

Teaching Guide for
Dealing with Tough Times

Marilyn Kielbasa

Thomas Zanzig, General Editor

To Jennifer Robin, who is entering young adulthood with her characteristic hopeful enthusiasm, tempered with the wisdom of experience, and firmly grounded in the things that matter most in life. Jennifer, may you always believe in your power to make a difference.



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Contents

Introduction 7

Session 1

Facing Pressures 20

Session 2

Winning, Losing, and Succeeding 34

Session 3

Resolving Conflicts 47

Session 4

Experiencing Loss 58

Session 5

Being the Only One 69

Session 6

Triumphing in Tough Times 81



Introduction



THIS COURSE AND THE DISCOVERING PROGRAM

There is an appointed time for everything,
and a time for every affair under the heavens.
A time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to uproot the plant.
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to tear down, and a time to build.
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance.
.....
A time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away.
.....
A time to love, and a time to hate;
a time of war, and a time of peace.

(Eccles. 3:1–8, NAB)

Young adolescents—like all of us—experience life in the various ways outlined by the writer of Ecclesiastes. They play, learn, struggle, pray, seek, grow, hurt, love, and celebrate according to the dictates of their life's journey. *Dealing with Tough Times* focuses on some of the struggles that are part of the universal human experience.

Young adolescents need to know that it is okay to experience life's difficulties; it is okay to hurt. They need to know that hurt happens to everyone and that they, like everyone else, will survive. This course explores some familiar situations that make life difficult for young people. It also challenges the students to draw on their own inner strength, the support of people who care, and the love of God to get them through their tough times.

The content of this course appeals to seventh and eighth graders. If the group is together for the school year, the students may feel more comfortable exploring the concepts later in the year, after they have shared experiences and maybe feel a little more bonded. Young people are better able to talk about their struggles, doubts, and fears with peers they know. Consequently this course can be more successful with students who know one another well.

Previous participation in other Discovering courses will make it easier for the students to understand and appreciate the concepts presented here. For example, *Understanding Myself* can give the students a firm base of self-knowledge from which to explore their feelings and emotions. *Learning to Communicate* and *Becoming Friends* can help establish a safe environment where participants can be assured that the group will listen to and respect their ideas and feelings. Refer to the coordinator's manual for additional help in deciding when to use this course.

The time estimates suggested for the session steps are based on a group size of about fifteen participants. If your group has considerably more or fewer members, you may need to make minor adjustments in the session plans. This course, like all Discovering courses, works well with larger groups, but in such cases you will have less opportunity to address the students' individual contributions and needs.

The six session plans of this course are each designed for a 1-hour meeting. If your group is scheduled to be together for more than an hour, the sessions can be extended with the optional approaches suggested at the end of each session plan. Also consult these approaches as alternative strategies if your teaching style or the students' learning style calls for changes.

The concepts and materials presented in this course can evoke strong emotional responses from young people. For that reason carefully consider the maturity level of your group if you are thinking about offering this course as a day of reflection or an overnight retreat. Emotion-laden experiences cannot be adequately addressed in one or two tightly structured days. A mature group that has established solid bonds and is capable of in-depth reflection and discussion might be able to handle a day of reflection or an overnight retreat using this course. However, this will be the exception rather than the rule.

Although the topics in *Dealing with Tough Times* follow a logical sequence, the sessions do not necessarily build on one another. Session 1 names difficulties young adolescents might experience. Sessions 2 to 5 explore four distinct but interrelated issues—competition, conflict, loss, and loneliness. Session 6 helps the students recognize that they have within themselves the power to meet and overcome tough times. The four intermediate sessions need not be taught in sequence, and they can easily be tailored to meet the needs of your group. For instance, if you sense that the group needs to spend more than one meeting on conflict resolution, feel free to arrange for it to do so, even if it means dropping one of the other sessions. Or if the group is experiencing a particularly difficult loss, you could follow session 1 immediately with session 4, which explores the issue of loss.

As you prepare to teach this course, perhaps the most important thing you can do is remember your own difficulties as a young adolescent. In many ways the tough times of the students in your group will be similar to your own. Their struggles are universal human experiences. Surviving these struggles is something to be celebrated. Know that by teaching this course, you are helping your students develop skills that will last a lifetime.

BACKGROUND

The Young Adolescent and This Course

Young people experience a critical transition from childhood to adolescence. The onset of puberty introduces dramatic physical, psychological, social, emotional, and cognitive changes that generally leave young people confused and bewildered and, at the same time, challenged and enthused.

Three theorists of human development—Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and David Elkind—can help us understand how young adolescents think and feel and why they think and feel as they do. Piaget, who studied human cognitive development, said that at some time in late childhood or early adolescence, a person moves beyond concrete operations to formal operations. This means that young adolescents are beginning to think abstractly and logically and that they can conceive of possibilities. They can think about thinking; every thought that they have is not limited by what they have personally experienced. Also, as adolescents mature the possibilities that they conceive can become more complex; what they once saw as a black-and-white issue can become nuanced. Elkind calls this thinking in a new key (see David Elkind, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, p. 23). The ability to think abstractly develops at different times for different people, and it develops sporadically in the same person over a period of time.

Erikson identifies eight stages of psychosocial development. The fourth stage, industry versus inferiority, is prevalent in children who are from about eight to twelve years old. At this stage young people come to believe that they must accomplish something in order to be recognized. If they do not achieve a sense of accomplishment, they can develop a sense of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

The fifth stage of development, identity versus role confusion, occurs in young people who are approximately twelve to eighteen years old. This stage is marked by a period of increasing experimentation. Adolescents test different roles in various situations. They try to synthesize their previous and present fluid identities. Their rather cumbersome attempts at defining a self often result in friction with their parents. For example, young adolescents try to change their relationship with their parents so that it corresponds with their changing identity. If their parents consistently see and treat them as children, friction occurs. The identity-versus-role confusion stage is also marked by a search for stability and security and acceptance in the peer group, and for significant others outside the home and the family. (This discussion of Erikson's fourth and fifth stages of psychosocial development is drawn from Elkind, *All Grown Up*, chap. 2, and Joan Lipsitz, *Growing Up Forgotten*, chap. 1.)

