

Psychotherapy Guidebook

BEREAVEMENT COUNSELING

Roberta Temes

Bereavement Counseling

Roberta Temes

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Psychotherapy Guidebook* edited by Richie Herink and Paul R. Herink

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

Copyright © 2012 by Richie Herink and Paul Richard Herink

Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

Bereavement Counseling

Roberta Temes

DEFINITION

Bereavement Counseling is the therapy that takes place when a professionally trained bereavement counselor meets regularly with a person or group of persons who have experienced the death of a loved one. Unresolved grief can remain for many years after the death of a significant person in one's life. Thus, recipients of Bereavement Counseling are not necessarily recently bereaved. The trained bereavement counselor may or may not be a professional therapist. Often those who elect to be trained are members of the clergy, widows who have successfully completed their own mourning, or funeral directors.

The focus of Bereavement Counseling is on health and normalcy. Bereavement is a psychologically healthy and appropriate response to the death of a relative or friend.

HISTORY

When extended families, religious rituals, and ethnic traditions were the

norm, mourners received ample support from their culture. As assimilation and alienation pervaded American society, people became removed from necessary support systems, from a caring community. With no secular mourning rituals to serve as guides through grief, and no known formalized way to complete the emotional relationship with the deceased, mental health professionals saw symptoms of depression in the bereaved population.

Various services for the bereaved were initiated in the mid-sixties. Telephone “hot lines” were established by hospitals and community agencies. Phyllis Silverman, at Harvard Medical Laboratories, established a Widowed-to-Widowed program, where a professionally trained widow reaches out to a newly widowed member of her community on a one-to-one basis. In the early seventies, groups of parents who lost children to leukemia formed a national support network, as did parents whose babies succumbed to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. By the midseventies most major cities had one or more programs for Bereavement Counseling services.

Bereavement Counseling is now a clearly defined subcategory within the mental health professions. The symptoms of depression experienced by a mourner are no longer judged pathological but rather as legitimate, time-limited responses to a profound loss.

TECHNIQUE

Most Bereavement Counseling services are modeled after Grief Groups, established in New York City in the mid-seventies. Groups of bereaved people meet for three months, one and a half hours each week, under the direction of a professionally trained counselor. Each group is composed of members who have experienced a similar loss, such as the loss of a parent, or loss of a spouse. The groups provide members with role models; those who have endured the same trauma.

Each meeting has a different agenda. During the first month, emphasis is placed on educating members about the bereavement process and the stages of grief. The second month meetings are particularly concerned with permitting the ventilation of feelings in a safe environment. Alliances within the group develop at this time. Meetings during the last month focus on future-oriented issues, such as values clarification and goals.

Occasionally, the leader will suggest specific assignments at strategic points for particular individuals. An example of such a homework assignment during the second month may be to write a letter to the deceased, and during the third month the homework may be to send for catalogues from all continuing education programs within a fifty-mile radius. The groups are neither encounters, sensitivity groups, nor psychoanalytic experiences. Leaders do not attempt to deal with pre-existing emotional disorders.

APPLICATIONS

Bereavement Counseling workshops are equally effective for children or adults. Anyone who has experienced the loss of a significant person — parent or spouse, child or lover, friend or relative — needs to complete the mourning process in order to get on with the tasks of life. A Bereavement Counseling workshop provides help for those who need support in passing through the stages of grief.