conditions.*

Opening: (5-10 Minutes)

Tough situations: begin the study by inviting the group members to contemplate difficult events or seasons in their lives. Have students brainstorm things they have experienced that were especially challenging. Allow them to share if they are willing, or have them write items down privately. Encourage them to consider how they felt or reacted during stress. What was hardest about the event/time period?

After this initial conversation (or sooner if it does not yield much), have students think of their reactions when witnessing friends who are hurting. When have they seen people close to them going through a hard time? Is it difficult to know what to say or do? What do they notice about themselves when encountering someone in grief?

If students feel that they have not personally had to go through periods of hardship, invite them to imagine a situation...perhaps challenge them to consider how they would feel if a loved one passed away, or if they received news of poor health. Have them seriously think about the emotions and sorrows that might accompany such a thing.

**Note: if preferred for anonymity, you may have students write some of these responses down and place them in a collective spot to discuss. If this study is being conducted*

online, that of course will not be an option. However, teens could still send a private message to leaders only, if desired.

Bible Exploration: (Approximately 20 minutes)

To aid youth who wish to comfort others, offer a Biblical basis for some key principles of demonstrating love and compassion to the hurting. Review a few passages, looking at them one at a time. Allow students to take turns reading, or to read silently or in pairs, depending on your group size, timing, and format. If conducting the meeting online, consider giving all students time to read the passages on their own. Or if time is short, you might share a screen with each passage. After reviewing each one, invite teens to discuss how they think it might apply to a situation of providing hope and healing. A few examples to provide include:

- Proverbs 25:20 (don't sing songs to a heavy heart)
- Job 16:1-17 (you'll need to provide a little bit of background here: After losing his children, livestock, and health, Job receives visitors. His "friends" have just told him that he has no reason to be miserable and that God must be punishing Him or have a reason for what is happening. Even Job's wife advises him to curse God and die. Here, he laments that his companions are not much for comfort! We cannot throw out simple statements or pretend to know more than God).
- Romans 12:15-16 (rejoice when others rejoice; weep with those who weep)
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 (God comforts us in all things, in order that we should share comfort with one another)
- Galatians 6:2 (bear one another's burdens)

It will also be useful to give teens some useful verses to share with those who are grieving. You may even consider providing a list (ahead of time or after) of verses that might be helpful to keep in mind. Many Psalms contain genuine solace for grief or trouble. A few suggestions include:

- Psalm 30:1-12 (Weeping lasts through the night, but joy comes with the morning)
- Psalm 73:23-28 (God is a constantly present guide and source of strength)
- Psalms 121 (Our help comes from the Lord, who made and rules over everything)
- Psalm 147:1-6 (God heals the brokenhearted and binds their wounds)
- Isaiah 40:28-31 (All who hope in God will receive new strength)
- Romans 8:18-28 (we are experiencing temporary suffering, but one day will be united with God. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit helps us in our prayers and lives).
- Revelation 21:4 (God will wipe away all tears; pain and sorrow will disappear)

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

Invite students to practice how they might offer support to a loved one who needs care. If you are meeting in person and group members know each other well, allow them to partner up and find a space together. Provide hypothetical scenarios for them to use, and allow them to role play conversations and reactions they might have in those given situations.

Encourage them to act out interactions or just discuss with partners how they might handle various challenges. If you prefer, and especially if this study is taking place in an online format, you can do this exercise as a group. Provide the group with one potential scene at a time, and allow them to brainstorm methods of handling it. A few possible circumstances include:

- A friend who has lost a pet
- A friend who had a close family member pass away
- A friend who had another friend pass away
- A parent losing a job
- A sibling or friend breaking up with a significant other
- A friend whose parents are divorcing

Discuss with students how they might comfort loved ones in these various situations. Talk about how they could sensitively approach friends and provide genuine care. Offer suggestions if teens are having a difficult time coming up with ideas or reactions on their own. Remind them to consider imagining both perspectives in each case.

Close with a prayer. If time and willingness allow, have students share prayer requests and pray for one another. Or consider allowing youth members to share the names or struggles of someone they know, who needs lifting up in prayer. Otherwise, offer a general prayer asking God to provide wisdom and care as we love and serve one another.

If space and time offer availability, let students have a few minutes to chat and fellowship before they depart. If you are using an online format, and have a large group, you might even split students into "breakout rooms" for them to talk in smaller clusters of friends. (Close: 2-5 minutes)

Suggested Resources for teens to support others and cope with loss:

The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends (Helen Fitzgerald)

When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing (Marilyn E. Gootman)

Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love (Earl A. Grollman)

Resilient Grieving (Lucy Hone)

Tear Soup (Pat Schwiebert)

Teen Grief: Caring for the Grieving Teenage Heart (Gary Roe)