Counseling Strategies for Loss and Grief

KEREN M. HUMPHREY
This book is dedicated to the women who shaped me with their presence:
my mother, Amy Riser Harrington Humphrey,
and my maternal grandmother, Elberta Riser Harrington.
And to the woman who shaped me with her absence,
my paternal grandmother, Lela Marie Beller Humphrey.
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For years my professional colleagues and I have discussed the need for a book of counseling interventions to supplement the theoretical literature on loss and grief. The vast majority of this literature centers on theoretical conceptualizations of bereavement grief and research on distinct topics (e.g., complicated grief, AIDS-related grief) or the characteristics of distinct populations (e.g., bereaved parents, the chronically ill). Although this knowledge base is essential to our understanding of loss and grief, the literature tends to falls short in consideration of the technical aspects of intervention. Most often authors suggest a direction for therapy, such as examining unfinished business or facilitating emotional expression, but the nuts-and-bolts descriptions of what to actually do with clients in therapy are often disappointingly vague or entirely absent. It is the old challenge of translating theory into practice, and it is the reason for this book.

The purpose of Counseling Strategies for Loss and Grief is to describe a range of counseling strategies appropriate to the treatment of loss and grief issues in diverse psychotherapy settings. It is based on contemporary understandings on the nature of personal and interpersonal loss and the ways in which people attempt to integrate loss and grief into their lives. The suggested strategies incorporate constructs and procedures from a wide variety of sources, reflecting both time-tested counseling strategies and more recent innovations in counseling theory and practice. Five themes guide this text:

1. Loss and grief are frequently encountered issues in psychotherapy that are inclusive of both death-related and nondeath-related circumstances. Despite substantial attention given to bereavement grief, nondeath-related losses just as often present significant challenges in the lives of clients. “All changes involve loss, just as all losses require change” (R. A. Neimeyer, 2000a, p. 5).

2. The experience of loss and grief is highly individual and intensely personal, reflecting a unique interaction of person, loss event, and the multiple contexts in which that loss and grief occur.

3. The boundary between death-related and nondeath-related loss is permeable so that knowledge associated with each assists understanding of the other. Differences between the two have less to do with the fact of death and bereavement and more to do with the uniqueness of an individual's response to loss and his or her particular grieving journey.

4. The natural extension of appreciating the uniqueness of each person’s experience of loss and grief and her or his particular manner of adapting to loss is the importance of tailoring counseling strategies to client needs. If the experience of loss and grief is unique, then counseling interventions that address those experiences must prioritize that uniqueness.
5. It is assumed that counseling professionals regard the strategies described here, like any therapeutic intervention, as inherently adaptable. Sound theoretical conceptualization and a solid working relationship precede selection of interventions, which are then customized to fit the unique needs of clients and the evolving counseling process.

Perhaps it is useful here to point out what this book does not attempt to do. It is not intended as a comprehensive treatment manual in which a set of prescribed interventions from a standardized theory are applied invariably to every client, family, or group. There is no laundry list of goals and objectives from which to pick and choose and no stereotypical list of cultural characteristics that obscures individuality. Instead, this book describes a broad range of counseling strategies that are adaptable across various theoretical orientations and includes practical suggestions for increasing their effectiveness.

Whom This Book Is For

*Counseling Strategies for Loss and Grief* is intended primarily for counseling professionals and clinical supervisors working in diverse psychotherapy settings. It also provides a valuable, practical resource for graduate trainees in counseling and counseling-related professions, where issues of loss and grief are inadequately addressed (Humphrey, 1993). The counseling strategies outlined here are most appropriate for adolescents and adults and are primarily aimed at individual therapy situations. However, suggestions for using these strategies in group and family therapy settings are provided. Additional resource recommendations specific to certain topics are also included throughout the text.

Terminology in This Book

Sometimes the terminology associated with professional psychotherapy services can be confusing, so the following clarifications apply in this text:

- *Counseling* and *therapy* refer to psychotherapeutic intervention services provided by qualified mental health professionals. No distinction is made in this text between counseling and therapy as long as services are delivered by a qualified mental health professional.
- A *qualified mental health professional* possesses at least a master’s degree in counseling or a counseling-related field (e.g., psychology, social work) and national certification or state licensure. *Counseling professional, therapist, counselor,* and *psychotherapist* are interchangeable terms describing qualified mental health professionals.
- *Grief counseling* and *grief therapy* refer to psychotherapeutic interventions involving both death-related and nondeath-related grief.
- *Strategies* is the preferred term for counseling interventions described in this book. The word *techniques* implies something done to clients by counselors without input from clients, whereas *strategies* suggests a more respectful and collaborative therapeutic activity, tailored to the uniqueness of clients, that is consistent with effective counseling for loss and grief.
Organization of the Book

Counseling Strategies for Loss and Grief includes two parts. Part 1, Unique Grief and Unique Grievers, orients readers to current thinking about loss and grief and the implications for professional counseling practice. Chapter 1 summarizes the shift from traditional to contemporary grief models in the form of guidelines for conceptualizing loss and grief. Chapter 2 highlights diverse aspects of loss and grief that merit special attention by counseling professionals. Chapter 3 outlines two contemporary grief models—adaptive grieving styles and the dual process model—with suggestions for using these models to enhance counseling services with grieving clients. Part 2, Counseling Strategies for Loss Adaptation, offers detailed descriptions of various interventions appropriate in counseling for issues of loss and grief, distinguishing them by focus or theoretical origins. Chapter 4 provides strategies that focus on cognitive and behavioral interventions, drawing largely from cognitive–behavioral and constructivist therapy models. Chapter 5 provides strategies that focus primarily on emotional processing. Chapters 6 and 7 offer strategies derived from two contemporary therapies arising from postmodern and constructivist thinking: narrative therapy and solution-focused therapy. Chapter 8 describes a number of recommended adjunctive activities that are especially beneficial to grieving clients, their adaptation to loss, and the counseling process. Finally, Chapter 9 addresses the challenges of working with loss and grief for the counselor as a person and a professional.
Acknowledgments

It has been my good fortune to work directly or indirectly with grieving people in a variety of settings over several careers. I remain in awe of those individuals and families who willingly shared their dying and their grief with me so many years ago in my first career as a parish minister. This book began with you.

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