

*Taking Charge:
Managing Life's Struggles*



*Taking Charge:
Managing Life's Struggles*



Marilyn Kielbasa and Michael Theisen
Thomas Zanzig, General Editor



Saint Mary's Press
Winona, Minnesota
www.smp.org



Contents

To Joseph Ryan, who faces the struggles of a four-year-old with a furrowed brow, a twinkle in his eye—and an hour or two in the yard with his favorite trucks! As he grows up and needs more than his backhoe to deal with the tough times, may he find comfort in knowing how very much he is loved.

—Marilyn

To those who have helped me SOAR in life, especially Mary, who continues to be the wind beneath my wings, and Christopher and David, whose presence challenges me to be a little less serious and a little more playful with life.

—Michael

Introduction	7
Optional Parent Session	18
<i>Session 1</i>	
The Stress of Life	30
<i>Session 2</i>	
Learning to Cope	45
<i>Session 3</i>	
Never Alone	65

Nihil Obstat: Rev. William M. Becker, STD
Censor Librorum
18 October 1995

Imprimatur: †Most Rev. John G. Vlazny, DD
Bishop of Winona
29 October 1995

The nihil obstat and imprimatur are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the nihil obstat or imprimatur agree with the contents, opinions, or statements expressed.

The publishing team included Cheryl Drivdahl, copy editor; Lynn Dahdal, production editor; Holly Storkel, typesetter; Maurine R. Twait, design consultant and handout designer; Proof Positive/Farrowlyne Associates, cover designer; Wayne Aldridge, International Stock, cover photographer; Sam Thiewes, illustrator; pre-press, printing, and binding by the graphics division of Saint Mary's Press.

The acknowledgments continue on page 79.

Copyright © 1996 by Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1318, www.smp.org. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce only the materials intended for distribution to the program participants. No other part of this book may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

Printing: 5

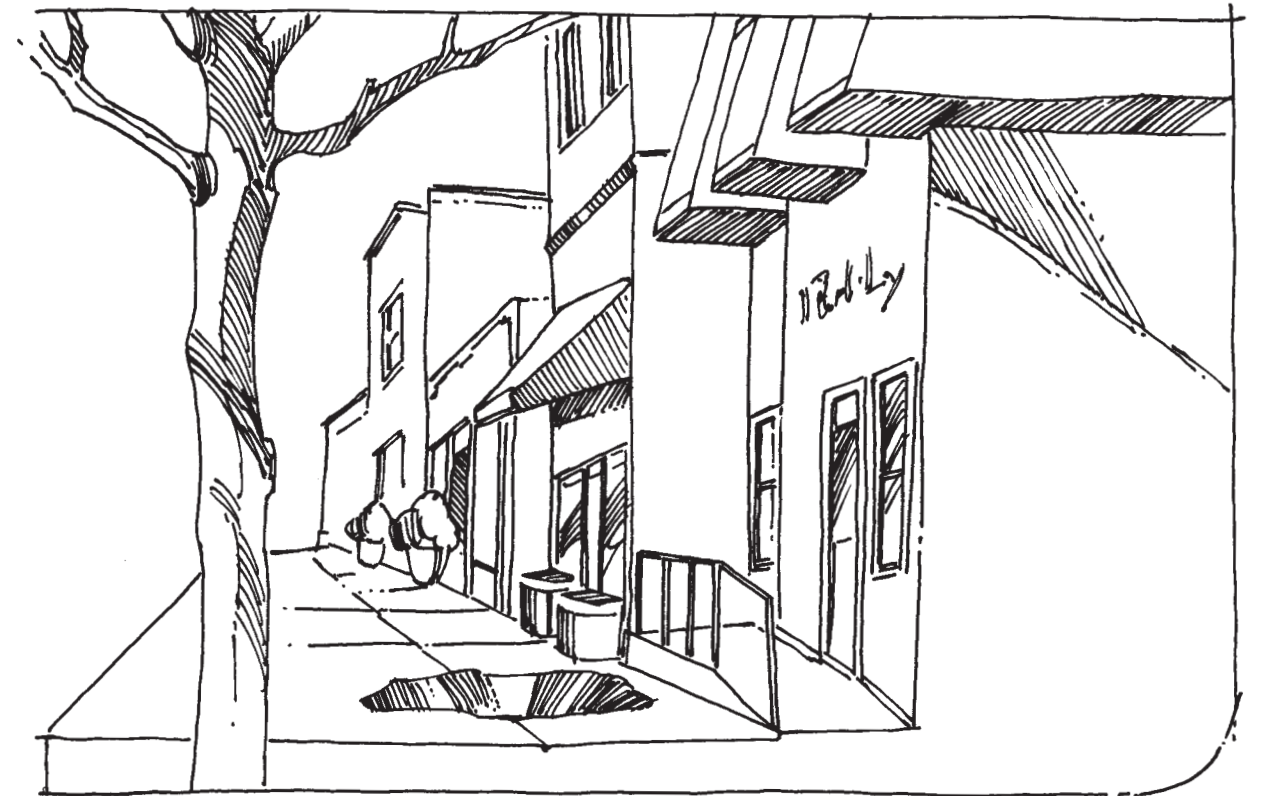
Year: 2003

ISBN 0-88489-382-0



Genuine recycled paper with 10% post-consumer waste. Printed with soy-based ink.

Introduction



An Overview of This Course

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

- I. I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost . . . I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.
- II. I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in, again.
I can't believe I am in this same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

- III. I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in . . . It's a habit . . . but,
my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.
- IV. I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.
- V. I walk down another street.

(Author unknown, in Wilson,
You Can Make a Difference! p. 70)

Every sidewalk, no matter how smooth it appears, is bound to have holes—in other words every person's life has struggles. These struggles are part of day-to-day living, part of the human condition. They can be as common as stress and pressure, as painful as failure and rejection, or as debilitating as depression and grief.

Young people experience many of the same struggles, or “holes in the sidewalk,” as adults do. For example, they struggle with self-acceptance, relationships, and frustrated dreams. But unlike most adults, young people do not have much experience climbing out of the holes. Thus, a young person who encounters a difficult situation may become frustrated and confused. Instead of climbing out, he or she may end up digging a deeper hole.

Taking Charge: Managing Life's Struggles is about helping young people find ways to climb out of the inevitable holes in the sidewalk. It is also about showing them different streets to walk down. The course is intended to teach young people to become proactive whenever possible and to identify and draw upon their internal and external resources. This course also challenges young people to embrace their humanness and to find God in the holes in the sidewalk. And it invites them to rely on God's providential love to help them find a new street to walk down when necessary.

Taking Charge is intended to be taught as three weekly 2-hour sessions presented in consecutive weeks. Extended breaks between sessions might interrupt the flow of the course. The activities are structured with a group of about ten young people in mind. If your group has considerably more or fewer members, you may have to make minor adjustments in the session plans. If you need assistance with this task, consult your program coordinator.

The focus of the first session of the course is on the pressures that are part of every person's life. Stress and pressure can be positive forces. The opening game demonstrates that both individuals and groups are at their peak performance when they are challenged by a certain degree and variety of activity. Then, by completing a survey, the participants identify the areas in their life that are personally troublesome. Following individual reflection, the participants work in small groups to name the major stressors for young people in general. These personal and general stressors are identified as changes, challenges, or crises—three categories that become the context of a presentation by the teacher and the basis of the rest of the course. A guided meditation concludes the first session.

