

CCFH Ministries Supplemental Topics

Helping Adults with Cognitive Disabilities Deal with Tragedy

by
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After the horrible shootings at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, I had a call from a friend who teaches a Sunday school class of adults with cognitive disabilities. She wanted to know if I had any advice on dealing with her class members' questions and reactions to the event.

As we chatted, it occurred to me that I had more ideas than I initially thought. Over the years of working with my own Sunday school class for adults with special needs, we have worked through several bad times. There have been death of family members, serious illness, September 11, floods, hurricanes, murders, and other events in their own lives and others reported on television.

Before I offer some suggestions, a disclaimer is in order. The advice is not universal. The ideas are for the adult student. However, the principles can be used with children as well. The mental age of the person will dictate the level of need. The range of awareness will be from not aware of the event to a typical understanding of what is happening.

Suggestion One: Try to Prevent Excessive Exposure to Events

Take a preventive step. If you have any influence in the television watching of your class members, tell parents and caregivers to limit their watching of cable television's reporting of tragic events. Some of my friends believed that several tall buildings were destroyed on September 11—not just the Twin Towers. To them, every rerun was another incident. In the same vein, if the family is dealing with a personal tragedy, be sure someone is available to your class member. They need to know what is happening. He needs to have someone offer encouragement and be assured of the presence of caring people.

Suggestion Two: Listen, Listen, Listen

Listen for how your students are reacting to an event. Let them guide what you say. Anticipating reactions or superimposing your feelings on the situation might not be where the class members are. If they seem agitated, want to talk, or seem fearful, respond to their specific needs.

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Suggestion Three: Respond to Individual Reactions

When you hear your class members' reactions, do not plan to spend an entire class on the topic. Really, I would suggest not even talking about it. Let individual class members raise their concerns. Let them set the agenda for your comments. Answer their questions and respond to their comments with as much information as you have. In my own experience, the reactions to events come up in our prayer time. Our practice is to ask everyone what they need to praise God for or ask Him for. As the saying goes, it can be a teachable moment. Following the making of the list, we ask God's attention to the needs we have listed. Even in routine times, it is a spiritual therapy session.

Suggestion Four: Offer Brief, Honest Explanations

Respond to questions directly. Do not explain the event in any detail. A student asked, "Why did that guy shoot all of those people in Virginia?" I did not talk about gun control, confidentiality laws, mental illness or similar topics. I just said, "I really do not know. Nobody will probably ever know. His mind was messed up." I got a hearty, "That's right!" Why did this happen? I have no idea. What is a "terrorist?" A terrorist is a person who treats people badly. Where is Iraq? It is a country far away. A lot of Americans are fighting a war there now. Some of the stories from the Bible took place there.

Suggestion Five: Know Your Influence on Your Students

Recognize the positive force you are in your student's lives. Your response has influence. Your ideas and reactions mold your students'. I have learned to watch my facial expressions and limit comments if someone mentions a bad event in class. Actually, some class members wait for my response. A calm face and soft words will do wonders to keeping the atmosphere calm.

Suggestion Six: Do Something Concrete





Let the class members do something concrete. Send a card. We keep the materials in the classroom to make cards. It is easier in events that happen to their families and friends, but it is good on national events as well. As a part of the sympathy expression, students from universities all over the country sent cards of sympathy to the students at Virginia Tech. Like us, our friends with cognitive disabilities need to feel they have done something for people who are hurting.

Saying a prayer is a concrete way of being involved. Take a class member with you to call on a friend in the hospital. Take some members of the class to sign a card in the town square for a national tragic event. Drawing pictures and writing notes (for those who can) to victims is another practical way of helping.

Suggestion Seven: Use Comforting Scriptures

Since you are involved with your students' spiritual lives, keep a few passages of scripture handy that assure us God cares for us, he is all powerful, he is ever-present, and he is our help in time of trouble.

These examples are from the NIV version:

-  I Peter 5:7: *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*
-  Isaiah 41:10: *So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*
-  Hebrews 13:5. . . *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*
-  Revelation 21:4a: *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, mourning or crying or pain.*

Suggestion Eight: Plan A Lesson Later

After the event is over, do a lesson with your class about how God cares for his friends in an event in the Bible. The stories of Job and Joseph are excellent ones for a variety of bad things happening to good people. It will help your class learn to use God's Word in their daily lives.

Being prepared to help your adults with cognitive problems deal with tragic events and crises in their lives will serve them well when they need them. Your words and your actions will help influence their reactions to future events.