



Using *Beyond Disaster* with small groups

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Introduction

This document offers basic instructions for using the booklet called *Beyond Disaster: A Survivor’s Guide for Spiritual First Aid*. You can find copies of the booklet in several languages, along with the latest versions of this document and other resources, at the website **DisasterRelief.Bible**.

Beyond Disaster was developed by the Trauma Healing Institute. Most Trauma Healing Institute resources are best used in small groups led by trained facilitators. While this resource contains many of the concepts used in *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help*, it was created as a stand-alone booklet to encourage anyone who is currently going through a crisis or has just recently gone through one. This could be an epidemic like coronavirus, other natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, or fire, or even events caused by people.

The first needs that are usually met in a crisis are physical—such as having enough food, clean water, shelter, and, in epidemics, face masks, disinfectants, and medical care. However, people’s emotional and spiritual needs are just as important and also need to be addressed. This booklet is designed for

Christians and others to begin addressing their fears, doubts, and emotions. That is why we call this “spiritual first aid.” Using this booklet can help people begin to recover emotionally and spiritually from trauma they have experienced.

This training module was written to help church leaders who may feel inadequately trained to address the effects of trauma. *Beyond Disaster* does not require group leaders to have professional training or counseling experience. It can be used in many ways:

- The entire booklet can be sent to people to read on their own.
- The booklet can be sent out one chapter at a time as an assignment prior to meeting on an online app such as Zoom to discuss the chapter and reflection questions.
- The activities included in some of the chapters could be assigned to be done individually. Then at the next meeting, people can be invited to share if they are willing.
- At the end of Chapters 1 and 3, there are sections devoted specifically to how to help children. Consider discussing these sections with children and those who work with children.

Best practices for leading an effective small group

- Prepare, but don’t worry. Be familiar with the booklet and have a plan for your group. Remember, you do not need to be a trained counselor or professional to assist your group with this booklet. You’re facilitating, not teaching. The materials are designed in a peer-to-peer format. You as a leader or group facilitator may also be going through the same situation as your church members, so the booklet should benefit you as much as your members. You are encouraged to participate in the individual assignments.
- You can choose the schedule you prefer, but we suggest taking it one chapter at a time over a period of weeks—one or two chapters per week.
- When going through a crisis, most people are overwhelmed and not able to think clearly. Do not give members too much information.
- Some of your members may be going through heavy grief and pain. If so, they are probably not ready to share about their situation or participate in a discussion group. No one should feel pressure to participate when they are not emotionally ready. You, as a leader, need to be sensitive to the needs of all of your members. Please make these discussion groups totally optional. Certain members will need one-on-one attention instead.
- This is **not** the time to teach or preach. People’s hearts and minds are overloaded and cannot process much during this time. Offering useful information is best.
- Speak more slowly than you usually do. Pause to give people time to understand what you are saying.
- Don’t be shocked if members share about their fears and doubts. In a crisis people will often say things out of fear or frustration. It is better for people to express these things than to try to hold them inside and cover them over with a smile. It does not mean they are bad or have lost their faith.
- Please invite different members of the group to read portions of the chapters and the Scripture, and encourage everyone to participate in the discussions. People receive the

greatest help from any group or activity when they can be active participants. Pay attention to the group dynamic. If a “talker” is dominating the conversation, encourage others to share.

- Some members may not feel comfortable sharing in a group setting. Everyone needs to feel safe in sharing as much or as little as they wish. Some may benefit more from one-on-one time with a group leader or other believer. Sharing in groups of two or three might be best if you know members who are hurting and need more personal attention.
- Although the booklet is designed to be used in a Christian setting, your members have many family members, friends, and neighbors who are not Christians but would greatly benefit from the contents of the booklet. You may want to encourage your members to use this booklet as a way to minister to those around them. It may even open the door to share the gospel at an appropriate time.