The bulk of the second session is devoted to a discussion and application of the SOAR model of managing life's struggles. The acronym *SOAR* stands for strengths, opportunities, assistance, and roadblocks. Using a style popularized by broadcast personality Paul Harvey in his radio spots entitled *The Rest of the Story*, one exercise demonstrates the elements in the SOAR model through vignettes based on the lives of famous and not-so-famous people. Participants are then invited to look at their own story and asked to weigh each element of the model in relation to the struggles they personally encounter.

At the beginning of the final session of *Taking Charge*, three approaches to problems are discussed: assertion, submission, and aggression. Through role-plays the participants have a chance to develop their skill in dealing with life's struggles assertively when possible. In the second half of the session, the teacher leads the young people through a process in which the young people identify their greatest external asset: people, agencies, and events that can help them when things get tough. The course closes with a prayer service about finding God in the paradoxes of life and in the opportunities for growth our struggles offer us.

Taking Charge also includes an optional 90-minute parent session. The happiness and emotional and spiritual health of their children are among the primary concerns of parents. Parishes must do what they can to assist parents with the critical task of raising children through all of life's stages. With that goal in mind, this session invites parents to reflect on their own adolescence as a starting point for a discussion about the struggles their children face. Information on recognizing cries for help, myths about adolescence, and ideas for equipping young people to handle life's challenges are part of the session. Parents are also led through the course outline and provided with discussion starters related to each session that they can use with their daughters and sons.

Note: Be aware that young people come from a variety of family situations and may be supported by adults other than parents, such as older siblings or grandparents or mentors or guardians. Be sensitive to this variety, and welcome both parents and other responsible adults to the parent session.

Ultimately, *Taking Charge* is designed to empower young people by validating their personal experience, connecting them to the universal experience of being human, and offering concrete ways to cope with and even conquer their struggles. There will

always be holes in the sidewalk. Young people need to know that. There will always be a way out of every hole. Young people need to know that, too. They also need to know that most of the time, there will be a new street to walk down if they work hard enough to find it. Finally, young people need to know that when they are deep in a hole, struggling to climb out, or when they are searching for a new street, there is a God who loves them and is with them every minute.

Background for This Course

The Adolescent and This Course

In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey states that the first and most basic habit of an effective person is the habit of proactivity, that is, taking responsibility for one's own life. Living life proactively is a learned skill. Especially when it comes to life's struggles, it is much easier to let things happen and later blame circumstances. Being proactive does not necessarily mean avoiding the struggles, but it does mean being able to draw on inner and outer resources to survive them and even thrive because of them. Being proactive as a Christian means looking to Jesus as a model, relying on faith, and recognizing God as the source of life and a constant companion in life's struggles.

Failure to acknowledge, confront, and accept the negative that is part of life can lead to all kinds of other difficulties. Those who do not handle day-to-day struggles risk depression and psychological defenses such as emotional withdrawal or cynicism. Of the many adolescents who experiment with alcohol and other drugs, only a small percentage develop debilitating addictions that continue into adulthood. Social scientists have found that the primary difference between young people who abuse drugs and those who do not is in how they handle their negative emotions—that in young people, drug addiction is clearly connected to an inability to deal with the tough times.

Taking Charge is based on the premise that taking a proactive approach to life is necessary for young people, just as it is for adults. Young people, even more than adults, need guidance and support in acquiring the skill of being proactive. But there are roadblocks: society holds certain myths about adolescence that can prevent us from recognizing the need to help young people handle life's struggles.

Myth 1: Adolescence is the best time of a person's life. Many adults look back at their adolescence with wistful nostalgia, forgetting about their own struggles with self-image, relationships, competition, loneliness, or rejection. Even if their adolescence was relatively happy, they undoubtedly faced difficult situations that may have seemed monumental at the time.

Significant changes take place in adolescence. Some of these changes are difficult to negotiate, some are barely recognizable—but all create a certain vulnerability in young people. When these changes of adolescence are combined with the normal ups and downs of life and with false expectations of a struggle-free life, the result can be a dose of reality that is painful or even brutal.

Instead of being reassured by the phrase “These are the best years of your life,” some young people interpret it to mean “It doesn't get any better than this.” Sadly, for some adolescents, this understanding is accompanied by a sense of ultimate futility or by thoughts of self-destruction.

Myth 2: We were their age, and we survived. So will they. One way to ensure that a young person will stop listening is to start a sentence with the phrase “When I was your age.” It is true that young people need to know that adolescence is not terminal. Most people make it through the teen years relatively unscathed and emerge as well-adjusted, productive, happy adults. But the circumstances under which people of different generations live their adolescence are often radically different. Today's adults were never fifteen years old in the nineties. They never encountered the same technological, moral, political, educational, social, and religious environments as today's teens. In short, they never had the exact same experience.

Adults must acknowledge and validate young people's experiences of struggle for exactly what they are: universal human experiences set in a unique context. Only then will young people trust what adults have to say about surviving the difficulties and growing through them.

Myth 3: Adolescents bounce back quickly. Many adults view with envy the seemingly rapid recovery of young people from times of struggle. It is not unusual for a girl who experiences a traumatic breakup with her boyfriend to be dating someone else a week later. A boy whose parents recently divorced may have a few visibly difficult moments but probably remains involved in school activities

with his friends. The starter on the basketball team who has a bad day and just cannot score the points needed to win a crucial game might be back on the court the next day, saying nothing about the disappointing loss.

But in fact, the girl who broke up with her boyfriend probably feels anger, rejection, or betrayal. The boy whose parents divorced is likely experiencing all the emotions that accompany the process of grieving. The basketball player who was unable to score points may feel a sense of failure, causing a temporary plummet in self-esteem.

Young people do not bounce back more quickly from emotionally traumatic situations than adults do. It only seems that way to an adult who sees the surface resumption of life-as-usual with no apparent side effects. In many cases a young person's recovery may be due to the innate human sense that life goes on in spite of it all. But sometimes young people (as well as adults) have no idea what to do with the negative feelings that result from life's struggles. Instead of dealing with those feelings, they might quickly find a new relationship, suppress all emotion, or immediately resume normal activity. All these reactions can lead to deeper struggles. True recovery takes time and, to a certain extent, skill. For both adults and young people, the outward appearance of life-as-usual is not necessarily the inner reality.

Teaching young people the essential skills for living from the context of faith is an integral part of the church's ministry. The church has another, perhaps more important, reason for helping young people learn to face the struggles in their life. In the book *Shadows of the Heart*, James and Evelyn Whitehead write: "Sometimes negative feelings' chief benefit is to apprentice us to mystery. . . . A more profound appreciation of life's mystery invites greater acceptance of ourselves and other people" (p. 6). In addition, perhaps an apprenticeship to mystery also invites us to a deeper relationship with the God of struggle, the God of peace, the God of sorrow, the God of joy, the God of life. It is hoped that *Taking Charge* will help young people who are at their most vulnerable to recognize the intimate union that exists at all times—and perhaps in a special way during tough times—between themselves and the God who is Mystery.

The Theology of This Course

The Scriptures are filled with words of reassurance that God is present to us at all times and in all ways. Many passages refer to God's nearness in times of struggle. A psalmist writes:

I raise my eyes toward the mountains.
From where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.
(Ps. 121:1–2)

Psalm 55 says,

Cast your care upon the Lord,
who will give you support.
(Vs. 23)

The writer of Matthew's Gospel comforts us with the words "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (11:28).

