Divorce and Other Loss Issues in Family Therapy

Chapter 18

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Divorce and Other Loss Issues in Family Therapy

- Loss comes upon a family like a thief in the night, taking something or someone dearly loved and treasured and leaving behind confusion and feelings of grief.
- When couples and families experience a significant loss, their equilibrium is shattered; their sense of normalcy replaced with an unexplainable void.

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The Grief Experience

- When people experience grief, they often experience feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, insecurity, anxiety, loneliness, and fatigue (Worden, 2018).
- Many people feel helpless and experience a strained sense of longing when deprived of someone or something they love and want.

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Family Communication During The Grief Process

- One of the greater challenges facing counselors working with grieving couples and families involves meeting the needs of the various members with respect to communication.
- For example, Miriam and Ray, both 60, recently lost their only son to a drug overdose. They had sought counseling at various points in their marriage and shared an unsteady alliance.

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Family Communication During The Grief Process

- Researchers suggest that grieving couples and families benefit from the opportunity to share their memories and together make sense of their losses.
- Grief theorists purport that the meaning families make of their losses and the sharing of feelings, thoughts, and memories bring people together, strengthen bonds, and enhance relationships.

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Culture, Communication, and the Expression of Grief

- Cultural norms play a prominent role in the grief experience of couples and families.
- Couples and families across the nation and around the world grieve daily, and the grief practices within their communities deeply influence how they respond.

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Theories of Grief

- The grief and loss literature has evolved considerably from Freud's initial conceptualization of loss and attachment.
- From theories that espouse task-oriented (Worden, 2018) and multiphasic processes of grief (Hussein, 2018) to those that emphasize meaning making in the grief journey (Neimeyer, 2016), the bereavement literature has progressed over the past several decades.

KÜLER-ROSS GRIEF CYCLE MODEL

- Kübler-Ross (1969) is perhaps best known for her stage theory and grief cycle model (Corr, 2019).
- Designed to reflect the experience of bereaved couples and families following the terminal illness or death of a loved one, this model is commonly used with myriad losses.

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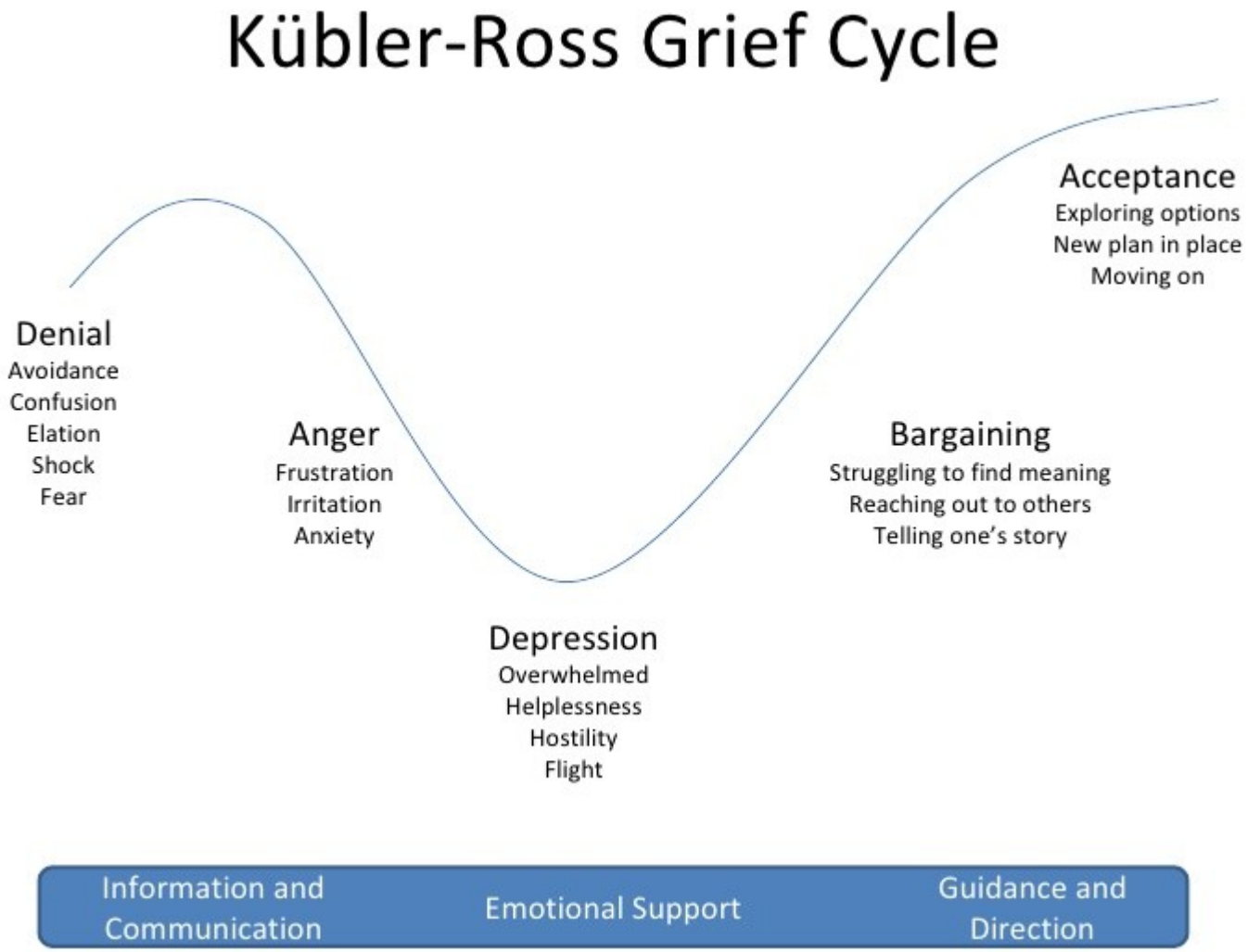

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Bowlby's Attachment Theory

- Whereas Kübler-Ross (1969) identified a stage theory perspective on grief, Bowlby approached grief from an attachment–separation perspective.
- For example, according to Bowlby (Bowlby, 1969; Jacobs, 2016), early attachments are pivotal to growth.
- People learn to depend on attachments that provide security and survival.

