

THE NEW NORMAL

8 Ways to Care
for Gen Z in a
Post-Pandemic World



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INTRODUCTION

ONE YEAR IN

A year into the spread of COVID-19 in the United States, Springtide checked in with young people ages 13 to 25. We asked about their experiences, how they processed losses and gains, and what they expect from life on the other side of the pandemic, gathering these insights contained in this report through a national survey of 2500 young people in February 2021.

This report shares what we've learned from young people in order to help you care for them in relevant, effective ways. Ways that don't rely on going "back to normal" but instead prepare for *a new normal*. Rooted in the social sciences, backed by data, and highly actionable, this guide offers 8 tips for ministry, outreach, and care in a post-pandemic world.



In March 2020, the first month of lockdown related to the threat of COVID-19, Springtide Research Institute conducted a study of over 500 young people ages 18 to 25, asking about their experiences and expectations about what was to come. You can find the full [Social Distance Study](#) here.

NOT BACK TO NORMAL

It will be tempting, as adults, to insist on going "back to normal," but that's only because it's more or less possible for adults to do so. An adult who's worked remotely may very well just return to the office she left and greet, in person, the colleagues she's been connecting with virtually for the year. **But for young people between the ages of 13 and 25, it's not uncommon for every year to be different from the next. There's no "normal" to return to.** Their world turned upside down just as they were starting to find their footing. We can begin to imagine:

- ▶ recent graduates who had clear plans and who suddenly faced uncertainty and scarce jobs;
 - ▶ a first-year college student who attended virtual courses from their childhood bedroom or studied on campus in partial lockdown and with new restrictions;
 - ▶ a senior college student who was sent home after spring break and missed their final semester as a college student on campus;
 - ▶ young people in jobs as essential workers who risked their health and that of their families in order to sustain themselves and their communities;
 - ▶ young people of all ages who lost loved ones, lost jobs, or watched parents lose jobs.
- Even in this brief snapshot, we begin to see that for young people these are not opportunities and events delayed, like an adult returning to a well-known office at a steady job. In many instances, these are developmental markers and moments, formative and singular events in the life of a young person that in many cases are simply lost. And often, these losses were coupled and magnified by a loss of support systems,
- ▶ a 14-year-old who spent the first (and possibly second) semester of high school never attending an in-person class or meeting classmates face-to-face. Her last in-person school experience was in middle school—her next will be as a sophomore;
 - ▶ high school and college students who missed out on performing in theater, band, or competing in sports—formative experiences rooted in skill-building and socializing—that can't be made up for;
 - ▶ students around the country who had no graduation ceremonies or drive-in graduations in parking lots and who waved their goodbyes to teachers and classmates for the last time from a distance;

the kind that would normally help them move forward in times of uncertainty or growth. **In essence, the pandemic has not been a speed bump in their life. It was a sudden and dramatic left turn.**

A year into the pandemic—a year in which more than 500,000 Americans have died and more than 28 million have been sick; a year in which isolation and loneliness are on the rise among young people—signs of hope are emerging. Cases and deaths are going down. Vaccine supply and distribution are going up.

Religious and faith leaders are part of this hope that's on the horizon. Caring for young people after a year of grief, trauma, upheaval, and uncertainty is a crucial and delicate calling. And the work might be different than you expect. It might mean giving up what you've been most looking forward to after a year away—Scripture studies on Wednesday nights or volunteer excursions on Saturday mornings, for example. It will definitely require reimagining what's possible and what's needed as young people process the past year and look forward to what's next.

This guide is an invitation to rethink what can be shed, what can be kept, and how to begin exploring best practices for ministry and engagement in a post-pandemic world.



SO WHAT CAN WE DO?

Any plans for ministry in the post-pandemic world have to start with rebuilding trust, understanding where young people are at, and exercising empathy. These values are at the heart of each of the 8 practical tips we offer in this guide.

Rebuild trust.

