



## Helping young people process violence

Dear friend,

“Flags had barely been raised back to full mast after the tragic shooting in Atlanta that claimed eight lives,” said Colorado’s governor Jared Polis, “and now a tragedy here, close to home, at a grocery store that could be any of our neighborhood grocery stores.”

We are still processing and grieving last week’s Atlanta [violence against Asian Americans](#), and now there’s a second mass shooting in Boulder. Our nation is reeling. And so are our young people.

For those of us committed to loving and serving teenagers and young adults, adding to the pain and confusion is that the suspects in both shootings are 21 years old.

In a culture desensitized toward violence, it can become too easy to look the other way. Words sometimes ring hollow, unable to fill the void left in the aftermath of tragedy after tragedy. But over the next several days and weeks, the young people in your home and church may want—or need—to process what happened with you.

We know this is not easy, so we've put together a few next-step resources you can utilize.

## 1) Use phrases that help them feel safe to share

Start with something basic, like, “**What do you know about ...?**” to assess what they've heard, seen, or processed already. This will give you a baseline for what else to ask or say. Try to match your response with their level of awareness.

Other open-ended phrases might also prompt young people to speak more freely, especially when they're confused, sad, or scared, such as:

- **Tell me more ...** [about what you're feeling; what you mean; what you're experiencing.]
- **I wonder how ...** [that person might feel; we can help; this is impacting you?]
- **Let me know if ...** [you want to talk more later; you have a friend who's struggling with this; you start to feel anxious or afraid.]

Chances are good that the young people in your life will pose questions for which you don't have answers. Here's a useful response to keep handy: “**I don't know, but...**” There are a number of ways to access the power of this phrase to hold a safe space with a teenager:

*I don't know, but ...*

... that's an important question.

... I wonder that, too.

... thanks for sharing it with me.

You might, of course, *have an answer to the question*. But even if you do, it might be wise to step back and probe a bit before unleashing your “right” answer. It might turn out that being heard is more important than the answer itself, at least at the moment.

## **2) Pray and sing laments to God**

*“Why are you so far off? Why have you hidden your face from me?”*

Common spiritual reactions to tragedy include anger at God, questioning God, and struggling to trust God. The most appropriate response to these kinds of reactions is to lament. Lament is a God-given tool to pray and worship our way through pain and tragedy. While uncomfortable and sometimes awkward to read, the psalms of lament (there are over 65 of them) in the Bible give us language for crying out to God in ways we might not normally find acceptable. That’s exactly why they’re preserved for us.

In response to traumatic experiences, it is critically important for a community of faith to offer space for this kind of response to God. As youth workers, we may fear taking students to those places of doubt, anger, and disappointment. However, failing to create an environment for authentic lament can result in spiritually and psychologically short-circuiting the necessary healing process. We have the opportunity to offer the hope of Christ and his re-orienting power to lives that have been plunged into trauma and disorientation.

Consider taking time in your next gathering for a reading of Psalm 88, 80, 61, 13, or 10. Ask reflection questions like, “Is it okay to say these kinds of things to God? Where could this kind of prayer go from here?” Then read through the psalm again and invite students to journal or draw their own continuing prayer for a few minutes. Afterwards talk through their feelings of comfort or discomfort in approaching God that way. If you’re a parent, try reading one of these psalms with your family as a way to grieve tragedy together.

### 3) Look for signs of post-traumatic stress

It's possible that recent shootings have left some young people in your community experiencing post-traumatic stress, even if their experiences are vicarious (for example, watching videos of traumatic events on social media). Symptoms include feeling hopeless, numb, on guard or scared, having trouble sleeping or eating, or other physical distress.

If someone you know is experiencing these symptoms, start by encouraging them to stop watching or reading news related to the events. Use some of the tools above to ask good questions and help them process what's going on. If signs of post-traumatic stress linger more than a couple of weeks, it's a good idea to help the young person find professional help.

Dr. Cynthia Eriksson, a trauma specialist in Fuller's School of Psychology, also has offered these suggestions for pastoral care we can offer to young people experiencing post-traumatic stress:

*We need to let them express whatever is going on in their minds in terms of their relationship with God. Our pastoral [and parental] tendency is to come in with some sort of answer, to help people not doubt anymore. However, the most important first step is to be heard, even if what needs to be said are horrible thoughts toward God. Let go of the need to be a theological educator and stay in the moment in a pastoral place with that person. Acknowledge that it's often hard to see God in the midst of those experiences.*

*If we turn to someone in the midst of doubt and say, "God is going to get you through this," we risk the possibility of the person feeling guilty or judged for not being able to hold onto that hope themselves. I'll never forget when I discovered Psalm 88. It doesn't end with professions of God's faithfulness, but rather something like, "I'm going to die". There are moments in life where we do not see the hopeful side, and it seems impossible to hold on to God's goodness. For many, it might take a long time to see God in the midst of what happened. The most caring thing is to hear the doubts and not try to "fix" the person or convince him or her otherwise.*

#### **4) Reference additional resources as needed**

These ideas are just a start. The following are articles and websites we trust and believe can help you as you navigate these challenging waters with young people. Please let us know about other resources that are helpful for you.

- [Good Grief –insights on helping ourselves and others work through loss and grief](#)
- [I doubt it: making space for hard questions](#)
- [Child Mind Institute: Trauma and Grief](#)
- [National Center for PTSD –resources for identifying and responding to post-traumatic stress](#)
- [Echo Parenting & Education resources for working with kids who have experienced trauma](#)

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