

HELPING YOUR TEEN IN TIMES OF SORROW AND SADNESS

St Benedict Parish Office of Youth Ministry

It is difficult to watch our young people experience grief at the loss of a friend or loved one. Our first temptation is to shield them from the pain and hurting, but in the long run this does more damage to your child than the grief could do. Instead take time to be with your child and listen to their pain. You will not have the answers, but you can share their sorrow and help them to move through the grief.



TRYING TO UNDERSTAND GOD'S WILL

In times of suffering and sorrow the first question people often ask is, *Why did God make this happen?* The reality we need to understand is that not everything that happens is the result of "God's plan." Sometimes, when tragedy strikes, or a person experiences suffering, or a loved one dies, a well-meaning (but erroneous) person will say, "This was part of God's plan." Again, this is not necessarily true in all senses.

In creating a world outside of himself, God put certain laws in place. He created physics and chemistry and the material world, which operates according to the way he created it.

One consequence of this is that not everything that happens in this world is a result of God's having directly willed it. Because of this, we have to realize that God doesn't "cause" all things to happen. In addition,

human beings (and angels and demons) have free will and can choose things that are clearly contrary to God's will.

We need to understand the difference between God's "perfect will" and God's "permissive will."

God's perfect will is when God directly wills a thing to happen or not to happen. This is always immediately and ultimately for the good.

God's permissive will is when God allows a thing to happen. This is not necessarily immediately a good. In fact, God often allows evil things to happen. He does this for a couple reasons (that we know of). First, God allows evil things to happen in order to preserve the gift of free will that he has given us. Second, God allows evil because he knows that he can bring about

a greater good.

At this point, it is important to note that God does not cause evil to bring about a good. (That would be evil and impossible for an all-good God to do.) Rather, God allows something to happen that is contrary to his will because he knows he can use this for an even greater good.

If this is true, it follows that we can trustingly submit to everything that happens to us as falling under God's will. Either it is a good that he directly willed or it is an evil that he allowed to happen, and he can bring about a good through this.

This does not necessarily make the situation feel any better in the moment, but we can rest assured that God wills the best for each one of us.

Father Michael Schmitz

MAKING SENSE OF SUFFERING

Unlike all other religions, Christians believe in a God who chose to rescue us by becoming one of us. Rather than just leaving us in our suffering, the Father sent His only Son to rescue us from sin and death. 'By His passion and death on the Cross, Christ has given a new meaning to suffering . . . it can unite us with His redemptive passion' (CCC 1505).

Redemptive suffering is the idea that our suffering can be united to Jesus' suffering as a prayer to God. Anyone who has seen a person suffer gracefully can attest to the powerful witness of faith in the midst of suffering.

One of the reasons that Catholics celebrate the crucifix (the cross with Jesus' body on it) is that it gives us a visual re-

minder that we are never alone in our suffering. When we cry out in pain, we are heard by the God who knows what we're going through. When we are betrayed, mocked, denied, made fun of, rejected, or judged, we can be sure that God has been in our position before. There's nothing we could endure, not even death itself, that God hasn't experienced.

No faith other than Christianity holds the shocking belief in a God who would choose to suffer for love of us. Just think for a second how crazy it is that the God who created all things visible and invisible, the One who breathed the stars and spoke the earth into being, loved us enough to suffer and die for us.

Suffering will always be hard to understand;

there's no quick answer, bumper sticker, or 140-character tweet that can totally answer all of our 'whys.' But even in our grief, we can look to the crucifix and know that we have not been forgotten or abandoned by God.

Because Jesus suffered, died, and rose for us, we can ache with the hope of an eternity in Heaven where we are promised:

'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away' (Revelation 21:4).

Lifeteen.com

THE BASICS

Grief has predictable stages. The many stages of grief include shock or denial, anger, guilt, bargaining, sadness or depression and acceptance. Denial is a normal coping mechanism that protects the individual from experiencing a flood of emotions too quickly. If a young person instantly realized and accepted the full reality of a loved one's death, with all the ramifications, he or she would be overwhelmed. However, by accepting the loss in bits and pieces, the individual can deal with it slowly.

Grieving is different for each person. The grief process will look different for each teenager. Once they begin to *feel* their emotions, they will not progress through the stages of grief in a linear fashion, by completing one stage

and moving to the next. Instead, a grieving person typically cycles through the stages, making it possible to experience anger one day (or even one hour) and sadness the next. It is crucial that you allow a person to experience and work through *each* of the stages and emotions.

Things you can do to support your grieving teenager:

•**Listen** The most beneficial thing that you can do for a grieving teenager is to be a good listener. They will need a safe place to share feelings and thoughts. They may want to talk about the deceased incessantly, often repeating stories and memories. While listening,

don't give advice until asked for input.

•**Normalize the teen's feelings** Help them see that any feelings they have about the loss are normal. Don't place expectations on how the student should feel—any feeling is normal and should be accepted.

•**Allow normal activities to continue** Allowing normalcy will help your teen realize that other parts of life can feel normal again, too, and will help them avoid slipping into isolation.

•**Don't forget about the rest of the family** The loss has likely had an impact on siblings and extended family members.

WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR TEEN

Encourage the expression of feelings. Help your teen to express their feelings by asking open-ended questions about the deceased person, such as: *What's your favorite memory with [the deceased loved one]? What quality did you most appreciate about them, and why? What would you most like to tell him or her?*

Writing in a journal is also an effective way for a teenager to express and work through feelings individually.

Participate in therapeutic activities. Asking your teen to show and discuss pictures of the deceased is an easy way to facilitate the process of grieving. Other activities symbolize letting go, such as sending a toy boat down a river together or releasing balloons into the air. It may be helpful for the bereaved person to write a goodbye letter first and then attach the letter to the boat or balloons. You may wish to pray aloud or read a Scripture passage, such as Psalm 23, before releasing the symbolic item.

Go to church together. Getting out the door can be a difficult step for someone who is grieving. Knowing they are going to a safe place with someone they love can be helpful

Pray together. Don't just pray for your teen, but pray with them, gently reminding them of the One who knows them better than they know themselves, who loves them, who will always be with them, and who offers hope for today and tomorrow.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

“I know just how you feel”

Grieving is such an intensely personal process that you have no idea how someone feels, even if you are grieving yourself. The mourner may not be sure how he or she feels from moment to moment, so you can't assume you know. Allow time and space for the mourner to share with you how he or she feels during the process.

“They're better off.” It may be true but still don't say it. The mourner can say it, but

if you say it, it can sound like an invalidation of the person's feelings of loss and grief and worse, an accusation of selfishness.

“They'll always be in your heart” Of course, the mourner will always have memories, but right now they'd rather have the flesh-and-blood person.

WHAT TO SAY

“I don't know what to say”

Grief can make even the most confident speaker feel awkward, so if you don't know what to say, just admit it.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Sometimes it helps to talk, and other times silence helps most. Sometimes mourners want to look through photo albums and share memories; other times they want to be distracted

with chitchat about almost anything else.

“Do you know how I can best help you?”

Your teen might like to go on as if nothing has happened or might like you to help the world “stop” for a time so they can just live this time of grief. He or she may not even know the kind of help needed; in that case, check back to see if they have thought of something specific you could do to help.