Even before the pandemic, young people reported low trust in plenty of institutions across the board—government, education, organized religion, and more. Their trust was tested during the pandemic, when authorities from all sectors of life gave often contradicting directions on how best to stay safe and move through this collective concern.



Over half (57%) of young people say **it will take time to rebuild trust where it was lost.**

One area they've lost trust? The government. Sixty-five percent of young people disagree or strongly disagree that our government has done its best to protect us, and 57% say it might be hard to trust others in general (including family, friends, government, schools, religious groups, etc.) because of how they handled the pandemic.

But there's hope for religious leaders. Fifty percent of young people agreed or

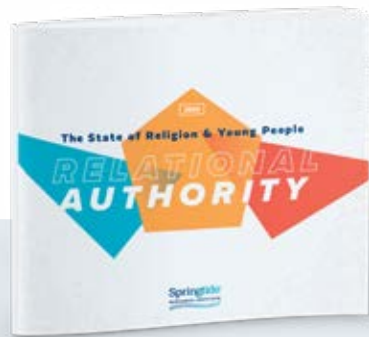
strongly agreed that their faith community has done a great job navigating the pandemic; this is a higher approval rating than either government or schools.

As a religious leader, you have an opportunity to rebuild trust. Young people don't necessarily feel they were safely led by trustworthy guides through a tumultuous year. The 8 tips we offer in this short report are rooted in ways to secure those foundations of trust.

Understand where they're at.

Springtide's data reveal where young people are at as they process and move through the difficulties and delights of this past year. But our data is just a jumping-off point. Young people will be processing difficult things at different paces, which means you also need to tune into the young people in your life in intentional ways. Part of being tuned in is expressing care.

Nearly eight in ten (79%) young people agree, “I am more likely to listen to adults in my life if I know that they care about me.” Showing care can be as simple as listening, being a consistent presence, or sharing from your own experiences. The most important thing is to communicate care for young people as individuals, not assuming you know where they’re at without asking.



Listening is one of the five dimensions of Relational Authority, a framework for building trust that’s explored and explained in-depth in [*The State of Religion & Young People 2020*](#).

Good ministry, outreach, and advocacy is about building connections; this guide is designed to help you establish those connections in meaningful, thoughtful ways. The tips we present throughout take into account the many places a young person might be coming from and suggest how to create environments that encourage openness and honesty.

Exercise empathy.

Empathy is the ability to enter into the experience of another person and adopt a tender sensitivity to their world—feelings, ideas, and values—even if you don’t naturally experience those things in the same ways. Understanding where *you’re* at in the work of emerging from a year of upheaval is an important first step in responding with empathy to the experiences of others.

Young people will look to you as a model for how to feel safe, grieve, celebrate, resist comparison, and more. If you’re struggling to do those things yourself, you’ll struggle to extend those things to a young person navigating them for the first time.

In each of the sections below, we invite you to reflect on where you’re at in practical ways. You can modify these same prompts to use with the young people in your life, practicing what you preach, and modeling what you offer. These *Exercises in Empathy* are key to making sure your ministry in a post-pandemic world is as effective and meaningful as possible.



**PRACTICE WHAT
YOU PREACH.
MODEL WHAT
YOU OFFER.**



HOW TO CARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN A POST- PANDEMIC WORLD



1. Create Safety to help young people regain their footing.

Uncertainty is about unsure footing. Safety is about making someone who stands on unstable ground feel confident taking a step, even when the next step might be equally as unsure as the first. We spoke with a practitioner trained in Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) who works with at-risk teens and children in a ministry context, and asked her about the importance of creating safety. “The brain in trauma,” she explained, “is in flight, fight, or freeze mode. Asking a young person who’s in a state of heightened uncertainty something as simple as ‘how are you?’ is practically unanswerable when the brain is in this mode. It’s like asking someone running a marathon to solve an algebra equation. The brain just can’t do both.”

