

Understanding Bereavement Counseling: A Panacea for Successful Counseling with Bereaved Clients in Nigerian Setting

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Abstract: Bereavement counseling professionals are very rare in Nigerian schools system. Although most of the available counselors with their general education knowledge in counseling often dive into this area to assist students and their families successfully work through the process of bereavement and grief. However, bereavement and grief are multifaceted human experiences that often require specialized knowledge, skills and understanding besides the counselor's general education experiences. In this study, therefore, focus on increasing counselors' understanding of bereavement counseling that would in turn serve as a baseline resource for successful counseling with bereaved students and other clients within the Nigerian setting.

Key words: Bereavement, bereavement counseling, bereaved clients, counselors, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Bereavement is an experience of grief that affects all aspects of the being of the individual. Literally, bereavement means 'deprived by death'. Bereavement is the consequence of the loss of something of value. It also refers to death of someone close. Bereavement also occurs following a divorce, miscarriage, job redundancy or any other loss in a person's life. The manifestations of bereavement are more intensified when there has been a sudden, unanticipated death. With the intensification, the period of time to process the reactions will often be longer (Wheeler and Amyot, 2004). Children tend to grieve for shorter periods of time than adults. They do not remain continuously sad. Instead you see them happy and then sad the next minute. When they are happy, this does not mean that they have stopped hurting inside. The grief often resurfaces at special times throughout their lives; for example at their graduation or wedding ceremony.

In the same vein, McClain *et al.* (2004) stressed that a child often grieves deeply, although their grief differs from that of adults in terms of expression, intensity and duration. Their ability to grieve is affected by the context of the death, their relationship with the person who died and their preexisting emotional and cognitive development. As adults, when a child dies, the grief that enfolds parents is characterized by feelings of intense

loss, sadness, emptiness and failure. Parents often perceive themselves as having failed in some way to protect their child from death. The loss may be the parents' first death experience. It may elicit parental guilt, magnification of minor omissions and anger and may have a profound effect on family functioning for an indeterminate period of time. The hopes, plans and dreams for this baby are shattered. Death becomes the ultimate separation, as parents are not able to fill their emptiness, even with another child or children born before or after the deceased. For bereaved parents, the beginning of grief marks a lifelong process of learning to live without their child. Ultimately, they will begin to integrate their loss and continue to find meaning in their lives. Nonetheless, the experience shapes their personal identity, as well as that of others, in ways both good and bad.

Bereavement is a difficult time for everyone and each passage through this veil of tears is an individual one. Regardless of the age of parents or children, the death of a child is always a major loss (Silverman, 2000). Every parent suffers the loss of a child differently. In other words, every parent is distinct in terms of needs, history, personality, coping style, relationship with others, social concerns, family situation and sense of meaning regarding the death of the child. Children who experience the death of a parent and sibling may show overt signs of

bereavement, in certain occasions their grief may be covert, making the caregivers feel as if children are not affected by the loss (Akinlabi, 2012). Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will become aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children, adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation.

Bereavement has the potential to affect the educational attainment and the physical and emotional health of the bereaved student; the work life of a person and the community perception of schools as supportive educational and psychosocial environments. Students who have experienced the bereavement of a significant relationship or aspiration will react differently depending, for example, on their developmental stage (Mallon, 2008) and socio-economic background (Humphreys *et al.*, 2010) and their family's level of support during this period amongst others. The common feelings felt by all including the shock, anxiety, denial, anger, hopelessness, fear, despair and loneliness can be made to feel worse or they can be made much easier to bear if the right kind of support is provided.

Adequate and appropriate support for the bereaved has the potential to alleviate any negative educational and health-related outcomes likely to occur in the future. Bereavement counseling is necessary to provide the adequate and appropriate psychological support for the bereaved. Bereavement counseling is what is needed when a person is so disabled by their grief, overwhelmed by loss to the extent that their normal coping processes are disabled. Bereavement counseling facilitates expression of emotion and thought about the loss, including sadness, anxiety, anger, loneliness, guilt, relief, isolation, confusion or numbness. It fosters creative thinking about the challenges that follow loss and coping with concurrent changes in life. Often people feel disorganized, tired, have trouble concentrating, sleep poorly and have vivid dreams and experience change in appetite.

