

THE OPTIMIST

Faith & Family Discussion Guide

The Optimist tells the true story of Herbert Heller, who kept hidden the story of his years in Auschwitz as a teenage boy from his family, until he meets Abbey, a young teenager whose own brush with pain and death inspires Herbert to open up. Through their honest and compassionate exchange, a healing and transformational friendship is born. This guide is designed to encourage families, small groups, and classrooms to reflect deeply on the emotional, spiritual, and relational themes at the heart of *The Optimist*.

Haunting Trauma

The Optimist is full of profound emotional and spiritual themes, but chief among them is trauma, both the experience of it, its hold on our lives, and how we navigate its lasting impact. Herbert and Abbey both suffer from PTSD as a result of drastically different traumas, the former from the horrors of the Holocaust and the latter from an emotionally abusive father, a neglectful mother, and the failed suicide pact with her best friend.

The film effectively shows how traumatic events and memories of them break into victims' lives wholly unexpectedly and without warning, often triggered by even the most mundane and harmless events. The film also showcases effective practices for navigating those invasive moments, from breathing exercises to therapy to conversations with fellow sufferers. There's also the trauma of survival, one that, perhaps, will never fully heal. These questions will, to some extent, forever haunt the film's central characters. Why did Herbert live while millions died? Why did Abby live while her friend died?

Questions for Consideration:

- Do you or someone you know suffer from trauma? How do you process those ongoing struggles?
- When have you seen someone endure great trauma? If they were able to navigate this trauma in a healthy way, how did this happen? In what ways has this inspired you?
- What role does faith, prayer, or spiritual community play in healing from trauma?

Curious Connections

One of the strengths of *The Optimist* is the inter-generational friendship at the core of the story. We don't often see such dynamics at work in film, and when we do, they're often played for comedy. But *The Optimist* shows the importance and benefits of developing friendships and nurturing relationships that cross generational divides.

Herbert is able to provide Abbey with some much-needed perspective on her own experiences. He never invalidates her suffering, but his honest recounting of the horrors he suffered puts Abbey's suffering in a much broader and deeper context. And to her credit, Abbey is never dismissive of any part of Herbert's story or judgmental of his decision to keep his story a secret for so long. She simply listens and asks questions, and her act of bearing witness to his suffering brings some measure of healing to Herbert's life.

At the heart of both of their approaches to one another is a healthy dose of curiosity. Herbert tells Abbey, "I'd rather hear about [you.]" The world would be a much better place if we all lead with a spirit of curiosity about the other, rather than judgment or a desire to be "right."

Questions for Consideration:

- Consider your friend and family relationships. Do you interact with people much older or younger than you? What have you learned from them? How have these relationships impacted your life?
- Have you seen inspirational inter-generational friendships in your community? In what ways do they encourage or inspire you to seek out similar connections?
- What assumptions do you hold about older or younger people? How might curiosity challenge or change those assumptions?

The Necessity of Friendship

Friendship—especially across generations—can bring joy, healing, wisdom, and perspective. While life is full of challenges, grief, and unpredictability, it becomes more bearable, more meaningful, and often more beautiful when we're not walking it alone. That doesn't always mean having a lifelong companion, but it does mean having someone, at some point, who sees you, understands you, and accepts you as you are.

The Optimist illustrates this truth with quiet power. One of its most poignant lessons is the value of authentic friendship, even if it comes briefly and unexpectedly. Herbert and Abbey are not lifelong companions, but in the short time they share, they offer one another something essential: permission to be fully seen. Their friendship becomes a turning point—unlocking honesty, vulnerability, and healing. Though their paths may ultimately diverge, the impact of their connection endures.

Abbey begins her story alone, shaped by dysfunction and pain, until she finds a sense of safety and recognition in her friendship with Herbert. Herbert, though supported by his family, finds in Abbey the freedom to express a part of himself long kept hidden. Their friendship is not about fixing one another—it's about witnessing and accepting each other with kindness.

