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## Helping Youth Grieve

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*On an icy morning in January, a young father and his two sons collide head-on with a truck driven by a teenage driver. The three in the car are killed instantly.*

*Although they are not members of your congregation, your members--especially the teenagers-- know the family well. The father had been a popular basketball coach, and among the mourners at your congregation are cousins of the boys.*

*The preacher at the non-Lutheran funeral tells the congregation that "the Lord called him home" on the day of the fateful accident.*

*Later, a confirmation student writes you a question in the margin of his sermon notes: "Was it fair that Joshua and Jeremy had to die?" You wonder who else might be struggling with the deaths and how to reach them.*

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- A young person from your congregation or community commits suicide.
- A teenager's father or mother dies following a lengthy illness.
- A friend, neighbor or relative is murdered.
- A classmate is diagnosed with HIV.
- Teenagers from your community are involved in a car accident.

These are only a few of the situations in which we are called to minister to and with young people who are grieving. In times of crisis, it is both a privilege and an awesome responsibility to listen and to speak: to listen to questions and cries, and to speak words of comfort and faith.

Times of death and grieving are particularly hard on teenagers and early adolescents. Just when they have their whole lives ahead of them, tragedy brings them to their knees. These are tremendous opportunities to reach out to young people with the hope of the Gospel.

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## Use Rituals

When it comes to grief, don't underestimate the power of ritual--both the formal rituals related to the funeral, and other rituals involving only youth.

Encourage youth to attend the funeral, and make sure the pastor and others consider the youth audience in choosing scripture, formulating prayers and shaping the message. If appropriate, ask young people for ideas and/ or to participate. A young person may have a special memory of a friend or relative to share.

Consider planning your own service of remembrance with youth. All Saints Day is a good time for young people to remember people who were important to them. Have your own "Service of Remembrance" in a cemetery or at the church, using portions of the "Burial Of The Dead" service from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Augsburg Fortress 1978). Invite them to light a candle for a person they want to remember. Use the opening prayer from page 207 of the *LBW*, having them insert the name of their choosing.

Ask them to write thoughts or memories that may be shared aloud or left unspoken. A service of remembrance might also include time at the baptismal font remembering their own baptismal promise and the promise to those who have died.

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## Encourage Questions

If a young person in your church or community dies, hold a special question/answer session for anyone who might have questions about death, about resurrection, and about faith.

If you know that the person was of another faith tradition or if there are questions regarding what happened at the funeral, provide a time for youth to ask questions such as:

- Is this fair?
- Does God make bad things happen?
- What does "the resurrection of the body" mean?
- What about heaven/hell?
- Was God punishing them?
- Whose fault was this?

The book, *Where is God in My Suffering* (Augsburg Fortress) by Professor Daniel Simundson of Luther Seminary, attempts to answer some of these questions. The questions of youth may range from factual to searching and personal. Take all questions seriously, even those which might "seem" to be on the surface.

Remember that you don't need answers to all their questions. In fact, if you have answers to some of those death questions you're probably quite a prophet. Discuss the mysteries of death and resurrection and the faith issues that surround them. Some things we don't know. But, there are word and sacrament promises that we cling to and can tell others in times of grief.

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"Some adults, as well as teens, believe that God controls everything and when someone dies, it is their 'time,' no matter what the cause of death."

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## Involve Parents

Don't forget parents, aunts and uncles as they struggle to minister to their own children. Consider including parents and youth in a question and answer forum.

A young person may want to talk about the fear of their parents' death, or of their own. Adults also need help talking with their children about grief and hope.

Make yourself available to parents who have questions about death; discuss their beliefs about the resurrection, the sovereignty of God and the meaning of suffering. Some adults, as well as teens, believe that God controls everything and when someone dies, it is their "time" no matter what the cause of death. It is important both to affirm the sovereignty of God, to acknowledge the reality of evil, the power of our own choices, and of the circumstances of an imperfect world.

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## **Be Vulnerable**

Pay attention to your own grief, and don't be afraid to share your feelings. Share your story appropriately, not in an attempt to steal the limelight or take away from what others say. Rather, find ways to share yourself a little at a time so that youth will know that it is safe to talk with you.

If your own friends or relatives have died, you know the stages grief takes. Be aware of those experiences as you listen to young people. Try to remember: Were you angry at your friend, others, or God? Did you feel like crying, or did you feel numb? Who did you turn to? Did you know what to say to your friend's parents? Did you know what to say to your grandmother when your grandfather died?

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## **Provide a Safe Place to Express Feelings of Grief**

Youth may have intense feelings of anger, sadness or depression, but they may not know where or how to express them. They may not feel they have permission to cry in church, or at a youth group meeting. Or they may not have the words to say how they really feel.

Encourage young people to express their feelings in places and ways that are good for them. Don't force them to share in a group setting. Instead, encourage them to write a letter or a poem. Creative writing, music, movies and other art forms are excellent avenues for expressing grief. A young boy from a rural area grieved for a murdered relative by writing this:

### *The Field of Sorrow*

*I need a plow to plow  
through the field of  
sorrow. A plow that is so  
sharp that it can penetrate  
any emotion. But there is  
so much grief the plow  
would have to be very  
sharp, very sharp indeed.  
It would have to be pulled  
by the strongest of all  
stallions. The field of  
sorrow is so large you  
would need two plows. The  
field of sorrow is so large  
you would need four  
horses, very strong horses.*

(Christopher Bocek, age 9)

Help youth minister to those to whom death is an ever-present reality--people at an AIDS clinic, a hospice ward, a nursing home. Serving others can help them experience the power of the Gospel in the midst of death and dying.

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## Help Youth Care for One Another

Just like adults, youth may not know what to say when a friend is grieving. They may avoid one another because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Have a group meeting to discuss appropriate and inappropriate things to say in times of grief, and what to write on a card. Let them know that it's all right--and often best--to say something as simple as "I'm sorry," and that it's good to talk about the person who has died. A good setting to talk about grief and comfort is in making cards together. Invite them to work in pairs or small groups to find scripture they think is comforting. Invite them to share verses they've chosen and talk about why they find them comforting.

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## Resources

- *EDGE TV* has an excellent video in their series on "Loss." Teens speak candidly and with faith about their own losses. It is quite powerful and moving, and might not be appropriate at the time of a community crisis. As with all resources, preview before showing to a group. An excellent pamphlet with guidelines for using this video for discussion accompanies it. (1.800.616.EDGE)
  - *Helping Children Grieve When Someone They Love Dies*. Theresa Huntley, Augsburg Fortress, 1991. This book talks about how children handle death and loss at different ages.
  - *Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grownups* William C. Kroehn, Free Spirit, 1996.
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## Be Alert for Other Grief Situations

Death of friends and family is an obvious time of grieving for young people and their families.

But be alert to other life changes that result in grief. For instance, a recent *Newsweek* article said divorce may be the deepest crisis of grief for children and youth.

Minister to youth in situations such as these:

- when parents separate or divorce;
  - at the time of a move;
  - when older siblings leave home;
  - the birth of a baby;
  - when a pet dies;
  - when a home is damaged or lost due to natural disasters;
  - during a community or neighborhood crisis;
  - selling a house;
  - unemployment or job change;
  - illness and disabilities;
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