

A Parent's Guide to
**TALKING ABOUT
VIOLENCE**

axis

*“Empathy is about finding echoes of another person
in yourself.”*

– Mohsin Hamid

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This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ❓ How do we react to violence?
- ❓ How can we respond, rather than react, to violence?
- ❓ How do we fight desensitization?
- ❓ How do we fight empathy fatigue?
- ❓ What does the Bible say about dealing with violence?
- ❓ How can we develop empathy and love for those who are suffering?
- ❓ How can we be hopeful despite the violence we see around us?

Introduction

In 2020 in the U.S., 45,222 people died from [incidents involving guns](#). In the top ten countries rated by [World Population Review](#), almost 61,000 people died in stabbings during 2021. One in twelve teenagers will experience [intimate partner violence](#). The [number of murders](#) in the U.S. has increased by 44% from 2019 to 2021. In 2022 alone, the [number of hit and runs](#) is almost 20 per neighborhood throughout the U.S. Worldwide, [1 in 3 women](#) will experience sexual violence in their lifetime. Right now, there are an estimated [40 wars](#) being waged across the globe.

Our world is a violent one. As the statistics above show, the amount of real violence experienced by people the world over is astronomical. That doesn't even include the violence we encounter in video games, what we see in movies and on TV, and what we read about. Everywhere, people cause each other harm. And in many cases, it feels as though we are helpless to stop it.

If there is one thing we know, it is that our God is a good God. But that can sometimes be hard to believe when we look around and see the pain and suffering that surrounds us. In [Habakkuk 1:1](#), the prophet cries out to God, saying "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?"

The goal of this Parent Guide is not to depress you, or make you feel that there is no hope. We at Axis believe in the redeeming power of Jesus Christ's new covenant, and we believe that one day there will be an end to all suffering, including the violence we see today. But for now, we need to learn how to understand and appropriately respond to and synthesize violence, so that we can live with the hope of that new covenant without giving up on our world as it is.

How do we react to violence?

Our initial reaction to violence, in most cases, is a fear reaction. According to the [National Library of Medicine](#), part of what is so distasteful to us about violence is the threat of what can happen to us as a result of it:

NLEs (Negative Life Events) have been independently associated with recurrent pain problems, acute infections, myocardial infarction, cardiovascular diseases, colorectal cancer, or skin diseases. Comparably, NLEs increase the risk for mental health problems as well as major depression and schizophrenia. NLEs, in particular violence, may also disrupt concentration and memory and indirectly impair academic performance contributing to early disability.

We fear the long-term effects of violence on our longevity and quality of life. We don't like the idea that our lives could be permanently altered by a single act of violence. And of course, that is frightening. Even if we can't fully understand what being on the receiving end of violence would mean, we sense the potential it has to harm us, or even kill us. It's why we check dark alleys, why we lock our doors, why we tell our children to come home when the streetlights come on.

But there's more to our dislike for violence. Even if it's not happening to us, we feel fear and anger at the concept of violence happening to others, friends and family and strangers alike. This response is called empathy. Christian Keysers of the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience in Amsterdam [says this](#) of empathy:

When we witness what happens to others, we don't just activate the visual cortex like we thought some decades ago. We also activate our own actions as if we'd be acting in similar ways. We activate our own emotions and sensations as if we felt the same.

An empathetic response isn't just something we should try to have, it's something we innately experience. We experience violence being enacted on others as though it is being enacted on us.

At least, we should. There is a term you're probably familiar with which has a massive impact on how we relate to and experience violence and empathy: desensitization. According to the [American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology](#), desensitization is "a reduction in emotional or physical reactivity to stimuli." In other words, it is the lack of empathetic response towards certain events or situations. Desensitization towards violence is especially an issue for teens and children, who witness more violence than previous generations in video games,

movies, and TV, as well as in reality. An article published in the Journal of Adolescence [says this](#) about desensitization studies done on fifth-graders: “Regression analyses indicated that only exposure to video game violence was associated with (lower) empathy. Both video game and movie violence exposure were associated with stronger proviolence attitudes.”

Gen Z is not only exposed to more violent media, but has been born into a far more violent world than the one their parents were born into ([statistics](#) show a rise in crime from 1,887.2 per 100,000 people per year in 1960 to 2,489.3 in 2019). On top of that, they have a window into all of that violence right in their pocket on their [smartphone](#). All of this combines to form a kind of “empathy fatigue”. [Dr. Susan Albers](#) defines empathy fatigue as, “The emotional and physical exhaustion that happens from caring for people day, after day, after day...Over time, we start to see people experiencing a sense of numbness and distancing or difficulty continuing to care.”

Empathy fatigue and desensitization are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, there is so much violence to care about that you become overextended trying to care about it all and collapse inwards. On the other hand, you are shown so much violence that you don't have to care about (video games, movies, TV) that it becomes rote and you begin to feel numb. In either case the result is the same: your ability to feel and synthesize violence is not only limited but, in some circumstances, completely broken down.