These verses have one thing in common: they each require a certain degree of proactivity on our part. God *is*, always *was*, and always *will be*, but we must be willing to recognize this omnipresent Being. We look to God not to avoid pain, but rather as a source of hope. In John's Gospel Jesus acknowledged the reality of struggle when he said, "In the world you will have trouble" (16:33). In the same verse, he reassured us with the words "but take courage, I have conquered the world."

Throughout the Scriptures we are encouraged to take charge of our life. As creations of a loving God, we have been gifted with all that we need to live life to the fullest. *Taking Charge* encourages young people to reach inside, to draw on the gifts within themselves, and to reach out to the God who surrounds them. Reaching within takes skill, knowledge, and the loving support of a community. Reaching out takes courage, strength, hope, and especially faith in a God who, in human form, came to us in hardship, struggled throughout life, died in agony, and triumphed over all.

This Course and Evangelization

In *The Challenge of Catholic Youth Evangelization*, evangelization is described as "the initial effort by the faith community as a whole to proclaim through word and witness the Good News of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard or seen it, and then

to invite those persons into a relationship with Jesus Christ and the community of believers" (National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry [NFCYM], p. 3). Evangelization is also the ongoing witness of the community of believers and, as such, the basis and energizing core of all the ministries in the church.

The Horizons Program is grounded in a commitment to evangelize young people effectively. Each course reflects that commitment in both content and methodology. All the courses, even those on topics that do not appear overtly "religious," explore the connection between the lived experience of the young person and Jesus' proclamation of the Good News. And all the courses employ strategies that actively engage the whole person, demonstrating that religious education can be not only informative but life-giving and even fun! In other words the Horizons Program tries to *be* "good news" not just proclaim the Good News.

God's presence with us through our struggles is indeed good news. Those who minister to young people must listen carefully to their stories. These stories are of joy and hope as well as pain and struggle. In listening to their stories, "we become avenues for Jesus' compassion, healing, hope, and reconciliation" (NFCYM, *Challenge*, p. 12). The tasks of evangelization include letting young people know of a God who cares and urging them to seek out God. The tasks of catechesis include empowering young people to live in a way that glorifies God and brings happiness to them. *Taking Charge* invites adolescents to explore some of the struggles in their life, connect these struggles to the broader human experience, deal with the struggles proactively when possible, and ground the struggles in God.

Teaching This Course

A Video Resource for Teachers

The information presented in this section identifies the elements requiring special consideration when leading *Taking Charge*. The creators of Horizons developed an informative video to prepare teachers to lead any of the courses in the program. The video is accompanied by a guide that summarizes the content of the tape, offers additional tips for teaching adolescents, and invites the teacher to track her or his experience with the program.

Both the video for teachers and its companion guide are included in the resources developed for coordinators of the Horizons Program. Contact the program coordinator in your parish for further information.

Preparing the Learning Environment

The effectiveness of a course such as *Taking Charge* depends, in part, on the physical surroundings and community environment of the group. High school students are likely to share their thoughts more readily and respond more positively if the space is comfortable and different from a typical school setting and the atmosphere is conducive to introspection and to sharing. Here are two suggestions for developing that type of environment:

Create a good physical atmosphere. You will need a physically comfortable space with sufficient room for the participants to move around. Some sessions require the participants to spend reflection time alone. It will be easier for them to resist the temptation to visit with other participants if they have enough room to separate from one another. Comfortable furniture and living-room lighting will help create a homey feeling. A flip chart or an easel with a pad of newsprint will be helpful for many of the activities. The traditional classroom is the least desirable situation. If such a room is your only option, try using music, candles, icons, or other sensory devices to create a more inviting environment.

Clarify expectations. At the beginning of the course, establish among the participants an atmosphere of mutual respect. Stress the importance of listening to one another and of refraining from hurtful remarks or put-downs. Mention the value of maintaining silence when it is appropriate and of honoring other people's need for quiet during reflection periods. When necessary remind the participants of these rules and any others that you establish.

Preparing the Material

Before each session read through the session plan and try to picture the processes happening in your group. You may need to make some adjustments based on your knowledge of the participants and the physical setting. Some of the activities require preparation. This could range from copying a simple list onto newsprint to gathering several items for

a prayer service. Allow yourself adequate time to get ready.

All the sessions include brief periods of teacher input. Some of these are informational, but most are intended to bring closure to a part of the session so that the participants might understand the connections between life and faith, between themselves and God. The session plans offer guidelines for these brief talks. Spend time putting these presentations together so that they are clear and hold the attention of the participants.

Preparing Yourself

Perhaps the most significant element of preparation you can undertake as the teacher of *Taking Charge* is to reflect on the struggles in your own life and how you have managed them. Consider some of the difficulties you encounter as an adult as well as your tough times as an adolescent. Read through each session plan, keeping in mind your own experiences and the unique experiences of today's young people. Where it may be helpful and appropriate, do not be afraid to share parts of your own story with the young people.

Sharing Your Own Story

Every course in Horizons connects elements of the Christian faith with the life experiences of young people. As an adult you have much to share from your own life that will be of value to the young people. Your willingness to share your experiences will enrich this course. It will also send the message that telling one's personal story in the group is okay. When you share your experiences with the young people, you show that you trust them enough to speak from your heart. And without saying it you also invite them to do the same.

Some commonsense guidelines can help you share your story in a way that adds to the understanding of the participants but does not distract them from their own life story:

- Be brief and to the point. Remember, the young people are there to reflect on their own life story, not yours.
- Talk about your experiences as a teenager without preaching or moving into the fatal "When I was your age . . ." mode.
- Share only the things that adolescents are emotionally prepared to handle.

- Be realistic. Talk about your struggles, triumphs, and growth over the years. This will let the participants know that self-knowledge is indeed a process. Do not mislead them into thinking that adults have all the answers. It is also unfair to suggest or imply that adolescents have no answers.
- Be honest and sincere. The young people will see through you if you are not, and your effectiveness as a teacher will be diminished.

Using Music

Some of the activities in *Taking Charge* suggest using music. No activities in this course *require* music or suggest specific pieces of music, because cultural preferences and individual tastes differ and specific tapes, CDs, or needed equipment may not be available. But music is a central part of the world of most adolescents, and you are thus encouraged to use it in the suggested places as well as in other activities where you think that it might be appropriate. Circumstances in which music can be used effectively include the following:

Popular music for prayer. Depending on the character of the group, the community environment, or even the area of the country, different types of music will be popular among young people. If you are not certain about what might work in activities for your group, ask a few young people for their advice; ask them well in advance of the session, so that they can listen for songs that will be useful. Besides helping you, this experience can be affirming for young people, who are usually thought of as learners and are not usually consulted for their expertise.

You might even consider forming a music advisory group of participants, whose job is to listen to popular music and point out some things that pertain to the topic of struggles and challenges. Each week this group of young people can suggest to the rest of the participants selections that can be used for prayer—and also for reflection or as a starting point for journal writing.

Background music for reflection. Some groups are easily distracted by the sounds around them. If your group has a hard time concentrating in silence, consider using background music to help the participants focus. Even for those who do not have trouble concentrating, music can alter the mood and

contribute to a sense of peace and inner silence. For background music use slow, soothing instrumental selections, preferably something that is unrecognizable to the group. Labels such as Windham Hill and Narada, which are known for their alternative adult-contemporary recordings, are particularly useful for this purpose. Some classical music can also help to create the type of environment you need. Or use recordings of natural sounds, such as those produced by an ocean surf, rain forests, or running streams.

