

Dealing with the Death of a Young Person

A Practical and Compassionate Response

National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry

Planning for an Immediate Response

The following guide is designed to enable the youth ministry community to better respond to the death of a young person, due to such tragedies as accident, suicide, violence, or terminal illness. Providing spiritual care in these times of grief and crisis is an essential part of the youth ministry mission, as laid forth in *Renewing the Vision*, "Pastoral care . . . provides and connects adolescents and families to support service, referral resources, and self-help groups to promote healing during times of loss, sudden change, and unexpected crisis" (RTV 43).

There are several important tasks to consider once word of a death is received:

- Who needs to be notified?
- Is there a crisis response team that can provide support?
- Should a memorial service be planned?
- How do we respond to the family?



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Whom to Contact in the Parish

1. Contact your pastor, even if he already may be informed, and discuss the role the parish will play in the post-death process, including funeral and prayer service preparation (see prayer service planning sheet).
2. Contact your youth ministry adult team, inform them of the death, and ask for support and ideas for the upcoming process.
3. Contact youth and their parents to relay appropriate information about

the death as well as to relay the plans for the events and rituals that will take place in the coming days to remember the deceased. Use of e-mail and/or parish website may be useful tools for communicating with the concerned teens and the parish.

Whom to Contact in the Diocese

1. Contact your diocesan youth ministry office, and ask if they maintain a crisis response team. If not, ask what resources they have available to apply to this situation.
2. If the diocese maintains a crisis response team, contact them and request their support and presence.
3. Contact your local Catholic Charities or other Catholic social service agencies in your diocese. These agencies often have mental health and counseling staff prepared for such a situation. For an online list of these organizations in your diocese, see www.catholiccharitiesusa.org.

The First Youth Gathering after the Death of a Youth: Issues and Program Ideas

At the beginning of the gathering, share accurate information as appropriate on the cause of death, circumstances, plans for the visitation, and funeral. Rumors and mis-information make dealing with the situation more difficult.

It is important for youth to process their feelings, anxieties, and fears and to experience a sense of community after

Tips for Planning the First Youth Gathering after a Death

Encourage participants to:

- seek support from their loved ones.
- share their feelings and emotions with those available to help.
- remember the deceased through prayer, rituals, memorials, journaling, photographs, and mementos.
- reflect on the hope provided by their faith in the face of tragedy.

Remember that:

- it may be difficult for those in grief to focus on anything else but their grief.
- those who did not know the deceased closely may also be hurting and grieving.
- even those adults in ministry leadership positions have a need to grieve.
- just being present and available to the youth is critical.

Finally, remind those present that grieving is a very individual process—there is no “right” way or time frame for expressing grief.

the death of someone they may have known, or someone who may have been similar in age or life situation.

People need an opportunity to process, to talk about the range of feelings they are experiencing, and to ritualize their feelings in symbolic action. If there is a large number of participants, dividing into small groups with an adult facilitator for each group might be helpful.

Possible discussion questions include:

- When and how did you first hear of the death?
- What was your initial reaction? How did you feel?
- How do you feel now?
- How well did you know the deceased? The family?
- Have you seen the family yet? What is appropriate to say?
- Who are the best friends of the deceased? How are they doing? What might you say to them?
- Have you experienced a death in your life before? Family or friends? How did you handle that experience?

Refer to the prayer service planning section—many of the activity suggestions that work well in the context of a prayer service also may work well as part of a gathering immediately following the death of a youth.

Responding to the Family of the Deceased Young Person

It is important for the immediate relatives of the deceased young person, especially the parents and siblings, to feel supported by and connected to the community around them, especially their faith community. To this end, it is important that the youth, as an extension of the parish community, show support when a young person has died.

If appropriate and feasible, young people should spend time with the family in order to communicate their feelings and experiences of the deceased. Sharing their experiences and feelings may help the family in their grieving process.