Elkind has drawn upon the work of Piaget and Erikson in developing his own ideas about adolescent egocentrism—the sense that young adolescents are self-centered, that they think the world revolves around them. Because they are egocentric, two characteristics emerge. First, they conjure up “imaginary audiences” and constantly play to them. They assume that others are as admiring or as critical of them as they are of themselves. As a result young people are overly conscious of and preoccupied with their looks and their behavior. They think they are constantly onstage.

Second, young adolescents have a sense of “personal fable.” Because they can think about their own thinking, they come to realize how private their thoughts really are. With that realization comes the belief that their feelings, and indeed they themselves, are special and unique.

Together, the imaginary audience and the personal fable can be the source of a big dream—like believing they will hit the winning home run in the World Series. But they can also be the source of a negative self-concept—like believing they are God's only mistake. As young adolescents grow into older teenagers, this egocentrism begins to diminish because they recognize the feelings of others and integrate those feelings into their own. (This discussion of adolescent egocentrism is drawn from Elkind, *All Grown Up*, chap. 2.)

These theories of human development in the early-adolescent years translate into the following prevalent attitudes and behaviors:

- As they move from concrete operations to formal operations, young adolescents are more aware of logic and possibilities. However, the break between the two ways of thinking is neither clear nor permanent and will probably be sporadic during early adolescence. When young people face problems, they are often unable to think clearly about possible solutions. They may feel hopeless and helpless. Their feelings of inadequacy rise as their problems increase. Overwhelming problems can tempt a young person to escape. Extreme avoidance behaviors include running away, abusing chemicals, and attempting suicide.

- Another by-product of the move to formal operations is the ability to conceive and understand puns, jokes, and sarcasm. Young adolescents often use sarcasm on one another and in doing so cause unnecessary hurt and alienation.
- Because thinking logically is relatively new for young adolescents, they need to practice. Often this takes the form of arguing just for the sake of arguing. This causes a great deal of conflict in their life.
- Most junior high people have not had to deal with many crises, and they may tend to overreact to some situations. Because they have not had many positive experiences of going through a tough time and coming out on the other side, they may feel powerless when they encounter difficulty.
- Because young adolescents are overly preoccupied with their behavior and appearance, they may withdraw from others and isolate themselves. For example, if an early-adolescent girl is overweight, she may be reluctant to go swimming because she is sure that everyone is looking at her, and criticizing her as much as she is criticizing herself. A series of situations like this could result in a lonely young person.
- As the theory of personal fable explains, the ability to think about thinking gives most young adolescents the idea that they are unique. This may translate into a sense that no one could possibly feel the way they do and that they must therefore be peculiar.
- Older adolescents and adults often find strength in a positive, realistic self-concept. However, because of the sense of personal fable and the imaginary audience, the self-concept of most young adolescents is not realistic and therefore cannot be a source of strength. So young adolescents look to their peers for acceptance and affirmation. They also seek the approval of older adolescents and adults.

The transition from childhood to adolescence occurs according to each person's internal biological clock. This explains the wide variation in maturity levels within a single group of seventh or eighth graders. A typical group of same-age middle school or junior high students can span four years in maturity levels. Some students may be firmly rooted in egocentrism, while others may be moving toward a more integrated sense of self. Some may be at the industry-versus-inferiority stage (which is proper to elementary school children), while others might already be in the identity-versus-role confusion stage. A few students might still be thinking in terms of concrete operations and might not yet have the capacity to see possibilities. These wide variations make working with young adolescents a real challenge.

The Theology of This Course

Human experience is the place of God's action. In the Incarnation we see that God is among us. Faith in the Incarnation radically affects the whole range of human experience, from great joy to deep anguish. God is present in young people's lives—in the classroom, in the home, in the school gym,

on the street. The time of God's grace matches each person's time, minute by minute, heartbeat by heartbeat.

The topics covered by *Dealing with Tough Times* find their roots in this awareness of the Incarnation, of God with us. In this course the young people are urged, invited, and reminded to look to the life of Christ for help. They see in Jesus' life not a series of difficulties to be avoided but a full range of experiences, including conflict, failure, and loss as well as joy, attainment, survival, and triumph. Like Jesus the students are asked to place their trust in God's keeping. Like him they draw on their own inner resources, and they also reach out to adults and friends they can rely on.

The middle school years, like all human years, are lived out in the matrix of the Incarnation, and God is within reach. This quiet lesson moves through all the sessions in this course. It will bubble up in respect shown to one another and in empathy extended when pain is acknowledged and when it is not acknowledged. It will also bubble up in reflection and prayer.

This Course and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

All Discovering courses rely on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as a primary resource and a guide to theological accuracy. The *Catechism* can also serve as a valuable source of both information and inspiration for the teacher. We encourage you to review and reflect on certain sections of the *Catechism* as you prepare to teach. In particular, read and reflect on paragraph number 1697, which discusses the nature and purpose of catechesis; numbers 1716 to 1717, which cover our vocation to beatitude; numbers 1718 to 1719, which examine the human desire for happiness; and numbers 1803 to 1845, which explore human virtues.