The *most* important thing to remember as you are going through this booklet is this: hurting people need to have a way to begin expressing their feelings in a safe place. They need to be heard and be assured that what they are feeling and experiencing is normal.

Your group members will not remember what you say as much as how you show love and concern for them. The key word is—**listen**.

How the *Beyond Disaster* booklet is designed

The booklet contains an introduction called “Start Here” and six chapters. All seven sections contain helpful information, Scripture passages, and reflection questions. Several of the lessons also contain activities that can be done as a group or individually during the week before the next meeting.

This guide goes through each chapter/section and gives you suggestions for leading each one. In some chapters, additional material is included here that you can choose to share if you prefer. *However, these words and activities are only suggestions.* You know your members well and can use the booklet in any way that you think will best minister to their needs.

It is suggested that the chapters be read together during your group sharing times. If you prefer participants read the material ahead of time, please review the main topics as you discuss the chapter.

Lesson 0—“Start Here”

For leaders—It is important for members to realize that they may have behaviors or feelings that don’t seem natural for them. Everyone’s reactions to a crisis will be different and they may experience things that they never expected. That is *normal*! These actions and emotions will disappear over time.

Opening activity—Prayer and song

Say—Many or most of our physical needs may have been met—such as having enough food, clean water, and in our situation, face masks and disinfectant spray. However, the emotional and spiritual needs we may be feeling are just as important and also need to be addressed. This booklet is designed for people to begin addressing their fears, doubts, and emotions. That is why the title includes the words “spiritual first aid.” This booklet is designed to help us all begin to recover emotionally and spiritually from the trauma we have experienced.

Say—Some of you may not be ready to talk about what you are feeling, and that is perfectly fine. If the information in the booklet is too difficult for you to read or think about right now, please do not feel you have to participate in this group. If you would like to participate but just listen, that is also fine. However, sharing what you're feeling with the group can be helpful, if you feel ready to do so. We can come together and help support one another as we share.

Prior to reading lesson 0 together, share the following section:

Say—I'm going to read a list of some normal reactions to trauma.

Each person responds to traumatic experiences differently. Here are some normal reactions you may have. They will often go away with time.

- You may find that your heart begins to pound fast and you breathe fast. You may have headaches and stomachaches. You may feel shaky or exhausted.
- You may have trouble sleeping or have no appetite.
- You may be confused and not be able to concentrate or make good decisions.
- You may feel anxious, overwhelmed, or depressed. You may blame yourself for what happened. You may be irritable and angry.
- You may want to be alone.
- You may try to avoid how you are feeling (for example, spend too much time on social media, use alcohol, work non-stop, overeat, and so forth).
- You may do things that, in the end, will bring you harm, like smoking, drinking alcohol or using drugs, or spending more than you can afford.
- You may have accidents.

Discussion: After reading through the above information, you as the leader might want to begin by sharing something that you have experienced during the crisis. This will help others be more comfortable to share.

Ask: Would any of you like to share about what you have been feeling? *Allow for sharing.*

Leading the lesson

- Ask different members to read the lesson aloud.
- As you read through the list of basic practices, ask members to share about personal experiences related to the list. Do they have other good ideas to share?

(Remember to ask questions and allow folks to share)

- Discuss the "For Reflection" questions.
- Ask members to share other Scripture verses that have encouraged them.

Closing—Prayer and song

Lesson 1—“Why am I feeling this way?”

For leaders—The most important concepts to remember from Lesson 1 are the three “Reactions to Trauma.” They are:

- Reliving the experience
- Avoiding things that remind you of the event/crisis
- Always being on alert

Opening—Prayer and song

Leading the lesson

- Ask different members to take turns reading through Lesson 1 and the Scripture verses. As you read, stop and ask for members to share their personal feelings and experiences.
- As you read through each of the three “Reactions to Trauma,” ask members to share examples of how people might react in these three ways.
- Discuss the “For Reflection” questions.

“What Helps Children?” Although this section is short, it is very important. Children have different needs than adults. Take time to chat with parents about how their children are reacting to the crisis.