This is what true friendship offers: not necessarily a lifelong partner, but a shared moment of grace and mutual affirmation. The memory of such friendships can continue to shape us long after they end.

Questions for Consideration:

- Who is someone in your life who truly sees you? How has their friendship impacted the way you see yourself?
- Is there someone around you who may need to feel seen or supported right now? How might you extend friendship or compassion to them?
- When have you experienced a short-lived friendship that made a long-term difference in your life?

Choosing Hope

The Optimist is about Herbert's healing, but the optimist in *The Optimist* is really Herbert's father, who, despite the unimaginable suffering he endures, never loses hope. In the face of great evil, Herbert's father chooses hope, joy, and love. He sets an example for his sons and their fellow prisoners. It's a lesson that Herbert never forgets.

Later in the film, Herbert tells Abbey, "I chose to believe my father." Hope, like so many feelings (love, fear, joy, and despair, for example) can take us by surprise. Think about how we talk about some experiences: we are "knocked off our feet" or "stunned into silence." But *The Optimist* shows us that there can be an element of choice in how we respond to all of our experiences. We can make a conscious *decision* to *choose* hope, joy, and love and to banish fear, hate, and anger. Of course, there are limits to the power, or effectiveness, of choice when

it comes to those who suffer from PTSD or clinical depression, but, for most of us, in our day-to-day lives, the power of choice is available to us. We can choose to hope, to live in love, and to banish hate.

Questions for Consideration:

- What gives you hope in difficult times?
- Talk about a time when you experienced intense feelings of fear, anger, or hatred. Were you able to process and release those feelings? If so, how? If not, why not?
- Who in your life models hope for you? What do they teach you about resilience?

Sharing Stories

Films are stories. *The Optimist* is a story about the power of sharing stories. Herbert has kept his story a secret for far too long. It perpetuates and extends the suffering that was inflicted upon him, his family, and millions of others. Sharing his story releases *some* of that trauma into the world, and, somewhat ironically, this shared trauma doesn't further extend that suffering but helps others find their own healing.

The film concludes with an encounter between the real Herbert Heller and a version of Abbey, in which a young woman tells Herbert of the impact that his story had on her life. It's an example of how shared stories can break the cycles of oppression that plague victims of traumatic events. And now, with *The Optimist* widely available for audiences around the world, that reach will extend even further.

Questions for Consideration:

- What stories animate your life? How do these stories help you process your daily experiences, traumatic or otherwise?
- When have you seen shared stories transform individual lives, relationships, and communities? How have they given you hope or provided healing in your own life?
- Is there a story you've been holding onto that you feel ready to share? What would it take to tell it?

Order Your Affairs

“Get your affairs in order.” That’s the difficult directive Herbert receives at the beginning of the film. But the film expands this phrase beyond its conventional meaning. Herbert’s “affairs” are not only financial or logistical—they are emotional, relational, and spiritual.

This section of the guide encourages viewers to reflect on the things left unsaid, the relationships unattended, and the hopes deferred. We don’t need to wait until the end of life to tend to what matters most. The invitation is to live with intentionality—every day.

Questions for Consideration:

- What affairs do you need to get in order—emotionally, spiritually, or relationally?
- Have you experienced the loss of a friend or family member who left affairs unattended? How did that impact you?
- What’s one step you can take this week to live more intentionally with the time and relationships you’ve been given?

THE OPTIMIST

Faith & Family Discussion Guide

Facilitator Notes & Scripture Reflections

This guide is designed for use in church, small and youth group, or classroom settings. As you lead others through these reflections, approach the conversation with empathy and curiosity. Encourage honest sharing, validate all emotions, and foster an atmosphere of safety, especially when discussing themes such as trauma, grief, and healing. Consider beginning each session with a brief moment of prayer. The Scripture reflections included below align with each theme and can be used to guide deeper spiritual connection and insight.

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Haunting Trauma

The Optimist centers on how past trauma continues to affect Herbert and Abbey in unexpected ways. Both carry invisible wounds—Herbert from the Holocaust, and Abbey from emotional neglect, abuse, and loss. The film illustrates how trauma can break into our lives without warning and how practices like connection, empathy, vulnerability, and authentic friendships help provide relief.

