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Emergence Health Network

Supporting a Client Through Grief

Grief is not a short term process and the feeling of grief is not limited to the loss of a loved one. Grief is a reaction to the loss of anyone or anything an individual is deeply attached to. Historically, grief has been viewed as a smooth transition from one stage of grief to another; to "move on". Research indicates that the most beneficial way of supporting a client through grief, is to allow them to create their own timeline and do not force them to move through the stages of loss, but to experience their own feelings organically.

As a professional, we can support clients through grief by creating an accepting environment that provides space for all feelings, encourage coping skill integration, teach therapeutic activities and encourage the client to participate in group therapy.

Communication is Key

Grief can be experienced many different ways. When an individual experiences a great loss, the person may experience disruptions in both physical and mental health. The person may also react in many different ways - sadness, yearning, guilt, loneliness, relief. The best way to gain awareness into what the client is experiencing is to ask them. Open and understanding dialogue between the professional and the client will provide awareness into what the client is experiencing and what is the best intervention to suggest as support. Keep in mind, everyone reacts to grief differently and as support staff it is important we do not tell the client what we think they should be feeling/doing.

Physical & Mental

A client may experience both mental and physical disruptions when navigating grief. A client may experience increased mental health symptoms: severe depression, suicidal ideation, risk of self-harm and substance abuse. Physical symptoms that might be experienced are: changes in eating habits, suppression of immune system, disruption of sleep and increased stress on the heart.

The best way to know what a client is experiencing, is to ask. Use open ended questions and inquire what the client is experiencing and how you and your team can be most helpful.

Try statements like, “I hear you saying you can not eat. Tell me more about that”, “I know you stayed in bed last week, is there an activity that we could do together today in the living room?”, “What is hardest for you today?”

Avoid using closed statements like, “I’m sorry”, “It will get better”, “Everyone dies”, “They are in heaven now”. These types of statements discourage the client from continuing to speak and will not provide more clarity into what symptoms they are experiencing.

Activities to Try

After you have discussed what the client is feeling and have gained more clarity into the issue, it can be helpful to process feelings through activities. It is important that we provide the client space to experience their feelings and to process them effectively. As support staff, it is important that we do not discourage communication of feelings by making statements like, “Don’t cry” or “It will be okay”. An important part of experiencing grief is the acknowledgement of feelings and processing those feelings through conversation, group therapy and therapeutic activities. Many people process feelings through the act of doing and not through the act of talking.

Here are a few ideas of activities to help the client process feelings:

- Keep a journal and write letters, draw pictures, write songs to the loved one
- Listen to songs that remind the client of the loved one
- Make a memory box of trinkets that remind the client of the lost person
- Develop a list of memories
- Cook a meal that remind the client of the loved one
- Hang pictures of the loved one
- Create a necklace with symbols that remind the client of the loved one

These types of activities encourage the client to think of the relationship with the loved one, as opposed to focusing on the feeling of loss. It is important to communicate and help the client see that the relationship with the loved one does not end when an individual dies. The memories are there and that person lives on through our thoughts and actions.

What Now?

As a professional, we provide support to individuals who greatly need our help. It is important we are aware of our responses and feelings while helping someone grieve. We can not place judgements on feelings, encourage a “speedy recovery” or compare our experiences with grief to a client’s.

Research indicates that an individual is able to “return to normal” after approximately 6 months after losing a loved one. During this time, coping skill lessons can be introduced and can increase a client's awareness of activities to try when feeling depressed, angery, lonely, etc.

For more resources:
Books, etc. (counseling.org/bookstore)

- *Counseling Strategies for Loss and Grief* by Keren M. Humphrey
- Good Grief (therapeutic card sets) and Dinosaur Game Board, Bradley Erford

- *Counseling Older People: Opportunities and Challenges* by Charlene M. Kampfe

Podcasts (counseling.org/continuing-education/podcasts)

- "When Grief Becomes Complicated" with Antonietta Corvasce
- "Remembering Lives: Conversations With the Dying and Bereaved" with John Winslade and Lorraine Hedtke

VISTAS Online articles (counseling.org/continuing-education/vistas)

- "A Shift in the Conceptual Understanding of Grief: Using Meaning-Oriented Therapies With Bereaved Clients" by Jodi M. Flesner
- "Current Trends in Grief Counseling" by Elizabeth A. Doughty, Adriana Wissel and Cyndia Glorfield
- "Frequency and Importance of Grief Counselor Activities" by Darlene Daneker
- "The Anniversary of the Death of a Loved One" by Rebecca M. Dedmond, Annie K. Smith and Sania Frei-Harper
- "Understanding Grief and Loss in Children" by Jody J. Fiorini and Jodi A. Mullen

Practice Briefs (counseling.org/knowledge-center/practice-briefs)

- "Death and Dying Issues" by Kathryn Layman & Jessica Swenson