Suggestions

Activities include writing short statements or stories concerning their positive experiences with the deceased. These memories and personal reflections can be gathered together in a book or other form that then could be given to the parents or relatives of the deceased as a sign of support and remembrance. One especially helpful and simple way to support the family of the deceased is to invite youth to attend the wake and or funeral of the deceased young person.

How to Prepare Youth for the Wake and Funeral Service

Many who have experienced the death of a young person, especially parents and relatives, have found it important for the friends and acquaintances of a deceased adolescent to attend the funeral and visitation rituals. This certainly helps the relatives of the deceased, but it often helps grieving youth deal with their emotions and fears. It is important, therefore, to prepare youth to understand and cope with these rituals, because this may be first encounter with death for many young people and thus their first funeral or wake.

Suggestions

It is important to tailor the explanation of the funeral and visitation procedures to the needs of the particular youth audience; more or less explanation of the mechanics of such rituals may be necessary. Such explanations may



include descriptions of the way in which the body will be displayed and the proper procedures for viewing. It may help to explain that there probably is no "right" way to approach a wake or funeral, but that the very presence of young people is often the best sign of support one can offer to the family. It is also important to keep in mind that different cultural traditions may influence the way the body is presented and the way in which prayer traditions are utilized.

Time should be spent identifying appropriate expressions of sympathy to the family. Ask the young people:

- What should we say to the parents?
- What do you think they need to hear?

At this stage in the grieving process, it also may be helpful to incorporate the families of the youths involved. This can be done effectively by communicating to parents the times and locations of all appropriate prayer services, visitations, and the funeral.

Suggestions for Continued Care and Support of Youth

The grieving process does not end at the funeral. The pain of the death will never fully disappear, but hopefully it will become manageable. For this reason, it is important that an effective ministry be put in place to support grieving youth throughout their struggle.

Suggestions

Many organizations exist to help the grieving through the long-term sufferings they endure. Some of these organizations can be found in the resource section at the back of this paper. One important thing that a parish youth ministry program can do to assist teens through the grieving process is to remember the death, and to resist the temptation to ignore the event because it causes too much pain. To this end it is especially important to acknowledge that anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, and other significant events in the life of the deceased young person can return a teen to a sense of crisis and more profound grief. Thus it is important that these times be remembered and dealt

with in the parish youth ministry community. One way to do this is through a memorial or continued remembrance. Other ways to remember can be found in the resources listed at the back of this booklet.

How to Memorialize the Deceased

Many who have experienced the death of a young person have noted the importance of memorializing the person who has died. In the case of a suicide, it is not advisable to glorify the death, and it may be more pastoral to consider the loss to the family and friends. The form and content of these memorials is often best determined by the efforts of the surviving youth who had a connection with the deceased. Yet, there are some common ideas that work in many circumstances.

Suggestions

One of the most powerful memorials involves the dedication of a particular location or object that was associated with the deceased; such as the placement of a cross or flowers at the site of an accident or murder if that was the cause of death, or at the school of the deceased, or at other appropriate places.

Many good memorials can be created using photographs of the deceased, including a memorial album created by young people, a prayer card to be distributed to the entire group, or another appropriate memento.

For those who wish to utilize financial contributions to memorialize the deceased, a scholarship fund, or other financial program to benefit youth or the community may be a powerful symbol of the continuing legacy of the deceased.

Another popular memorial idea involves an organic reminder of the deceased: such as a flower garden, a tree, or other plant. This memorial idea can also be incorporated as a helpful symbolic action



There are many creative ways to memorialize someone who has died.



Prayer Service Planning Resource

for the youth. In some cases a plaque, stone, or other stationary memorial may be appropriate and beneficial.

When responding to the death of a young person through a prayer service, you may find yourself having to address different realities or experiences as time progresses after the death. There is grieving and loss, upheaval and turmoil from an unexpected passing, hope in the resurrection and the path to acceptance and trust in the saving power of our God.

The following is an outline for planning a simple prayer service for your parish or school. The suggestions of music and scripture are categorized to aid in assembling a prayer that can help respond to your specific situation.