Scripture Reflection: *“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”* — Psalm 34:18

Questions for Consideration:

- Do you or someone you know suffer from trauma? How do you process those ongoing struggles?
- When have you seen someone endure great trauma? If they were able to navigate it in a healthy way, how did that happen? In what ways has this inspired you?
- What helps you feel safe and supported when life feels overwhelming?

Curious Connections

The film presents a rare but beautiful intergenerational friendship between Herbert and Abbey. Their bond is built on listening and mutual respect, not judgment or expectation. This dynamic reminds us of the power of authentic interest in others, especially those outside our typical social circles.

Scripture Reflection: *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* — Philippians 2:4

Questions for Consideration:

- Do you have relationships with people much older or younger than you? What have you learned from them?
- Have you seen inspirational inter-generational friendships in your community? What makes them meaningful?

- What would it look like to listen with more curiosity and less judgment in your relationships?

The Necessity of Friendship

The Optimist reminds us that even brief, authentic friendships can bring lasting healing. Abbey and Herbert find in each other a kind of spiritual connection—a witness to their pain, a mirror to their strength, and an invitation to be vulnerable. The film reminds us that friendship doesn't have to be lifelong to be life-giving.

Scripture Reflection: *"Two are better than one... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up."* — Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Questions for Consideration:

- Who is someone in your life who truly sees you? How has their friendship impacted the way you see yourself?
- Is there someone around you who may need to feel seen or supported right now? How might you extend friendship or compassion to them?
- How can you be more intentional in nurturing or initiating friendship with someone in need?

Choosing Hope

Though the trauma Herbert faced could have defined him, he chose to live by the example of his father, who modeled hope, love, and joy in even the darkest of times. *The Optimist* reminds us that while not all suffering is preventable or curable, hope is a radical, spiritual act of defiance that can be chosen—even in pain.

Scripture Reflection: *“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”* — Hebrews 10:23

Questions for Consideration:

- What gives you hope?
- Talk about a time when you experienced intense fear, anger, or despair. How did you move through it?
- Who in your life inspires you to choose hope even when it’s difficult?

Sharing Stories

Herbert’s story is a reminder that sharing our pain with others, even late in life, can bring release and healing—not just for ourselves but for others. The film honors the sacred power of testimony and invites us to consider how bearing witness can help repair brokenness.

Scripture Reflection: *“They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.”* — Revelation 12:11

Questions for Consideration:

- What stories animate your life? How do these stories help you process your daily experiences?
- When have you seen stories bring healing or transformation to others?
- What part of your own story might bring hope or connection if shared?

Order Your Affairs

One of the film’s earliest lines prompts us to consider the unfinished business in our lives—relational, emotional, and spiritual. *The Optimist* suggests that ordering our lives doesn’t just mean practical tasks like paperwork or planning, but also the spiritual and relational work of releasing burdens, making peace, and passing on truth.

Scripture Reflection: “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” — Psalm 90:12

Questions for Consideration:

- What affairs in your life need attention—emotionally, relationally, or spiritually?
- Have you experienced the consequences of a friend or loved one leaving things unresolved?
- What legacy or message would you want to leave for those you care about?

As you engage with *The Optimist*, may these reflections lead to deeper connection, healing conversations, and renewed faith in the power of friendship, storytelling, and hope.

THE OPTIMIST

Mental Health & Resilience Discussion Guide for Teens and Young People

The Optimist tells the true story of Herbert Heller, who kept hidden the story of his years in Auschwitz as a teenage boy from his family, until he meets Abbey, a young teenager whose own brush with pain and death inspires Herbert to open up. Through their honest and compassionate exchange, a healing and transformational friendship is born. This guide is designed to encourage families, small groups, and classrooms to reflect deeply on the emotional, spiritual, and relational themes at the heart of *The Optimist*.