Using Journals

Keeping a journal, or simply writing an occasional journal exercise, is a good way for young people to internalize learning, record the events of their life, keep track of feelings, or explore a topic further. Like most of the courses in the Horizons Program, *Taking Charge* offers suggestions for including an optional journal component. In some cases journal activities are designed to be included in the session itself; in others they are intended for use by the participants between sessions.

Journal activities present an opportunity for one-to-one ministry to young people. A young person might write something in a journal that she or he would not feel comfortable sharing in a group or even talking about at all. If you do assign journal activities, take the time to read the young people's responses—with *their permission*—and then write in comments or words of encouragement or affirmation. Your personal attention might make a big difference to a young person who is struggling, searching, or just growing up.

Though we strongly encourage you to consider using at least some of the journal activities in *Taking Charge*, they are not an integral part of the course. In fact, some practical reasons can be given for *not* including the journal component. First, if *every* teacher of *every* course in the Horizons Program chose to include journal keeping, the young people would quickly tire of the activity. Second, the process of journal keeping is time consuming and energy consuming for teachers. Teachers of multiple courses could become frustrated, if not exhausted, by having to monitor a large number of journals. Finally, some people simply do not like to keep a journal. It is better to encourage journal writing as a form of personal exploration for young people than to demand it of them.

Carefully assess whether the journal option is a good one in your particular situation. Consult the

program coordinator and teachers of other courses. If you decide to incorporate journal activities into your course, some nitty-gritty questions must be answered: What materials are required? Will you respond to journal entries, and if so, in what way? What will you do if a young person reveals in a journal concerns or issues that demand a response beyond your ability or your authority as a teacher? For helpful information on these and other issues related to journal keeping, consult your program coordinator.

Knowing When to Intervene

Some of the material presented in *Taking Charge* may be difficult for some young people because of their own circumstances. Some people may be in difficult family situations. Others may be struggling with situational or chronic depression, addiction, or loneliness. People in your group may have experienced abuse of some type. Many young people will simply be feeling the pains of adolescence.

Your willingness to listen and offer support to a young person who is struggling will be enough in many cases. But for those who are experiencing difficulties that go beyond normal adolescent challenges, you may need to suggest professional help for the young person and the family, and even connect them with the proper resources. In all such cases, consult your program coordinator or pastoral staff for guidance and suggestions.

A Note About the Optional Parent Session

Parents are concerned about the emotional development of their children. They want to know how to help their children navigate the waters of adolescence, especially when the waters get rough. Parents *need* to know when their children are struggling, so that they can support their children in any way possible. They also need to know the difference between the challenges that are part of ordinary human development, and serious problems.

The optional parent session in *Taking Charge* could provide a vital service to the parents of young people in your program. It is designed to address some of the issues and concerns of parents of adolescents. The session includes some basic information on adolescence, advice on how to help a young person who is facing difficulties, and materials to

facilitate dialog between parents and their children. Consult your program coordinator about the feasibility of conducting the parent session in your parish. If you decide to do it, give parents adequate notice so that they can plan it into their schedule.

The parent session is best conducted *after* the first session of the course. This is because some of the information about the worries and struggles of today's youth that will be generated by the participants in the first session will be presented to the parents. It is possible to adapt, however, if circumstances dictate that the parent session be held before the first session of the course or concurrently with it.

The parent session is designed to last 90 minutes, versus the student sessions' 2 hours, for two reasons. First, much discussion is likely to be generated among parents and between the parents and the presenter. The limited time frame allows this to happen without turning the session into a marathon. Second, if someone else leads the parents at the same time you are working with the young people, and the sessions are held at two different sites, the shorter time frame of the parent session allows for transportation accommodations. However, the parent session can easily be expanded to 2 hours. Suggestions for doing so are included in the session plan.

Follow-up for the Parent Session

Consider the following possibilities for continuing the ministry to parents and families of the young people in your parish:

- Develop support groups for parents to share their insights on raising adolescent children.
- Invite guest speakers on topics such as communication skills, helping young people deal with tough times, suicide prevention, media awareness, conflict management, and so forth. You might do a survey during the parent session to find out what parents identify as their needs or interests.
- Do an evening or daylong retreat for young people and their parents based on some of the topics in this course.
- Hold a series of movie nights for parents alone or for young people and their parents. View and discuss movies that deal with issues of adolescent struggles, surviving life's difficulties, finding hope, or other topics related to this course.
- Invite an expert in contemporary media to conduct a workshop for parents on specific ways the media reflect adolescent struggles.

Using This Course as a Retreat

Many of the courses in the Horizons Program can be recast as retreats or days of reflection. *Taking Charge* may be suitable for adaptation as a retreat depending on the parish program, the timing, the leaders, the purpose, and above all the young people themselves. If you want to consider using *Taking Charge* as a retreat, consult your program coordinator and together weigh the following advantages and disadvantages:

Advantages

- The opportunities that a retreat format offers for prayer and worship will enhance the experience of *Taking Charge*. You can supplement or expand the session plans by further developing the prayer ideas that appear in the course or by adding new ones.
- A retreat often takes place in a setting that is conducive to prayer and reflection, journal writing, or just being alone with God. Such a setting can only deepen a young person's encounter with God and self.
- Many excellent films depict adolescent struggles and the positive and negative outcomes of these struggles. Such films could be incorporated into a retreat plan, along with discussion in which the principles and techniques learned in *Taking Charge* are applied to the situations in the films.
- A retreat on topics such as the ones presented in *Taking Charge* gives young people a concentrated opportunity to step back and focus on their life and the strengths, opportunities, roadblocks, and resources they face each day. The format also ensures that an adult will be present for support and encouragement throughout the process.
- A retreat format offers more time to process situations both individually and within a group. Someone who has difficulties opening up in a new situation may benefit from this extended processing time.
- Through the community that builds naturally in a retreat, the young people can experience a supportive environment in which to share their concerns and a new support system to carry them beyond the retreat.
- If the retreat is designed to include parents in some way, it could foster an intense connection between the young people and their parents as they share in discussion and prayer.

Disadvantages

- The topics of *Taking Charge* are heavy. For some young people who lack maturity, they may be too intense to do all at once.
- Though a retreat provides many opportunities for significant one-on-one discussions between young people and adults, it does not allow for ongoing interaction unless the adults make a deliberate attempt at follow-up.
- Coordinating a retreat with the parent session may be difficult. The parent session may have to be restructured, depending on when it is offered.

Special Preparation Needs

For the segment on community resources in the parent session and in session 3, you will need to gather names and phone numbers of resource agencies in your community. Help lines, hot lines, mental health agencies, peer ministry groups, crisis centers, school counselors, and parish personnel can all be listed. You might even laminate copies of your list and present them to parents for future reference. It may take you some time to prepare this list, so you may want to get started before the course begins. Check your phone directory and consult your program coordinator and pastoral staff for assistance.

This Course and Total Youth Ministry

Additional Youth Ministry Program Suggestions

The Horizons Program includes a manual entitled *Youth Ministry Strategies: Creative Activities to Complement the Horizons Curriculum*. It contains a variety of activities and strategies organized into thematic categories and cross-referenced according to the courses in the curriculum. It includes suggestions for shortened and extended programs, off-site events, intergenerational gatherings, parish involvement, and prayer and liturgical celebrations.

This valuable resource can enhance the young people's experience of the Horizons Program and help your parish fulfill a commitment to total youth ministry. Contact your program coordinator about the availability of the manual.