Teaching This Course

Each course in the Discovering Program consists of two components: a teaching guide like this one that fully describes the course goals, objectives, content, and session plans, and a companion student booklet. The booklet is not a conventional textbook, in that the students are never expected to read it outside of the sessions. In fact, substantial reading is never required as a regular feature of the learning process. Nor does the booklet look like a textbook; for instance, it contains no recognizable chapters as one would expect in a standard text. The student booklet for each Discovering course, rather, is to be used only in conjunction with the session plans described in the teaching guide. It is effective in this way because of the following features:

- The booklet provides a kind of running summary of the themes and essential information that are presented through the engaging session plans. This gives students a record of what they have learned in the course. It is also a helpful feature when a student misses a session; at the next session, you can ask him or her to briefly review relevant pages from the booklet.

- The booklet uses sidebars and quotes related to the main topics to draw the young people further into the material and enrich their learning. You may use the sidebars in any way that seems appropriate—perhaps as discussion-starters, topics for journal entries, or simply focal points for a brief silent reflection.
- The booklet includes an occasional personal reflection or journal-writing activity that students are asked to complete quietly on their own.
- The booklet presents activities designed for use in small groups—such as discussion-starters, role-plays, and vignettes.
- Finally, the booklet’s attractive design—using original art, bold colors, interesting type, evocative photos, and so on—is intended to support the total learning process.

Note that for this course some booklet pages are not referenced in the teaching guide. You may want to refer the students to these pages for their own reading outside of class, or simply let them discover the pages on their own.

Student Booklet Sidebars

The student booklet includes a number of quotes, prayers, and lists of summary information that are not central elements of the course content. Set off graphically from the other booklet materials, these sidebars are generally not referred to in the session plans. They are included in the booklet to spark the students’ interest and imagination, provide comfort, and remind them of important points covered in the sessions. As you prepare for each session, reflect on the sidebars and decide if you wish to use any of them in your teaching. For example, consider using the “Remember These Things” sidebars for review at the beginning or end of sessions, and the “Words of Hope and Care” extracts to prompt journal writing or creative projects.

Student Booklet Bound into the Teaching Guide

For your convenience and easy reference, a complete copy of the student booklet for *Dealing with Tough Times* is bound into the back of this guide. You may find it helpful to tab or mark the booklet pages related to a given session as you prepare to teach it. That will make it easy to flip back and forth between the guide and the booklet.

Student Booklet Pages in the Session Plans

As a visual aid, reduced versions of some student booklet pages are reproduced in the left-hand margin of the session plans. Such pages appear at the beginning of the related instructions. If more than one booklet page is involved in an activity, only the first of those pages is reproduced in the margin.

Prayer Experiences

Establish a prayer area within the room where you will meet with your group. This area will become a focal point for a time of prayer during each session. An enthroned Bible in a designated place in the prayer area attests to the importance of the Scriptures and of shared prayer. Items such as a candle and a plant or flowers are recommended for the enthroned Bible.

You are asked to bring to each session an item that represents the session topic. This item is added to the prayer space, and the items brought accumulate throughout the course. Consider the following options for this exercise:

- At the first session, ask each student to bring to the next session an item that represents the topic. Do this for every session. You may need to make phone calls or send postcards to remind the students. Spend some time during each session talking about the items that the students brought. Have the young people take their items home after each session; there will not be room to accumulate all these items and display them in subsequent sessions.
- At each session ask a different student to bring an item for the next session. Call the student during the week to remind him or her and to check in. This option provides a good opportunity for one-on-one ministry. You may want to ask each volunteer to leave his or her item with you for the remainder of the course, so that you can display it in each subsequent session.

Guided meditative prayer is used once in this course. If you feel that your group cannot—or will not—take this meditation seriously, it is best to avoid it and adapt the prayer to a style with which the students are comfortable. Most teachers report success with guided prayer but sometimes run into difficulty using the technique with sixth graders, who commonly lack experience with this kind of prayer.

Some Preparation Needs

To teach this course, you need not rely on accumulated knowledge as much as on personal reflection on life experience. The best way to begin preparing for each session is to think about your own struggles and your own experiences of succeeding or coping. Talking about these may make you or your students feel somewhat uneasy and uncomfortable, depending on how recently or how deeply they have touched your life. However, your willingness to share them can encourage the students.

This course provides a forum to explore issues that students might have considered too personal, embarrassing, or unique to talk about freely. The session plans include a variety of methods to engage the students in age-appropriate action, interaction, and reflection. In deciding whether to use any of the optional exercises offered at the end of the sessions, keep a sense of this balance in mind while taking into account the maturity and readiness of your students.

Discussions on Sensitive Issues

Discussions on sensitive issues require careful facilitation on the part of the leader and sensitivity on the part of all participants. Establishing emotional safety is essential. To help the students be more comfortable and trusting, make every effort to incorporate the following guidelines:

- Have everyone in the group sit at the same eye level, preferably in a closed circle. This configuration communicates the message that everyone is in this together and that the thoughts and the feelings that are shared will be kept within this group of people who care about and respect one another.
- Remind the group that whatever is shared must remain within the group. Note that in this course the students are asked to trust their private thoughts with the group, and each group member must be worthy of that trust.
- Share your own experience first. This sets the tone or the level of sharing that you are expecting from the group. Be careful not to share something that is beyond the students' level of understanding. Also, be in control of your emotions; young people become frightened when adults lose control.
- Assure the group that no one is required to share anything that would make them uncomfortable. However, encourage the participants to at least tell a little of their story.
- Explain that simple courtesy enhances self-esteem and mutual respect and creates a comfortable environment. Being courteous means respecting one another by developing good listening skills, giving full attention to the speaker, and building on one another's conversations.

A note of caution. Because of the private nature of the material presented in this course, some of the students may have a hard time with certain sessions, and they may need extra attention from a loving, caring adult. Be sensitive to the students' reactions and behavior, and do not expect their signs of emotional pain, depression, or simple discomfort to be the same as those of adults. For example, a young adolescent who is suddenly disruptive during a session may be sending the message that the material is hitting too close to home. Or a student who has always had something to say in discussions may show a total lack of interest, indicating that she or he is having difficulty with the issue at hand.

