

Leadership Team Training Resource

Trauma and Lament

"Why, LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"
Psalm 10:1

What's this for? Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have left a significant imprint on our country, and the aftereffects can be felt in every community — even in your youth ministry! Trauma likely exists in your students' lives in other forms as well. We want to offer you some practical tools for noticing and addressing the trauma-related stress responses that may show up among the students in your care, and to suggest the important role of *lament* in the process of healing.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

A psychological and physiological response to an intensely stressful event or experience.

WHAT IS PTSD?

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, is a clinically diagnosed disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of life-threatening events (military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or violent personal assaults like rape). People who suffer from PTSD experience psychological and physiological symptoms which are severe enough and last long enough to significantly impair the person's daily life.

TAKE NOTE: While everyone who experiences symptoms does NOT develop the disorder, it's important to be aware of what the symptoms are and consider *to what extent* they may be impacting someone's normal ability to "do life."

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS SYMPTOMS:

Research from other large-scale disasters tells us that there is a range of common reactions that survivors can expect in the aftermath of traumatic events. Here is a brief list:

Emotional and Cognitive Reactions:

- Feeling hopeless about the future
- Feeling detached from others, feeling numb
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling jumpy and easily startled, on guard
- Having upsetting dreams
- Feeling nervous, scared, sad
- Avoiding things that are reminders of the event
- Being irritable or easily angered

Physical Reactions:

- Stomach problems, change in appetite, overeating
- Trouble sleeping
- Fatigue
- Racing heart, rapid breathing
- Headaches
- Not taking care of oneself (exercise, diet, medical)
- Substance abuse
- Worsening of previous medical conditions

Spiritual Reactions:

- Anger at God
- Questioning God's goodness, difficulty trusting God
- Difficulty finding meaning in life's events

WHAT IS LAMENT?

A strong expression of sorrow, regret, or complaint to God in prayer or song, either individual or communal.

IS THIS IN THE BIBLE?

Absolutely. There are 65 Psalms of lament, and the whole book of Lamentations is, well, a lament! Whenever the people of God experienced national disaster, persecution from enemies, sickness/death, or felt like God was absent, they lamented.

The usual pattern includes stating some kind of complaint or protest to God, a reference to God as the one who has been the Deliverer, a direct request for God to intervene, and a promise to praise God in the end. Here's a list of some of the lament Psalms:

Communal: Psalms 10, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 126

Individual: Psalms 6, 39, 61, 88, 102, 109, 142

LAMENT AS DISORIENTATION

Psalms of lament have also been called Psalms of disorientation. This can be a helpful word to use, especially with adolescents — they live in disorientation by definition!

Theologian Walter Brueggemann sees the Psalms walking us through three seasons of life. This framework helps us think about how we teach kids to pray and worship. The seasons are:

- **Orientation:** life as-is, properly ordered, God is in charge and all is well. Creation Psalms and praise psalms reflect this season (these are usually the ones we know best! Psalms 19, 96, 146-150).
- **Disorientation:** Crisis and tragedy comes and throws us into distress, discouragement, dismay, and puts us in need of God's deliverance from the pit of chaos. The Psalms of lament give words to these cries for help.
- **Reorientation:** God steps in and re-structures our reality, starting life in a new way, surprising us with a new gift. Thanksgiving Psalms celebrate this salvation experience (Psalms 106, 116, 118).

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP? If you know a student who seems to be experiencing posttraumatic stress, don't be afraid to offer help. Here are a few suggestions for youth workers:

- Assess the situation: How strong are the symptoms, and how often do they seem to occur?
- Be a safe place for them — a person to whom they can honestly express their emotions, questions, and doubt.
- Encourage them to be honest with God about what they are experiencing.
- Allow them to share their story, to the extent they are comfortable. Re-telling is an important step in healing.
- Help them be thoughtful about decisions, and be careful not to push them to make big decisions too soon.
- Support getting them back into some kind of regular routine.
- Make sure their practical needs get met.
- Keep watching! If symptoms get worse, assist them in finding professional psychological help in your community.