Opening/Introduction

Any prayer service should begin with a call to prayer and introduction in light of the death. A good and proper way to begin would be with a song followed by the sign of the cross. The introduction should be made by an adult leader (priest, deacon, youth ministry leader) and should set the tone for the service that will follow. Depending on the situation, the introduction may also inform those present of the circumstances of the death (for a more immediate event) or how the family and community is responding to the loss.

The opening prayer follows this introduction, and should speak to the needs of the situation. It may be helpful to have the prayer composed by the young people.

Readings

The next segment of the service consists of appropriate and relevant readings of Scripture, or perhaps other suitable non-Scriptural passages. Listed are suggestions from the Old and New Testament that may help respond to the different points in the grieving process. Often the practice is to share a reading from the Old Testament, a reading from the non-

Gospel New Testament writings, and a Gospel. The psalms can also be used either set to music or read reflectively. The list offered below is in no way comprehensive, and you may find other readings more fitting or that the suggestions would work in other settings as well.

Scripture Passages

- Ester C: 1-4, 8-10—Turn our sorrow into joy (immediate)
- 2 Maccabees 12: 43-46—He had the resurrection of the dead in view (resurrection)
- Sirach 2: 1-13—Trust God and he will help you (acceptance)
- Sirach 51: 8-12—I will ever praise your name and be constant in my prayers to you (immediate)
- Isaiah 55: 6-9—My ways are not your ways (acceptance)
- Lamentations 3: 17-26—It is good to hope in silence for the saving help of the Lord (immediate)
- Psalm 27—The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom do I fear?
- Psalm 42—As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God.
- Psalm 103—Bless the LORD, my soul
- Psalm 116—I shall walk before the LORD in the land of the living
- Psalm 122—I rejoiced when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."
- Psalm 130—Out of the depths I call to you, LORD
- Mark 10: 13-16—The kingdom of heaven belongs to the children (acceptance)
- Luke 21: 34-36—Be vigilant at all times and pray (immediate)
- John 6: 44-47—Whoever believes has eternal life (resurrection)
- John 11: 21-27—I am the resurrection and the life (resurrection)
- John 11: 32-38, 40—You will see the glory of God/Jesus wept (immediate)
- John 14: 1-6—In my Father's house, there are many dwellings (acceptance)
- Romans 6: 3-9—We too might live in

newness of life (resurrection)

- Romans 14: 7-9, 10-12—Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's (immediate)
- 1 Corinthians 3: 9-11, 16-17—You are God's temple (acceptance)
- 2 Corinthians 5: 1, 6-10—We have an everlasting home in heaven (acceptance)
- Ephesians 2: 13-18—Christ is our peace (acceptance)
- 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18—We shall stay with the Lord forever (resurrection)
- James 4: 13-15—You have no idea what your life will be like tomorrow (immediate)
- Revelation 7: 9-10, 15-17—God will wipe away all tears (acceptance)

Reflection or Remembrance

An opportunity for reflection is important when dealing with the death of a young person. There are several ways to conduct this time of reflection and remembrance. A few designated people, such as the parish priest, youth leader, or some of the young people could be asked to prepare reflections to share in advance. Depending on the setting, it may also be beneficial to allow some impromptu sharing by those in attendance of memories and feelings at this time. This could be done aloud or through some sort of ritual action described below.

Ritual or Symbolic Actions

Responding through some sort of ritual or symbolic action can help those present to express all of the feelings, emotions, and grief in a concrete and physical manner. Following are a few suggested ritual actions. Of course, any type of ritual or symbolic action should respond to the needs of those gathered and be appropriate to the situation.

Book of Memories

A common ritual action is the compilation of memories of the deceased in a book. If prepared ahead of time, this could be shared aloud as a part of the prayer service. It could also be compiled as a part of the service and assembled into a piece that can be shared with the family of the deceased after the funeral.