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Mourning is considered the expression of these emotions. According to Bowlby (1969, 2005), there are four phases of mourning.

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A Family's Adaption to Loss

- In conceptualizing a family's adaptation to loss, counselors consider a number of factors.
- Was the death of a loved one sudden? Did the family member linger? Was the death violent (Walsh, 2019)? Was the loss ambiguous (Boss, 2016) or disenfranchised (Worden, 2018)?

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Common Experiences of Loss In A Family System

- Families experience a myriad of losses every day.
- Some families experience death, divorce, sudden illness, and job loss.
- They lose children, parents, siblings, and friends. Families cope with miscarriage, family crises, traumas, and injury.

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Divorce

- Divorce is not only a relatively common reality for some families; it can also be a source of tremendous grief and family disorganization.
- In addition to legal issues, such as distribution of assets and child custody and support, families also negotiate a number of emotional, structural, and relational challenges.

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Divorcing Couples

- When people marry, most enter the union with an expectation that they have found the one person with whom they can share mutual trust, love, and respect until the end of time.
- Spouses build lives together that can lead to deep bonds and shared histories.

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Children of Divorcing Families

- Children whose families are disrupted by divorce often experience a range of emotions. Many feel angry and betrayed.
- Some feel abandoned and lose trust in adults.
- Some children lose contact with one of their parents, and they may have to adjust to becoming part of a new blended family.

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Adult Children of Divorce

- Many children function well following their parents' divorce, and counseling can help them make sense of their loss in ways that support their resilience.
- Many adult children of divorce carry strengths that support their relationships with others, including an increased capacity for empathy and a greater understanding of emotions.

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A Child Dies

- Often considered the worst possible grief, couples and families who face the death of their child suffer immeasurably (October et al., 2018; Stevenson et al., 2017) Regardless of the child's age and stage in life, parents expect their children to outlive them.
- Couples and families suffering this loss often experience prolonged grief (October et al., 2018), particularly because their lives as they have known them to be will never be the same.

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Grief and Loss in Older Adulthood

- Practicing self-compassion is an important skill at any age, and especially so as one reaches older age.
- In the later stages of a person's life and as adults grow older, they lose important friends and family and suffer their own physical or psychosocial declines.
- Some older adults experience chronic disease as they age.

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Ambiguous Loss

- Couples and families suffering an ambiguous loss (Boss, 2016) lack clarity and in some cases live with deep anguish and a grueling sense of uncertainty.
- Ambiguous losses, which come in two forms described next, are commonly experienced by couples and families.

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Childhood Trauma as Ambiguous Loss

- When a child endures physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence, bullying, or the loss of a parent, the family unit is shattered (Mitchell, 2016).
- Many traumatized children develop subthreshold posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

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Getting the Family Involved

- Family involvement and grief work is crucial in the aftermath of childhood trauma.
- Although children experience considerable grief, Tutus and Goldbeck (2016) found that some parents experienced greater distress than their afflicted children upon learning of their child's trauma.

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Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

- Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy is one evidence-based treatment used to treat traumatized children and their nonoffending family members.
- TF-CBT demonstrates efficacy in various environments and with diverse cultures.

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Miscarriage as Ambiguous Loss

- When couples and families look forward to the birth of a child only to lose the child by miscarriage, they do not often have a body to bury, nor do they have memories of the child to grieve (Mcgee, PettyJohn, & Gallus, 2018).
- Given that women often miscarry during the first 20 weeks of pregnancy, they may not yet share their news with friends or family.

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Disenfranchised and Stigmatized Losses

- Managing grief can be complex when couples and families experience unacknowledged or stigmatized losses.
- Thompson and Doka (2017) described this form of grief as unsanctioned and disenfranchised.

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Issues of Loss With Gay and Lesbian Couples

- Members of the lesbian and gay community are particularly vulnerable to suffering in silence.
- Couples and families with gay or lesbian members may suffer ambiguous losses that, in some cases, also carry social stigmas.

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CREATIVITY IN GRIEF AND LOSS COUNSELING

- Couples and families often pursue counseling services during times of grief and loss, seeking direction, comfort, and clarity.
- In the first moments of contact with a counselor, clients need a safe physical and emotional space to share their grief.

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Creative Interventions with Couples and Families Experiencing Loss

•Counselors working with couples and families have many resources available to promote healing after loss.

a) Audio Recordings
b) Videography
c) Scrapbooks
d) Memory Box
e) Online Support Forums
f) A Musical Chronology

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Summary

- Counselors work with grieving couples and families every day.
- Divorce and other losses can create havoc in the lives of couples and families.
- Understanding the impact that loss can have on a family and the challenges they face can help counselors deliver effective, supportive, and compassionate counseling services.

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Summary

- Counselors can offer a safe physical and emotional space for clients to share their grief.
- Counselors can also assist couples and families by addressing the systemic reaction to loss, as well as each family member's responses and needs.

Thank You