

Preface

The dominant grief psychology that has informed counseling practices for one hundred years has faced challenges. Psychodynamic theories and practices, which encourage people to terminate their strong ties to those who have died, are on the decline. Instead, an anthropological argument that supports people's preferences for the continuation of a relationship of sorts after a person dies, has gained wide attention. Many cultural practices and personal stories reinforce the belief that bereaved person(s) desire to continue the bond with those they love. The desire to help people hold on to a sense of relationship though has been squelched by the absence of counseling practices that support the development of such a relationship. In the absence of new practices guiding the development of a healthy, vibrant story of connection, counselors revert to outdated models that omit the relational dimension and suggest completing "unfinished business" and moving on. Without a new model, counselors have been adrift in discourses that disconnect the bereaved from those that they love.

This book offers to fill the gap between the challenges to conventional grief psychology and the new practices needed for bereave-

ment counseling. While this text does offer readers a structured guide for facilitating bereavement support groups, it is intended as more than a simple “how to” book. It is also intended to inspire readers with an invigorating theory and practice. The ideas that infuse the subsequent chapters outlining bereavement support groups engender a new way of thinking. Many people living with grief can attest to the value of these ideas. They seek guidance about how to form a meaningful new bond with those who have died in hope of addressing the depths of pain that death has created. This book offers a template for an effective way forward—one that includes the stories, emotion and memories that remain after death.

This book suggests a new kind of conversation and a new model of grief psychology, in which the living can make central and accessible selected aspects of their relationship with those who have died. This is not to suggest transcendental conversations or séances in which people speak to the ghosts of the dead, nor is it about a morbid prolonging of sad stories of loss and encouraging people to pine for what was. It is rather about finding ways in which the deceased person’s stories, values, meanings, and connections to those they loved can be folded into the lives of the living. In this way, the deceased continue to have a metaphorical “voice” that can be accessed and drawn upon. The book illustrates how the living can utilize the metaphorical presence of the deceased through stories, actions and rituals to affirm the connection as more than a passing memory to be shelved next to dusty old photo albums.

In order to suggest a new way of thinking, I must first take stock of where psychology has been. A brief outline of the historical under-

pinnings of grief psychology follows. I shall show how this psychology has encouraged the bereaved to get over their loss, to move on, and to invest in life as an individual, rather than as relational partner to a deceased spouse, parent, child, pet, friend, cousin, and the like. While this conventional approach has been helpful for some, it has often failed many who wanted to honor a continuation of loving connections. A traditional grief model has left behind the deceased person, insisting that the bereaved distance themselves from the moments that could build a successful future where memories are honored and celebrated. Ironically, the dead person's stories have not been prominently featured in the grief experience.

The theories and practices presented here may challenge long held assumptions about what is helpful when counseling bereaved people. The ideas, however, are also intended to nourish practitioners and laypersons alike who are hungering for something more than grief psychology has offered for the last fifty years. They are presented here to fill a void in the literature about how specifically to construct helpful conversations.

Who is this Book For?

This book aims first to speak to counselors, psychologists, social workers, clergy, and medical professionals who provide support services to those whose loved ones have died. Sometimes, however the provision of bereavement support services falls to caring volunteers. This book intends to be an asset for them too. All of these people are linked by a common denominator—the desire to ease the suffering of those who live with grief.

While the book is written as an instructive guide for a new bereavement group model, it can also be used to guide services to individuals and bereaved families in other formats like individual or family therapy. The theoretical underpinnings can stimulate thinking and hone clinical skills in various contexts. For students studying psychology or counseling, the ideas here can be catalysts for learning bereavement counseling.

Lastly, one additional group of readers might benefit from this book—bereaved persons whose loved ones have died. While it is not directly a “self-help” book, it contains ideas and activities that anyone can use to soothe the pain that death has brought. While the activities are described in the context of a group, many can be used for private journaling or reflection by those in search of solace. The ideas and activities may guide bereaved readers toward new meanings and refresh stories of hope in the face of the challenges of grief.

Why Bereavement Groups?

I have facilitated literally hundreds of support groups over the years, both in private settings as a counselor and in connection with my employment in hospices. Groups can help the bereaved constructively manage the pain of grief in a manner that affirms relationships—both relationships between the deceased person and the bereaved and among the other members in a support group setting. Support groups provide unique opportunities to both be heard and to bear witness to another’s experience that are not often possible during individual counseling. Groups can lessen a sense of isolation that often accompanies grief.

