Grief Counseling Best Practices

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Knowledge

Concepts of Grief & Loss

The professional counselor who demonstrates competence in grief counseling...

- is knowledgeable of the various types of death and non-death losses that individuals may experience, and how those losses impact human growth and development across the lifespan.
- understands that certain types of death and non-death losses (e.g., infertility/pregnancy loss, military deployment, incarceration, pet loss) may be disenfranchised or minimized.
- demonstrates knowledge of various theoretical models of grief counseling (e.g., stage/phase models, existential/humanistic theory, meaning reconstruction, attachment theory), including their strengths and limitations.

Contextual Knowledge

The professional counselor who demonstrates competence in grief counseling...

- is familiar with institutional barriers, including medical model and diagnostic approaches, that affect the processes of grieving and dying.
- can identify grieving clients' different needs based on their developmental phase of life.
- understands how sociocultural identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, age, sexual/affectional orientation, gender identity/expression, spirituality/religion, socioeconomic status/class, ability/disability), can affect a client's grief responses and/or be source of grief (e.g., discrimination, systemic oppression, loss of rights).
- understands the significant role that rituals and ceremonies can play in the grieving process.
- understands the importance of social support and resources for grieving clients.

Ethical Practice and Continuing Education

The professional counselor who demonstrates competence in grief counseling...

- is familiar with ethical guidelines related to loss and bereavement (e.g., American Counseling Association, Associated for Death Education & Counseling).

- stays up to date on current research and practice in grief and loss counseling (e.g., by attending professional conferences or workshops, reading professional journals, and/or consulting with experts knowledgeable about grief practices with diverse populations).

Awareness

Counselor Self-Awareness

The professional counselor who demonstrates competence in grief counseling...

- is aware of their own point of view about death and mortality.
- is aware of how grief has impacted/continues to impact their life.
- is aware of their limitations in helping others grieve, including their competencies, countertransference, and bias toward the experience and expression of grief and loss.

Foundational Beliefs

The professional counselor who demonstrates competence in grief counseling...

- affirms that grief is an individualized experience for each client, with range of possible emotional reactions.
- is aware of the developmental, social, cultural, and systemic factors that contribute to a client's grief.

Skills

General Skills

The professional counselor who demonstrates competence in grief counseling...

- can validate and normalize feelings of grief and loss for both death and non-death losses, providing psychoeducation as appropriate.
- can help their client navigate the grieving process without rushing them or imposing an expected timeline.
- knows and avoids platitudes that are unhelpful to say to grieving clients (e.g., "Everything happens for a reason").
- ...can adjust responses specifically for clients who have experienced ambiguous loss and/or disenfranchised grief.

Assessment and Treatment Planning

The professional counselor who demonstrates competence in grief counseling...

- can assess and describe presentations of grief, including specific symptoms (e.g., avoidance, intense emotional pain, difficulty with reintegration).
- can differentiate signs of grief and bereavement from signs of other mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress.
- can identify and address prolonged grief (e.g., Prolonged Grief Disorder).
- can apply case conceptualization and treatment planning skills specific to grief counseling.
- can apply specific interventions linked to theoretical models of grief counseling.
- can apply trauma-informed interventions when addressing grief and loss in counseling.
- can work with clients on integrating their losses into a new reality, including changes to roles and identities.
- can help clients maintain connections and bonds to the loss object/person, as appropriate.
- asks about a client's spiritual/religious beliefs, rituals, and conceptualization of life after death, and tailor their interventions accordingly.