

Resources for Students in Grief

Student ministry leaders:

If you'd like to see the best resource our church has for helping students who are dealing with grief, look in the mirror. You have been trained, disciplined, and commissioned to serve the students under your care for a reason. When one of the students you have invested in suffers through a loss, such as a death, divorce, or other disappointment, *you* are in the best position to move toward them and their family to help. *Move toward your student* with guidance from the Word and with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, just as you typically do in your ministry role. "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Corinthians 3:5-6).

That being said, there is a wealth of resources out there for how to help people, and young people in particular, through grief. If a student under your care has experienced loss, big or small, look through these resources. They will give helpful perspective and practical next steps. Most of all, they will help you to *move toward your student* with confidence. Also, be sure to reach out to Middle School Ministry staff for more help and prayer support.

Book recommendations for students themselves:

- *Stuff that Sucks* by Ben Sedley. Told in an extremely down-to-earth and winsome voice, this book walks teens through negative thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Sedley begins with a discussion about things that suck and how they, well, suck. Then he discusses our negative thoughts and emotions, pointing out that sometimes people, or society in general, or even our own minds tell us not to think or feel what we are thinking or feeling. The way forward he suggests is to *embrace* rather than *fight* against what we are feeling. *Stuff that Sucks* also includes activities that help readers decide what matters to them personally, think through how to make small steps of progress toward those values, and practice mindfulness by focusing on the moment and the senses. Overall, this is a practical and approachable read to help students experience, rather than run from, the negatives in their circumstances and their own minds.
- *When a Friend Dies* by Marilyn E. Gootman. This book is a tear jerker so brace yourself! It speaks directly to teens who have lost someone, providing empathy and clarity. This is a handy resource because it speaks directly to the grieving teen. Also, it is laid out visually in a way that will get and keep a teen's attention, with little text on each page and lots of visual aids. It is also very accessible in the way the ideas themselves are presented. It is less cool and more heavy than *Stuff that Sucks*, due to its very specific intended audience of teens grieving the loss of a friend. *When a Friend Dies* is full of useful suggestions and clarifying points necessary for young people suffering through loss, including allowing yourself to mourn and communicating to others. It emphasizes thinking positive thoughts more than other sources which focus more on the need to embrace the bad feelings. It does teach that teens need to accept the loss and mourn, but it places greater emphasis on avoiding extreme negativity. The biggest strength of the book is that each section has a series of quotes from teens about their own experience.
- *The Grieving Teen* by Helen Fitzgerald. This book is laid out in question-and-answer format with over a hundred different prompts and responses. It is not very engaging to read straight through, but it is a good resource for students to have so they can look up the section on their

specific question or circumstance. The more universal topics are better covered in *When a Friend Dies*, but this book is useful because of how specific some of the sections are, for example: managing hospital visits, taking on additional responsibilities at home after the death of a parent, dealing with the added pain of having witnessed the death, navigating funerals and other services, postponing grief to focus on other crises if necessary, and adjusting to the idea of potentially getting a step-parent.

Book recommendations for a student's support person (i.e. you):

- It would be wise to read any book above to help understand what your student is going through, especially if you recommend that book to the student.
- *What Grieving People Wish You Knew* by Nancy Guthrie. This book is a MUST READ. Nancy Guthrie is one of the founders of GriefShare, and has experienced profound loss in her own life. Writing from her own experience and pulling from extensive surveys from people in grief, Guthrie provides a very practical, very powerful guide for how to help those who are dealing with loss. She writes from a biblical and gospel-centered perspective. This book emphasizes *moving toward* people who are grieving, and it gives many excellent, clear, well-reasoned ideas for how to do so (and how not to). Like most Christian books, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew* has its best content toward the beginning of the book, so even reading just the first two chapters would be an extremely valuable experience. That being said, the whole thing is full of wisdom, with insightful chapters about specific topics like how to show support in the age of social media, and how to sensitively discuss heaven.

