

Article 66

Professional School Counselors Address Grief and Loss: A Creative Group Counseling Intervention

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Abstract

Children and adolescents experience many types of loss, and as a result, grief is often displayed within the school setting. Group counseling is an effective intervention for children and adolescents who experience grief and loss. Professional school counselors are highly trained and qualified to offer effective interventions within a group counseling format. Creative interventions are engaging and therapeutic, thus, serving as ideal interventions in which professional school counselors can offer group counseling sessions. Utilizing Marge Heegaard's book, *When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope With Grief*, the authors will offer a brief overview of 11 group counseling sessions coupled with creative interventions for children and adolescents to address grief and loss in a school setting. Implications for student learning targets will be offered.

Importance of Grief and Loss Work in Schools

Many students experience some type of loss in their lives. Loss is often associated with the death of a loved one, but ambiguous loss is just as prevalent. Ambiguous loss is a type of loss that may not be recognized (Guidry, Simpson, Test, & Bloomfield, 2013; Mauk, 2011). Loss can be tangible or intangible and both types can cause physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional problems for the child who experiences loss (Guidry et al., 2013; Mauk, 2011). A child can experience loss through parental separation, divorce, illness of a loved one, relocation to a new home or school, break-up with a romantic partner, or the loss of a friendship or pet (Guidry et al., 2013; Mauk, 2011). Furthermore, the effects of grief can manifest through academic failure, acting out due to displaced anger, aggression, inappropriate risk-taking, runaway behaviors, sexualized behaviors, and/or substance abuse (Mauk, 2011).

Grieving can disrupt a child's normal functioning, but helping the child work through their emotions can foster emotional healing and restoration of the child's overall health (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008). The purpose of grief work in schools is to help children work through acceptance of the loss, experience the associated pain and emotion involved with the loss, adjust to life without the loved one, and find ways to remember their special someone in everyday life (Guidry et al., 2013). It is important to recognize that children do not grieve in the same way as adults (Massat, Moses, & Ornstein, 2008). Some do not follow a stage model of grief. Once such model is as follows (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008): 1) Shock is the first reaction to the event where the person feels numb, physical pain, and/or withdrawal. 2) Denial happens when the grieving person acts as if nothing has happened and refuses to accept that his loved one is no longer with him. 3) Depression occurs through a prolonged period of painful feelings, despair, and emptiness. 4) Guilt occurs as the grieving person blames herself for the loss of her loved one. 5) Anxiety can manifest in a panic attack, which often happens when reality finally sinks in that their loved one is gone. 6) Aggression can be directed towards the person who might have prevented the loss or the lost object. 7) Reintegration is when the grieving person has accepted the loss as reality. But children oftentimes experience grief much differently.

Similarly, Worden (2009) developed the Tasks of Mourning Model, which integrates four different tasks to successfully complete the work of mourning. The tasks are as follows: Task 1—To accept the reality of the loss on an intellectual and emotional level. Task 2—To process the pain and grief, which depends on the type of pain that is being experienced and the nature of the relationship with the deceased. Task 3—To adjust to a world without the deceased, which can be external (daily living), internal (finding oneself or redefining oneself), and spiritual (developing a new worldview). Task 4—To find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. The Tasks of Mourning Model encourages one to accept the loss, find a unique way to remain connected with the deceased, and learn to move forward (Worden, 2009).

For children, grief is integrated in everyday tasks such as attending school, playing, and in other school-related activities (Guidry et al., 2013; Mauk, 2011). To some, it can seem like the child is even happy and unaffected by the event, but through play and other avenues, a child typically will express their pain and other emotions (Guidry, 2013). It is important for adults to have the ability to recognize when a child is

grieving. Some examples might include a child who has trouble sleeping at night or has nightmares, a child who often frequents the nurse's office at school for a headache or stomachache, a child who is often easily distracted in class and daydreams, or a child that completely withdraws from peers and other adults in his/her life (Guidry, 2013; Massat et al., 2008). If we can learn to recognize that a child is grieving, we can learn how to best help the child cope with their feelings associated with grief and loss. If we advertently or inadvertently dismiss the child's feelings, unresolved grief can lead to emotional and behavioral problems, in turn, impacting academic achievement (Mauk, 2011; Pérusse, 2009). According to Mauk (2011), a student can create emotional blocks to learning that can affect attention span and memory capacity, which can negatively affect overall academic performance. It is for the aforementioned reasons that there is a great need for grief and loss groups in the school environment.

According to the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (2006), schools must be well prepared to deal with and handle crises of all magnitudes. The school counselor's role is essential in providing needed support for grieving students. One benefit of offering grief/loss groups within the school setting is to reach out to several young people in their time of need. Professional school counselors are in the ideal position to promote and support mental and emotional health while identifying the children that are dealing with grief/loss.

