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## Training Students to Provide Grief Counseling

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# Training Students to Provide Grief Counseling

## **Abstract**

This conceptual manuscript describes how counselor education programs can benefit from integrating grief counseling content into existing curricula, as well as the issues that make that implementation challenging. The authors offer practical strategies and suggestions for course content and activities, and discuss implications for future research in this area.

## **Keywords**

counselor preparation, grief counseling, grief education

Grief is a universal human experience so counselors can expect to provide services to grieving clients at various points across the lifespan. Grief-related losses, and specific and cumulative individual responses to losses can be the presenting issue or they may be underlying issues when clients seek counseling services.

A person's loss and the corresponding grief are not solely confined to the death of a loved one. It can also include the loss of a relationship, the loss of an expectation, or the loss of a significant role or job. Humphrey (2009) offers a comprehensive definition noting:

*grief* refers to (a) an emotion, generated by an experience of loss and characterized by sorrow and/or distress, and (b) the personal and interpersonal experience of loss. Grief is highly unique and multidimensional, reflecting a distinct convergence of responses (i.e., cognitive, affective, physical, behavioral) and contextual influences (e.g., personal, social, cultural, historical). (p. 5)

Given the universal yet individualized nature of grief and loss it is important that counselor educators prepare counselors in training (CITs) to provide grief counseling.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Standards (CACREP, 2009) do not specifically address grief and loss training, but they do state counselor education programs are responsible for coursework that addresses human growth and development including “studies that provide an understanding of the nature and needs of persons at all developmental levels...including...theories of individual and family development and transitions across the lifespan” (p. 11). Doughty Horn, Crews, and Harrawood (2013) highlight some of those transitions, including but not limited to developmental life-cycle transitions, divorce, addiction and recovery, career changes, illness and disability, and trauma, all of which can lead to grief and loss-related concerns.

In response to the increasing role of counselors in crisis and disaster situations, the 2009 CACREP standards require that counselor education programs train counselors to understand and be able to provide counseling during crises, disasters, and other trauma-causing events. Grief is a common response to trauma, regardless of whether the loss is physical or psychological (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), which necessitates that CITs learn about grief and loss counseling.

This paper presents an overview of the current state of grief and loss training provided to counselors, counselor preparedness to provide grief counseling, and the challenges of integrating grief coursework in counselor education programs. Suggestions of ways to integrate grief counseling content and learning experiences for CITs into existing courses are also provided.

### **Grief Counseling Training and Counselor Preparedness**

Counselor educators who teach grief content have the task of providing CITs with theories and evidenced-based interventions in preparation for eventual work in clinical and educational settings. Acknowledging the gaps between the outcomes of grief research, grief education, and service delivery is important. Among their recommendations to address these gaps, Breen and O'Connor (2007) note the importance of providing improved grief education that addresses the contextual nature of grief and appropriate grief intervention strategies to a number of service professionals, including counselors. That education, according to the authors, includes a greater sensitivity to and recognition of the diversity of experiences and needs of people who are grieving in order to provide appropriate services. Given the need to provide grief counseling to diverse populations, it is important to consider how grief counseling education is taking place, how counselors report their preparedness to deliver grief counseling, the frequency with which it is happening, and how it can be implemented and improved.

A review of researchers that investigated when and how grief counseling training was provided in counselor education program gives context to the current state of grief counseling training. Humphrey (1993) conducted the first known study of grief counseling training when she surveyed 135 counselor education program coordinators. Seventy percent of participants responded that teaching grief counseling was very important ( $n = 37$ ) or important ( $n = 58$ ), and 82% ( $n = 110$ ) said grief counseling was addressed in their program, typically as part of a larger course or in field experiences but not as a distinct course. It was not clear how many programs offered a required course specific to grief counseling. In a more recent study, Low (2004) surveyed 79 CACREP-accredited school counseling programs to determine how much training pre-service counselors received in grief education. Results indicated the majority of programs offered some grief counseling education, while there was notable variety in the offerings. Fifty-eight programs offered some form of grief education, while 31 programs offered none. Only six of the 58 programs that offered grief education required school counseling students to take a grief counseling course and 29 programs offered an elective course. The remaining programs integrated grief education via a lesson or module in other required or elective courses (Low, 2004).

Related to counselor preparedness to provide grief counseling, Charkow (2001) surveyed 147 family counselors to determine how much specialized training and competence in death and grief counseling they received during their training and to identify variables that predict counselor competence in grief counseling. Results indicated that while most respondents reported moderate to high levels of perceived grief counseling competence, they simultaneously reported their specialized grief-related training within their counselor education program was less than adequate. Wass (2004) found that most grief counseling training occurs through

continuing education rather than in graduate programs. In a more recent study, Ober, Granello, and Wheaton (2012) surveyed 369 licensed practicing counselors about their level of training and level of competence to provide grief counseling. With regard to coursework, 55% of participants had not taken a specific grief counseling course, although 73% said the content was infused into at least one other course. Post-graduation, 70% of the participants said they completed some level of professional development in grief counseling. Most of the participants (91%) noted grief counseling training “is necessary or should be required” (Ober et al., 2012, p. 153).