Online resources:

- The Center for Loss website by Dr. Alan Wolfelt: <https://www.centerforloss.com/>. This site has many practical ideas for people who are experiencing grief themselves or who are helping others who are grieving. The same material is in Dr. Wolfelt's book *Healing Your Grieving Heart (for Teens)*, and presumably in the non-teen version as well. The book provides a few more specific ideas, but the content is mainly the same. There are two main emphases in Wolfelt's material. The first is the difference between grief and mourning. He explains that grief is the internal mental and emotional experience of the person who has suffered loss, whereas mourning is the process of *expressing* that grief. This distinction is important because grief is inevitable but mourning must be chosen and embraced in order for healing to occur eventually. In his discussion about grief and mourning, Dr. Wolfelt points out repeatedly that there is no right way to grieve or mourn because each person's experience is so different, therefore it is important not to be critical of oneself or others. The other emphasis in Dr. Wolfelt's work is the role of the friend, counselor, or family member of the grieving person. They are not to be a healer, leader, or teacher, but rather a *companion*. This is the key idea for effectively helping the bereaved, and it involves being with them in their grief, listening and being present, rather than seeking the right thing to say or do to fix the person. Dr. Wolfelt's website is very easy to navigate with different headings for different topics.
- "Helping a Teenager Deal with Grief," from the website What's Your Grief: <https://whatsyourgrief.com/helping-a-teenager-deal-with-grief-2/>. What's Your Grief is a website written by mental health professionals with many articles. This article provides a very helpful picture of the similarities and differences between how teens experience grief versus

how adults do. The same content is discussed in their podcast, which is linked at the bottom of the article, and here: <https://traffic.libsyn.com/whatsyourgrief/teens.mp3>. The podcast has a short section on dealing with grief and social media that isn't in the article.

- “Supporting a Grieving Person,” from the University of California Santa Barbara website: <https://www.hr.ucsb.edu/files/docs/asap/Supporting%20a%20Grieving%20Person.docx.pdf>. This is a very short, handy introduction to helping others with grief. It takes many of the same ideas in *What Grieving People Wish You Knew* and puts them in a very quick and easy format. Some of the suggestions will look different when helping support a student rather than an adult, but the general principles are the same. Also, if your student has faced loss, then their family has too, so consider putting some of these ideas into practice with your student's family.
- Articles for how to help younger children:
 - “Signs of Grief in Children and How to Help Them Cope,” from the health website Very Well Family: <https://www.verywellfamily.com/signs-of-grief-in-children-and-how-to-help-them-cope-4174245>. This article is geared to helping adults recognize grief and its expression in younger children, and then how best to respond.
 - “What You Should Never Say to a Grieving Child,” from the website of clinical psychologist Ben Michaels: <http://drbenmichaelis.com/heres-how-to-talk-to-a-child-about-a-death-in-the-family/>. This is pretty self-explanatory. Based on sound principles about grieving, empathy, and emotional intelligence, this is a short discussion about things we should never communicate to kids who are grieving.
 - “Seven Suggestions for Explaining Death to Children” by Lauren Schneider, LCSW from the website Eluna: <https://elunanetwork.org/resources/seven-suggestions-for-explaining-death-to-children/>. This article offers quick pointers for how to talk to younger kids about a loss.
 - “Finding the Right Words: Guidelines on how to talk to grieving children about death” <https://www.centerforloss.com/2016/11/finding-right-words-guidelines-talk-grieving-children-death/>. Another “do's and don'ts” about talking to kids who have experienced a loss.
- “MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF THAT COMPLICATE HEALING,” from John Montgomery, Dwell Grief Ministry Leader (who also originally recommended all the resources above). Contact him at grief@dwelcc.org.
 - Myth: The goal of grieving is to get over it.
 - Fact: The goal is not to get over grief or go around it. You must go through it and find ways to reweave the loss into the fabric of your life. The goal is not to return to normal but to create a “new normal”.
 - Myth: Grief and mourning are the same thing.
 - Fact: While many people use the words “grieving” and “mourning” interchangeably, there is an important distinction. Grief is the many internal thoughts and feelings we experience when a loved one dies; mourning is the outward expression of our grief.
 - Myth: It's important to “be strong” and keep a “stiff upper lip” in the face of loss.
 - Fact: Feeling sad, frightened, or lonely is a normal reaction to loss. Crying doesn't mean you are weak. You don't need to “protect” your family or friends by putting on a brave front. Showing your true feelings can help them and you.
 - Myth: If you ignore grief, it will go away.