As a catechist you are called on to be many things to your students, not the least of which is a friend. Remember that being a friend is different from being a counselor. If you sense that a student needs more help than you can give him or her, know how to initiate an intervention before the situation becomes a crisis.

Options for Expanding the Course

If you are able to expand this course or lengthen some of the sessions, you might want to use some of the following resources for a variety of programming options. Also check out the optional activities listed at the end of each session plan in this guide.

Print resources. The following books deal with all the issues presented in this course and likely will spark discussion among your students. Consider using them to supplement the course content if you meet for longer periods of time or if you do the course as a day of reflection or a retreat. (See the resources section at the end of this introduction for details about these books.)

- *Finding Hope, Friends, and I Know Things Now* are part of the Stories by Teenagers series compiled and edited by Carl Koch and published by Saint Mary's Press. The stories in these books are all written by high school students and represent many moments of growth in a teenager's life.
- *Letters to Judy*, by Judy Blume, is a compilation of letters to the author, who is popular among young adolescents. An occasional sharing of letters from this collection may create a sense that the struggles your students face are not uncommon. Excerpts from the letters can be used creatively as discussion-starters, sparks for journal entries, or occasions for prayer.
- *Signs and Wonders from Our Journals*, by Carole Duncan Buckman, is a series of journal entries from five middle school students. Though these entries are fictional, they are based on the author's actual experience as a teacher of young adolescents. The entries cover a wide range of young adolescent life—from the highest highs to the lowest lows. Your students are likely to find themselves somewhere in this book. Excerpts from the book can be used as discussion-starters or occasions for prayer.

Guest speakers. Consider inviting guest speakers to present programs for your students on topics such as drug abuse, stress management, suicide prevention, and time management. A prevention program now might alleviate the need for an intervention in the future. You might invite parents to the programs, or run parallel programs for them with different speakers or at different times.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Curriculums take on greater clarity, direction, and purpose if they are described in terms of 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 Discovering 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 Discovering Program provides the goals for all the courses in the 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 specific tasks that must be accomplished if the goals are to be achieved. The coordinator’s manual identifies the objectives for each course in the curriculum. Each course, in turn, supplies a clear statement of objectives for each session in the course.

The Goals and Objectives of *Dealing with Tough Times*

Goals

The goals for this course in the Discovering Program are as follows:

- that the students identify and explore common difficult issues and circumstances in their life
- that they recognize and begin to accept that struggles and hard times are part of the experience of every human being
- that they learn positive strategies for coping with and overcoming hard times
- that they grow in their faith that God is a constant companion

Objectives

Each session has its own objectives, which will help realize the four course goals. The objectives of *Dealing with Tough Times* that follow are phrased as tasks for the young people.

Session 1: “Facing Pressures”

The students will do the following:

- identify pressures in their life
- recognize that their struggles are typical of their age-group

Session 2: “Winning, Losing, and Succeeding”

The students will do the following:

- identify healthy competition
- explore the relation between winning and being successful
- evaluate their views about competition

Session 3: “Resolving Conflicts”

The students will do the following:

- see that although conflict is inevitable, it can be resolved positively
- identify areas of conflict in their life
- identify styles of conflict resolution
- realize their need for forgiveness of themselves and others

Session 4: “Experiencing Loss”

The students will do the following:

- recognize that people experience and survive a variety of losses in their life
- identify losses they have experienced
- explore the concept and the process of grieving
- acquire tools to use in empathizing with peers who suffer loss

Session 5: "Being the Only One"

The students will do the following:

- identify situations that produce feelings of loneliness and isolation
- distinguish between being lonely and being alone
- gain confidence in their ability to deal with loneliness
- learn to value and seek time alone
- experience imaginative prayer

Session 6: "Triumphing in Tough Times"

The students will do the following:

- realize the need to deal with difficulties before they become unmanageable
- identify negative and positive ways of coping with stress
- examine the sources of strength in their life

RESOURCES

Background

The following books can be helpful background reading in preparing to teach this course:

- Benson, Peter L., Judy Galbraith, and Pamela Espeland. *What Kids Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Raise Good Kids*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1994.
- Elkind, David. *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1984.
- Gootman, Marilyn E. *When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing*. Edited by Pamela Espeland. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1994.
- Gordon, Sol. *When Living Hurts*. New York: Dell Publishing, Laurel, 1988.
- Kroen, William C. *Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grownups*. Edited by Pamela Espeland. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1996.
- Lipsitz, Joan. *Growing Up Forgotten: A Review of Research and Programs Concerning Early Adolescence*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1980.
- McCoy, Kathleen. *Coping with Teenage Depression: A Parents' Guide*. New York: New American Library, Signet, 1982.

Supplemental

- Benson, Peter L., Judy Galbraith, and Pamela Espeland. *What Teens Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Shape Your Own Future*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1998.
- Blume, Judy. *Letters to Judy: What Kids Wish They Could Tell You*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Pocket Books, 1986.

- Buckman, Carole Duncan. *Signs and Wonders from Our Journals*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1998.
- Creative Resources for Youth Ministry series. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press. See the entries under Wayne Rice and Mike Yaconelli, comps., for specific titles in this series. Check your parish library or diocesan media center for these books. Or order them from Saint Mary's Press, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1320; phone 800-533-8095; web site www.smp.org.
- Koch, Carl, ed. *Finding Hope: Stories by Teenagers 3*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1998.
- . *Friends: Stories by Teenagers 2*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1997.
- . *I Know Things Now: Stories by Teenagers 1*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1996.
- Nelson, Richard E., and Judith C. Galas. *The Power to Prevent Suicide: A Guide for Teens Helping Teens*. Edited by Pamela Espeland. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1994.
- Rice, Wayne, and Mike Yaconelli, comps. *Creative Activities for Small Youth Groups*. Edited by Yvette Nelson. Creative Resources for Youth Ministry series. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1991.
- . *Creative Communication and Discussion Activities*. Edited by Yvette Nelson. Creative Resources for Youth Ministry series. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1991.
- . *Creative Crowd-Breakers, Mixers, and Games*. Edited by Yvette Nelson. Creative Resources for Youth Ministry series. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1991.
- Stories by Teenagers series. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press. See the entries under Carl Koch, ed., for specific titles in this series.