Parish Program Connections

A religious education curriculum is, ideally, just one component of a total parish program in which all those responsible for the formation of young people work together with the entire parish to meet the holistic needs of its youth. *Taking Charge* can be a springboard for connections with other youth ministry experiences. You might develop these connections by doing the following:

- Invite someone from a local outreach or crisis center to do a program on managing stress, handling tough times, helping a friend who is struggling, or a related topic.
- Begin a peer ministry or peer listening program in your parish, or plug into one that already exists in the community. Be sure to arrange for adequate training and ongoing supervision for all participants who are interested in being peer ministers or peer listeners.
- Conduct a weekend retreat or a series of workshops, for young people, on stress management, relaxation techniques, Christian meditation, and other related topics.
- Administer the survey in handout 1-B, "How Do I Handle Stress?" to all the young people in your parish, taking care to keep the responses anonymous. Publish the results in the parish bulletin or newsletter. Accompany the statistics with a paragraph about young people's struggles, to raise adult awareness about the difficulties of being an adolescent in the current culture.
- Ask the young people to recommend appropriate movies that deal with life's struggles or that give examples of people who encounter, manage, and overcome difficulties successfully. Use these movies for retreats or as the basis of discussion evenings.

Family Connections

- Expand the parent session into a workshop series for all parents of adolescents in your parish. Invite presenters from the community to deal with a variety of topics, ranging from helping young people manage their everyday struggles to intervening in a crisis.
- Use the discussion questions on handout P-B, "Bringing It Home," as the basis of a discussion evening or day of reflection for the parents and young people.

Goals and Objectives in This Course

Why Use Goals and Objectives?

Curriculums take on greater clarity, direction, and purpose if they are described in terms of their goals and objectives. This observation is based on a commonsense principle: We have a difficult time getting somewhere if we do not know where we are going. Educators who design learning experiences must identify their destination as a first step in determining how to get there. The statement of goals and objectives is a practical way to identify the desired outcomes for a program.

In the Horizons Program, goals and objectives are used in the following ways:

Goals. Goals are broad statements of what we wish to accomplish—learning outcomes we hope to achieve. The coordinator's manual for the Horizons Program provides the goals for the entire curriculum. Each course within the total program also includes a statement of its goals. The goals often have an idealistic quality, inviting the teacher to reflect on how the course relates to the personal and faith development of the young people. At the same time, the course goals are realistic, measurable, and attainable. As a teacher, at the end of the course, you should be able to look back and determine if you have in fact achieved the course goals.

Objectives. Objectives are statements that define how to get to the goals. They name the specific tasks that must be accomplished if the goals are to be achieved. Each course supplies a clear statement of objectives for each session in the course.

The Goals and Objectives of Taking Charge

Goals

This course has three goals:

- That the young people understand that difficulty is a normal part of the universal human experience and includes the potential and opportunity for personal growth

- That they recognize the sources of growth, support, and assistance both within themselves and around them
- That they see God as a source of hope and comfort, and prayer as a source of strength

Objectives

Each session has its own objectives, which will help realize the three course goals:

Optional parent session

- To help the parents get in touch with their own experience of struggle in adolescence and connect it to the life of their children
- To present information about adolescent development and issues as they relate to handling life's challenges
- To describe the structure and content of the course and provide materials for parent-child interaction

Session 1: "The Stress of Life"

- To present to the young people the concept that limited stress is a healthy dimension of life and can add to one's creative productivity
- To help them identify the sources of stress and struggle in their life
- To examine life's struggles as they fall into the categories of change, challenge, and crisis

Session 2: "Learning to Cope"

- To help the young people grow in their awareness of an ever-present God
- To present examples of people who have overcome difficulties and to challenge the young people to think positively about their own prospects for happiness and success
- To demonstrate a model of managing life's struggles by looking at one's strengths, opportunities, sources of assistance, and roadblocks

Session 3: "Never Alone"

- To introduce and explore with the young people three common responses to life's struggles
- To help them recognize and identify the network of support that is available to them
- To summarize the concepts presented in the course by looking at examples from the Scriptures
- To bring the course to a hopeful and prayerful close

Suggested Resources

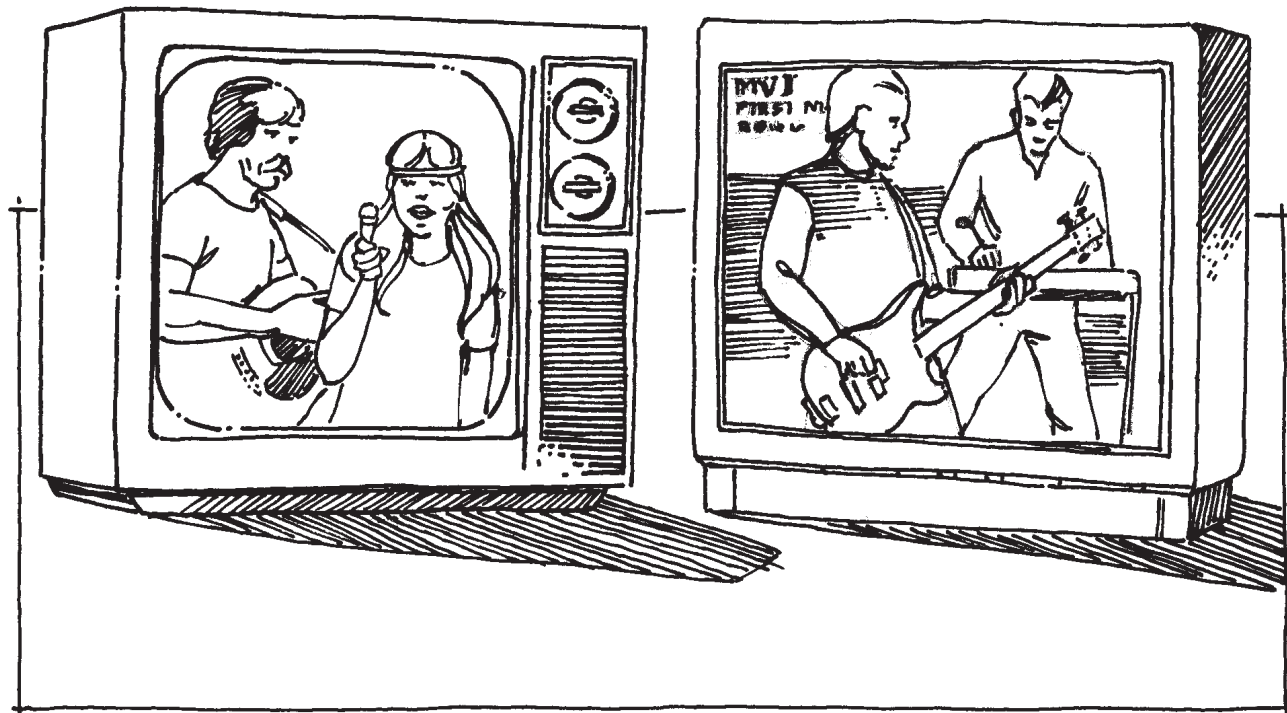
Arsenault, Jane E. *Guided Meditations for Youth on Personal Themes*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1995. A good resource for retreats or meetings that deal with struggle in a young person's life. The materials consist of a tape of meditations, and a leader's guide with scripts of the meditations and with suggestions for activities.

Hipp, Earl. *Fighting Invisible Tigers*. Rev. ed. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1995. A twelve-part course in the development of life skills. This is an excellent resource for ongoing exploration of the topics of stress and pressure in young people's lives. The materials consist of a student booklet by Earl Hipp, titled *Fighting Invisible Tigers: A Stress Management Guide for Teens*, and a leader's guide by Connie C. Schmitz with Earl Hipp, titled *A Leader's Guide to Fighting Invisible Tigers: Twelve Sessions on Stress Management and Lifeskills Development*.