These are also addressed in bereavement counseling (Rando, 2000). This is to say that bereavement counseling facilitates the process of resolution in the natural reactions to loss and as such, is appropriate for resolving reaction to losses that have overwhelmed a person's coping ability.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Concept of bereavement: The concept of bereavement has been variously defined by different authors. Bereavement refers to the condition of the individual who has suffered a loss and may be experiencing psychological, social or physical stress caused by the termination of a significant relationship with a thing or someone. Bereavement is the loss of a relationship with a person or thing that is valued (O'Brien and Guckin, 2013). Bereavement is a state of loss of a loved one through death (Andanje *et al.*, 2012). There are three elements viewed as essential in defining bereavement, namely, a relationship with a person or thing that is valued; there is a loss of that relationship and survivor is deprived by the loss (Corr and Corr, 2000).

In contemporary society, bereavement is used to mean the death of a significant person. Bereavement can be expressed in culturally specific acts of mourning, for example, funeral rites or ritualized withdrawal from public activities (Madison, 2005). Bereavement is a 'natural' emotion that is experienced when one is parted from what is dear. Its effect can be painful and debilitating. If it is dealt with effectively it can initiate insight. However, if it is dealt with unskillfully, complications may arise (Huxter, 2012).

For the purpose of this study, bereavement is considered as a condition of having suffered a loss. It encompasses the many forms of loss that result in a survivor being deprived of a relationship with a person or thing that is valued (for instance, pet, friendship, sibling and parent). Although individual's life stories and those of their families and communities, are filled with weaving and reweaving of webs of connection and patterns of caring that they find and make meaning but bereavement strikes a blow to those webs, to their personal, family and community integrity. Bereavement is generally followed by grief, regarded as a social and an individual process. As such, families, educators and others in social groups may facilitate or hinder the grieving process. Since, grief results from bereavement and it encompasses different kinds of reactions (for instance, depression, anger and isolation) that follow a loss or series of loss, the Southern African AIDS Training Program in 2001 described grief as the pain and experience of bereavement. Bereavement involves how individuals feel the loss that affects them physically, emotionally and spiritually. There are many different forms of grief-anticipatory grief, acute grief, normal grief and complicated grief. Worthy of note for counselors and educators is the anticipatory grief. When someone discovers that he or she has an incurable illness,

a process of grieving starts for both the patient and the family and is accompanied by feelings of fear, anxiety and sadness about what is to come. This is called anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is a multifaceted process that consists of anger, guilt, anxiety, irritability, sadness, feelings of loss and decreased ability to perform habitual tasks (Casarett *et al.*, 2001). For example, consider a case whereby a student is anticipating the death of a parent who is receiving palliative care in a hospital. Whilst the parent is still alive, much positive work can be done to help the student, especially through support and guidance. The impact of the grief can be significantly influenced at this preparatory stage through bereavement counseling. Therefore, the understanding that the student may have begun the grieving process prior to the bereavement is essential for effective counseling.

Concept of counseling: Counseling as a helping profession has existed for a long time now. Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals. Counseling involves helping people move through uncomplicated or normal grief to health and resolution. The principal goals of counseling are to focus on building psychological strength and wellbeing and to resolve specific difficulties. Clients are assisted to take greater control of their lives by developing new perspectives and understanding and to manage difficult emotional experiences more effectively and to think and behave in new ways.

Counseling is a structured conversation between a counselor and one or more clients that assists the client's to work through their difficulties or personal problems. Counselors encourage clients to recognize and develop new ways they can deal more effectively with problems. From these definitions, we consider counseling as a helping relationship that individuals, in this case, bereaved individuals, their families and groups are assisted in building psychologically strength and wellbeing, developing new perspectives and understanding about bereavement and managing difficult emotional experiences more effectively and to think and behave in new ways.

There are several occasions when individuals would actually require bereavement counseling. For instance, counseling may help if clients feel they are really struggling with their grief or if they feel there is no other person they can talk to about what they are going through. Counseling may also help immediately after client's loss or even years later, as life events can sometimes trigger unexpected reactions they may wish to

explore. Counseling may help if client feel that family, friends and community are placing expectations on them and their grief that seem hard to achieve. Counseling is helpful in advance of bereavement, in that a person may be 'anticipating' the death of a significant person in their life (for instance, parent, spouse or child). If someone has an incurable illness, they and their loved ones can be helped to prepare for bereavement through counseling.

Concept of bereavement counseling: Bereavement counseling is a confidential discussion about loss and its impact. It is the process whereby people can express and learn more about their grief experiences and receive the support they need. Bereavement counseling is a form of therapy aim at helping people cope with grief and mourning following the death of loved ones, or with major life changes (for instance, death of a spouse, divorce, fire outbreaks and accident) that trigger feelings of grief. Bereavement counselors offer a congruent and non-threatening atmosphere where the bereaved client can express their thoughts and emotions with an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of how they manage and engage the challenge of bereavement. Thus, bereavement counselors are specially trained and experienced in counseling and supporting individuals and families who are bereaved or grieving.