This guide is designed to help teens and young people process the film through the lens of mental health—focusing on friendship, trauma, emotional resilience, connection, and the power of storytelling.

Understanding Trauma and Emotional Pain

Both Herbert and Abbey carry emotional wounds—very different in origin, but similar in their depth and persistence. Herbert’s trauma is rooted in survival and silence, while Abbey’s comes from grief, neglect, and loneliness.

The film shows how trauma doesn’t just live in the past—it echoes into the present. Flashbacks, anxiety, shame, and emotional detachment are all ways that unresolved pain shows up in daily life.

Mental Health Insight: Trauma can affect anyone. It doesn’t have to come from war or violence — it can come from bullying, loss, abuse, or even feeling invisible.

Questions for Reflection

- What kinds of trauma can impact young people today?
- Can you think of a time when something from the past affected your present emotions?
- What helps you cope when you're overwhelmed by emotion?

Naming Depression, Anxiety, and Grief

Abbey shows signs of deep emotional pain—withdrawal, self-doubt, mood swings, and risky behavior. While not explicitly labeled in the film, she is clearly experiencing symptoms of depression and unresolved grief.

These mental health struggles are common among young people but often go unspoken. The film opens a door for us to talk honestly about what it feels like to be numb, angry, lost, or hopeless—and how crucial it is to ask for help.

Mental Health Insight: Depression is not weakness. It’s a real health condition that deserves care, support, and treatment.

Questions for Reflection

- What are some signs someone your age might be struggling with depression or anxiety?
- What are healthy ways to respond when you notice those signs in yourself or someone else?
- Why do you think it’s sometimes hard to talk about mental health?

The Healing Power of Friendship

The friendship between Herbert and Abbey isn't about fixing each other — it's about being seen. In that space of honest connection, both begin to heal.

Herbert finds someone who listens without pity. Abbey finds someone who affirms her worth. Their relationship shows that a single, sincere connection—no matter how brief—can change your entire outlook on life.

Mental Health Insight: You don't have to be a therapist to help someone. Just listening, showing up, and being kind makes a difference.

Questions for Reflection

- Have you ever had a friendship that helped you through a hard time?
- What does it mean to be a good friend to someone who's hurting?
- How can we tell the difference between healthy support and emotional codependency?

Intergenerational Wisdom & Support

One unique part of *The Optimist* is the relationship between an older adult and a teenager — something we don't often see in film or real life.

Herbert doesn't minimize Abbey's pain just because she's younger or because of his experience. He recognizes it, relates to it, and respects her journey. In return, Abbey becomes someone who helps Herbert finally speak truths he's held inside for decades.

Mental Health Insight: Sometimes the best support comes from unexpected places—older adults, mentors, teachers, coaches, or even someone you just met.

Questions for Reflection

- Have you had a mentor or older friend who made you feel seen?
- What can adults learn from listening to younger people?
- What can teens learn from older generations when it comes to healing or perspective?

The Importance of Talking About Hard Things

One of the film's most powerful messages is that silence can prolong suffering. Herbert's secrecy protects him, but it also isolates him. Abbey's pain festers when she hides it.

When they begin talking—about loss, guilt, fear, survival—they begin to feel lighter. Their conversation doesn't erase the past, but it releases some of the weight they've carried alone.

Mental Health Insight: Talking about hard things doesn't make them worse. It makes them more manageable—and reminds you that you're not alone.

Questions for Reflection

- Who do you feel safe opening up to?
- Why do you think people avoid talking about painful emotions?
- What would it look like to create a safer space in your family, school, or friend group?

Making Space for Hope

Herbert's father believed in hope—even during humanity's darkest moments. That belief is passed down to Herbert, and eventually to Abbey. Hope, as portrayed in the film, is not denial. It's a decision to keep going, even when life feels impossible.

For teens struggling with depression, hopelessness can feel like a wall. The film gently reminds us that even a tiny light—someone who listens, a reason to wake up, a story worth telling—can break through that darkness.