Additionally, professional school counselors should adhere to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2012), which promotes academic, career, and social/emotional development of all students (ASCA, 2012; Pérusse, 2009). In the delivery section of the ASCA National Model, there is an emphasis on providing direct student services. Direct services are to be delivered throughout the schools' overall curriculum, including: guidance lessons within the classroom, individual student planning, and responsive services (ASCA, 2012). Within each counseling service provided, students are given information, knowledge, mindsets, behaviors and skills that are appropriate for the child's individual developmental level. Services can range from individual counseling, small and large group counseling, family counseling, and classroom guidance lessons. These direct approaches are also utilized when counselors respond to a crisis situation in which the counselor meets the student's immediate needs and concerns. These services are put in place to help students overcome issues that impede their academic achievement and overall school success. According the ASCA National Model (2012), the counseling process in a school setting is designed to help a student identify problems, causes, alternatives, and possible consequences so they can make decisions and take appropriate actions. Professional school counselors do not provide extensive therapy; rather, they provide brief treatment to assist the student back to wellness and healthy functioning (ASCA, 2012). It is for these reasons that a group counseling approach in a school setting is an appropriate intervention for grieving students.

Despite the well-documented and supported benefits of group counseling for children and adolescents in the research, along with the recommendations from the ASCA National Model (2012), group interventions in schools are oftentimes underutilized. According to Williams, McMahon, McLeod, and Rice (2013), there are many reasons why group counseling sessions are not facilitated regularly within the school setting. Professional school counselors' graduate level skills are underutilized due

largely in part to the role confusion inherent within the school counseling profession. Historically, the stigma attached to school ‘guidance’ counselors is that they are responsible for class scheduling, testing, paperwork, and several other inappropriate and non-counseling duties. Professional school counselors are trained at the master’s level to provide mental health counseling, but they are often not provided the time and support to offer such services to students. Additionally, there is sometimes a lack of administrative support when it comes to counselors being afforded the time and opportunity to provide actual counseling services during the school day. Many administrators believe that high-stakes testing is of the utmost importance; thus, the mental health of the child not the focus. Another challenge for professional school counselors presents when teachers are reluctant to allow a student out of class, because they feel the need to protect every minute of instructional time. In an intensely academic climate (Williams et al., 2013), there is not much room to work on the social/emotional needs of students who may actually need that one-on-one individual time due to a family crisis, or group counseling sessions that holistically address children’s needs. There are many struggles that a professional school counselor could face that could potentially hinder the counseling process from occurring in the school setting, including the lack of understanding of the group process combined with a lack of confidence in the school counselor’s ability to lead groups effectively (Williams et al., 2013).

However, literature suggests that group counseling is very effective in many ways and can promote academic, career, and social/emotional development (Mauk, 2011; Pérusse, 2009). The benefit of having group counseling as a school intervention is that professional school counselors can see multiple students at one time without having to take away from a lot of instructional time. Children and adolescents in particular typically learn best from each other. While teachers facilitate task-oriented groups in the classroom to help children meet academic needs, school counselors lead group counseling sessions in similar ways to enhance the students’ positive growth and development. It is important to remember that group counseling can be an essential component for the overall development of children. In order for children to do well academically, they need to be able to feel safe and work through their personal issues. The school environment already provides them with a safe place to learn academically, but if not at home or at school, where else would children be able to turn in times of trouble—when a loved one passes away, when a parent/guardian becomes incarcerated, or when their parents separate or divorce? It is important to highlight that creative school counseling interventions can be effective outlets for students during difficult times in their lives.

Art therapy is one example of a creative intervention that utilizes students’ drawings and paintings for exploration and expression of emotions associated with a loss (Chilcote, 2007). Chilcote (2007) studied the effects of art therapy with children who were affected by the December 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka. Survivors experienced great loss during this time but were not given an open opportunity to express their emotions toward the event. The study was a 4-week art therapy group for 113 children between the ages of 5–14 who were affected by the tsunami. Throughout this creative approach, art therapy was found to be an effective intervention in helping the children grieve and heal. Narrative therapy and bibliotherapy are other effective interventions to help children express themselves, especially when they may not feel very comfortable with directly discussing or sharing their grief-related feelings (Mauk, 2011).

Granados, Winslade, De Witt, and Hedtke (2009) suggested that an effective intervention to use with clients involves the practice of remembering their loved one. This remembering practice helps to keep lost loved ones alive in their hearts and minds and emphasizes acceptance of the reality of the loss, letting go, and finally saying good-bye. This intervention also helps children become aware that the relationship with their loved ones does not have to end just because they are not physically here anymore. Instead, it depicts a new type of relationship, in story form, that helps keep that sense of connectedness with that person. The group process described by Granados et al. allowed the children to introduce their loved ones to the group, share their relationship stories, and acknowledge cultural rituals about death. Children were encouraged to make memory cards for their loved one. The last part of the group process was deconstructing messages about death and grief using the voice of the loved one as a resource.