SESSION
1

Facing Pressures



AN OVERVIEW OF THIS SESSION

Objectives

The students will do the following:

- identify pressures in their life
- recognize that their struggles are typical of their age-group

Session Steps

This session uses pages 1 to 6 of the student booklet and includes the following steps:

- A. an icebreaker and a course introduction (10 minutes)
- B. a presentation and a discussion on handling pressure (10 minutes)
- C. the student booklet activities “Welcome!” and “I’m Worried” (15 minutes)
- D. the student booklet activity “I’m Coping” (15 minutes)
- E. a discussion about a group profile of worries (5 minutes)
- F. a closing prayer (5 minutes)

BACKGROUND

Young people need help identifying tough times. They also need to know that they are not alone in their struggles and that everyone experiences times when life does not work well; this recognition is the first step toward coping. In addition, young people need encouragement and support to believe that they can draw on their inner strength and that they can reach out for help from family, friends, and God. As students learn that it is okay to hurt, they begin to realize that they can manage, they can survive, and they can even triumph.

Because the issues treated in this course are often private, take care to establish strong bonds among group members and to emphasize simple courtesy. This first session is deliberately scant in personal sharing. As the students work together on group tasks and come to see themselves as having things in common, they build a foundation for future sessions and establish a comfortable environment of mutual respect. This opening session is a good time to establish the importance of keeping group discussions confidential. Gentle but persistent reminders should then be sufficient in future sessions.

To help alleviate anxiety within the group, consider naming some of your own fears and worries and talking about some of the struggles in your life. Young people need to know that adults go through tough times. However, they also need to hear of our hope and of the constructive ways in which we cope with difficulty. You can set a receptive tone for the course by relating personal experiences that put the students at ease and that encourage them to offer their ideas and express their feelings. In this process of disclosing personal challenges, avoid pouring out emotion for its own sake.

This session is designed to help the students name their struggles and realize that such experiences are part of living. After engaging in an opening icebreaker that simulates the human reaction to tough times, the young people listen to a story about one young person experiencing difficulty. Then they complete a booklet activity that gives them a chance to think about their own fears, worries, and pressures. From their individual responses they develop a group profile to which they will return later in the session.

The next exercise gives the young people an opportunity to look at what pressures are coming from outside of them and what pressures are coming from inside of them. It then asks them to identify which of those pressures they can do something about and what they might do. They need to know, for example, that though they may not be able to do anything about the amount of schoolwork they have to accomplish in a week, they can do something about pacing themselves as they complete it.

Next, the group returns to the profile of fears, worries, and pressures it developed earlier in the session. The students compare their concerns with those of other young people and are led to the understanding that other people their age experience the same kinds of pressures.

This session closes with an opportunity for the students to pray for one another. Throughout the sessions of this course, encourage the young people to develop their personal prayer life as a source of guidance, strength, and comfort. Help them also to see the strength that is to be found in a community of believers praying for one another through all the ups and downs of life.

PREPARATION

Materials Needed

- name tags (optional)
- rubber bands large enough to fit snugly around the head, one for each student
- an item symbolizing worry, stress, and pressure
- a stack of twenty-two books of various thicknesses
- student booklets, one for each student
- pens or pencils
- blank self-adhesive labels
- small pieces of blank paper, about 4-by-4 inches, one for each student
- newsprint and markers
- masking tape
- a small table, a pillar candle and matches, a Bible, and a centering object such as a cross or a picture of Jesus (These items are referred to in subsequent materials needed lists simply as an enthroned Bible.)
- a Bible marker
- a tape or CD player, and a recording of reflective instrumental music (optional)

Other Necessary Preparations

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

- For step A.* Locate an item that symbolizes worry, stress, and pressure, as described in step A.
- For step B.* Prepare to present “Pat’s Story” as suggested in step B.
- For step D.* Prepare a newsprint list of worries as directed in step D.
- For step D.* Make and post four signs as instructed in step D.
- For step F.* Mark Psalm 23 in the Bible that will be placed on the prayer table.
- If you wish to change the procedure to better fit your teaching preferences or the learning style of your group, see the Options section at the end of this session plan.

Teacher Prayer

During your preparation time, take a few moments for quiet prayer. Calm your thoughts and be silent in God’s faithful presence. When you are ready, think about the following questions:

- What are your greatest worries, fears, or pressures right now?
- What is one thing about worry, fear, or pressure that you hope the students learn in this session?

Imagine yourself giving your concerns about yourself and your students over to God, and God taking them from your hands. Then read the following scriptural passage:

Did you not know? Had you not heard?
Yahweh is the everlasting God,
who created the remotest parts of the earth.
Yahweh does not grow tired or weary,
God's understanding is beyond fathoming.
God gives strength to the weary,
and strengthens the powerless.

(Adapted from Isa. 40:28–29)

PROCEDURE

A. Icebreaker and Introduction (10 minutes)

Before the session. Find an item that represents worry, stress, and pressure, such as one of the following objects:

- a book on stress management
- a pressure cooker
- a picture of someone with a worried look on her or his face
- a bottle of aspirin
- a rope tied in knots

1. Welcome the students to the first session of the course. If they do not know one another, have them introduce themselves to the rest of the group. You may want to provide name tags if you have a large number of students in your group.

If the students do not know you, introduce yourself by telling them your name and a little bit about your family, your work, and anything else that you think might interest them.

