

## Chapter 1

### *What This Book Offers*



#### **Sam**

Jenny and Barry attended a support group following the death of their adult son. To all appearances their eldest son, Sam, seemed poised for a promising and fulfilling life. After graduating from a prestigious college in journalism, he had secured a good job at a magazine. A recent promotion, just before his untimely death, was suggestive of his future professional success. Having recently married, his personal life too seemed to offer such promise and his wife was expecting their first child.

Sam's parents described him as a caring and ethical man of whom they were deeply proud. His colleagues and siblings spoke of him in glowing terms that reinforced the sense that his was a tragic loss. His death was a shock, not just because he was only thirty, but also because the circumstances surrounding it affected how his parents came to think of him. Sam apparently died by his own hand.

After Sam's death, his parents desperately sought answers to ease

their suffering. They tried to discover what they could from reading police reports and hired doctors to interpret grisly autopsy reports. They met many times with a counselor schooled in the conventional bereavement model who encouraged them to “find closure”. The counselor thought relief might result from their visiting Sam’s grave and saying “goodbye”. With the counselor’s guidance, they gave away some of Sam’s possessions and put away pictures. When this did not provide respite from their grief or conduce acceptance of the loss, the counselor sent them to a clergyperson in their search for answers to their existential questions. This recourse also failed. Jenny and Barry yearned for understanding of what had happened and why.

Sam’s parents ultimately enrolled in a narrative support group in their quest. Sam was “introduced” to the group during the meetings; Jenny and Barry told stories of his life as a boy and as a young man embarking on marriage and an exciting career. They brought in some of his writing and read beautifully crafted poems to the group members. They shared pictures of a sweet, cherubic youth laughing and playing with his brothers and sisters.

Although it was still terribly painful, Jenny and Barry started to tell the stories that death had not stolen from them. They talked about staying involved with their yet unborn grandchild so they could tell him or her about Sam. They began a journal that included their favorite pictures and moments with Sam that would someday become a gift for their grandchild, when he or she was old enough to understand. They enlisted the help of their other children too, so that Sam’s stories would not be lost and could be carried on for everyone’s benefit.

The narrative restoration of Sam's life steadily became more compelling to them than the drama of his death. While many unanswered questions remained, the pursuit for storied connections became paramount. Jenny and Barry needed to hold on lovingly to their son's memory more than they needed to say goodbye to him. They needed to salvage the stories that *conventional grief counseling* encouraged them to jettison. Keeping his life stories accessible became critical for them as well as for the people who might yet come to know of Sam. They needed to reclaim his storied life, even while this was seemingly eclipsed by his death.

The opportunity to restore a new type of relationship between Sam and his parents became possible through a remembering focus in *grief psychology*. Unlike the conventional encouragement to let go of connection after a person dies, the narrative approach supports an acknowledgement of continuing bonds between the living and the deceased. Within a storied approach, as in *narrative therapy*, the best of a relationship, which occurred in the past, is used to create a new, storied connection through which the relationship can continue into the future. Death ensures that the connection must be of a different sort, but the bereaved can now select elements of the relationship that will be most useful in their own lives. In a narrative world, our relationships are not automatically canceled by a physical death, any more than they are when a person leaves home for a trip or runs to the grocery store. The stories of the deceased can remain important. Building counseling practice on these assumptions is an art, one this book can teach.

## **An Overview of the Text**

This book is an invitation to a new kind of counseling conversation with people like Barry and Jenny who are living with grief. The practices and theories outlined here represent a shift in the grief counseling field—these conversations actively include the deceased person through the medium of story, unlike traditional exclusionary practices. Such stories contain linguistic legacies that can provide bereaved persons with much needed sustenance as they navigate turbulent and troubled waters following the death of a loved one. The stories bequeathed by the deceased have often been overlooked as a resource, but they can be employed to help the bereaved continue living after death has touched their lives.

This book details a six-week bereavement support group plan predicated on a change in counseling practice that assigns the dead an appropriate voice in the conversation. Such conversations must be carefully introduced into the lives of the bereaved. The group offers exactly this: a medium to successively build a new form of relationship with a person who has died.

While it may seem crazy to suggest “a relationship” with a dead person, establishing just that brings relief to those who attend the series. It provides a vehicle for those living with what can be debilitating pain to achieve their desired reconnection with those who have died. It may appear presumptuous to speak about needing to reconstruct a relationship benefited already by long-standing bonds; after all, the bereaved obviously had such a connection with the deceased. But what is involved here is to create a model facilitating this continuing relationship. When a person dies, the old script of how to

connect to that person is suddenly erased and previously familiar ways to interact fail. The new vacuum gives way to yearning and grief. The bereaved suffer in part from not knowing how to locate the dead person in their lives. The bereaved crave that reconnection, but our usual grief theories and practices have sternly rejected any possible renegotiation of relational space.

Fortunately, there are sources of relief for the bereaved. This book provides readers with the tools to create new bonds. The six-week support group guides members through a process for reconstructing relationship. Each of the six weeks, addressed in separate chapters, allows the reader—if a group facilitator—to learn precisely what to do in the counseling situation in a step-by-step process; lay readers, of course, will also benefit from gaining new appreciation for major hurdles bereaved people face. Chapters are dotted with examples that illustrate the impact of the in-group exercises and journal exercises between weekly sessions. There are also suggestions about how to handle various problems that crop up. This sequencing allows the reader to easily access this text as a guidebook. It can be dipped back into again and again when using this new way of thinking and practicing in a group. The book's format provides the reader with convenient tools for repeated consultation when applying this new approach to grief counseling.

## **Upcoming Chapters**

Before outlining the system of weekly sessions, theories underlying the practice will be explored in evolutionary terms. Chapter one will briefly outline the development of grief psychology and how its accre-

tions have impacted the bereaved. Without such *deconstruction*, the significant difference of the *social constructionist*, narrative model cannot be appreciated. Through the examination of the assumptions of both a conventional model and a narrative model, the reader will notice distinctions in the dramatically differing approaches to practice. The assumptions and practices of this new approach to grief counseling are the focus of the second chapter, and its successor, chapter three, spells out some of the logistics of running grief counseling groups.

Chapters four through nine explain the six-week group, with one week per chapter. Each chapter will detail the theoretical underpinnings that shape the week's activities. Additionally, journaling exercises will be suggested for group members to use to enhance their group experience between group sessions. Journal exercises and possible questions will be outlined in each chapter corresponding to the week's topics.

Before the concluding remarks in chapter ten, the excitement of the model should prepare you to get underway with your first narratively-structured bereavement group. It is the author's profound hope that this book will provide the necessary tools—but most importantly, the concepts—that enable a constructive new approach. This new counseling model will not only change the lives of those whose loved ones have died but will also forever change those who witness their stories.