Qualities of bereavement counselors: Based on the review of literature on bereavement counseling, the qualities expected of bereavement counselors include:

- Actively listen in a supportive manner to and learn about clients and their specific experience of grief
- Sensitively and caringly help individuals to grieve their losses in their own unique ways
- Help clients identify and access what they need to help them in their experience of grief and bereavement
- Support clients in expressing their grief in whatever way is safe and right for the client
- Provide bereaved clients with information and strategies that they may not have considered before
- Respect client's right to manage their grief and bereavement in their own way
- They do not tell bereaved clients how they should or should not feel or behave
- They will not expect clients to do their grieving within a timeframe

- They will not need to be protected from client's pain and tears. Instead they show empathic understanding

Role of bereavement counselors: Wheeler and Amyot (2004) have since identified the roles of bereavement counselors. The bereavement counselors helps bereaved clients recognize that in most cases, their emotional reactions are natural, normal and to be expected. The bereavement counselors also assist clients to reduce additional stress by organizing and prioritizing day-today and recovery-related tasks. They help individuals to understand and recognize the wide range of reactions to trauma, such as numbness, frustration, confusion, anger, anxiety, sadness and feelings of helplessness.

They assist individuals to draw on their own strengths and develop healthy coping mechanisms that permit them to gradually resume their pre-bereavement level of functioning. The bereavement counselors systematically draw upon an array of recovery resources for appropriate referrals. A bereavement counselor give clients time and space to talk about their feelings, including the person who has died, their relationship, family, work, fears and the future (Hansson and Stroebe, 2007).

Goals of bereavement counseling: Based on the review of literature, the goals of bereavement counseling include:

- Bereavement counseling is aimed at helping bereaved individuals gain an understanding of their emotions and feelings with an opportunity to explore any difficulties that obstruct their adjusting to living with the loss (James Paget University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust)
- By engaging in the counseling process, the hope is that clients will feel a greater sense of well-being and gain a more comfortable ability to manage themselves emotionally
- Bereavement counseling can help the bereaved to reconstruct their personal story and their family system, because we do not live with or face grief in a vacuum
- The goal of seeking for bereavement counseling is to help the bereaved learn to live with loss and in time, be able to give attention and emotions to others and to move forward. Life will slowly begin to feel meaningful and enjoyable once more as a result of bereavement counseling intervention

- Special days or anniversaries, especially the first one or two after the death, can be difficult. Some people find it helpful to plan for these times and to mark them in a personal way. Thus, bereavement counselors focus on providing a warm climate for installation of hope to individuals and families so that they can experience this passage of time without anxiety and depression

Basic skills for bereavement counseling: The basic skills for bereavement counseling as recounted by Shaefer *et al.* (2002) include:

- Ability to listen and attend to story of a person's life and death and to parents' expressions of grief within their cultural context
- Ability to convey sense of empathy
- Gain knowledge about cause of death, family development and family dynamics
- Ability to assess grief response of family members, including suicide ideation and risk and availability and appropriateness of social support networks; c) parental knowledge and understanding of cause of death
- Ability to provide anticipatory guidance for grief process, explaining how grief is expressed and what to expect over days and weeks ahead
- Ability to make appropriate referrals for grief therapy and/or to other community health and social service programs, including natural supports and healers appropriate for the family's culture

DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS

This part describes both the characteristics of bereaved clients and the distinctive characteristics of bereavement counseling as well as the essential steps in bereavement counseling. The essence is to show the understanding of the distinctive characteristics of bereavement as a concept and bereavement counseling as a helping relationship.

Characteristics of bereaved clients: Bereaved individuals show variety of symptoms including; physical reactions, behavioral, cognitive, emotional and spiritual reactions (Wheeler and Amyot, 2004). From these researchers' analogy, we present the characteristics of bereaved clients as follows:

The physical characteristics of bereaved clients: The bereaved are prone to series of physical reactions that manifest as part of the individual's way of handling the

stress and anxiety of his/her loss experience. The following are possible physical reactions: changes in appetite: overeating, binge eating, under-eating, loss of appetite; sleep disturbances: oversleeping, difficulty falling asleep and awakening, inability to get motivated for another day, under-sleeping, nightmares, loss-centered dreaming and interrupted sleep; exaggeration of other physical situations and blood pressure, diabetes, allergies, digestive and stomach problems, headaches/migraines.

