



RESEARCH ARTICLE

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF COUNSELING IN THE FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

Life is full of losses from the time of birth to the day of death. Most of the other losses could be recovered except the loss arising from death. No one is immune to the loss from death. Death is therefore a fact that each family member should understand and accept that at one time or another the pain of death will be experienced. Family members respond to news of death differently depending on their relationship to the deceased as well as personality. After death grieving and mourning sets in which require technical knowledge on the part of the counselor to help the bereaved person to regain normalcy through verbalization of what happened. The bereaved person goes through a series of stages which counselor can help through so as not to be fixated in one stage. Various techniques and skills are used to help the grieving person in the journey towards healing. The current paper examines the meaning of death, its place in the family as well as the role of counseling interventions that are specially needful in overcoming the feelings and reactions arising from the death in the family. It is hoped that this paper will significantly contribute new ideas on the relevance of counseling during the circumstances of death hence encourage family members to utilize this great service for their own good.

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INTRODUCTION

Loss and Bereavement

Death and the process of dying are perhaps the hardest facts of life for man to face. When we were children many of us were fortunate enough to have not had to experience the loss of a loved one. Today this seems more common place where children do experience many losses ranging from grand parents, parents, to peers and siblings. Death is nowadays becoming a reality than it was in the past partially due to diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other terminal diseases such as cancer. Other sources of death in the world include various kinds of accidents which have been increasing each day in Kenya. There is need to understand death, its meaning and place, how to face it and accept it in the family. Man is born to die but it is hard to accept it as a fact of life. Death gives life a limit and reminds man that he or she is finite and limited.¹ Death therefore stimulates man to develop goals and possibilities in making life worthwhile and meaningful. Facing the possibility of death sometime, man is challenged to make the best of life for he has only few years in which to accomplish his/her plans and potentials. Realizing that man will only exist for a certain length of time ignites and helps initiate in man to live within these limits of time. The awareness of death constantly directs the cause of his/her life, and determines the values he chooses to cherish.

Death not only gives life quality of worth importance but it also stimulates toward moral impetus. In many societies and families there are taboos surrounding death and dying. There are of course customs and practices which deal with what is inevitable but often to talk about this reality is thought of as inviting it to happen.² Every person's death is unique and it is important to say that we all know that we will die but none of us knows when or how. In our Kenyan society husbands and wives tend to form small close-knit family units with their children and to have a lesser degree of involvement with their parents and others in the family.³ The wife's roles, plans and problems tend to be husband centred. The cultural evolution that has made marriage an integral part of our social organization has done little to ensure that the functions that it performs will be adequately carried out after the death. Increasing this regard of formal mourning has meant that bereaved individuals get little support from society at large and from their families in particular. Loneliness, poverty, sexual frustration and absence of the security that comes from sharing responsibilities are a few of the ongoing feelings that stem from deprivation.

Literature Review

Because of the vulnerability of the bereaved scientific research into bereavement can be carried out only to a very limited

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¹ Lierop (1992) Pastoral Counseling, Nairobi, CCEA.

² Lierop (1992) Pastoral counseling, Nairobi CCEA.

³ Williams (1961) The minister and the care of souls, New York, Harper & Row Br. Ltd.

extent.⁴ It is important in the study of bereavement counseling to focus on emotional factors and not scientific factors. Grief is the deepest human emotion which is basically manifested in intense sorrow due to either death of a loved one, separation, natural disaster, miscarriage, loss of a job, emptiness or deprivation.⁵ This paper will focus more on the grief occasioned by death. Death is a subject that people fear to deal with because it is frightening and raises issues of mortality which we don't have ready on theirs. Bereavement is the state of sorrow over death or departure of a loved one. Mourning is an external expression of loss.⁶ While we grieve internally, we mourn externally. In mourning the grief goes public it is an outward expression of the loss to the external world. When mourning is done within communal context the loss is acknowledged and life is affirmed and continued support for the bereaved is actualized. Both grieving and mourning are essential towards our journey of healing after the loss. Persons who grief and mourn after death of a loved one tend to cope better with their loss than those who postpone their grief to later years.⁷ People sometimes think that the more words, hymns, and prayers that are used during mourning is more comforting. Our religious beliefs play an important part in bringing meaning to death.⁸ Grieving and mourning takes time and energy to get into grips with the feeling of the costs. For some grieving and mourning may take weeks, months and years. Whatever period it takes, it should be understood as a process which takes its own course.