Reflection Questions:

- ▶ How do you think about violence? What violent situations have you experienced? How do you think about those experiences? How did you deal with them? Do you think you are desensitized to violence? Have you ever experienced empathy fatigue?

How do we deal with desensitization?

Desensitization is a difficult thing to fight, mostly because we are so surrounded by violence that we are, even as children, used to it. The [Journal of Interpersonal Violence](#) says, “Children exposed to multiple sources of violence may become desensitized, increasing the possibility of them imitating the aggressive behaviors they watch and considering such behavior as normal.” However, this does not *have* to be the norm.

The opposite of desensitization is not avoidance, removing ourselves from all violence both simulated and real. If we do that, we close ourselves off to the possibility of healthy empathy. Especially when it comes to parenting teens, we cannot protect them from violence as a whole. Even if you were to take away all violent video games, movies, and TV, and forbid them from engaging with articles and news reports pertaining to violence, they would still be exposed to violence and violent material at friends’ houses, school, and in the world at large. Not to say that discernment isn’t important in choosing what media our teens see, including limiting the kinds of movies, TV, and video games you bring into your home, but it’s important to remember that we can’t protect our children from everything. Nowhere is this more evident than in teens’ experiences and responses to the threat of personal violence. [Everytownresearch.com](#) says this about gun violence and teens:

Annually, more than 3,500 children and teens (ages 0 to 19) are shot and killed, and 15,000 are shot and wounded—that’s an average of 52 American children and teens every day. And the effects of gun violence extend far beyond those struck by a bullet: An estimated three million children witness a shooting each year. Gun violence shapes the lives of the children who witness it, know someone who was shot, or live in fear of the next shooting.

Our children live with the understanding that violence is a part of the world they inhabit. Kids go to school every day with the knowledge that they have to keep going, even though the simple act of attendance could potentially make them the target of a [shooter](#). There is no way to completely protect our children from violence. Instead, the key to helping our children decrease their desensitization and develop higher levels of empathy is to help them *sensitize* themselves to violence. [Several studies](#) show that when teens are shown the impact that violence has on real people, including victim interviews, war impact photography, and conversations with friends

and relatives who have experienced violence, these things can help them to understand that violence is more than just something seen in media; it's a real thing that has real results.

Another way to increase sensitization is to discuss media violence with your children. If all they are doing is seeing violence without processing it, they are much more likely to become desensitized to it. Instead, the [Center for Media Literacy](#) argues that having conversations with your children about what violence means to them can help them sensitize themselves to even the mindless violence depicted in many video games, movies, and TV shows:

The best way to help children deal with violent television is to watch with them and talk to them about what they see. Find out what they understand and what they don't...It is important for children to learn the difference between reality and fantasy at an early age and to know how costumes, camera angles, and special effects can fool them.

When kids understand that the violence they see in the media is specifically designed to be at least somewhat palatable to them, they can understand that real violence does not have that veneer of attractiveness.

It's hard to break down a state of desensitization, whether you've been exposed to media violence for a long time, or you've experienced domestic, cultural, or personal violence. But it is not an impossible task. Empathy is something that can be fostered and grown, and it is perhaps the most valuable tool to take into life as a whole. An empathetic person is able to create deep and lasting relationships and be sensitive and personal when it comes to difficult situations. Working to sensitize ourselves and our children to violence has long-term value when it comes to understanding and living in a painful world.

Reflection Questions:

- How do you notice violent media affecting you? Practically, which video games, movies, and TV shows do you want to limit in your home? How can you become more sensitive to violence?

How do we deal with empathy fatigue?

Empathy fatigue is associated with burnout, irritability, exhaustion, and an overwhelming sense of loss. Gen Z, more than any other generation, has experienced empathy fatigue due to the serious and life-changing events that have occurred in their lifetime. [WGSN](#) says this of Gen Z's relationship with empathy fatigue:

[From March to October of 2020], the world has faced environmental devastation, the greatest civil rights movement of our time and a pandemic, resulting in compassion fatigue. This is when people feel less empathy due to prolonged exposure to compound collective trauma.

Gen Z also has had more access to these events than any other generation due to their exposure to social media. All across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, videos and pictures of the death of George Floyd, the effects of COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine to name a few have filled their collective consciousness. It is impossible to care at maximum capacity for every single issue, so as a result they have shut down their ability to empathize at all.

But, as with desensitization, this does not mean that their empathetic abilities are lost forever. The key to reducing empathy fatigue is pinpointing the fact that you are experiencing it. [Goodtherapy.org](#) says,

Knowing the signs and symptoms and continuing to check in with yourself can help you better prevent and manage compassion fatigue if it arises. Many people find that ranking their level of compassion fatigue on a scale of 1-10 is an effective strategy. For example, a rank of 6 might mean you are declining social invitations due to feeling drained and a 7 might be difficulty sleeping due to excessive worry about someone else's well-being.