The Cross of Remembrance

Youth are asked to write down a prayer or a special memory of the deceased and to attach this memory or prayer to a cross. A picture of the deceased could be placed at the base of the cross. The cross should be present at the funeral if possible as a sign of love to the family of the deceased. After the funeral, this cross could serve as a memorial to the young person.

Balloons to Heaven

A variation on the written memories theme, this ritual involves tying these memories and prayers to balloons to be released as a group (although environmental hazards do exist if a very large number of balloons are set free) either at the meeting place, or, if appropriate, at the gravesite. This could symbolize the release of prayers and memories into God's hands.

Nurturing New Life

This action is used often in a variety of situations, yet in the case of remembering a deceased young person, it becomes all the more poignant. In this ritual, each person is given a bulb, seed, or sapling to plant and instructed to remember the deceased in the new life present in the flower, plant, or tree. Larger plants and trees could become permanent memorials to the deceased and could be planted as a group at the parish, school, or other appropriate location.

Intercessions and Prayer

In any gathering such as this, it is important to offer prayers of intercession that connect with the experiences and feelings of those gathered. These could be offered spontaneously or prepared beforehand, perhaps taking the form of a litany set to music. As with the opening prayer, the young people may be called upon to compose these prayers.

Closing

It is fitting to close with a prayer such as the Lord's Prayer or another composition. This would also be the time to share with those gathered the details of any upcoming services such as the wake or



funeral, or if this prayer service has taken place more removed from the passing of the young person, other resources of support and grieving can be shared and discussed. A song would also help bring closure to the service.

Music

The music compiled below is just a small sampling of what is available for use, both liturgical and non-liturgical. As with the Scripture listing, the list attempts to address the different situation one may face in the timing of such a service. It may also be helpful to discuss the selection of music with the young people.



OCP—Various Sources

Acceptance

- *In Every Age*; (Janet Sullivan-Whitaker) from *Choose Christ*
- *Day of Peace*; (Janet Sullivan-Whitaker) from *Live It!*
- *Hallways of Always*; (Ceili Rain) from *Change in Your Pocket*
- *Fly Like a Bird*; (Manibusan/Canedo) from *Love Never Fails*

Resurrection

- *Pastures of the Lord*; (Curtis Stephan) from *Sacred Revolution*
- *Go In Peace*; (Sarah Hart) from *Into These Rooms*
- *You Are Not Forsaken*; (Curtis Stephan) from *Sacred Revolution*

Upheaval

- *Daniel's Heart*; (Steve Angrisano) from *Set Free*
- *In My Heart and In My Tears*; (TR Smith) from *Persuaded*
- *Holy Darkness*; (Dan Schutte) from *Spirit & Song 2 CD 6*

GIA

- *I Know That My Redeemer Lives* (David Haas) from *I Shall See God*—A Gospel style song of farewell
- *I Cry Before You* (Lori True) from *Before I Was Born*—A rather intense song of lament, appropriate for difficult times
- *Like a Little Child* (David Haas) from *No Longer Strangers*—Responsorial psalm
- *The Hand of God Shall Hold You* (Marty Haugen) from *All Are Welcome*—A calm and touching song of farewell or final hymn
- *We Shall Rise Again* (Jeremy Young)—A rousing hymn of hope in the resurrection.

WLP—all from *Voices As One® Volume 2 Hymnal*

- *I Survive* (John Angotti)
- *No More Fear* (Aaron Thompson)
- *In the Shelter of Your Arms* (David Yackley)
- *Come, All You Blessed Ones* (Steve Warner)
- *Holiness Is Faithfulness* (Danielle Rose)
- *The Rock of Faith* (Ed Bolduc)
- *Forever* (Michael John Poirier)
- *Jesus, Hope of the World* (Paul Tate)
- *The Lord Is My Light/Psalm 27* (Ed Bolduc)
- *Unless a Grain of Wheat* (John Angotti)

Resources and Support Materials

General Grief Materials

Cassini, Kathleen, Jacqueline Rogers. *Death and the Classroom*. Cincinnati: Griefwork of Cincinnati, 1996.