The loss of a loved one through death cannot be reversed or recovered but through appropriate grieving process, bereaved persons in the family can learn to integrate the loss as part of their new reality.⁹ So grieving and mourning continues as bereaved persons get to terms with irreversible change that has taken place in their lives as a result of the loss. It is healthy and normal to mourn in one's own cultural context. Crying and fears are natural ways in which we express those painful feelings which we cannot bring out clearly in words.¹⁰ Each individual needs to discover ways to express those feelings of loss and healthy ways that will bring relief from the emotional and spiritual pain of the loss. The understanding of grieving and mourning as a process opens doors for the bereaved person to feel that it is right for their feelings to be ventilated.

Stages of Grief

There are five stages of psychological grief that a client has to go through¹¹

- (i) Denial – shock and denial act like a shock absorber to human tragedy. Statements such as “it cannot be true” are common. Denial is a temporary defence mechanism. The client tends to be in shock, disbelief or panic. A person requires such a shock absorber immediately after the news of death is announced but then

gradually the client will be able to accept the reality later.

- (ii) Anger

When denial cannot be maintained then other reactions set in such as anger, rage, envy and resentment. There is an experience of irrational outbursts of anger and uncontrollable crying or wailing. Some are angry about themselves for doing nothing to stop what has happened and others anger are directed towards God. Anger acts like a catharsis in the sense that the person is able to express his or her feelings.¹²

- (iii) Bargaining

Clients here often promise a life of dedication if they are spared from death. Some asks God for special favours or promise to change only if there are no painful outcomes like death. This stage takes the form of negotiation. The client believes that if he/she negotiates well such deeds as death won't happen any more.

- (iv) Depression

One experiences despair and hopelessness. There is a realistic hope versus despair. The healthier our backgrounds and circumstances the easier to overcome this depression. The client may be experience more pain and gradually moves towards acceptance.

- (v) Acceptance

At this stage there no longer anger at depression about his or her fate. One arrives at a point of trust and begins to resume life's responsibilities. The client begins to request to be left a lone and not to be bothered by news from the outside. He or she is no longer talkative and does not desire many visitors. Acceptance therefore means “yes it has happened.”

Grief Counseling

Everyone at some time in life faces a crisis.

Someone once said that anxiety is the price one pays for being a live. In a survey done one time in the United States it was revealed that when people find themselves in a crisis 42% will seek a pastor, 31% will go to a psychologist, marriage counselor or psychiatric, while 29% will go to their family physician.¹³ Death is a form of crisis because a person is unable to solve problems, experiences anxiety, guilt, restlessness and disturbances in the routine of life. Bereaved person with pathological grief can be helped in journey towards healing by a psychotherapist. This is only possible if the bereaved persons acknowledges their problem and are willing to engage in the healing process. The therapist's job is to help the bereaved persons remain focused on the issue of the loss and help them through active and reflective listening.¹⁴ The greatest challenge on the part of the bereaved

⁴ Parkes (1986) Bereavement London Tavistock Publications.

⁵ Lierop (1992) Pastoral Counseling, Nairobi, CCEA.

⁶ Wolfelt (1992) Understanding grief, helping yourself heal, Briston PA.

⁷ Mwiti (1999) Understanding grieve as a process Nairobi Uzima Press.