Nelson, Richard E., and Judith C. Galas. *The Power to Prevent Suicide: A Guide for Teens Helping Teens*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1994. A book written for young people on how to help friends who may be heading for trouble.

Whitehead, James D., and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead. *Shadows of the Heart: A Spirituality of the Negative Emotions*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994. A text that explores the positive potential hidden in negative emotions. This book demonstrates how negative emotions can lead to personal growth and spiritual development.

Optional Parent Session



Objectives

- To help the parents get in touch with their own experience of struggle in adolescence and connect it to the life of their children
- To present information about adolescent development and issues as they relate to handling life's challenges
- To describe the structure and content of the course and provide materials for parent-child interaction

Session Steps

- a welcome, introduction, and reflection (25 minutes)
- a small-group discussion of adolescent stressors (20 minutes)
- a break (10 minutes)
- a presentation on the myths of adolescence (10 minutes)
- a presentation on the outline of the course (20 minutes)
- closing comments and prayer (5 minutes)

Background for the Teacher

Parents are interested in helping their children grow up to be healthy, happy, and holy individuals. This is one way that believers live the Gospel call to build the Reign of God. But the circumstances of day-to-day life often stand in the way of even their best efforts to make that happen. This session is designed to give parents some insights into their children's growth and development and some ideas about how to help their sons and daughters through life's difficult moments.

This parent session is optional, but you are strongly encouraged to make use of it in some format. It is designed as a 90-minute session, but it can easily be expanded to 2 hours or more by using some of the ideas suggested in the Alternative Approaches section at the end of the session plan. The best time for the parent session is shortly after the first session with the young people. This will allow you to report on the top five stressors of adolescents as formulated in session 1 by the young people themselves. But the parent session will work at any time before, during, or after the course. If it is scheduled to run concurrently with one of the other sessions, someone other than you will have to lead it.

To open the session, you ask the parents to think about their own adolescence and some of the struggles and challenges they faced during that time. In a follow-up exercise, you present the same questions and the same system of feedback as in the first exercise. This time, however, you ask the parents to rate the struggles of their adolescent children. Once they have become aware of some of the feelings and experiences they share or do not share with their children, the parents gather into small groups to discuss these issues in greater depth.

You begin the second half of the session with a discussion of three of society's myths about adolescence. Then you present an outline of *Taking Charge*, based on the goals and objectives for the course. Included in this outline is a discussion of community and parish resources that are available to help troubled families. You also distribute a list of suggestions for family activities and discussions based on the material presented in the course. Most of these suggestions are developed from the Family Connections ideas in each session plan, and in many cases you will be making the same suggestions to the young people themselves as you work through the course.

After the parent session, together with the parish staff or program coordinator, consider some of the suggestions for follow-up that are listed on page 14. These are just a few ways that your parish community can help parents with their task of raising a new generation of believers who are healthy, happy, and holy and who are themselves committed to building God's Reign.

Preparation

✓ Materials Needed

- name tags (optional)
- index cards or strips of paper in three different colors, one card or strip of each color for each participant
- newsprint and markers
- colored self-stick dots
- the list of the top five stressors from session 1 (if available)
- printed resources that may be of interest to parents (optional)
- copies of handout P-A, "The Goals and Objectives of *Taking Charge*," one for each participant
- copies of handout P-B, "Bringing It Home: Activities and Discussion Topics for Parents and Adolescents," one for each participant
- a list of community and parish resources to help families in crisis (if possible)
- a Bible

✓ Other Necessary Preparations

Prepare to lead this session by doing the following things and checking them off as you accomplish them:

- For step A. List the phrases and the corresponding colors on newsprint as directed in step A.
- For step B. Write the questions on newsprint.
- For step C. Gather books, program materials, and other resources for display during the break.
- For step D. Prepare a talk on the myths of adolescence.
- For step E. Prepare a list of names and phone numbers of resource people and agencies as described in step E.

- ❑ For step E. Read through the entire course. Prepare to describe briefly the content of each session based on the course objectives.
- ❑ Determine if you wish to change this session by using one or more of the alternative approaches described at the end of this session plan.

Opening Teacher Prayer

Before the session begins, find a quiet spot where you can be alone with your thoughts for a few minutes. Recognize God's presence in the quiet. When you are ready, read the following prayer:

Gather Me to Be with You

O God, gather me now
to be with you
as you are with me.

.....
let me be easy for a moment.

O Lord, release me
from the fears and guilts
which grip me so tightly
from the expectations and opinions
which I so tightly grip,
that I may be open
to receiving what you give,
to risking something genuinely new,
to learning something refreshingly
different.

O God, gather me
to be with you
as you are with me.
(Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace*, p. 70)

Consider what an awesome responsibility it is to raise a child! That God entrusts human beings with the task is a profound reminder that we continuously share in the ongoing work of creation.

Think about someone you know who is a good parent. (That person may be you.) Ask God to continue to bless this person with the grace necessary to live the role successfully. Now think about someone who is struggling as a parent. (Again, that person may be you.) Ask God to bless this person also.

Procedure

A Welcome, Introduction, and Reflection Exercise (25 minutes)

If you wish to expand the parent session to 2 hours, check the Alternative Approaches section at the end of this session plan for ideas on different ways of handling this activity.

Before the session. List the following phrases on newsprint and designate one color of index card or paper strip to represent each phrase. Write the color next to the phrase.

- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost never

1. Introduce yourself to the parents and tell them a little bit about yourself if they do not already know you. You may want to comment briefly on things like your involvement in the parish, your family, your work, or anything else that you think would be of interest to the listeners.

Briefly describe the content of this parent session. Explain the session objectives in your own words, or simply say something about the topics to be covered.

2. Distribute three index cards or strips of paper to each person, one of each color. Display the newsprint sign that you created before the session, and point out which color represents each phrase.

Tell the parents to think back to when they were the age of their child. You may want to have them close their eyes and focus on the context of their adolescent years. For example, you might ask them to remember where they lived, what they looked like, who their friends were, and so forth. When they are focused, explain that you will read a number of statements describing some of the struggles of adolescence. They are to respond by holding up the index card or paper strip that indicates how frequently they remember having that experience.

3. Read the following statements, pausing after each one to give the participants a chance to select and raise the appropriate index card or paper strip. You may not have time to go through all the statements. If you expect that will be the case, choose those you feel are most appropriate for your group.

You may want to keep track of or at least briefly comment on the number of "votes" each item gets. Encourage the parents to look around at each set of responses, noting their diversity or similarity.

- When I was in high school
 - I worried about how I looked
 - I thought a lot about my future
 - I argued with my parents
 - I got depressed
 - I wanted to be accepted and liked by others
 - I had secrets that I did not tell anyone
 - I had at least a passing thought about suicide when I was really down
 - I wondered if there really is a God
 - I was afraid of something
 - I competed with others for grades, in sports, in music or drama, and so on
 - I felt lonely
 - I worried about things that were happening in my family
 - I thought my parents had unrealistic expectations of me
 - I took some unwise risks that could have gotten me in trouble
 - I dated
 - I had questions about my sexuality
 - I experienced rejection and failure
 - I thought I was experiencing the best years of my life
 - I sometimes felt unloved
 - I confided in an adult other than my parents
 - I relied on my friends for care and support
 - I relied on my parents for care and support

4. Tell the parents they will now have a chance to consider some of the same questions from their children's perspective. Explain that you will read a similar set of statements. Using the same system of colored index cards or paper strips, they are to rate the frequency with which they believe their daughters and sons struggle with each issue.

