

teaching notes

ten-week
series
to help build
strong minds

Sample

What if?
Expectations
Safety
Forgiveness
Rejection
Peace
Loneliness
Baggage
FOMO
Shame
Insecurity
Conflict
Perfectionism
Weaknesses
Self-worth
Friendships
Help
Community
Embarrassment
Looks
Tribe
Contentment
The future
Hopes
Success
Sin
Anxiety
Relationships
Honesty
Overwhelm
Disappointment
Strengths
Confidence
Comparison
Failure
Guilt
Overthinking
Body image
Purpose
Identity
Rest
Fears
Doubts
Falling short
Isolation
Feelings

Welcome to CHANGING MINDS

Introduction

I've been in youth ministry for over 30 years and I've never seen a time like this - where so many of our children and young people are struggling with their minds: social anxiety, school refusal, OCD, depression, disordered eating, self-harm and more...

Meanwhile, the gospel is still GOOD NEWS! We have young people with no church background arriving in our groups and saying, 'We haven't got any stability in our lives, and Christians seem to have that. We want community and you have that here too." Knowing Jesus brings people stability, security in his unconditional love and hope for the future even when the world is difficult. Being part of a loving, sacrificial community brings acceptance and encouragement.

This material is designed to help young people fix their eyes on Jesus (Heb.12.2) and to discover that the gospel is good news for their minds. The gospel sets us free and gives hope. Focussing on Jesus and living in obedience to him changes everything, including our thought patterns, helping us avoid an unhealthy focus on self, comparisons with others, fear of the future, and more. This course is an exploration of what the Bible says and helps us to allow the gospel to influence every area of our lives, including our minds. **Can it be used with adults?** Of course it can because it's biblical teaching into a cultural issue that affects adults as well as young people!

Publicity

Sample

Do use some of the words on the front cover in your publicity. They're words and ideas I hear a lot in youth ministry. Many of these I didn't hear at all when I first started in youth ministry over 30 years ago, like overwhelm and overthinking.

Consider how you talk to parents/carers about this course: What if young people overshare and confuse others? Is it self-help or Bible teaching? Be clear in communication what the course is trying to do and how it will be run.

Included with the course is some publicity for Instagram and some pictures for other use. If there's anything else that would be helpful, please ask. I've still got the original work.

Presentation

I normally preach through a Bible passage, but this series is thematic teaching, picking up various verses through the Bible. This is different, but is still biblical! I could have done a series on Genesis and a series on Ephesians, and so on, and eventually if I applied the passages well, I could have covered all the same ground, but it would take much longer, and I think we would lose some of the impact of holding all of this together. Sorry if you don't like thematic teaching, but I think Jesus did it himself in passages like Luke 4.1-13. I do understand the dangers and I hope I've avoided them.

There is a Powerpoint template that goes with the series, as well as a participant's booklet to take notes and record weekly challenges.

We need to start with our Bible passages: what is there in these verses that shapes our minds? What is there here that, if we really knew this and believed this and lived this, would utterly transform our minds and, if other people knew it, would change their minds too? I've put down some key words to pick up, where I think these verses could challenge our thinking about those key areas. In session 3 for example, 'Who am I?' is about identity, but you can also cover issues like looks, body image, self-worth, strengths/weaknesses, safety, children of God, redeemed etc, made in God's image. Please take these words seriously. When else are we going to be talking about perfectionism or overthinking?

Choose one or two key passages, and have them look up the verses, but make sure that you only use one or two, not four. If you're bringing in other verses, read them but only tell them at the end where they are, then they can make a note and find them later. You can also put the verse on a screen. That keeps it from being a verse hunt with people struggling to keep up. By all means add your own verses (why not let me know what you used?), but beware of exhausting young people by jumping all over the place. As I say in my book, if you want people to look up a verse, give them the verse number before you start reading it; if you don't, don't. I've put some links on the notes as illustrations. Always double check that they are right for your context and if you can find better ones, let me know. Also, make sure you've played any advert preceding a video before the session starts. You don't want to be embarrassed. This series is a great opportunity to invite in visitors to share their stories too.

Sample

Be careful that each session is age and experience appropriate. Be aware of how different people will handle deeper sharing. It's good that people are sharing their struggles with their minds, but we don't want that to negatively affect others in the group. For that reason, as much as you can, put older young people in small groups with other older young people. I appreciate that may not always be possible because of group size and leader numbers.

Make sure that small group leaders are aware that young people might share a wide range of their personal challenges, from gender identity questions to self-harm, from eating disorders to OCD. That didn't happen in my small groups, but it may. It's fine to say, 'Thanks for sharing that. That's very important. Please can you and I talk about that after the session?' But be sure that you do go back to them. You may also need to talk to others who heard things that are difficult to hear and ask how they are feeling about it. Talk to those children's parents, without breaking confidences. The reality is, sadly, many of our young people will be hearing some very difficult things to hear a lot at school and in group chats. Providing a safe place to hear and talk about those things is very important.