Ask parents to:

- Share behaviors and feelings their children have expressed.
- Share things they have done to encourage them.
- Share ideas about things they have done or can do with the children as a family.
- Encourage children to talk about how they are feeling. They can do this by drawing pictures about what happened, or they may reenact their experiences in their play. Be attentive. Talk about their drawing or play: what happened? How did they feel?

Important—Children are very intuitive and hear a lot more than parents often realize. Please encourage parents to talk about sensitive or fearful issues away from the children. The most important thing parents can do to help their children is to be well themselves!

Individual assignment—Draw a picture that expresses how you have been feeling during the current situation. Go to a quiet place and take time to pray and reflect about how you have been feeling. Your drawing can be something specific or symbolic. If you are comfortable doing so, at our next meeting you can share your drawing with the group. Encourage your children to do this activity as well.

Closing—Prayer and song

Lesson 2—“How can I calm these strong emotions?”

For leaders—This lesson offers four activities that can help your members relax and calm their emotions.

Opening—Prayer and song

Looking back—From the last meeting’s assignment, ask members to share their drawings with the group. Invite children to share their pictures. Discuss how you felt during the exercise. Ask members to share how it helped them express their feelings.

Leading the lesson

Section 1—Do something . . .

- Choose someone to read through this section and then ask members to list additional activities that they could do.

Sections 2, 3, & 4:

- Choose other group members to lead the next three activities and guide the members to do these activities together as a group.
- After concluding each one, ask members how they felt as they were doing it.
- Ask which of the three exercises they liked the most.
- Ask members to share other ideas about how they relax.

Individual assignment—Prior to the next group meeting, ask members to invite family or friends to do one of the exercises from Lesson 2. When your members are leading others to do an exercise, it will help them remember it better and allow them to begin putting it into practice in their own lives.

Closing—Prayer and song

Lesson 3—“Why do I feel so sad?”

For leaders—This lesson features the “grief journey.” Although it is only a brief introduction, it should be helpful for your members. The illustration in the lesson should help your members visualize the process that is involved when we grieve.

Opening—Prayer and song

Looking back—Ask members to share their experience of inviting family or friends to participate in one of the Lesson 2 calming exercises. Did their friends find it helpful? Any other thoughts or ideas?

Background on the grief journey

- The “denial & anger” stage can last 1 to 6 months, maybe longer.
- The “no hope” stage can last for 6 to 18 months, maybe longer. Some people may remain in this stage for years. However, if people do not seem to be making any progress toward healing after two or three years, they may need additional support from a counselor, pastor, or doctor.
- The “false bridge” of trying to avoid the grief journey can actually keep the person from healing and may cause the healing process to take longer. People may mean well when they encourage those who are grieving to move on, but it really does exactly the opposite.

Leading the lesson

- Choose different members to read through the lesson.
- Discuss each part of the grief journey illustration—ask members to give examples of things people may do or be feeling during each part of the cycle.

- Talk about the dangers of taking the “false bridge.”
- Ask members to share about losses they have experienced during this current crisis.

Discussion

- Read the section “things that can help us grieve.” Have members share about some of the things that are mentioned in the section.
- Ask members to think about other ways that they can help people grieve.
- Discuss the “For Reflection” questions.

“What Helps Children”—Read through this section and discuss each part.

- Discuss things that have been going on in your childrens’ lives.
- Discuss details specific to teenagers.
- Share ideas that members have used with their children & teens during this crisis.
- Encourage parents to go through the booklet, or parts of the booklet, with their children.

Closing—Prayer and song

Lesson 4—“How can my wounded heart heal?”

For leaders—The important concept in this lesson is for members to realize that physical wounds and heart wounds have many of the same symptoms and both require special care to heal. *Learning and practicing the four questions* can be most helpful in helping people in the healing process.