Creating safety, then, is about helping a young person move from *fight, flight, or freeze* to (in Springtide’s language) *breathe and be*. Only from that space of breathing and being, finally calm and safe enough to take a break from “survival mode,” can they do the more internal work of unpacking, processing, and sharing about themselves.

By and large, young people have not felt safe this year. Seventy-four percent say they hope to feel safe again when the pandemic is over. As a way to gauge their sense of risk or safety in the world around them, we asked about these experiences in concrete places. Aside from “at home,” “on virtual calls,” or “in nature,” in almost every area of life we asked about, less than a quarter of young people said they felt safe during the pandemic.

Spaces where young people say they feel safe



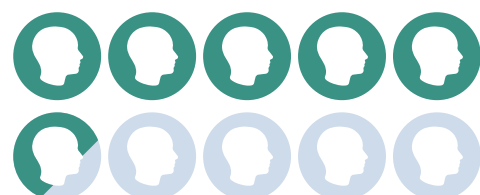
EXERCISE IN EMPATHY: Reflect on a time when you felt confident taking the next step forward in your life. What 3–5 words describe that particular time in your life—including the people, circumstances, resources, etc. you had? What conditions led you to that feeling of security? Now, host a conversation with the young people in your life, sharing your own responses and reflections without requiring responses—they may still be in marathon mode. Instead, consider inviting them to simply observe how they’re feeling as they listen to you. Can they relate to the experiences of others sharing? Are there big or small differences? Inviting them to comment on your experiences feels less risky and doesn’t require them to dig deep in identifying hard-to-name emotions or share those emotions before they’re ready. This is a critical step in establishing a sense of safety and helping them find footing.

Handwriting lines for the exercise.

2.

Grieve What's Been Lost *without dwelling on the negatives*

As you begin to gather once again with young people, it will prove helpful to hold space for each unique voice. Religious leaders—professionals and volunteers alike—are uniquely well-equipped for this work. Rituals help us to grieve and move on without forgetting. Remembering and honoring the people, events, and opportunities that were lost is important even as we move into a post-pandemic world. Safety is the foundation of these rituals around grief, because we should never rehash something painful as a matter of small talk, but to try to gather the meaning of it after it has passed. Often, rituals that don't depend on conversation or sharing are effective precisely because words can fall short in times of great emotion or trauma.



57% of young people ages 13–25 agreed or strongly agreed that **“When the pandemic is over, I expect that a lot will be different, in mostly disappointing ways.”**

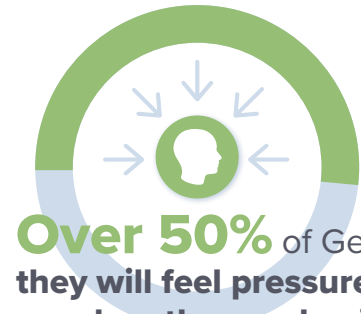
When we asked young people about some of the basic things that they feel they've lost this year, contact with friends (47%), eating in restaurants (43%), and traveling (43%) were the things young people said they were most unhappy to lose—but there are all kinds of other “losses,” big and small, to grieve.

EXERCISE IN EMPATHY: *It's easy to focus on the negative—maybe looking back, the whole year feels like a waste or a loss. Maybe it's hard to name this loss because others have lost much more, or because the loss you've experienced is so significant. Call to mind one concrete loss, or even something you fear won't be the same after the pandemic. Take time to honor that loss: what it meant to you, how it formed you, what you'll miss, and how you might move forward. Ask the young people around you, “What would be an important or meaningful way you could imagine honoring that loss?” You might even be able to create a collective ritual that honors a variety of grief expressions together.*

4.