This comprehensive guide, especially useful in school and institutional settings, contains sample letters, forms, and other helpful materials, as well as resource list.

Barr-Harris Children's Grief Center
<http://www.barrharris.org/>

Barr-Harris Bibliography
<http://www.barrharris.org/barrbib1.html>
 Both of these sites provide a good starting point for exploring resources and services available for adolescents dealing with grief.

Association for Death Education and Counseling
<http://www.adec.org/>
 This is a good starting point for general grief information and it has a very large links page with many resources not listed here.

Growth House Inc.
End-of-Life Care Community
<http://www.growthhouse.org/childgrv.html>
 This particular page contains links to a wealth of online and print resources on death and dying, especially concerning children and adolescents.

The Compassionate Friends, Inc.
 1-877-969-0010
<http://www.compassionatefriends.org/>
 This is one of the largest support groups for parents who have lost a child.

The Dougy Center
<http://www.dougy.org/>
 This is one of the best resources for helping grieving young people. The Dougy Center provides a large range of support, training, counseling, and resource services. Their Web page contains a variety of short suggestions and informational pages on grief topics, many dealing specifically with teens.

Funeral Service Educational Foundation
<http://www.fsef.org/links/help.htm>
 The Funeral Service Educational Foundation has a variety of materials, including some resources on cultural variations in funeral customs, grief responses, and ideas about death and dying.

Liturgy and Prayer

Order of Christian Funerals, 1989
 This resource contains all of the official funeral rites of the Catholic Church, offering options for readings, vigil services, funeral Mass, and the Office for the Dead.

Murder and Violent Death

Parents of Murdered Children
<http://www.pomc.com/>
 This is one of the largest support and advocacy groups for relatives of murdered children.

Suicide

Tuttle, Robert. *Dealing with Crisis*. Louisville KY: Bridge resources, 1997
 This brief book has a variety of materials dealing with presuicide issues, such as warning signs, as well as materials concerning post suicide matters, such as grief and dealing with a suicide attempt.

The American Association of Suicidology
 202-237-2280
<http://www.suicidology.org/>
 One of the premier suicide research organizations, the AAS has a wide range of resources on all aspects of suicide. Their Web page also contains many links and online resources about suicide.

The Yellow Ribbon Campaign
<http://www.yellowribbon.org/>
 This organization has a number of online resources and links, as well as support groups and other grief suggestions.



Developing a Plan of Response



**T a k e
S o m e
T i m e t o
P l a n
N o w !**

Whom to Contact

Parish
Pastor/Staff
Youth Ministry Team
Young People

Diocese
Youth Ministry Office
Catholic Charities
Response Team

Community
Social Services
Mental Health Agencies

Plan the First Youth Gathering

- Who is on the planning team?
- When will we meet?
- What will we do?
- Materials, information, communication needed

Plan the Response to the Family

What will we do?

Prepare Young People for the Funeral and Wake Services

- What will we do?
- When will we gather?
- Who will lead the session?

Memorial

- Who will plan it?
- What will we do?
- When will it happen?

Follow-up Care

- What do our young people need?
- What resources are available?
- Identify anniversary or important dates/events to remember

Prayer Service Planning Sheet

Prayer Environment _____ Hospitality _____

Opening

Opening Song _____ led by _____
 Call To Prayer/Introduction _____ read by _____
 Opening Prayer _____ read by _____

Readings and Reflection

Reading _____ read by _____
 Response to the Reading _____ led by _____
 Prayer or Reading _____ read by _____
 Gospel Reading _____ read by _____
 Reflection(s) _____ by _____

Symbolic Action/Ritual

Description _____ led by _____
 Song _____ led by _____
 Intercessions _____ read by _____
 Response to the Intercessions _____

Closing

Announcements _____ read by _____
 Prayer _____ read by _____
 Song _____ led by _____