Similarly, Marge Heegaard has written several books to help children, adolescents, and adults through difficult times. In particular, Heegaard (1988) wrote an interactive workbook for children called, *When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope With Grief*. It is a workbook that was specifically designed to help children learn to cope with grief. Heegaard described what change is, the stages of grief and loss, and invites children who complete the workbook to tell their story in a safe and non-confrontational way. Workbooks as such can be used to help children understand death, remember their loved one, and help them cope with the reality of the loss.

Overall, when children experience a great loss, the most effective interventions are creative interventions, which include visual, literary, and performing arts interventions (Mauk, 2011). These interventions help support the child, reduce the intensity of the grief event, speed up recovery, and reduce negative effects of bereavement (Mauk, 2011). Thus, students have an opportunity to share their story of the significant loss that they have experienced and they can learn to cope with these changes in a creative format.

Following is an example group design that is manageable for professional school counselors to implement within a school setting. For the purposes of this article, the authors gained permission from Marge Heegaard to share her workbook as the tool for the group counseling intervention described below. *When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope With Grief* has been utilized by the authors for several years and has been an effective group counseling tool for addressing grief/loss work in schools.

Group Design

Students should be screened for their willingness and appropriateness for the grief and loss group with a simple questionnaire (Appendix A). Students that wish to participate and meet the criteria are accepted into the group. As well as making phone calls to the parents or guardians of the students, professional school counselors should send home a letter outlining the group process, and one should gain written permission for the child's participation. Assent from the students should be acquired as well. Students could meet in the professional school counselor's office once per week during lunchtime.

At the first meeting, group rules are created by the students. Rules include, but are not limited to: be respectful to other group members, only one person talking at a time, no

teasing or making fun of other group members, and no talking about others outside the group. Confidentiality is discussed along with the limitations of it. Students are then given the pre-survey (Appendix B) before receiving their “When Someone Very Special Dies” grief and loss booklets (Heegaard, 1988). Each session begins with a check-in about the homework assignment that was given during the check-out of the previous group meeting. An example might be to practice a coping skill or ask a loved one a question about the person that died. The session lasts approximately 30 minutes and covers about four or five pages of the supplementary text for the group. Students are asked to read the page being covered to the rest of the group. The group leaders provide some examples being discussed and then encourage the students to take a few minutes to draw or write down words that represent their feelings about the particular subject being covered. After all group members have completed the task, each member is invited to share what they wrote down. Participation is not mandated, but encouraged and supported. If group counseling is effectively facilitated, usually all group members feel safe and comfortable and share their thoughts and feelings. After 10 to 12 weeks of grief and loss group processing, expressing feelings and creating positive supports and coping skills, the completion of the group is celebrated. Multiple forms of expressing positive completion of the group can be explored along with student involvement. Following is a brief overview of each session.

Overview of Group Sessions

Session 1

Introduction of group members; review of confidentiality; creation of group rules by group members; purpose of group; introduction and review of group work material; complete pre-survey; talk about termination and the end of the group; group members personalize their workbook with crayons, markers, and other decorative supplies; check-out.

Session 2

Check-in; begin discussion on change (e.g., spring, summer, fall, winter); explore individual change; change creates loss; living is growing and changing; death is a part of change; illustrate/color and discuss group members’ workbook entries; check-out.

Session 3

Check-in; explore why people die; honor a person or persons and their significance; share why or how that person died; explore spiritual or religious meanings; discuss saying good-bye and if there was a funeral service; illustrate/color and discuss group members’ workbook entries; check-out.

Session 4

Check-in; continue the discussion on what happens after death; explore questions group members may have had that related to the loss of their loved one; review and validate feelings; discuss how and why group members hide some feelings; illustrate/color and discuss group members’ workbook entries; check-out.

Session 5

Check-in; explore different feelings and how they impact our body; discuss healthy coping skills; draw out feelings of sadness and anger and explore why we feel what we feel; normalize feelings and process healthy ways to express them; illustrate/color and discuss group members' workbook entries; check-out.

Session 6

Check-in; discuss feelings of fear and worry; review healthy ways to express our feelings; explore how we feel different than others and discover positive characteristics of group members; identifying tasks or activities group member excel at or enjoy doing; talk about termination and the end of the group; illustrate/color and discuss group members' workbook entries; check-out.

Session 7

Check-in; discuss how group members were informed about the death of their loved-one; talk about ways to let others know how and when group members need comfort; share different ways we like to be comforted; explore things group member wished they did or did not say or do; illustrate/color and discuss group members' workbook entries; check-out.

Session 8

Check-in; share favorite memories of lost loved ones; discuss important things group members learned from their lost loved-one; begin to review/identify supports at home and at school; illustrate/color and discuss group members' workbook entries; check-out.