Ober et al. (2012) also assessed counselor perceived competence to provide grief counseling using the Death Counseling Survey (Charkow 2001, as cited in Ober et al., 2012) and found participants rated themselves “highest on Personal Competencies and lowest on Conceptual Skills and Knowledge” (p. 153) meaning, according to the authors, that participants viewed themselves as having the self-awareness to work with grieving clients but did not believe they were adequately prepared in terms of specific grief-related skills and knowledge. This highlights the need for counselors to understand that awareness and personal experience with a topic is not the same as professional training and skill development. This need is also supported by Doughty Horn et al. (2013), who described an unpublished study they conducted in which they found participants (N = 161 counselors) who attended grief counseling workshops experienced lower levels of anxiety about working with death-related issues. The majority of the participants (84%) in the unpublished study stated they had not taken a grief counseling course in their graduate program, but it was not clear if the content had been infused in other courses in the curriculum.

## **Challenges to Integrating Grief Counseling Coursework**

As CITs learn to assess, engage, support, challenge, and help facilitate change in clients' lives, an argument can be made to acknowledge the utility of deepening their understanding of how to work appropriately with grieving clients. This training can take place through specific coursework and clinical experiences; however, it is challenging to add new courses in curricula that are already full of content required for accreditation and to help students work toward various certifications. There are two challenges to this process that deserve mention.

First, administrators and faculty in CACREP-accredited programs may be challenged to integrate a stand-alone grief counseling course into an existing program because of the sequence and timing of required courses used to meet the standards (Servaty-Seib & Tedrick Parikh, 2014). The 2009 CACREP standards require master's students to complete at least 48 credit hours, with some programs requiring 60 credits (e.g., Addiction Counseling, Clinical Mental Health Counseling). Although CACREP provides flexibility in how standards are met, ensuring all standards are met requires significant time and additional courses specific to the specialty area. This commitment of time and additional courses makes it challenging to add additional required courses that do not directly meet CACREP standards.

Second, counselor educators' lack of experience or training to provide grief counseling training, as well as their own attitudes and beliefs about grief counseling (Doughty Horn et al., 2013; Eckerd, 2009; Humphrey, 1993), can be another challenge to offering grief counseling training in graduate programs. Given that grief counseling training is not required in graduate counseling programs (Breen, 2010), faculty may not be specifically trained to provide or teach grief counseling. In addition, as noted, earlier researchers (Ober et al., 2012; Wass, 2004) found

that some counselors felt ill-prepared and anxious about providing grief counseling and these same reactions may apply to counseling faculty since they are also trained as counselors.

Humphrey (2009) acknowledged that grief and loss do not occur in a vacuum for anyone, including counselor educators, and that individuals must recognize grief and loss occur in the multiple and fluid contexts of personal, familial, social, cultural, and historical influences. The expectation for counselor educators to work diligently to monitor their own attitudes, beliefs, and biases is an important one. If those attitudes, beliefs, or biases could influence CITs' learning experiences in unethical or unproductive ways, it is imperative counselor educators recuse themselves and engage in their own personal and professional development activities to be effective educators and supervisors.

### **Integrating Grief Counseling Learning Experiences in Current Courses**

As noted earlier, there is research to support incorporating grief counseling learning experiences in counselor education programs, but based on the authors' extensive review of the literature there is limited information in the counseling literature about how to develop these learning experiences. The content provided in this section is based on a review of the broader literature (e.g., Doughty Horn et al., 2013; Hunt, 2007; Humphrey 2009; Matzo et al., 2003; Wass, 2004) as well as the experiences of the authors, who have provided students with grief counseling training and supervision. It could be used to infuse grief counseling content into existing courses or to create a stand alone course.

Based on a review of the literature (e.g., Doughty Horn et al., 2013; Humphrey, 2009; Hunt, 2007; Matzo et al., 2003; Servaty-Seib & Tedrick Parikh, 2014), the following topics are important to include in grief and loss counseling training: an overview of models of grief; developmental stages of grief; the role of culture in the grief experience; physical, emotional,



behavioral, and spiritual reactions to grief and loss; grief counseling strategies when working with individuals, families, and groups; and counselor self-care. Content can be covered through readings and course activities designed to facilitate experientially-based learning about the role of grief and loss in counseling. Four specific activities developed by the second author are presented. The intent is to provide students with didactic and experiential opportunities to increase their awareness of and knowledge about grief counseling, as well as provide opportunities for students to practice using counseling skills in a grief counseling context (e.g., case studies, role plays). With each activity students should be encouraged to talk with the instructor or seek additional support or counseling if the assignments bring up personal issues of grief and/or trauma.

### **Short Grief and Loss Topic Paper**

For this assignment, students write a five-page paper on a specific grief and loss topic of their choice. This assignment evolved from a Term Paper Assignment originally developed by the second author (Hunt, 2007). Topics can come from the syllabus, course readings, or students can develop their own focus. Topics students have written about in the second author's course include infertility, the loss of a family pet or animal companion, job loss, grief and young children, grief and chronic illness, using music in grief work, and divorce-related grief. The objective for the assignment is to have CITs "synthesize clinically relevant information" (Hunt, 2007, p. 105) related to grief counseling, including counseling techniques and strategies. This allows all students to leave class with specific information about a variety of grief and loss topics.