⁸ Moloney (2005) Counseling for HIV/AIDS Nairobi, Paulines Publications, Africa.

⁹ Mwiti (1999) Understanding grieve as a process Nairobi Uzima Press.

¹⁰ Gichinga (2006) Counseling the Wounded, Nairobi Don Bosco Press.

¹¹ Lierop (1992) Pastoral Counseling, Nairobi, CCEA.

¹² Lierop (1992) Pastoral Counseling, Nairobi, CCEA.

¹³ Clinebell (1984) Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling, Tennessee, Abingdon Press.

¹⁴ Parkes (1992) Bereavement, London Tavistock: Publications.

persons is their ability to express their feelings while the greatest challenge for the therapist is the ability to listen to the bereaved persons and assist them in dealing with grief. The clergyman or a counselor more than any other person in the various helping professions has a free entry into the homes of people who at facing bereavement, the counselor can help the client by giving hi or her a true companionship during grieving. The funeral often precedes the peak of the pangs of grief which tends to be reached during the second week of bereavement.¹⁵ The bold face' put on for the funeral can no longer be maintained hence there is a need for some closer relative or friend to take over many of the accustomed roles and responsibilities of the bereaved person, thereby setting him or her free to grieve. Such a person must be prepared to accept without reproach the tendency of the bereavement person to pour out feelings of anguish and anger, some of which may be directed against the helper (counselor). In fact it may be necessary for the helper to indicate to the bereaved that he or she expects such feelings to emerge and that there is no need for them to be 'bottled up.'

Helpers should show by their willingness to reveal their own feelings that they are not ashamed of them or rendered useless by them. If they are ashamed or feel destroyed by them they will not help the bereaved. In a similar way the widow at widower who is succeeding in coping with his or her own grief can help his or her children to cope with theirs.¹⁶ Adults' children can give a great deal of support to aggrieving parents. Visits and expressions of sympathy paid to the bereaved reassure them that they are not alone in the world which helps to reduce feelings of insecurity

The counselor's role

During the process of grieving the person needs to gradually renounce his or her longing for the lost person and to accept the real world without the loved one. The counselor helps the grieving person or persons with courage, faith and sense of reality. Since grieving is so intense and promote feelings of anger and hatred the counselor need to encourage the verbalization of these feelings.¹⁷ These feelings if it is turn inward can result in suicide. Exercises and source light work can be recommended by the counselor to the grieving person to minimize cases of depression. The counselor helps the bereaved person to readjust to the environment where the deceased is no longer there by guiding him or her to form new relationships with those surrounding them. The counselor also maintains contacts with the grieving person or persons thereby helping them to deal with emerging confusions and other forms of emotional distress. The bereaved can also be held to see things clearly, really and objectively. Reading spiritual literature of any faith may help. Counselor also assist the bereaved to person to face the reality of his or her situation and to think through the deeper meanings of his or her new responsibilities, new relationships and new problems of adjustments.¹⁸ The counselor can help the bereaved to replace despair, with hope, fearfulness with courage and guilt with

feelings of forgiveness. It is also paramount to help the mourner find a substitute for the loss he has experienced. The grieving person or persons can be assisted and inspired to live and work creatively and meaningfully thereby finding a fulfilling life that is really worthwhile and satisfying. Depending on their faith the counselor or clergyman can help the bereaved persons to locate spiritual resources such as God Bible, Quoran, prayers, sacraments among others. Bereaved persons respond to these spiritual resources which help them meet their unique grieving needs and goes along way in their healing. The counselor can assist the grieving person to idealize the deceased through the empty chair technique. The bereaved person talk out any disagreements or troubles he/she may have had with the deceased person in former days. By means of confessing any past conflicts through idealizing the deceased the mourning person will have the feeling that he has paid his emotional debt. Because mourning people are vulnerable and are therefore open to all answers for the questions they ask, it is appropriate that counselors and clergymen should attempt as much as possible to provide the answers they feel qualified to give and minimize false hope but instead give realistic positions of issues in life. Although the counselor at clergyman is traditionally the person whose role is to help those that mourn. It is important for them to refer severely bereaved persons for medical attention.