Session 9

Check-in; continue discussion on support system; expand to create a list of people that belong in each group members' "care circle"; illustrate/color and discuss group members' workbook entries; check-out.

Session 10

Check-in; review healthy coping skills; discuss a person or people each group member can talk to; share healthy/safe ways to show others that we care; continue to provide hope for future happiness; talk about termination and the end of the group; illustrate/color and discuss group members' workbook entries; check-out.

Session 11

Check-in; review coping skills and support systems with the group members; complete post-survey; create a card honoring group members' lost loved-ones; celebrate the lives of those gone and the completion of the grief and loss group; terminate the group. Another way that the authors have terminated the group was to have each student write a message on a balloon filled with helium. Some students have written a letter, a memory, RIP, or other personal messages. The school counselors would gain permission from the students to have the principal join the balloon activity. Involving the principal was beneficial in many ways (e.g., strengthens the school counselor-principal

partnership, gives the principal a clear view of how effective group counseling can be if allowed the ability to do so, gives the principal a different perspective on the students and the students' concerns in the school setting). The termination activity allows the students a chance to celebrate their success in completing the group, they get to say good-bye to their loved one, and they get to take home a picture of the commemorative activity.

Note: Check-in usually begins with reviewing the check-out from the previous session. An example would be discussing what healthy coping skills group members practiced during the week. As with any group, sessions may overlap or run longer due to in-depth conversations. As such, the group design is flexible in that this entire process can last from 11 to 13 sessions if needed.

Readers are encouraged to utilize this or a similar tool as a creative intervention to address grief and loss with children and adolescents within a group setting in a school counseling context.

Student Learning Target (SLT)

This model can be used to satisfy the professional school counselor's student learning target (SLT) as well. By implementing the emotional wellness survey, the school counselor can obtain a pre-intervention measure as a base number from which to start. The intervention, the grief and loss group, can be implemented and the emotional wellness survey can be administered upon completion of the group to measure group member's perceptions of emotional wellness. A decrease in the average score on the instrument would indicate an increase in self-perception when dealing with grief and loss in a healthy manner. An example SLT previously proposed by the authors is as follows.

Rationale

Based on previous professional school counseling experience, students who do not acquire the necessary life skills to effectively deal with grief and loss can develop maladaptive coping skills (e.g., self-harm, substance abuse, physical aggression, withdrawing and isolation, relational aggression, etc.). As a result, these behaviors can have a negative impact on their educational success in school. Through the use of a screening tool, students can be identified as dealing with grief and loss and may express the desire to learn new, healthy ways to cope with their loss. The grief/ loss group will teach beneficial ways to utilize healthy coping skills and gain positive social support systems to aid in their healthy grieving process.

Conclusion

Grief and loss is prevalent within school settings, and many students experience a variety of emotions resulting from their losses. Professional school counselors can provide valuable supports for students to optimize their mental health while striving for academic success. It is critical that professional school counselors advocate for their role, their expertise, and their desire to facilitate group counseling sessions for students who experience grief and loss within the school setting. It is the authors' hope that readers will feel inspired to continue to provide students with a holistic experience in their schools—

one that strengthens students' minds and spirits. All documents provided can be replicated and modified to help service students.

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Appendix A

Grief and Loss Group Screening

Name: _____ Date: _____

Homeroom Teacher: _____ Grade: _____

I have experienced a loss in my life and have difficulty dealing with it at times. Yes No

When dealing with my loss, I am able to use healthy coping skills. Yes No

I would be interested in participating in a Grief and Loss Group. Yes No

If I were to participate in the group, I would be prepared to work and share. Yes No

The Grief and Loss Group would meet once per week during your lunch time. You would get your lunch and come to the Student Support Center where group would take place. Group would last about 30 minutes and the sooner we get started, the sooner we finish. As with all groups, you may experience sadness or anger while sharing your story. That is a normal part of the group process, and you can experience your feelings in a safe and supportive environment. If you feel like this would benefit you, we would really like you to be a part of the group.

Sincerely,

Professional School Counselor

Appendix B

Grief and Loss Group Emotional Wellness Survey

1. I am able to identify people in my life that I can talk to when I feel sad.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

2. I am able to identify healthy coping skills to deal with sadness and grief.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

3. I am able to identify feelings of sadness and anger and talk about them with a trusted person.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

4. I am able to identify three people in my support network.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

5. I am able to identify three healthy coping skills.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

6. I feel that I am able to deal effectively with the loss of my loved one.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

7. I feel that I am able to help others who have lost a loved one.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

8. I feel that I am able to talk with the family and friends of the person who died.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

9. I feel that I am able to better understand how loss affects me and my emotions.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

10. I feel that I am able to better understand how loss affects those around me.

Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

Name

Date