Mental Health Insight: Hope is not always loud. Sometimes it's just a whisper reminding you that things can change.

Questions for Reflection

- What gives you hope when you're struggling?
- How can you offer hope to someone else without minimizing their pain?
- Have you ever chosen to keep going even when it was hard? What helped?

Telling Your Story (When You're Ready)

Herbert held on to his story for years, unsure how—or if—it could ever be shared. But when he finally did, the impact reached far beyond himself.

Telling your story can be terrifying. But when done with care and intention, it can also be healing—for you and for others.

Mental Health Insight: Your story matters. When you're ready, sharing it with someone you trust can help you own your journey and start to heal.

Questions for Reflection

- What part of your story would you want someone else to understand?
- How can hearing someone else's story help you feel less alone?
- What's one step you can take toward sharing a truth you've been holding inside?

Finding Meaning in Pain

Herbert doesn't try to justify the pain he endured—but he *does* find meaning in what he chooses to do with it. Abbey, too, begins to discover that her pain can be part of her story, not the end of it.

The Optimist shows that we don't get to choose everything that happens to us. But we do get to decide how we respond—and what kind of story we want to live going forward.

Mental Health Insight: Pain doesn't define you. What you do with it can help shape who you become.

Questions for Reflection

- Is there something painful in your past that has made you stronger or more compassionate?
- What lessons have you learned through your hardest experiences?
- What do you want your story to say about who you are?

When to Get Help

Abbey's emotional distress—though unspoken—is visible. And like many teens, she doesn't know how to ask for help, or if she's even "allowed" to. *The Optimist* quietly models what it looks like to receive support from someone trustworthy.

Whether it's a counselor, school staff member, youth leader, or hotline—asking for help is always okay. And it's a sign of courage, not weakness.

Mental Health Insight: If you're hurting, you don't have to wait until it gets worse. Help is always available.

Questions for Reflection

- If you needed help, who could you talk to right now?
- What's one thing adults could do better to support teen mental health?
- What would it take for you to feel safe enough to ask for support?

Closing Thought: You're Not Alone

The Optimist reminds us that connection is healing, sharing is brave, and even the hardest stories can have redemptive chapters. If you're struggling, keep this in mind:

- Your story is not over.
- You matter more than you know.
- Help is available. Always.

Resources for Teens

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (Call or Text — 24/7 support)

Crisis Text Line: Text “HOME” to 741741

Teen Mental Health Resources: nami.org, jedfoundation.org, teenmentalhealth.org

Local counseling offices, school psychologists, or trusted faith leaders

THE OPTIMIST

Group Discussion Guide: Mental Health & Resilience for Teens and Young People

Facilitator Notes

About This Guide

This discussion guide is designed to help youth engage with *The Optimist* through the lens of mental health, emotional resilience, and the power of authentic connection. The themes and prompts are suited for use in:

- Youth groups
- Classrooms
- Mental health workshops
- Counseling programs
- Church small groups

Each section includes Facilitator Notes, Discussion Questions, and Mental Health Insights for anchoring the conversation with empathy and depth.

Facilitation Tips

- Create a welcoming space. Emphasize confidentiality, non-judgment, and mutual respect.
- Normalize emotion. Let teens know it’s okay to feel sadness, anger, confusion, or discomfort.

- Pace with the group. You don't need to cover everything in one session. Break sections across multiple meetings if needed.
- Support, don't diagnose. This guide is for discussion, not clinical analysis. Have local mental health resources on hand if deeper needs arise.
- Use active listening. Affirm, paraphrase, and reflect. Make sure teens feel heard without being corrected.

SECTION 1: Facing Trauma & Emotional Pain

Facilitator Note:

Teens may have experienced trauma in various forms—abuse, grief, bullying, instability. Emphasize that trauma can come from both large events and repeated small hurts.

Mental Health Insight:

Trauma affects how our brain processes safety and trust. Talking about it doesn't erase it, but it can lessen its control.