Action Therapies

It is important that the person or persons who is bereaved be encouraged to do some work for there is healing in working. The grieving person as a matter of fact need to return to meaningful work in which he was engaged. The counselor need to prepare the bereaved person to regain normalcy and usual life. The following are some of the action therapies that can enhance quick heading as well regaining normalcy.

(a) The use of art

It means using art in a therapeutic way/the advantage of using art in therapy is that it becomes a symbolic way for people to communicate. Art therapy can be used to increase understanding of conscious material.¹⁹ For instance a grieving person can be encouraged to express his or her anger resulting from death in a drawing and the client and therapist can discuss what the drawing symbolizes and feelings it represents. It can be very useful when dealing with reluctant and non-verbal clients in the family. Painting and drawing can facilitate growth and change on the bereaved persons as the counselor helps him or her to focus on symbolic areas of pain. The art provides an emotional outlet for people who have difficulty expressing their feelings and desires hence effective in helping them to understand their confusion.

(b) Music therapy

Music play an important role in healing and nurturing the bereaved person. Most clients enjoy singing, dancing or listening to music which may be ideal for grieving person who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally. Music is a versatile tool that can reduce anxiety, elicit memories,

¹⁵ Moloney (2005) Counseling for HIV/AIDS, Nairobi, Paulines Publications.

¹⁶ Lierop (1992) Pastoral Counseling, Nairobi, CCEA.

¹⁷ Williams (1961) The Minister and Care of the Souls, new York Harper & Row Br. Ltd.

¹⁸ Capuzzi (2001) Introduction to Counseling Profession, USA, Allyn & Bacon Ltd.

¹⁹ Capuzzi (2001) Introduction to Counseling Profession, USA, Allyn & Bacon Ltd.

communicate feelings, develop rapport and create moods.²⁰ Music is also energizing and has a calming effect. Bereaved persons could be told to recommend songs that express who they are their conflicts or their hopes and encouraged to share how the songs are relating to their experiences during the moment of grief.

(c) Writing

Writing offers a powerful tool for clients to clarify their feelings and events and gain insights into their problems. Writing contributes to personal integration because for many clients seeing something in writing has more impact than hearing it. Journaling is one form of expression in writing. The bereaved person is encouraged to write down thoughts and feelings about events each day. During the session the counselor can encourage the client to share anything from the journal that they felt was significant. Journaling allows for self-expression and the acceptance of feelings, relieves emotional pain and allows clients to deal with emotions in a cognitive and objective manner.

(d) Bibliotherapy

It refers to a process designed to help individuals solve problems or understand themselves through their response to literature or media. Bibliotherapy can create awareness of how others have dealt with similar problems. The literature recommended should be consistent with the faith of the client which may include the Bible, Quoran among others. It is also important in selecting books for therapy to consider the presenting problems on the part of the grieving clients.

(e) Deepening spirituality

As people express their questions regarding life issues for instance death, consideration of the spiritual dimension of the grieving person becomes an important aspect of in counseling. Emotional complaints that counselors hear everyday such as emptiness, meaninglessness, and disillusionment, losses are issues which are spiritual in nature which may suggest a search into involvement with a transcendent power. Einstein once said "science cannot provide man with ultimate answers to the ultimate questions, this is up to man's faith."²¹ This therefore calls upon the counselor to involve the spiritual components in helping the grieving person through the use of religious resources that boost their faith and hope in the midst of these circumstances working services, sacraments, reading scriptures, testimonies among others are important in building fourth of the grieving client. The counselor may work hand in hand with clergymen to achieve this.