2. Give each student a rubber band and announce that the group will now engage in an icebreaker exercise. As you describe this icebreaker, keep the rules simple and avoid using the word *winning*. Tell the students to put the rubber band around their head so that it crosses the tip of their nose; you might want to demonstrate this. Explain that the object of the exercise is to maneuver the rubber band down around their neck without using their hands. Assure the students that any facial contortion is legal.

When everyone understands the rules and the object of the game, announce a time limit of 2 minutes and give a signal to begin. As the students try to accomplish their goal, cheer them on. Also, observe how they react to the task and how they solve the problem.

(This exercise is adapted from Wayne Rice, John Roberto, and Mike Yaconelli, eds., "Rubber Band Relay.")

3. When time is up, begin a discussion of the icebreaker by pointing out that games can teach lessons about how people act in everyday situations. Ask the students if they can see any connections between the rubber band game, the topic of this course, and life. If they have problems seeing the similarities, help them along by making the following observations:

- ▶ The rubber band is similar to outside pressure. To overcome pressure, people sometimes act in abnormal or uncharacteristic ways.
- ▶ During the game everyone was under the same kind of pressure, and they dealt with it in a variety of ways. Mention the responses that you observed. For example, some students may have refused to participate, others may have been serious about their task, and some probably struggled to finish first.
- ▶ In this game, participants could not use their hands because that would have made accomplishing the task too easy. Often when people are under a lot of pressure, they want to choose the easy way out.
- ▶ [Include this point if it applies to your group.] Even though winning was not mentioned, some students seemed to interpret the activity as a competition. Often people compete even when there is no contest.

4. Discuss the students' creative solutions. Some might have asked another person to lend a shoulder to maneuver the rubber band, or some might have used the wall or an object in the room to nudge the rubber band along. Ask questions such as the following:

- ▶ How did you feel as you struggled while others had already succeeded? or as you succeeded while others were still struggling?
- ▶ Who depended on others for help?
- ▶ Who tried to succeed alone?
- ▶ What are the advantages of going it alone?
- ▶ What are the advantages of reaching out for help?

5. Display the item that you brought to symbolize worry, stress, and pressure. Comment on the item. Then summarize the previous discussion by saying something like the following in your own words:

- ▶ Just as all of you were under the same kind of pressure to get the rubber band down to your neck in this game, everyone is also under some pressure in their life. Often pressure causes worry. Sometimes we worry about events in our family. Sometimes we worry about things that happen in the world. Sometimes we worry about whether we are liked by other people. For most young people, school is a major source of stress.
- ▶ Difficulty is a fact of life. And learning how to deal with difficulty is an important part of growing up. In this course on dealing with tough times, we will look at difficulties we face, and we will begin to learn how to manage them.

Note: Before moving on to the next step, put the symbolic item in a prominent place. Leave it there until the closing prayer in step F.

B. Presentation and Discussion: Handling Pressure (10 minutes)

Before the session. Practice reading “Pat’s Story,” found in the Notes section at the end of this session plan, so that you can proclaim it easily and with a sense of drama. Also, collect a stack of twenty-two books for use in part 2 of this step and, if you want to, decide which book will accompany each situation in the presentation.

1. Ask for a volunteer or select an outgoing, expressive student to come to the front of the group. Explain that this student is going to help interpret a story you will read. Ask the volunteer to stretch her or his arms out in front in a receiving posture, with hands together and palms up. Tell the group that this person represents Pat, a junior high student with typical worries and dreams.

2. Read “Pat’s Story” from the Notes section at the end of this session plan. As you do so, pause at each asterisk (*) and place a book in the volunteer’s open hands. At each pause let the weight and the size of the book match the gravity of the situation that Pat faces. For example, getting yelled at warrants a small paperback, and the thought of Grandma’s dying warrants a large book. The point of the presentation is that an increasing burden of problems and worries can become too great for a single person to handle alone.

Keep reading the story and piling on the books as long as the student holds the stack. If the volunteer asks for help, stop the reading and move on to the discussion that follows. If the volunteer drops the stack before the story is completed, assure him or her that this is all right. Then, if you think the students recognize the point of the presentation, stop the reading and move on to the discussion. If you think they have not gotten the point, finish reading the story amidst the pile of books.

3. Lead the students in a discussion of “Pat’s Story,” using questions like these:

- ▶ What is the point of this presentation?
- ▶ How does the stack of books represent what happens to us when things get to be too much to handle?
- ▶ What could our volunteer have done [or what did she or he do] to make the books easier to handle?
- ▶ Who could Pat have gone to when things got to be too much?
- ▶ What negative behaviors do people your age use to cope with tough times? What positive behaviors do they use?
- ▶ Some of the pressures we experience come from within us—from our own worries and expectations, for example. Others come from outside us—such as from stressful situations and other people’s expectations. What inside pressures did Pat experience? What outside pressures?

(This presentation is based on Suicide Prevention Center, “The Weight of the World.”)



Booklet page 1

C. Booklet Activities: “Welcome!” and “I’m Worried” (15 minutes)

1. Distribute the student booklets, pens or pencils, and blank self-adhesive labels. Tell the students to write their name on the label and stick it on the cover of their booklet. Read with them “Welcome!” on page 1 of the booklet, and give them a chance to look through the rest of the booklet. Allow no more than 30 seconds for the young people to browse.

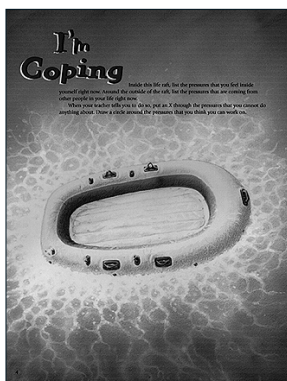
2. Tell the students to turn to “I’m Worried” on pages 2 to 3 of their booklet. Point out the list of worries there, and comment that it contains situations commonly experienced by people in junior high.