The behavioral characteristics of bereaved clients: Given that the loss event changes the individual, behaviors, whether while alone or in social settings, also reflect the change the individual is experiencing. Some of the behavioral reactions of bereaved clients include: aggressive behaviors: volume/tone in speaking; irritability; tension; Withdrawn/passive behaviors: very quiet and introverted; short answers; limited conversation; feels unworthy of happiness; self-doubt increases: needs much reassurance; decisions are difficult, indifference/apathy may follow; meaninglessness; not wanting to initiate activities or leave home; reckless or self-destructive behaviors: alcohol use/abuse often to numb feelings; drug use/abuse to numb and escape the emotional reactions; sexual promiscuity to seek comfort; or to “dare” something to happen to me such as AIDS; reckless driving or other behaviors to challenge fate/the world; hyperactivity: excessive energy to act out the stress/anxiety in areas such as cleaning, working and shopping.

The cognitive characteristics of bereaved clients: The cognitive aspects of bereavement include reduced attention span: inability to follow a conversation, to read and to stay focused; this affects many on the job regarding performance; forgetfulness; loss-centered thinking: focus of much of the individual’s thought process to the point of obsessiveness; impaired self-esteem; idealization of the past, of the future and of the individual and the relationship lost and exaggerations in magical thinking (e.g., I made it happen).

The emotional characteristics of bereaved clients: This involves self blame and guilt: “I could have..,” “I shouldn’t have...,” “If only...,” “ Why didn’t I...”; fears of getting through each day being alone, being a single parent, the dark, new places and old favorite places, social settings and of making the right decision’s; helplessness/hopelessness: “What will I do now?,” “Will God punish me too?,” anger at life’s situation, at God, at unfairness, at the one who died, at others for being happy; desiring

the lost loved one and the world that was; being withdrawn: not sharing feelings with others because they don’t understand or “get it,” not able to give emotionally to others and even family members; anxiety: All of these create an accumulation of general anxiety for many grieving individuals. Again, trying to handle life in a new fashion imply creating a new “normal”. This is all transition and for many that means anxiety until it becomes the “new” acceptable way of life.

The spiritual cum philosophical characteristics of bereaved clients: This aspect indicates that whatever one’s belief system, there may be challenges to that system. What was believed often comes into question and is examined in light of the loss and goes through its own change strengthened or weakened but changed. This is part of the process of grief and adaptation to the loss; those with a belief in God may question in their paining/adjusting experience: Why God didn’t intervene?; Why did God let this happen? and Where is God?. In fact, various questioning about God and one’s anger towards him often creates guilt for the individual to work through.

Characteristics of bereavement counseling: From the review of literature, the following characteristics of bereavement counseling were identified:

- Bereavement counseling is a caring relationship and develops through mutual respect and empathic understanding
- Bereavement counseling acknowledges that the experience of grief and the mourning process involves many changes in the life of the individual. It is a period of adaptation and transitions in all aspects of the individual’s life
- Bereavement counseling acknowledges that adapting takes as long as it needs to take for the bereaved. This because an individual’s circumstances in life, coping mechanisms and spiritual/philosophical beliefs will all contribute to the outcome of help
- Bereavement counseling is premise on the notion that learning to accept that we do not get over a loss but learn to live with the loss experience, can assist individuals in accepting their grief response. The loss experience is part of the individual’s life journey in all aspects physical, behavioral, cognitive, emotional and spiritual
- Bereavement counseling research demonstrates that the inability to make sense of the loss is perhaps the primary factor that sets the bereaved apart from those whose losses are more anticipated in the context of serious illness in the loved one (Neimeyer, 2000)

Bereavement counselors acknowledge that everyone experiences and expresses grief in their own way and is often shaped by culture. For bereavement counselors, it is also not uncommon for a bereaved person to isolate from their friends and family and feel helpless as well as hopeless. To them, one should expect a wide range of emotion and behavior associated with grief. For some of the counselors, in all places and cultures, the grieving person benefits from the support of others. However, in places and cultures where such social support is lacking, counseling should provide an avenue for healthy resolution. Bereavement counselors accept that grief is a process and the goal is 'resolution.' To them, where the process of grieving is interrupted it can remain unresolved (unfinished business) and later resurface as an issue for counseling.