Gestalt Counseling by Fredrick Perls

The term gestalt is a German word which mean whole. The Gestalt counselor focuses more on integrating the various parts into one wait (whole). In Gestalt counseling there is a greater emphasis on the here and now experiences. The grieving person is encouraged to live in the present moment.

The role of the gestalt counseling is to help the bereaved persons to see reality of what has happened and that the client cannot change the situation. The counselor helps the bereaved to achieve higher level of self awareness in the circumstances surrounding him or her arising from death. The Gestalt counselor encouraged the bereaved client or clients to move from environmental support (support from others including the deceased to self-support (internal support or available resources). Inorder to be self-supporting clients are encouraged to be in touch with their organismic existential centres (I am what I am)²² Clients who are in touch with their organismic selves or with their senses are self-actualizing and will support themselves. Self-supporting people take responsibility for their existences and possess freedom of choice.

Research Findings

The research was conducted among ten families which had experienced death between May and August, 2010 within Kericho District. The data collection was done using participatory and non participatory observation, interview and document analysis. Since death is an emotive issue, questions that were posed were indirect. The study found that death is still the most feared in the family with 75% of those interviewed confirming this. The deceased person is also feared. None had preparations towards dead for instance the ones interviewed had not written a will, insurance against dead was not evident while people were encouraged frequently during funeral ceremonies to subscribe to National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF). Main causes of dead noticed were suicide, accidents, unexplained causes included cancer and HIV/AIDS. Reactions to death is characterized by shock, denial and disbelief. The closer the deceased to the grieving person the bigger the loss hence more painful. Those closest persons to the deceased such as spouse, children and parents requires deeper and structured counseling interventions. This is because the intensity of the loss (Death) evokes feelings of guilty, loneliness, helplessness and hopelessness. The stages of grief exist but are not clearly defined.

Counseling interventions

Counseling during the circumstances of death was found to take spiritual dimension which is offered by clergymen. It was observed that people are closer to God during this time and God is also seen to be real. God is mentioned severally immediately with the news of the death and continues during the grieving process and proceeding gatherings. Focused on the resurrection of the dead is evident with clergymen stretching the knowledge of the grieving clients to realize this. Counseling skills utilized more frequently are supportive and emphatic skills active listening, clarification, confronting, modeling, interpretation among others are used. Spiritual counseling is emphasized as opposed to psychological counseling. Psychological counselors have not asserted themselves strongly in this occasions hence are not included in the funeral programmes. Resources used to help the bereaved

²⁰ Capuzzi (2001) Introduction to Counseling Profession, USA, Allyn & Bacon Ltd.

²¹ Lierop (1992) Pastoral Counseling, Nairobi, CCEA.

²² Jones (1995) *The Theory and Practice of Counselling*, London, Cassel Washington, House.

persons include religious resources e.g. religious texts, clergymen speeches, prayers as well as cultural resources. Since the family is a subsystem of the culture then cultural values and demands need to be incorporated into the whole spectrum of mourning. Counseling also needs to borrow from the cultural system the interventions that enhances the self-worth of the grieving persons.

Recommendations

1. Psychological counseling need to enhance its place more in grief counseling in the family as a right.
2. More counselors, leaders, clergymen and family members are strongly recommended to have knowledge in grief counseling so as to help be able to assist family members during grieving.
3. Psychological counselors need to be evident more during mourning in the family through frequent visits to the family, getting involved and offering the necessary support and not spectating as the work of helping the grieving persons is done by clergymen.
4. More literature on grief counseling in family is needful in various languages borrowing from the diverse cultures and settings within which families are established.

Conclusion

Grief and bereavement counseling is emerging as a very important component of counseling in modern times due to frequent cases of death arising from such incidences as accidents, terminal diseases, mass murder among others which are on the rise.

Families are faced with bereavement more often than not in the current times than it was in other times. This calls for counseling to take more centre stage than it has been. This paper has given some innovative understanding of grief which will help bereaved persons to be patient with themselves in their journey towards healing.

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