Read the directions with the students and be sure they understand that they are to check the column that represents how frequently they worry about each item. Point out that at the end of the list, they are to write the three things that cause them the greatest concern. Tell them that their top three worries need not be limited to the list in the booklet.

Announce that they will have about 4 minutes to complete this activity. Encourage them to move so that they are at least arm’s length from the people around them in order to ensure privacy. Tell them to work silently and alone, and direct them to begin.

3. While the students are working in their booklet, quietly place a small piece of blank paper near each person. After they have completed their checklist, ask them to list their three greatest worries on their piece of paper. They should not sign their name. As the students finish writing, tell them to fold the piece of paper, and collect all the papers. Announce that they will have an opportunity to discuss these worries in the next exercise.

Note: Keep the papers identifying worries handy for use in steps D and F.



Booklet page 2

D. Booklet Activity: “I’m Coping” (15 minutes)

Before the session. Copy the list of worries from pages 2 to 3 of the student booklet onto a sheet of newsprint. Set the newsprint aside for use in part 1 of this step.

Make four signs on sheets of newsprint and post one in each corner of the room. The signs should read as follows:

- Almost never
- Sometimes
- Frequently
- Almost always

1. Ask the students to turn to “I’m Coping” on page 4 of their booklet. Tell them to list inside the life raft pressures that they feel inside themselves. These might include the following pressures:

- not liking oneself
- worrying about the future
- not being able to make friends

On the outside of the raft, they should list pressures that are coming from other people in their life. Examples are as follows:

- friends who are drinking or breaking rules
- parents who do not get along
- teachers who seem to falsely accuse students or harshly judge them

Emphasize the importance of naming specific, concrete worries. Assure the students that their responses are for their eyes only. Allow about 5 minutes for this writing.

While the students work on this task, retrieve the newsprint list you copied before the session. On it tally the responses you collected on small pieces of paper at the end of the previous activity. As you finish recording the information from each piece of paper, refold the paper and set it aside for use during the closing prayer, in step F. When you have finished this compilation, set the newsprint list aside for use in step E.

2. When the students have completed the first part of the booklet exercise, read the remaining directions on page 4, which tell the students to put an X through the pressures they cannot change and a circle around those they think they can work on. Give them about a minute to do this.

3. Tell the students to stand up and gather in the center of the room. Call their attention to the signs in the corners of the room. Tell them that you will read a number of statements. After each statement they are to move to the corner of the room that best represents how frequently the statement applies to them.

Read the first statement from the list below. When everyone has chosen a corner, pose the question or questions under the statement and direct the students to discuss their answer or answers with the other people in their corner. Allow about a minute for discussion. When time is up, briefly solicit feedback from each corner group. Then gather the students back in the center of the room and move on to the next statement. Continue in this manner until you have completed all the statements.

- ▶ *Statement.* When I am under a lot of pressure, I talk to someone.
Questions. Is it easier to talk to adults or to people your own age about things that are bothering you? Why?
- ▶ *Statement.* When I am under a lot of pressure, I do something physical to relieve the stress.
Question. What kinds of physical activities make healthy stress relievers for people your age?

- ▶ *Statement.* My family is a source of stress for me.
Questions. In what ways can families be a source of stress? In what ways can they be a source of support?
- ▶ *Statement.* Certain friends are a source of stress for me.
Questions. In what ways can friends be a source of stress? In what ways can they be a source of support?
- ▶ *Statement.* I can do something about some of the pressure in my life.
Questions. What are some of the pressures people your age put on themselves? What can you do about them?

4. Gather the students in the center of the room. Thank them for their participation in the activity and their contributions to the discussions. Point out that through the activity they may have noticed that other people feel the same way they do about certain things. It is important to realize that we have a lot in common with other people in our tough times as well as in our good times.

E. Discussion: A Group Profile of Worries (5 minutes)

1. Post the group profile of worries that you compiled on newsprint during the previous step. Draw the students' attention to this profile and ask for their observations and reactions. Allow time for them to share their comments.

2. Point out the top five worries of the group. Then compare the group profile to the five top fears of young adolescents from a national survey:

1. My parents might die.
2. My school performance might not be good enough.
3. I might get AIDS.
4. My family might not have enough money.
5. I might die.

(Adapted from "What Jr. Highers Think")

Again note that even though we sometimes feel like we are the only people who struggle with certain things, in fact many other people struggle with the same issues. Also, recognize that some students may be experiencing fears and worries that are not shared by others in the group. Assure the young people that any such uniqueness is probably limited only to your small group, and likely many other young people in their community share the same concerns.

F. Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

1. Introduce the remainder of the course and this prayer time by saying something like this in your own words:

- ▶ You have probably spent a lot of time thinking about all the things that are happening in your life. You have many things in common with your friends, and even with me and other adults you know. Most of us enjoy life most of the time, but once in a while, something goes wrong, which makes life difficult.
- ▶ During the next five sessions, we will look at some of the things that make life difficult, such as competition, loneliness, conflict, and stress. At the end of the course, you may know yourself a little better, understand your friends more, and see some places where God fits into your life. You should better understand what to do to get through the tough times.
- ▶ Prayer is an important part of life at all times—during the good times and the tough times.

2. Invite the students to join in a time of prayer. Place a small table in the middle of the group. On the table arrange a pillar candle, a Bible marked at Psalm 23, a centering object such as a cross or a picture of Jesus, and the item symbolizing worry, stress, and pressure that you introduced at the beginning of the session. If you have a recording of reflective instrumental music, play it softly in the background to help the young people center themselves for prayer.

3. Randomly distribute the small pieces of paper on which the students wrote their top three worries earlier in the session. Ask the students not to unfold them, because they represent other people's private thoughts. Direct them to simply hold the paper you gave them in one hand and cover it with the other.