Begin reading the statements below, pausing after each one to allow the parents time to think about their response and decide which card or strip to raise. Once again, you may want to choose certain statements, depending on your time. Encourage the participants to look around at the diversity or similarity of responses.

- My son or daughter
 - worries about how he or she looks
 - thinks a lot about the future
 - argues with me
 - gets depressed
 - wants to be accepted and liked by others
 - has secrets that he or she does not tell anyone
 - has at least a passing thought about suicide
 - wonders if there really is a God
 - is afraid of something
 - competes with others for grades, in sports, in music or drama, and so on
 - feels lonely
 - worries about things happening in our family
 - thinks I have unrealistic expectations of him or her
 - takes unwise risks that could get him or her in trouble
 - is dating
 - has questions about his or her sexuality
 - has experienced rejection and failure
 - thinks that these are the best years of his or her life
 - sometimes feels unloved
 - confides in an adult other than his or her parents
 - relies on friends for care and support
 - relies on his or her parents for care and support

5. Acknowledge the similarities and the differences between the parents' responses and their assessments of their children's struggles. With few exceptions, the responses will likely be similar.

Conclude the activity by making the following comments in your own words:

- Struggle is a universal and timeless reality. Everyone occasionally experiences difficulties in life. Age does not make one immune, nor does the generation one grew up in or the environment in which one lives.
- Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time of life because of the developmental changes that occur. Because young people do not have a great deal of experience in overcoming obstacles, they often react strongly when difficulties occur. Extreme reactions are a natural part of growing up. As people grow they learn to deal more effectively with difficult situations, if only because they come to realize the prevalence of struggle.

- Each person must learn for herself or himself how to handle life's difficulties. If we do not learn to cope with the tough times, we will always see ourselves as powerless. We will always be reacting to a situation instead of acting in our best interests. The purpose of *Taking Charge* is to teach young people about their options and their support systems. The course is also designed to enable them to be proactive so that they can view the inevitable struggles of life as temporary setbacks rather than life-altering disasters.

B Small-Group Discussion: Adolescent Stressors (20 minutes)

If you are doing this parent session after session 1 of *Taking Charge*, have the list of issues that the young people agreed were the top five stressors of adolescents. If the parent session is happening concurrently with session 1 of the course, you may have to wait to present the top five stressors until they become available.

Consider expanding this discussion exercise to 30 minutes or more if you are extending this session to 2 hours.

Before the session. Write the following questions on newsprint:

- What are some things that worry young people today that were not issues for their parents' generation?
- What are some things that parents worried about as adolescents that are not a concern of young people today?
- What are the top five stressors in young people's lives right now?

Copy the list from handout 1-A, "Stressful Issues," onto newsprint.

1. Ask the parents to form small groups with approximately four people in each group. Encourage spouses to split up so that they are not in the same group. Ask for a volunteer in each small group to be the group's recorder. Provide each volunteer with a blank piece of paper and a pencil or pen, or, if you prefer, a sheet of newsprint and markers.

2. Display the questions that you copied onto newsprint before the session. Tell the participants that they have about 5 minutes to discuss the first two questions in their group and record their answers. When that time is up, ask the recorders to report the results to the large group.

3. Display the list of stressors you copied onto newsprint before the session. Give each small group five colored self-stick dots. Tell the parents that each small group is to decide which of the listed items are the top five stressors of young people today. When a group reaches a decision, its recorder should place a colored dot next to each of those items on the newsprint.

4. Discuss and comment as time allows.

C Break (10 minutes)

If you have a resource table set up, encourage the parents to browse the materials during the break. You might have included information on parenting adolescents, adolescent issues, and skills for helping young people deal with struggles. You might also have included brochures and pamphlets for appropriate parish and community resources, agencies, and programs.

D Presentation: The Myths of Adolescence (10 minutes)

The information presented in this part of the session is taken directly from the introduction to *Taking Charge*. You may want to read through the course introduction again for other appropriate information to include.

Before the session. Prepare to deliver a talk in your own words on the material outlined in part 1 of this step and on pages 9 to 10 of the introduction.

1. Present the following material in your own words:
- We recognize that people must know how to be proactive in order to feel that they are in charge of their life. We teach young people to be proactive when it comes to deciding on a career or lifestyle, managing finances, or resolving conflict. In the process, we acknowledge the unknown influences on these activities, and are

quick to point out that human beings are never *totally* in control. But the opposite is also true: we are never totally victims of circumstances—unless we allow ourselves to be.

The same principles hold true when it comes to dealing with life's struggles. However, society maintains certain myths about adolescence that may prevent us from recognizing the need to help young people handle difficulties and from effectively meeting that need.

2. Explain each of the following myths, using the information in the course introduction:

- Myth 1: Adolescence is the best time of a person's life.
- Myth 2: We were their age, and we survived. So will they.
- Myth 3: Adolescents bounce back quickly.

3. If you have time, invite comments from the parents. They may be able to suggest more myths. If this happens, write their suggestions in the Evaluation section at the end of this session plan.

4. Move directly into your presentation on *Taking Charge*.

E Presentation: Outline of *Taking Charge* (20 minutes)

Before the session. Prepare a list of names and phone numbers of local people and agencies that are available to help adolescents and their families in difficult situations. Include help lines, hot lines, mental health agencies, peer ministry groups, crisis centers, and school personnel and organizations. Include resources from the parish, school, and community. Check the local phone directory and consult your program coordinator and pastoral staff for assistance.

Note: You will also need this list for session 3. Compiling it now will save time later.

Read through the entire course. Prepare to describe briefly the content of each session, based on the objectives stated in handout P-A, "The Goals and Objectives of *Taking Charge*."

1. Distribute copies of handout P-A and of handout P-B, "Bringing It Home." Also distribute copies of the community and parish resources list if you prepared it before the session.

2. Call the parents' attention to handout P-A. Review the course goals and session objectives with the participants. Describe briefly the content of each session, noting the concepts and types of activities in each step. Invite questions and comments from the parents.

3. Call attention to handout P-B. Note that this handout includes questions for discussion between parents and their children based on the content of each session. It also includes suggestions for activities from the Family Connections section of each session.

4. If you distributed copies of a list of community and parish resources, call attention to them. Explain that the young people will also receive copies of the list during the final session of *Taking Charge*. Preface a discussion of the resources list with comments like these, in your own words:

- Most adolescents report feeling happy and well adjusted most of the time. They relate well to their families and to their peers and are comfortable with their values. But no matter how well equipped we are to handle the challenges of life, we all experience difficulties. Usually we work through the tough times, trusting in God and relying on friends and family members for care and support. But sometimes we discover that our needs or the needs of someone we love go beyond what we are capable of handling alone. In those cases it is helpful to know the options available to us.
- Sometimes it is difficult to tell and even harder to admit when an adolescent needs help beyond what parents can offer. Certain warning signs may be clues that a young person is heading for trouble. Each sign represents a change in behavior, the significance of which depends on many variables, including personality and personal style, the length of time the change has been noticeable, and the circumstances surrounding the situation. These signs are as follows:
 - withdrawal from friends, family, and activities that the young person previously enjoyed
 - loss of interest in taking part in life
 - changes in physical needs and behaviors, such as sleeplessness or sleepiness, loss of appetite or constant overeating, or lack of attention to personal hygiene

- connections with an entirely new group of friends—especially if some of the members of the new group are known for their poor judgment or risk-taking behaviors
- self-mutilation
- drop in grades or trouble focusing on school-work
- behavior that involves excessive and dangerous risks, such as sexual promiscuity, chemical abuse, or high-speed driving
- increased involvement in conflicts
- giving away prized possessions
- sudden recovery from a period of depression

Note that any of these warning signs may indicate a need for professional help. In addition, emphasize that the last two signs *may* indicate that a person is suicidal. If these signs are present, immediate intervention is necessary.