Resist Comparison *by making space for a range of emotions.*

Psychologists have long cautioned against defining ourselves or our experiences through comparison to others. Our processing of the pandemic cannot devolve into a “grief war.” Everyone has lost things—daily routines, the chance to travel, or a sense of normalcy in general. Many have lost friends or loved ones, as well as the opportunity to grieve or celebrate the lives of those lost. And, of course, many people have experienced real joy, as well. Avoid the trap of comparison by making room for a range of emotional responses as valid and important.



Over 50% of Gen Z tell us they will feel pressure to move on when the pandemic is over, but they won't feel ready.



57% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “It might be hard to see how other people are processing if it’s different than how I’m feeling.”

Comparison will be tempting, especially as young people will undoubtedly be exposed to cultural narratives in the news, media, and from family or friends about how they should be making up for lost time.

EXERCISE IN EMPATHY: Resisting comparison starts with expanding your emotional intelligence and vocabulary. Find pictures online that evoke what you feel, even without words. Make a collage. Take time to write down feelings and then do an exercise looking up synonyms to find the word or words that really capture where you’re at. Encourage the young people in your life to go through the same exercises, taking time to learn about themselves and the experiences of others with empathy.

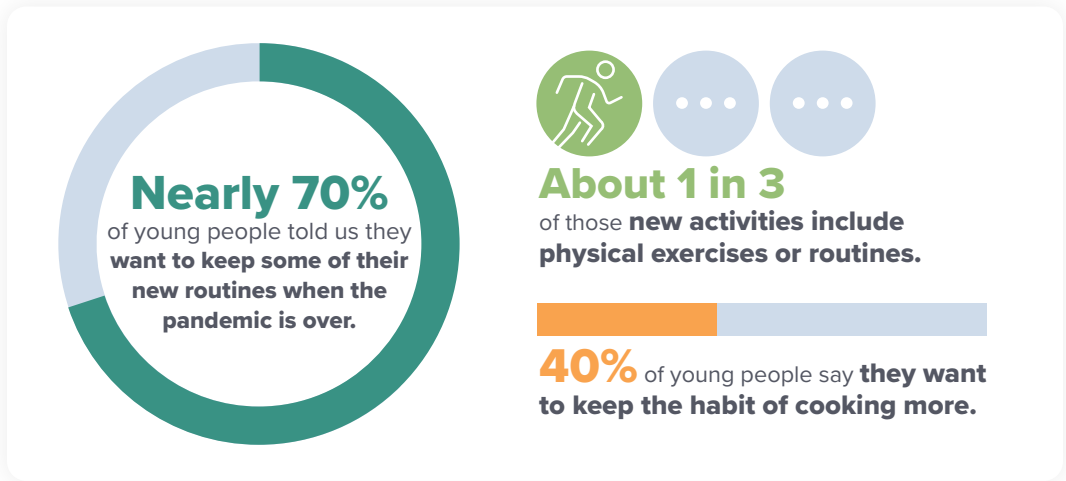
A series of horizontal lines for writing, starting below a green downward-pointing arrow and extending to the bottom of the page.

6.

Take Care of the Body to help the body and mind process stress.

In our conversation with the TBRI practitioner, one of the central ways she suggested creating safety was through physical movement and activities—including starting with meeting basic physical needs. Preparing food and then eating it together (without “deep talk”) is a simple way to build embodied trust. If the body feels safe, the brain can start to relax and process, too. In fact, the body does a lot of work holding on to stress and anxiety, sometimes without the brain knowing it. Whether or not young people have already changed some of their wellness routines during the pandemic, your ministry can introduce these elements. Walks, deep breaths, decreasing sugar or caffeine intake, drinking more water, are all simple but effective ways to care for the body in a time of stress or upheaval.

Many traditions already recognize the important role of the body for the spiritual life. Two of the five pillars of Islam relate to bodily practices: fasting—a practice of refraining from and then enjoying certain foods or activities, and pilgrimage—a physical trek to Mecca, that also prompts a bodily orientation in daily prayers. In Hinduism and Buddhism, meditation is a common practice. In the Theravada tradition, a Buddhist might sit still, hands in lap, legs crossed, focusing her attention on her breath, body, and inner feelings to seek enlightenment.