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THE IMPORTANCE OF HOPE

Lament should take us to a place where we have said what needs to be said and we are capable of *hoping* again. This is no easy journey! We cannot force kids to have hope. However, it's important to keep in mind when we try to help them enter into lament that we want to give these feelings somewhere to go... On the other end of this dark hole, someone has to be holding on to hope for them! **Consider what it means to be guides who are carrying hope on behalf of those who cannot yet experience it.**

GETTING REAL WITH GOD:
THE LINE BETWEEN PRACTICING
AUTHENTICITY AND WHINING...

Um, this lament stuff sounds a lot like whining to me...

If you're thinking that, don't feel bad! It can be hard to discern the line between honestly and authentically giving our stuff to God and, well, whining about it. **What do you think about that line?** How does that impact the way you interact with students?

The use of these "psalms of darkness" may be judged by the world to be *acts of unfaith and failure*, but for the trusting community, their use is an *act of bold faith*, albeit a transformed faith.... Nothing is out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart.

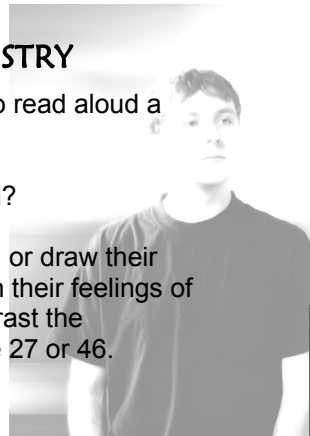
Walter Brueggemann,
Spirituality of the Psalms, p.27

AN IDEA FOR PRACTICING LAMENT IN YOUR MINISTRY

In your small group, or maybe in community worship, take time to read aloud a lament Psalm. Ask a couple of reflection questions like:

- Is it okay to say these kinds of things to God?
- How do you think it might deepen your relationship with Him?
- Where could this kind of prayer go from here?

Then read through the Psalm again and invite students to journal or draw their own continuing prayer for a few minutes. Afterwards talk through their feelings of comfort or discomfort in approaching God that way. Maybe contrast the "complaint" attitude of laments with the confidence of Psalms like 27 or 46.



*"You are my refuge,
my portion in the land
of the living."
Psalm 142:5*

TEAM QUESTIONS AND APPLICATIONS

- To what extent are our students at risk for posttraumatic stress symptoms? What's the level of impact in our community from the hurricanes? Are there other factors unique to our context?
- Would you say that most of our students are now in a state of orientation, disorientation, or reorientation in response to recent events?
- Do we allow space and time for lament in our ministry? How? When? Where? How does it impact students?
- What are some reasons people tend to avoid lament-type prayers? What scares *you* or makes you uncomfortable with lament?
- If it's not already happening, where could the practice of lament fit best into our current ministry structures?

HIT LIST: WEBSITES FOR GOING DEEPER

- An article accompanying this hand-out can be found at www.cyfm.net
- The National Center for PTSD, www.ncptsd.org
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsn.org
- The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, www.aacap.org
- Youth Specialties distributed a fantastic list of ideas for processing and communal lament in their September 7th "YS Update" email newsletter. <http://www.youthspecialties.com/free/email/ysupdate/archive/index.php?issue=20050907>
- For more on trauma on the CYFM website, see Dan Hodge's Article: "Trauma & Tha Drama in Tha Hood: Understanding the Issues Behind Trauma and Distress": http://www.cyfm.net/article.php?article=trauma_hood_drama.html

References used for this material:

- Stress symptoms lists adapted from the worksheet: "Reactions to a Major Disaster: A Fact Sheet for Survivors and Their Families," accessed from the National Center for PTSD website: www.ncptsd.org
- Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A theological commentary*. Augsburg Old Testament Studies. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.
- Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002.