- Fact: Trying to ignore the pain or keep it from surfacing will only make it worse in the long run. For real healing, it is necessary to lean into your grief and actively deal with it.
- Myth: If you don't cry, it means you aren't sorry about the loss.
- Fact: Crying can be a normal response to sadness, but it's not the only one. Those who don't cry may feel the pain just as deeply as others. They may simply have other ways of showing it.
- Myth: Grief happens in predictable stages.
- Fact: Everyone mourns in different ways. Don't think the goal is to move through prescribed stages of grief. Grief is a reflection of the individual, their relationship with the person who died, the circumstances of the death, coping skills, and many other factors.
- Myth: Grief should last about a year.
- Fact: There is no right or wrong time frame for grieving. How long it takes can differ from person to person. In reality, some form of grief will always be there.
- Myth: Moving on with your life means forgetting about your loss.
- Fact: Moving on means you've accepted your loss—but that's not the same as forgetting. You can move on with your life and keep the memory of someone or something you lost as an important part of you. In fact, as you move through life, these memories can become more and more integral to defining the person you are.
- Myth: No one will ever love you the way your loved one did.
- Fact: While no one will love you in the same way as another, you can trust God to provide you with the love that you need. With God as your ultimate parent, you have someone who loves you perfectly.
- Myth: Women grieve more than men.
- Fact: Although men are often thought of as "less emotional," they can feel the same intense grief emotions as women. Where they may differ is in how they express emotions and how they cope with them. So although people may experience the same type of emotions, some people might feel and express them differently.
- Myth: God cannot be trusted because he allowed your loved one to die.
- Fact: Bad circumstances should not define your theology. God can be trusted to fulfill his promises. Psalm 145:13: "The Lord is trustworthy in all He promises and faithful in all He does." He cannot be trusted to fulfill your agendas or desires. Trusting God does not always mean you will understand what he is doing or why he is doing it.
- Myth: You should avoid getting close to others to avoid feeling such pain again.
- Fact: Healthy relationships are a vital component of health and well-being. Giving up close relationships may be more painful. Strong relationships can contribute to a long, healthy, and happy life. As "iron sharpens iron," in true Christian fellowship, Christians sharpen one another's faith and stir one another to exercise that faith in love and good works, all to God's glory.
- Myth: You must make something "good" out of your tragedy.
- Fact: Many people try to ease their pain and give meaning to their loved one's death by turning the death into a cause such as fighting cancer or lobbying for gun control. While this can be good and, in fact, therapeutic, such activities should be done only after the person has had time to fully process their grief.

- Myth: You grieve less if you had a conflicted relationship with the deceased.
- Fact: Losing someone you had a complicated relationship with leaves the same void as other losses, but it can leave you with even more unanswered questions and unfinished business. When you lose such a person, the turmoil doesn't necessarily leave with them. Because when they're gone you lose not only the difficulties and challenges, you also lose the hope that things can ever be right.
- Myth: You grieve less when the person who died "lived a long life" or they were suffering and you are relieved they aren't suffering anymore.
- Fact: You grieve the absence of the person. Though faith that someone is in a better place or no longer suffering can be a comfort, this does not remove the pain that the person is gone.
- Myth: Expressing doubt and anger demonstrate a lack of faith.
- Fact: Anger at God and doubt are not incompatible with faith in God. The notion that belief in God demands calm acceptance of everything that comes your way is false. If you stifle such emotions and don't ask the "why" questions, you will be shutting yourself off from finding answers.
- Myth: You recover from grief like you recover from a cold, it gets a little better every day until it completely goes away.
- Fact: There are ups and downs, good days and bad days, good months and bad months. No matter how much you wish it was, grief isn't a straight line and the end point isn't "all better".
- Myth: You grieve less when you know in advance someone is going to die.
- Fact: There is no formula for how an anticipated loss will impact us because we all grieve differently. Anticipatory grief may reduce the intensity of grief following a loss, but there are many times that the grief following a death is not impacted at all. Often, a person is so consumed with caring for the dying loved one that they are unable to grieve until the death occurs.
- Myth: Grief has an endpoint.
- Fact: When you lose someone you loved deeply, that loss will be with you in some way forever. Grief may feel different or be more manageable, but it will always be there and that's okay. Unfortunately, people often make us feel like we should've reached the "end" of our grief.