If you are asking people to share deeply, say by writing on an anonymous post-it note then reading out the answers, please make sure you warn young people you will be reading out answers, even if they're anonymous.

Make sure when you deliver the course, you encourage them to do each weekly challenge at the back of their participant's booklets and learn the memory verse. If you have time, help them to learn the verse before you finish the week. If you want to open Angel Envelopes in session 9, you might want to make them and start them in week one.

Following up

Take some time at the start of each week to refer back to the memory verse and the weekly challenge. How have people done with it? When we ran the course, at the start of the next week, we asked people to answer a question that followed on from last week e.g. for the start of week 4 we put a flipchart up with the question in the middle: "Write something positive about yourself…" Fascinating to see that even with the prompt, a lot of people still wrote: "I'm friends with Jamie" or "I've got tickets to see X." It shows us something of the challenge we still have.

Author's note:

It is difficult for many of us as leaders to talk about our minds too. We know that one day there will be no more illness and pain, but illness and pain harm the minds of many young people today. Mental illness is an illness. Nobody should be coming off medication unless their doctor says so. So we cry out to God for a miracle of healing our minds but we use the best medical advice we can too.

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Please note that this material was written by a church youth worker, and not a medical expert. I'm Dave Thornton, author of **Raising the Bar: Nearly Everything You Need to Know about Christian Youth Ministry**. The course was tested at my home church - Christ Church, Winchester, UK. Please take time before you start the course to talk to any local experts that you can find, as I did, but also to find resources that you can signpost people towards. You might even want to draft those experts in to help.

Most of us aren't trained counsellors. Let's leave the counselling to the experts. All of us though can teach Bible truth, we can be gentle, compassionate and understanding. We can offer a God who is always with us (Matt.28.20) even in our darkest moments (Psalm 23.4), a God who eases our burdens and gives us rest (Matt.11.28) and an eternal hope (2 Cor.4.17). Make sure all of your leaders know what needs to be reported to your Safeguarding Lead.

You can find more resources at www.churchyouthministry.com where you can also buy my book. I'd love it if you send me any encouragements, feedback, comments, questions or suggestions. "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." (Proverbs 27.17). My email is churchyouthministry@btinternet.com.

4. What if I'm never famous?

Big idea:

God calls us to follow Jesus, whatever situations we find ourselves in.

Key passages:

- Jeremiah 29.11-13 (We can be known by God)
- Mark 1.16-20 (Jesus calls Peter and Andrew)
- Matthew 9.9-13 (Jesus calls Matthew)
- John 1.43-51 (Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael) (Jesus says 'Follow me!' to all of them)
- Matthew 11.28-30 (Come to me, take my yoke)
- John 3.1-21 (Purpose to be saved to eternal life)
- Ephesians 2.10 (Good works planned)

Key words to pick up:
Calling, purpose, disappointment, failure vs. success, expectations, comfort, hopes, fears , doubts, falling short, catastrophising, what if? Knowing God/loving Him.

Introductory activity:
Any building activity would work: tallest free-standing tower built using just newspaper and tape in 10 minutes or bridge over a marked 'river', supported only on the river bank, built using newspaper and tape that will support the heaviest weight (e.g. baked bean tins); etc. Give teams a couple of minutes to plan, then let them build. Use this to introduce our plans - sometimes they work out, sometimes they don't, sometimes they look like they're working out, then they fall down at the very last minute. At the end, what is going to stand under pressure?

Sample

Notes for teaching:
Culture often says we should be achieving loads e.g. climbing Everest, getting straight As, having a six-pack, going to college/uni, being in a relationship, etc. Maybe we end up feeling like under-achievers. Our minds might tell us that whatever we try will end in disaster. What are our expectations from each day and our whole lives? Do we think we need to have achieved something huge? What are our hopes and fears? What if everyone else is having more fun than we are? What if everyone else is more liked than us? What are our doubts about ourselves? What are they stopping us doing? William Shakespeare wrote in Measure for Measure:

ISABELLA: Alas, what poor ability's in me to do him good?
LUCIO: Assay the power you have.
ISABELLA: My power? Alas, I doubt—
LUCIO: Our doubts are traitors and makes us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt.

In other words, our doubts and fears stop us attempting anything. They keep us locked up, scared about failure.

God says our purpose is to follow him, whoever we are and wherever we find ourselves (Mark 1.16-20, Matt.9.9-13, John 1.43-51). The disciples' purpose became being with Jesus. Our purpose is to come to Jesus to find salvation in him, coming out of the darkness and into the light (John 3.1-21). When we come to him, we find his yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matt.11.28-30).

Culture says you deserve comfort. If only you start your own business/invest in cryptocurrency/ have loads of followers, whatever... The reality? Life will be a mixture. All of us at times will suffer. God says we can expect life to be hard, even as Christians (Luke 9.23 (carrying cross) and 2 Timothy 3.12 (godly lives lead to persecution)). Sometimes we'll succeed and sometimes fail. We can be realistic without being pessimistic.