## **Grief and Loss Interview and Paper**

This assignment, originally developed by Hunt (2007) adapted from an activity developed by Rando (1984, pp. 9-13), is designed to “help students explore their own and others’ beliefs about and reactions to grief and loss” (Hunt, 2007, p. 105), which Matzo et al. (2003), Servaty-Seib & Tedrick Parikh (2014), and Wass (2004) recommend as an important aspect of grief counseling training. The final paper is typically 10-12 pages of text and is written in three sections. In section one, students write about their own grief and loss experiences, connecting their experiences to course content. For section two, students interview a person of their choosing about that person’s grief and loss experiences, again connecting what they learned in the interview to course content. Students are provided with possible prompts (Hunt, 2007) to guide the interview, adapted from an activity originally developed by Rando (1984; see pages 9-13 of Rando for the specific activity). Examples include “How do you express your own grief? In what ways do you think your reactions to loss are related to your family and cultural background?” (Hunt, 2007, p. 103), and “What strategies or tools have helped with your own grieving process?” The final section of the paper requires that students synthesize what they learned about themselves and about grief counseling from completing the assignment. The instructor is the only person who reads the paper, but students meet in small groups to discuss the experience of completing the assignment and how what they learned can be applied in a counseling setting.

## **Media Reaction Assignment**

The Media Reaction Assignment is a small group assignment that requires students to watch a movie or a season of a television show in which loss is a central or prominent theme. This assignment evolved from a class activity originally described in Hunt (2007). As students in

the second author's class have noted, most movies could be included in this category when viewed from a grief and loss counseling lens. The use of movies or TV series as a learning activity serves as a more interactive case study than reading words on a page (Doughty Horn et al., 2013; Toman & Rak, 2000). Students are required to watch the same movie or show (together or separately; they select the movie or show by consensus) and record their discussion (40-50 minutes) of the following questions:

1. How did you feel watching the film/series?
2. Which of the characters did you identify most with and why?
3. What did you learn about grief and loss from the film/series you were not previously aware of?
4. How might the media affect how counselors approach working with grief and loss?
5. Pick one character you would most/least like to work with and discuss why. What issues would you expect that person to bring to counseling? How would you address these issues?

The use of small group discussion, rather than writing a paper, allows students to talk about their reactions while learning about the reactions of other group members. The assignment is graded based on the recorded discussion.

### **Online Discussions**

This assignment includes four online activities designed to provide students with opportunities to engage in discussions about grief counseling outside of class. Students must respond to postings from two other students for each assignment. For Assignment one, students post one to two paragraphs about themselves, including why they are interested in taking the course and what they hope to learn from it, on a discussion board one to two days before the

class begins. This allows students to start thinking specifically about what they want to learn about grief counseling, why they want to learn about it, and how they want to engage in the course.

For Activity Two students select a grief and loss-related website. Since many people use the Internet for information and support, this allows students to think about how clients might view the content found on grief-related websites. Students post a summary of how they found the site, the site's target audience, and the benefits and limitations of using the site.

Activity three asks students to find an example of how grief and loss are portrayed in the media (e.g., TV, film, Internet, radio, magazine, book). In a written response posted on the discussion board, students are asked to describe the media example they chose in one to two paragraphs, then discuss what messages their example sends about grief and loss, and how the message affects the targeted audience. Finally students are asked to comment on what the media element they selected says about how grief and loss is socially constructed in American culture.

In the final assignment students are asked to develop a list of five organizations or community resources in a particular region that provide grief and loss counseling services, providing the name of the organization, contact information, and services offered.

These activities are provided as examples of assignments that can be offered in a course specific to grief and loss counseling or can be infused into a broader range of counseling courses to help students learn about the importance of developing grief and loss counseling skills. Consultation with faculty colleagues, counselor education and supervision resources, and grief and loss continuing education can also provide useful training recommendations.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Counselor educators face the challenge of giving CITs curricular and experiential learning experiences that equip them to work effectively in various counseling settings with a board range of counseling issues, including grief and loss counseling. Counseling researchers (e.g., Charkow, 2001; Low, 2004; Doughty Horn et al., 2013) provide evidence that some counselors do not believe they are well equipped to adequately support grieving clients. Additional quantitative and qualitative research that assesses counselor and counselor educator experiences with and attitudes about grief counseling training is needed. Findings from these kinds of studies can inform current teaching practices of counselor educators with CITs. Furthermore, research that assesses CIT interest in and experiences with grief counseling, new counselors' perceptions of preparedness to provide grief counseling, and counselor educator attitudes and beliefs about the value of grief counseling preparation are all important in providing quality grief counseling to current and future clients. Research in the area of grief counseling training can inform the counseling knowledge base on how to confront longstanding and emerging needs within the profession regarding grief and loss counseling.

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