

THE NEW NORMAL

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



CONTENTS

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Introduction

One Year In	4
Not Back to Normal	5
So What Can We Do?	7

How to Care for Young People in a Post-Pandemic World

1. CREATE SAFETY to help young people regain their footing	12
2. GRIEVE WHAT'S BEEN LOST without dwelling on the negatives	14
3. CELEBRATE WHAT'S BEEN GAINED without insisting on optimism	16
4. RESIST COMPARISON by making space for a range of emotions	18
5. GET TOGETHER to combat isolation with intentional gatherings	20
6. TAKE CARE OF THE BODY to help the body and mind process stress	22
7. TURN TO THE ARTS to find new modes of expression	24
8. FOCUS ON THE PRACTICAL by offering young people concrete help	26

Conclusion



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

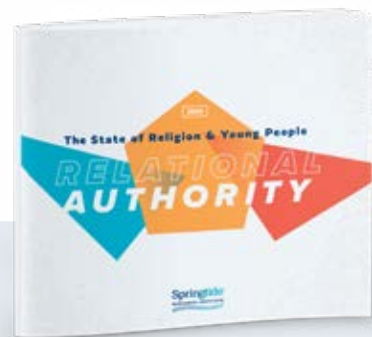
strongly agreed that their faith community has done a great job navigating the pandemic; this is a higher approval rating than either government or schools.

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.



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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