Invite the students to pray silently for the person whose paper they hold. Encourage them to ask God to help that person handle the tough times in her or his life. Remind them that as they are praying for that person, someone is also praying for them.

4. After about 30 seconds of silent prayer, invite the students to place their paper near the centering object on the prayer table and to then return to their place. When all the students have gone back to their place, take the Bible from the prayer space and introduce a scriptural reading by saying something like this in your own words:

- ▶ Hundreds of years ago, faithful followers of God wrote songs and prayers about God, just as they do today. Some of their songs and prayers were filled with happiness; others told of tough times. We will close this session by praying one of them, Psalm 23.

Invite the students to listen as you pray the psalm from the Bible. When you have finished, point out that an adaptation of this psalm appears on page 6 of their booklet.

Note: Save the items that you used in the prayer space, including the one symbolizing worry, stress, and pressure, for future sessions.

OPTIONS

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 optional approaches.

For step A. Many different games can be used to illustrate the point that pressure is part of life. If you want to extend the session or replace the rubber band exercise, consult a collection of youth-oriented games, such as *Creative Crowd-Breakers, Mixers, and Games*, compiled by Wayne Rice and Mike Yaconelli (see the Resources section at the end of the course introduction).

For step B. Have the students decide what size book should be placed in the volunteer's hands for each situation in the reading. Before you begin the story, explain to them that the size of the book should reflect the seriousness of the situation. The students can take turns selecting a book to use as each situation arises.

For step D. Instead of using the student booklet page "I'm Coping" in part 1 of this step, divide the group into teams of no more than six members. Give each team a marker, and a sheet of butcher paper or newsprint large enough to trace the outline of one team member's body. After all the teams have traced a person, have them use their outline to create a poster of the inside and outside pressures that people their age experience. Provide a variety of materials such as magazines, glue, scissors, and colored markers. Encourage the students to draw or write about or create a collage of the pressures that they experience. Continue with the rest of the step as outlined in the main session plan, substituting the poster for the booklet page again in part 2.

As a variation of this activity, provide each student with a large sheet of poster board and have the young people create individual posters.

For step E. Invite the students to choose a parent or another adult who is significant to them, and to interview this person about his or her worries and fears back in junior high and now as an adult.

After step E. If the group is new and the members do not know one another well, invite them to create a poster listing guidelines that will facilitate trust, respect, and group interaction for the remainder of the course. Mount the poster in a prominent place so that it can serve as a reminder of mutual respect and consideration in subsequent sessions. This option will take extra time, so if you use it, be sure to make adjustments in another part of the session or to extend the meeting time.

For step F. To extend the prayer time, begin step F by dividing the group into pairs. Give each person a Bible. Tell the pairs to rewrite Psalm 23, using a modern image of God to replace the shepherd image. Use one or more of the pairs' rewritten psalms as part of the closing prayer and as part of an opening or closing prayer in each remaining session of the course.

NOTES

Pat's Story

I'm thirteen years old, and I'm in junior high. Like you I spend a lot of time in school. School is okay, I guess. All my friends are there, so I don't mind going. My favorite subjects are science and art. I get pretty average grades. My parents and teachers keep telling me that I could be doing a lot better than I am.* They say that if I tried harder, I could be just as smart as my older brother was in junior high.* My parents are really proud of him because he is going to be a doctor. I think they are hoping that I will be something important like that too.*

I usually get all my homework done. If I have a little extra time, I go to my room, listen to music, and start drawing. I'm pretty good at art, and I have the best art teacher in the school this year. She takes time to show me how I can improve, and she tells me when I have done a good job. I drew some things for the school newspaper once, and in sixth grade I won a prize for drawing. It was a blue ribbon that had "First prize—art" printed on it. I had it on the wall in my room, right next to my prizewinning drawing. But the last time my dad painted my room, he took them both off the wall and told me not to put them back up because it would ruin the new paint.*

I gave my stepmom a picture once for Mother's Day. She said she liked it, but she didn't hang it up.* I gave one to Grandma too. Grandma had hers up for a long time.

I like to play soccer. It's a fun sport, and my team has won quite a few games. A lot of my friends are on the team, but there are also some people on the team that I don't get along with very well.* I don't like the way they treat people. The other day they were making fun of one of my friends. They said that my friend was the reason we lost the game. I tried to tell them that the ref made a bad call on that play and that it was no one's fault, but they started making fun of me too.* So I stopped, but I wish I could have told them exactly what I was thinking!* They are just as bad in school as they are on the soccer field.* They do a lot of things that could get them into trouble. Last weekend they got someone's older brother to buy them beer before the movies. My friends and I ran into them on the way to the theater, and they offered us some.* They weren't acting drunk, but you could smell the beer on their breath. One of them sits next to me in science. At our last test, she wanted to copy my answers.* It's hard to say no sometimes.*

That was a bad day for me all around. When I got home, my stepmom yelled at me for forgetting to clean my room.* Dad came home late and in a bad mood, and he grounded me for a week for having a fight with my little

sister.* She started it, but they always take her side.* I'm not used to having a little sister. It was just me and my older brother in my family until Dad got married again.*

I can understand why my dad was in a bad mood. My grandma is eighty-one years old and seems always to be sick. She's in the hospital again. Dad was there today, and I heard him telling my stepmom that it doesn't look good. I hope Grandma doesn't die.* I would really miss her a lot. She's the only one who pays attention to me sometimes.*

So you see, my life is pretty normal, just like yours. I worry about a lot of things, like what I'm going to do in the future* and if other kids my age like me.* Most of the time, I'm pretty happy, but things get me down sometimes. I wish I had someone to talk to about all of this.* My parents listen sometimes, but other times they're too busy.* I guess if I really needed them, they would be there for me. Like you I have good days and bad days.