EXERCISE IN EMPATHY: The body does a lot of work processing new information—especially information about how to stay safe and keep others safe, like the kind we’ve received in the past year. How can you incorporate some physical movement—walks, exercise, mindful breathing—that help you care for your body, mind, and spirit in intentional ways?

Handwriting lines for reflection:

7.

Turn to the Arts *to find new modes of expression.*

Sometimes moving through a difficult time is easier when an object outside ourselves prompts a way to process it. A good book whose protagonist is easy to relate to can trigger an “aha!” that helps us see how to move through a circumstance. Art and nature, in general, are powerful vehicles for helping connect us with something outside ourselves.

In that sense, they are ‘religious’ vehicles in themselves, fostering a sense of “something more” that can lead to conversations, questions, and curiosities at home within your own religious traditions and rituals. Art and nature connect us to something greater through wonder: curiosity about the world around us, including the experience of others. This can lead to self-understanding, as those insights also teach us a new vocabulary for our own self-expression.



Nearly 1 in 3 young people **want to keep their new practices of painting, sculpting, or other artistic hobbies.**

During the pandemic, about a **quarter of young people said they felt safe being in nature.**



Think of a walk through a gallery or a walk through the woods as companion exercises that help us feel connected to others and find nonverbal expression for our experiences.

EXERCISE IN EMPATHY: *The arts can be cathartic. They help us find new ways to express and process feelings and experiences. Try journal writing, drawing, making music, dancing, or sculpting. Visit an art museum, watch a movie, read a book of poetry, take photographs, or craft a social media post. Importantly, ask the young people in your life to talk about their artistic hobbies without the pressure to “explain” their art. Help them to see connections to others and the Divine that they might not be able to articulate. If they’re open to it, consider hosting a time for young people to share the art they’ve been working on with each other and within your community.*

Handwriting practice lines consisting of a series of horizontal lines for writing.

8.

Focus on the Practical by offering young people concrete help.

The only way to make progress is one step at a time. But when faced with an overwhelming amount to do—when it feels urgent to make up for lost time, for example—we can feel paralyzed. The transition out of the pandemic is likely to bring almost as much difficulty as the transition into the pandemic. This is not because life will be worse, but because transitions themselves are hard. Finding ways to ease transitions by taking big decisions off the table and focusing on practical things—like preparing a meal, turning in the next assignment, adding journaling or breathing exercises to a list of weekly goals—will help young people find their footing and move forward.

In the context of ministry, this is not the time to tackle a new study series or take a deep dive into a difficult text or idea. Instead, try simply re-learning how to pray or meditate together. Rebuild the metaphorical vocabulary of collective religious and spiritual expression by focusing on tangible, concrete steps.



Nearly 1 in 3 young people tell us that a year after living in a pandemic, they **feel trapped**.

About a quarter of young people say they have turned to therapy or counseling this year to begin processing. This feeling of being trapped and the need for a safe, trusted outlet make sense. Fifty-seven percent of young people agree or strongly agree that “when the pandemic is over, I’ll need time and space to process what happened.” Time and space are the most practical and basic first steps you can focus on giving.

EXERCISE IN EMPATHY: Sometimes the practical thing is the most difficult: asking for help. You or the young people in your life may experience more than just passing stress. Create a safe environment where addressing mental health is the norm, and get professional help if necessary, or help young people get connected. Consider inviting a psychologist/psychiatrist to come chat with your group to offer practical advice about addressing mental health concerns as a way to open up this conversation.

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Even if you ran wonderful, effective programs before the pandemic, your post-pandemic ministry, outreach, and advocacy will likely need to shift, even in small ways. Young people’s social, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs are different—so the ways you meet those needs should be different, too.

You simply cannot return to normal. 



The New Normal

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