

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. We gathered the 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:

- ▶ 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 hard drive-in graduations in parking lots and who waved their goodbyes to teachers and classmates for the last time from a distance;
- ▶ 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,

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

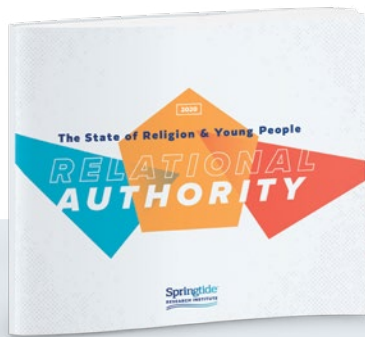
strongly agreed that their faith community has done a great job navigating the pandemic; this is a higher approval rating than either government or schools.

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*

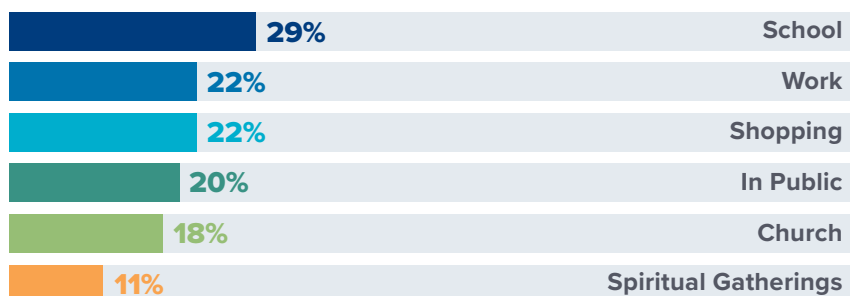
Uncertainty is about unsure footing. Safety is about making someone who stands on unstable ground feel confident taking a step, even when the next step might be equally as unsure as the first. We spoke with a practitioner trained in Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) who works with at-risk teens 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. Besides a few key places (in nature or on virtual calls, for example), young people by and large **did not agree** that they felt safe in various spaces and settings this past year.

Spaces where young people say they felt safe during the pandemic.

Participants were allowed to select more than one option.



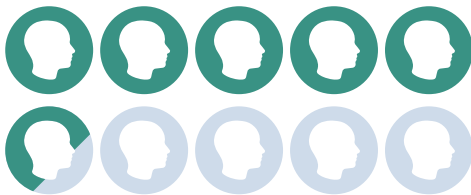
Percentages are rounded



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.

[illegible]

3.

Celebrate What's Been Gained *without insisting on optimism*

Young people need a model for how to hold difficulty and delight together, because life is full of such tensions—and always will be. It's tempting to write off the whole year, but digging deeper to name and claim what has been gained is important work. This doesn't mean optimism or silver linings: it means concretely describing what has been gained so that the narrative doesn't stick in your (or anyone's) head that an entire year of life was a wash.

The religious rituals and sacred scriptures of your tradition are crucial tools here. Think of the Psalms in Jewish and Christian texts—the way lament and joy sit side by side. Now is the time to take the teachings of your traditions and put them into action, not because religion necessarily gives us all the right answers, but because it can offer frameworks and rituals when there are no clear answers.



Nearly 70% of young people tell us that after the pandemic, they **“won’t take for granted relationships and opportunities the way they did before.”**

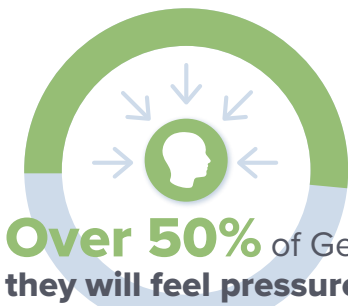
A quarter of 13-to-25-year-olds report feeling closer to people after a year of living in the pandemic, and 44% percent say they found joy in getting more time to themselves. These are just a few glimpses of “gains” from the past year.

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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.”**

exposed to cultural narratives in the news, media, and from family or friends about how they should be making up for “lost time.”

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5.

Get Together *to combat isolation with intentional gatherings*

It will be important to maintain virtual connections even as opportunities to foster in-person relationships grow. Many young people have established relationships in the last year that have only existed online, and we know [online connections can be transformational, not just transactional](#). We should keep those spaces and relationships available to them, in addition to pacing one-on-one, small group, and larger gatherings back into our calendars. The pacing is important—we’ve collectively internalized a narrative that gathering is risky, unsafe, or inadvisable. It may take time to unlearn that lesson.

When we do gather, we should remember that the heart of many religious traditions is community. Being in community is not just caring for who shows up, but also being mindful of who is in your fold but failing to show up, and reaching out to them. Use the disruption of the pandemic to think through how and with whom you are gathering, keeping in mind that just because we can return to pre-pandemic programs for gathering young people, it doesn’t mean we always should. While the pandemic forced some new realities, it also accelerated realities that were already at work, including a trend toward virtual or smaller gatherings. This might be an ideal time to re-think what was and wasn’t working about your ministry before the pandemic and seize the opportunity to reimagine how to gather well.



57% of young people agree or strongly agree that **most of their connections are virtual, even during normal times.**



Nearly 60% agreed with the statement, **“When the pandemic is over, I might feel a little tentative about socializing, making plans for the future, being in large groups, traveling, etc.”**

The return to in-person gatherings is important for combating isolation, but it should be thoughtful, keeping in mind the real bonds that have happened online this year.

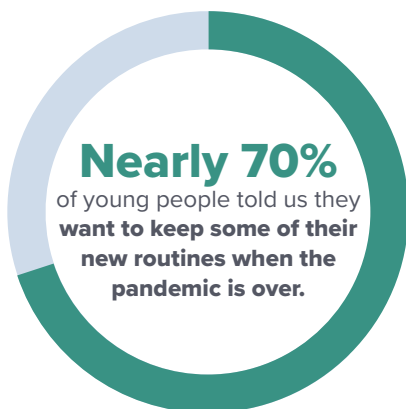
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6.

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.



About 1 in 3

of those **new activities** include
physical exercises or routines.



40% of young people say **they want
to keep the habit of cooking more.**

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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.

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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.

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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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