Refer to the list of community and parish resources, commenting on entries as you feel is appropriate. Assure the parents that you will contact them if you observe that their son or daughter may benefit from the help of a professional.

F Closing Comments and Prayer (5 minutes)

1. Begin your closing comments by reading the poem "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters," on page 7 of this text.

2. Note that the purpose of *Taking Charge* is to help young people find their way out of the inevitable holes in life's sidewalk, and even to find a new street to walk down. The course is also about encouraging them to reach out to God, who loves them and walks every step of the journey with them.

3. Thank the parents for their participation in the session. Invite them to contact you if they have any comments or questions about the course or their child's participation in it.

4. Close by reading Exod. 13:21–22, the account of God leading the Israelites as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Alternative Approaches

After reading the session plan, you may choose to do some things differently or to make additions to an activity. Consider your time limitations first and then the following alternative approaches. Also consider these options if you wish to extend the session to a full 2 hours.

For step A. If you are concerned about the sedentary nature of the parent session, consider making this step more active, using one of the following options:

- Post four signs in four different areas of the room, labeled "Most of the time," "Frequently," "Sometimes," and "Almost never." After you read each statement regarding a struggle in the life of an adolescent, ask the parents to move to the sign that identifies the frequency of the struggle. When groups have formed under the signs, ask them to discuss some of the particulars of that struggle. For example, when you read the statement "I argued with my parents," their discussions could focus on the issues they argued about the most. The statement "My son or daughter confides in an adult other than his or her parents" could begin small-group discussions of the role this significant adult plays in the child's life.
- Set up a continuum along the wall. Designate one end "Frequently" and the other "Almost never." After you read each statement about an adolescent struggle, ask the parents to move to the point on the continuum that represents the frequency of that struggle.

For step E. To extend the step, tell the participants to break into the same small groups they worked in earlier, when they discussed adolescent stressors. Tell them to brainstorm a list of things parents can do to equip their daughters and sons to manage life's struggles, and to help their children through the tough times. After 10 minutes or so of brainstorming, ask a spokesperson from each group to share the suggestions. You can also do the brainstorming in a large group, to save time.

For step F. If you have an extended period of time, consider using the closing prayer service from session 3 to end the parent session, rather than the closing comments and prayer listed for this step. Remember to thank the parents for their participation, and to invite them to contact you if they have any comments or questions about the course or their child's participation in it.

Closing Prayer and Evaluation

Before doing the closing teaching prayer, you may want to complete the evaluation at the end of this session.



Closing Teacher Prayer

Think about everything during the session that was good and everything that was challenging. Thank God for the insights, experiences, and ideas that you and the parents were able to share with one another. After a few moments, close with the following psalm:

If Yahweh does not build the house,
in vain do the builders toil;
if Yahweh does not guard the city,
in vain do the sentries watch.

Children are a gift from Yahweh,
who rewards with descendants;
like the arrow in a victor's hand
are your children.

(Ps. 127:1–4, in Schreck and Leach,
Psalms Anew, pp. 177–178)

Bringing It Home:

Activities and Discussion Topics

F O R P A R E N T S A N D A D O L E S C E N T S

After each session of *Taking Charge*, spend some time with your son or daughter discussing the material covered in the session. You do not have to have a formal talk. In fact, you may have more success if the discussion happens informally and almost spontaneously. Opportunities for good discussions often come at unexpected times and places, such as in the car, while doing chores, or while running or shooting baskets.

Session 1

Your teenager may have been asked to bring home a copy of a survey titled “How Do I Handle Stress?” It is designed to get people thinking about the way they react to pressure and what they see as their own stress level. Spend a few moments completing the survey yourself, and then encourage other family members to do so and to share the results with one another. Try to find ways to reduce the stress levels for any family members who are feeling overwhelmed.

Questions for discussion

- What were the top stressors for young people during your own adolescent years? Discuss the differences and similarities between life then and now.
- What does your daughter or son perceive as the top five stressors for adults? for you specifically? What would you put on the list?
- Ask your teenager to describe the three categories of struggles discussed in session 1: changes, challenges, and crises. What significant changes, challenges, and crises have you recently faced as a family?

Session 2

In session 2, the young people heard stories of famous and not-so-famous people who managed to succeed in spite of difficulties. Ask your son or daughter to share some of the stories with you and other family members. Did anything about those stories move him or her? If so, what?

Each young person was directed to bring home a copy of the handout “SOARing Through Life.” Ask your daughter or son to explain each element of the SOAR model to you. Think about the strengths, obstacles, sources of assistance, and roadblocks in your own life and in the life of the family. Are there any sources of assistance that your family needs but has not used to the fullest? What can be done to change that?

Questions for discussion

- What are the personal strengths in your adolescent? Tell him or her about them. Do what you can to affirm and encourage the development of these strengths.
- What are the strengths, obstacles, sources of assistance, and roadblocks in your family? Ask your daughter or son the same question. Listen carefully to her or his perceptions of the family.
- Do you know anyone who has overcome many difficulties to achieve their goals? Ask your teenager if they have any friends who seem to do well in spite of obstacles.
- What is your definition of success? How does your son or daughter define the concept?

Session 3

In the final session of *Taking Charge*, the participants looked at people and situations in the Scriptures and applied what they had learned in the course to each situation. With your family, read a few of the following Scripture passages and talk through the questions.

Scripture passages

- Luke 4:1–13 (Jesus’ temptation in the desert)
- Mark 14:32–42 (Jesus praying in Gethsemane)
- John 6:2–11 (a woman caught in adultery)
- Matthew 19:16–22 (a rich young man)
- Luke 22:54–62 (Peter’s denial of Jesus)
- Job 1:13–22 (Job’s loss of property and children)
- Romans 7:15–25 (Paul’s inner conflict)
- Psalm 116:1–13 (recovery from illness)
- Genesis 39:7–23 (Joseph’s imprisonment)
- Exodus 14:10–18 (the crossing of the Red Sea)
- 1 Corinthians 2:1–4 (Paul’s uncertainty)
- Exodus 17:1–7 (water from the rock)
- Jeremiah 1:4–10 (the call of Jeremiah)
- Mark 4:35–40 (Jesus calming a storm)

Questions for discussion

- Is the story about a moment of change, challenge, or crisis?
- What emotions or feelings did the main character(s) experience?
- What were the main character’s (or characters’) strengths? opportunities? sources of assistance? roadblocks?
- Were the responses assertive, aggressive, or submissive?
- Does the story identify any components of the main character’s (or characters’) network of care? If so, what are they?
- What did the main character(s) finally choose to do?
- How and where was God present in the struggle?

The young people were directed to bring home a copy of a handout titled “Litany of Strength,” which was used as part of the closing prayer for the course. Use this litany as a family prayer.

“Catch” your teenager being assertive, and affirm her or him for the way she or he handled the specific situation.

Questions for discussion

- Think about each member of the family. Is each person’s predominant response to difficult situations aggressive, submissive, or assertive?
- When is it necessary to be aggressive or submissive in family life? How can you help one another develop assertive approaches to dealing with people at home, at school, and at work?