Self-awareness is the key to understanding when you might be experiencing empathy fatigue. If you notice your teen is complaining of depression, anger, or exhaustion, it might be helpful to dig a little deeper into *why* they feel that way. If they've been immersing themselves in the news, be that through social media or traditional reporting, they might be feeling—and this is not an exaggeration—the weight of the world on their shoulders. Encourage your teen to engage their heart with their minds and think about how this information impacts them. If they can verbalize why they are hurting, or, more accurately, why they have stopped hurting and become numb,

they can begin to ease themselves out of that place of exhaustion and back into a space of caring consideration.

Now, that's easier said than done. What are some practical ways we can deal with the effects of empathy fatigue rather than simply becoming aware of it? According to compassionresiliencetoolkit.org, "Compassion resilience is the ability to maintain our physical, emotional, and mental well-being while responding compassionately to people who are suffering." Therapist Aundi Kolber, who struggles with empathy fatigue in her line of work, said that, "When she gets home, she unwinds and says she engages in mindfulness, contemplative prayer, walks in an intentional way, listens to music, connects to affirmations and reaches out to people close to her for support." Practices like these help to refocus a person experiencing empathy fatigue on their *own* feelings through processing, mindfulness, and outside care rather than keeping them trapped in the cycle of taking on others' feelings all day, every day.

Another way to reduce empathy fatigue in order to develop compassion resilience is to limit the intake of things you must feel compassion for. This doesn't mean closing yourself off from everything, but it might mean *not* watching triggering videos, learning about violent situations in person from people you trust rather than from people on social media, or telling some people who come to you needing to process that you aren't able to engage with any more emotionally taxing situations at the moment.

It also doesn't mean you have to maintain all these boundaries forever. Being self-aware and noting when you're feeling overwhelmed gives you the ability to make an informed decision about whether this is a situation where you need to push through and feel what you believe you need to feel, or whether you need to take a step back and rest. Especially for teenagers, who feel all feelings with intensity, breaks from actively caring will help them care more and better in the long run about personal and global issues, especially when it comes to violence.

Like any human quality, empathy has a great deal of ability to bounce back. As we cultivate our empathy, rather than throwing all of it at every problem, we will see it grow and become stronger. Self-awareness and healthy boundaries create empathy that can handle the violence it's called upon to deal with. For our teens, learning these lessons creates empathy that extends far into adulthood, and releases them from the numbness and exhaustion of empathy fatigue.

Above all else, though, prayer creates healthy empathy. Like Jesus says in [Matthew 5:44](#), "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." When we lift the violence of the world up to God in prayer, it becomes easier for us to experience empathy not only for the

victims of violence but for its perpetrators as well, allowing us to have the best response possible to all situations as we look with care and compassion on a world which so desperately needs it.

Reflection Questions:

- Have you experienced empathy fatigue? How would you rate your level of empathy fatigue on a scale of 1-10? How do you personally unwind when you are feeling overwhelmed? How can those tools help you deal with empathy fatigue? How can you develop compassion resilience? What do you think that looks like in your own life?

Conclusion

In Habakkuk 1, the Lord responds to Habakkuk's cry against violence with an assurance that he is in control: "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told." No matter what is happening in our personal lives or in the world, we can be assured that God is working out a plan for good. And, most importantly, the crux of this plan has already been accomplished: Jesus' death on the cross. When Jesus died, he purchased with his blood all the sins and all the consequences of the sins of everyone in the world. When he came back to life, he made the assurance that one day all would be made right—an end to suffering, grief, and violence. If we place our hope in Jesus, we will never be disappointed.

That doesn't mean that we shouldn't do our best to live the kingdom life while we're here on this earth. A huge part of maintaining hope in a violent world is doing our part to assist those who are impacted by violence. Whether that means advocating for victims of domestic violence by sharing the National Domestic Violence Hotline (800-799-7233), or participating in [local legislature](#), or donating to organizations fighting to [end human trafficking](#), we all have a role to play in mitigating the effect violence has on people around the world.

As we mentioned above, the best tool we have for keeping up hope in a violent world is prayer. In Matthew 6 we find the best-known prayer in the world, the so-named Lord's Prayer. Specifically in [verse 10](#), we find a prayer that, upon closer examination, seems like an odd request: "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This prayer should give us more hope for this world than anything. It gives us hope that while the kingdom of God in heaven is not yet here, there is a foretaste of the kingdom that can exist with us here on earth. We ask God to bring it *now*, to the people he loves and cares for, and that his will may be accomplished. We pray that God would do what he's promised, and show his love and care to those who are suffering. We pray that he would give comfort to the lonely, and seek the lost. He will listen, because he's said he will listen. We echo in our prayers the words of Psalm 121:1-2: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth."

Reflection Questions:

- ▶ Where in the Bible do you see God's plan for restoration? What are some ways you can practically help mitigate violence in our world? How can you pray for God's kingdom to come about on earth?

Invitation to Generosity

We hope you enjoyed this Parent Guide. To help us equip more parents and caring adults to minister to the next generation, consider making a donation at axis.org.

Sources

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Related Axis Resources:

- › Conversation Kit on Violence
- › Conversation Kit on Video Games
- › A Parent's Guide to Talking About Death