Essential steps in bereavement counseling: The step by step process that characterizes bereavement counseling makes it systematic in nature. The essential steps in counseling bereaved clients suggested by Shaefer *et al.* (2002) are:

- Gain knowledge of factors (such as culture family system, manner and cause of death ,hopes for the future, child's age, sibling, history of loss, medical and medical issues, professional and social networks) affecting the individual's grief experience
- Anticipate parental behavior and expressions of grief
- Portray grief as a lifelong process that is unique to each individual
- Distinguish normal from complicated grief reactions
- Assess client's emotional state and ability to care for self and others (i.e., ability to provide both functional capacity and emotional support)
- Determine family's multiple needs and sources of support

APPLICABILITY OF BEREAVEMENT COUNSELING

Bereavement counseling can be applied in Nigerian setting. Researchers have suggested that bereavement counseling is highly effective for people who suffer from unusually prolonged and complicated responses to bereavement. Bereavement counselors can offer pre-bereavement care, helping individuals and their family cope with their feelings of anticipatory loss. The counselor supports the individual and their family to learn to use strategies such as relaxation, engaging in positive activities and challenging negative thoughts, in order to combat the associated symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Bereavement counseling can be especially important for children. Children's stress levels are at their highest before their family member dies, so psychological support during this time is very important. The National Association of School Psychologists believes that school children and their communities around a war wrecked country could be impacted by the loss of life associated with the war. The effects may be significant for some people because of their emotional closeness to the war and/or their concern over terrorism. Children, in particular, will need the love and support of their teachers, parents and most especially, the professional support of bereavement counselor to cope with their loss and reach constructive grief resolution.

Bereavement counseling may be offered in an individual or group session. A common area where bereavement counseling has been extensively applied is with the parents and victims of cancer, HIV/AIDS, miscarriage, diabetes, divorcee and flood victims. Bereavement counseling is applicable where a person suffers anticipatory grief, for example an intrusive and frequent worry about a loved one whose death is neither imminent nor likely. Anticipatory mourning also occurs when a loved one has a terminal illness, for instance, fibroid. This can handicap that person's ability to stay present whilst simultaneously holding onto, letting go of and drawing closer to the dying relative (Rando, 2000).

Neimeyer (2000)'s research shows that bereavement counseling can reshape behavioral and emotional responses of people bereaved by violent death, for example, survivors of suicide, homicide and accident. In the same vein, Kissane and Bloch applied bereavement counseling to promote mutual support and problem-solving in bereaved families. Their research shows that relationships with the family are crucial in the grieving process and interventions that strengthen family relationships and interpersonal communication have much to offer the bereaved.

One way of effectively offering bereavement counseling is through the Theravadin Buddhists' practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness means staying aware of mind and body conditions in a present moment context (Huxter, 2012). With mindfulness a bereaved person can more effectively acknowledge the reality of loss and allow the pain of grief to manifest without further complication. If the pain is experienced without undue reaction, the undermining effect and manifestation of grief can be resolved and the bereaved person can function relatively free from impediment.

LIMITATIONS IN THE APPLICATION OF BEREAVEMENT COUNSELING

In March 2007, an article in the Australian Psychological Society journal, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, included bereavement counseling and therapy on a list of treatments with the potential to cause harm to clients (Larson and Hoyt, 2007). In particular, individuals experiencing relatively normal bereavement reactions were said to be at risk of a worse outcome after receiving bereavement counseling.

Where the loss has been traumatic, the rebuilding of the client's world may be more difficult because trauma impedes grief. Making sense of the event, talking about it, remembering the deceased and thinking about it may cause hyper-arousal that the bereaved wishes to avoid. Thus, bereavement counseling may be much more problematic and in-depth psychological or psychiatric intervention may be needed (Mallon, 2008, 2010).

In providing help to students, whilst personal experience and intuition are important, there are major limitations if relying on these personal factors. For example, personal experience of bereavement may be limited or intuition may be coloured by subjective values, beliefs and prejudices. Also, therapist may not have fully recovered from his own previous personal bereavement (either consciously or sub-consciously) and may become re-traumatized when having to consider how best to provide support to a student dealing with bereavement or grief issues (O'Brien and Guckin, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Bereavement is the condition of having suffered a loss. Losing one's own life (that is, dying) or losing a loved one is also associated with grief. Grief is felt by all ages and all persons. Since, death is inevitable and universal, it is necessary for counselors to be prepared to offer help to those who experience bereavement. Death may end a life but not necessarily a relationship. How counselors handle the resulting distress can help shape the immediate and longer-term grieving process for students and families.

Therefore, what is necessary is that counselors and educators have to equip themselves with the knowledge, skills and resources necessary to support bereaved students. The role of the counselor is pivotal in supporting students who have been bereaved, as well as their peers and the rest of the school community.

Bereavement counseling is applicable in Nigerian setting. However, bereavement counselors must take cognizance of the constraints in bereavement counseling and take adequate steps to address these concerns.

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