Discussion Questions:

1. What stood out to you about how Herbert or Abbey carried their pain?
2. Have you or someone you know struggled with a painful memory or experience that was hard to shake?
3. What are some ways people cope with trauma—both healthy and unhealthy?

SECTION 2: Understanding Depression, Anxiety, and Grief

Facilitator Note:

Avoid clinical labels unless youth use them themselves. Instead, talk about feelings—numbness, sadness, hopelessness, or feeling "too much."

Mental Health Insight:

Depression and anxiety often show up as withdrawal, anger, exhaustion, or not feeling anything at all. These are valid signals that support is needed.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you notice about Abbey's emotional state throughout the film?
2. Why might some people hide their struggles or try to act like everything's fine?
3. What can adults or peers do to make it easier for teens to talk about their mental health?

SECTION 3: The Healing Power of Friendship

Facilitator Note:

Focus on the value of emotional safety in relationships—not fixing or performing, but simply being real with someone.

Mental Health Insight:

Supportive friendships reduce stress, boost self-worth, and are one of the best protectors against depression and anxiety.

Discussion Questions:

1. What made Herbert and Abbey's friendship different from others in their lives?
2. Who in your life lets you be fully yourself?
3. How can we become safer friends for those around us?

SECTION 4: Intergenerational Wisdom & Mentorship

Facilitator Note:

Teens often feel misunderstood by adults. This section opens up reflection on what healthy adult-teen relationships can look like.

Mental Health Insight:

Older mentors can offer perspective, experience, and validation—but the key is mutual respect, not control.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever felt like an adult really understood you? What made that possible?
2. What can teens and adults learn from each other about mental health and resilience?
3. If you could ask an older person one honest question, what would it be?

SECTION 5: The Importance of Talking About Hard Things

Facilitator Note:

Teens may be hesitant to open up. Emphasize that the goal isn't confession but connection—breaking isolation is the first step to healing.

Mental Health Insight:

Unspoken emotions don't disappear—they build up. Expressing feelings is a skill that can be learned and practiced safely.

Discussion Questions:

1. What happens when people keep everything inside?
2. Who feels safe to talk to in your life? What makes them trustworthy?
3. How can we create spaces (in schools, churches, homes) where people feel safe sharing?

SECTION 6: Choosing Hope

Facilitator Note:

This section gives teens permission to acknowledge darkness *and* still hope. Balance realism with encouragement.

Mental Health Insight:

Hope doesn't ignore hardship—it holds onto the possibility that things can get better. That belief alone can be powerful.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does hope look like for you when life is hard?
2. When have you seen someone choose hope in a tough situation?
3. What helps you keep going on your hardest days?

SECTION 7: When to Get Help

Facilitator Note:

Normalize therapy, crisis lines, and mental health resources. Encourage youth to recognize when they need extra support—and how to help others do the same.

Mental Health Insight:

Getting help early can prevent long-term emotional harm. There's no shame in needing support.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are signs someone might need more than just a friend—they may need professional help?
2. What's one barrier that keeps teens from asking for help—and how can we break that barrier?
3. What would a truly supportive mental health culture look like in your school or community?

SECTION 8: The Power of Sharing Your Story

Facilitator Note:

Not everyone is ready to share personal stories—but everyone can benefit from hearing others' truths. Encourage listening with care.

Mental Health Insight:

When you share your story with someone safe, it rewires the brain toward healing. Storytelling builds empathy and connection.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Herbert kept his story secret for so long?
2. Has hearing someone else's story ever helped you understand yourself better?
3. What's one part of your story that shaped who you are today?

SECTION 9: Finding Meaning in Pain**Facilitator Note:**

This section gently moves into purpose—not forcing teens to “be grateful for suffering,” but helping them see how growth can emerge from struggle.

Mental Health Insight:

Meaning-making is a key component of resilience. It's not about minimizing pain, but discovering what we do with it.

Discussion Questions:

1. Can pain ever lead to growth or change? Can you think of an example?
2. What have you learned about yourself from something hard you went through?
3. How can we support each other in making meaning out of our challenges?

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