Opening—Prayer and song

Leading the lesson

- Choose different members to read through the lesson.
- As you discuss the list of physical symptoms, ask members to compare these to heart wounds. How are they similar or different?
- Talk about how important it is to tell your story. Have members discuss things that would make a good listener.
- Discuss the section about the four questions. Ask different members to share answers to these four questions concerning the epidemic experience.

The four questions

- What happened?
- How did you feel?
- What was the hardest part for you?
- Who or what helped you to start feeling safe? (If someone does not feel safe yet, ask, What small thing could you to begin to feel safer?)

Individual assignment

Say—Let's all practice using the four questions this week. If we practice, we will remember it better.

- Choose a story to share about something that happened in your life (not a really serious event, and not too long). Have the other person ask the four questions. Set the timer for 10–12 minutes. Then switch—they tell a story and you ask the four questions.
- Remember that when you are the listener, your most important job is to listen, not to try to fix the person or give solutions.

Closing—Prayer and song

Lesson 5—“How can I relate to God in this situation?”

For leaders—This lesson discusses what a lament is. Members will be given the opportunity to write their own lament to God.

Looking back—From the last lesson's assignment, practicing the listening questions,

- Ask members how they felt as they were sharing their story.
- Ask members how they felt as they were listening and asking the questions.
- Was there anything difficult about the exercise?
- Did the exercise help you to clarify any of your feelings?

Leading the lesson

Say—Besides talking and doing artwork, we can express our feelings to God through writing a lament. It can be written by one person or by a community. More than sixty of the psalms in the Bible are considered laments. In a lament, people pour out their complaints to God and beg him to help them.

- Choose different members to read the first part of the chapter.
- Make sure everyone knows the three main parts of a lament—address God, complaint, request.
- **Say**—God already knows our hearts and knows what we are thinking, so it does not surprise him when we cry out to him. It may seem awkward, but if David wrote so many laments and they are recorded in the Scriptures, we also can write them without fear that it will make God angry. He wants us to come to him with all of our emotions and feelings.
- *Read Psalm 13 in unison together*—have members decide what the three main parts are.
- Discuss the “For Reflection” questions.

Individual assignment

- Invite members to write their own lament. This can be done in prose, a picture, or in any way that they choose.
- Remind members that it must contain the complaint part; the other parts are optional.
- Members who are willing will be invited to share their laments with the group at the next meeting

Closing—Prayer and song

Lesson 6—“Looking to the future”

For leaders—This lesson allows you to review all that you have studied and discussed in the *Beyond Disaster* booklet. It may be good to encourage members to continue to review the booklet and what they have learned as they continue through the crisis.

Opening—Prayer and song

Looking back

- Invite members to share their laments or drawings with the group.
- Ask members for feedback about how they felt when writing the lament
- What was the hardest part?
- What was something that they learned through the exercise?

Leading the lesson

- Choose different members to read through the lesson.
- Read the Scripture verses together.
- Discuss things they have learned about themselves through this booklet.
- Discuss what the group might want to do going forward: continue meeting for support and prayer, do another book study together, or do *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help* with a trained facilitator. This book is best done three to six months or more after the crisis has passed.
- Discuss the “For Reflection” questions.

Before you close—Encourage members to share the booklet or parts of it with their family, friends, and neighbors. Although it is designed for believers, non-believers have been experiencing the same situation and trauma that they have. The booklet could open the way to share the gospel.

Closing—Prayer and song

Next steps

When this current crisis is past, your church members may still have many ongoing family, financial, emotional, and spiritual issues that may take a long time to work through.

For more information about the Trauma Healing Institute and its programs for adults, children, and teens, please visit the website **traumahealinginstitute.org**, or contact your local facilitator. We also welcome feedback on this resource. If you use this pilot version, you are invited to send comments to info@traumahealinginstitute.org.

May God bless you as you lead and support members of your church during this season. May the information provided in the *Beyond Disaster* booklet help you all begin the process of healing your heart wounds individually and as churches.