God wants to prosper us, but what does that look like? Calling on him and coming to him, seeking after him. (Jer.29.11-13) Those are good plans! He has a purpose for us, already marked out. Not to be a lawyer (though we might be). Nor to get married (though we might). Nor to have a long life (though we might). Christians all have spiritual gifts to use (1 Cor. 12). He has good works ready for us, and we can do those things however things turn out (Eph.2.10).

The speech from the Barbie movie "Impossible to be a woman" (America Ferrera's Iconic Barbie Speech) is an interesting one. In summary, you can't win. Be aware of the connotations of the movie as a whole, and it's fair to say it's impossible to be a man too, often for very similar reasons.

Sample

What are we pinning our identity on? What will fulfil us? Things turning out just the way we planned them? One military general said, 'No plan survives first contact with the enemy.' Our expectations need to change. We can trust God and enjoy life without being in control. Imagine a partner dancing lesson. What's the worst that can happen? Tripping over? Not being able to do it? Someone saying no to dancing with us? I elbowed two women in the head during my first dancing lesson and now teach my youth group to dance! You can share your own failures.

Maybe 'What if?' should be replaced by 'Even if...' 'What if I get it wrong?' becomes 'Even if I get it wrong, God will still love me, God's people will still love me and I'll still follow Jesus.' Don't dwell on the 'What if?'s, instead throw yourself into it, and even if it all goes wrong, you may find success and even joy! The worst thing is never stepping forward at all. What if the disciples never followed?

Sometimes we think God's calling is mainly about career or success. We think: "What if I choose the wrong job?", "What if I never become successful?" or "What if my life looks ordinary?" God is powerful and loving enough to get us where He wants us to be - doing his good works (Eph.2.10), so let's enjoy the journey. Follow Him in worship and prayer, godliness and witness.

Compare 'What if I'm never famous...?' to 1 Thess.4.11-12 (Ambition to lead a quiet life and work with your hands). You might want to invite some people in to talk about what people have found about their purpose. Not all will have run a marathon or gone to college/ university. Some may stay at home and look after children. Some may be eye surgeons. Some will have done both.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is helpful. Lowest is Physiological. Then Safety (including emotional as well as physical), then Love and belonging. Do young people feel they are loved and belong? Then is Esteem (i.e. status and respect). Top is Self-actualisation (which is about legacy) and then Transcendence. But Jesus is with us, even right at the bottom, when only our physical needs are being met and we don't feel safe or loved. We don't need to be worthy to worship God. We can be a servant. We don't even need to be the best servant. We don't ever need to be esteemed or be self-actualised and achieve a worldly legacy. We know because we have the example of Christ (Isa.53.3).

You can tell the story of a past saint here, perhaps from your own church, perhaps from your own past. Many will have been known for their godliness and spiritual impact, and yet be unknown by the rest of the world.

God's calling for our lives gives us new priorities that will change our minds. God's calling frees us from the worldly need for achievement and allows us to be content. Think more about God's plan for our lives here: What is God's plan for my life? | GotQuestions.org

Small group questions:

1. What is something that you would love to achieve in your life? [Encourage people to think widely - might be getting married, or buying a house, or being a global singing superstar or stopping poverty]
2. How do you feel about God's plan being to come to Him and follow Him all your life, wherever that takes you? [Think about whether that might be fulfilling, interesting and exciting]
3. How might following God's calling free us from overthinking or catastrophising situations or worrying about not achieving everything we could in our lives?
4. When might following God's call on our lives be uncomfortable?
5. How could we follow God's calling this week?
6. Whether your plans work out the way you planned or don't work out, how might you still prioritise God?

Sample

Songs:

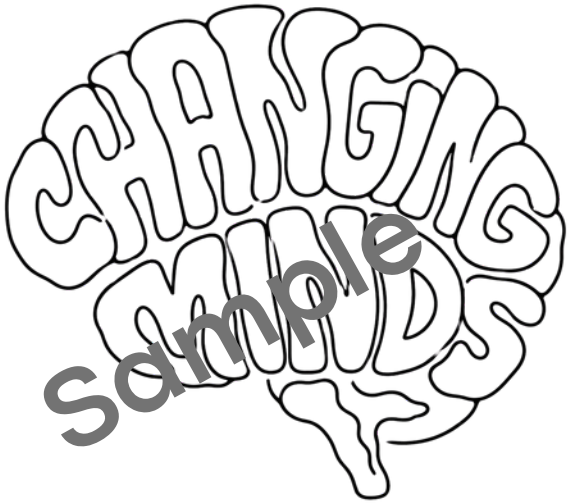
"Yet not I but through Christ in me" by CityAlight
"Mighty to save" by Hillsong Worship, Reuben Morgan & Brad Gillies

Memory verse:

Jeremiah 29.11

Weekly challenge (in the booklet):

What are the must-haves for your life? What are the would-likes?
Think about whether the 'must-haves' really should be 'would-likes'.



Sample

All quotes are from The Holy Bible: New International Version [NIV], 2011

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