Group experiences can aid those who are deeply pained and can change their lives. But the sharing of stories alone is not enough to change a life. Conventional bereavement counseling has also utilized support groups for people living with grief, but has ended in drastically different points than what this book will suggest. What unfolds in these pages is a new paradigm for bereavement counseling and specifically for bereavement groups. It is a model that values stories and love as transformative for the living. Through the power of story, strength borrowed from the dead can uplift the living and transport them to new places. Innovative conversations in groups can generate surprising new meanings, strengthen resilience and restore identities.

The Origins of “Remembering Groups”

The ideas set forth in this book breathed their first breath while I was employed at Vitas Innovative Hospice Care, where I designed and facilitated bereavement groups. The birth of this new model was only possible following fruitful conversations with my husband, John Winslade, and with a colleague, Jennifer Andrews, about the use of narrative ideas in bereavement groups. These conversations spurred on a successful research project for a Ph.D. dissertation through the Taos Institute and Tilburg University, entitled *Folding Memories into Conversation: Remembering Practices in Bereavement Groups*.

While at Vitas Hospice, I enlisted the assistance of many graduate students who trained under my supervision in the art of group facilitation. Along with them, I co-facilitated countless groups for people who had experienced some of the most challenging losses. Some of their stories can be found in this book. It was, and is, my

hope, that this model of counseling offered respite from their pain. The research that subsequently occurred as a part of the dissertation would suggest this to be the case.

How to Use This Book

The book outlines a template for facilitating bereavement support groups using a *narrative approach*. After the initial chapters that address a paradigm shift in grief psychology, subsequent chapters are conveniently divided into six group sessions, one chapter per session. It would behoove the reader to read through the entirety of the group sessions to have an overview of the series before embarking on the group itself. Then, each week can be revisited in sequence, as it approaches, to shape the exercise and hone needed skills.

Each chapter also contains a topic for discussion, a particular exercise and journaling activities. The series is successively built so that each week's session builds on the previous week. While it is possible to expand the weeks to include more material and additional group sessions, experience suggests that using less time or rearranging the order of the sessions has not been beneficial.

Some words that appear in the text have been selected for a limited glossary. The concise definition of the terms may enhance the reader's understanding of theoretical assumptions and practices that set these ideas apart from conventional models. Words that appear in the glossary have been designated in *bold italics* throughout the book.

Acknowledgments

People often speak about writing as though it were a solitary experience, yet any good book, and any good idea, only comes to life

through words exchanged by many. This book is certainly no exception. There are multiple voices, both living and deceased, who have contributed to this project. Much of the thinking behind the research, the questions, and the ongoing inclusion of stories can be credited to my admiration of Barbara Myerhoff's work. I have a special kinship with her, her love of stories and the way in which she recorded the stories of elders of the Aliyah Senior Citizens' Center in Venice Beach, California whose lives are documented in the Academy Award winning short documentary (1977), and book, *Number our Days* (1978). Myerhoff would capture the best of a story and shape it into well-crafted words that bespoke her not-so-secret love of the elderly people and of ritual. Her ideas were brought into therapeutic practice by Michael White (1989, 2007) for whom I will be forever indebted.

There are also those who are living who helped to shape my embryonic thinking and writing while this project was developing and became my dissertation. Certainly the support from the Taos Institute has been invaluable, including the encouragement and astute advising received from Ken Gergen. Even when I encountered obstacles to completing the project, Ken believed in the importance of the work. Others at the Taos Institute as well have made the book possible. Harlene Anderson stepped in to offer editorial support and kind suggestions to propel this project over the finish line. And of course, Dawn Dole has been a rock solid guide, assisting in the sorting of details and bringing clarity to the complexities of publishing.

I could not have completed the dissertation or the writing of this book without the tutelage of two men who have supported my aca-

demetic pursuits. My husband, John Winslade, has never wavered in his vision that the theories set forth here have revolutionary import for those living with grief. He has been my sounding board, my occasional editor and a steadfast partner as I have sorted through the joys, and periodic frustrations that come with a book project.

The other person who has had a large hand in the book's life is my father, Charles Hedtke. As he did with my dissertation, he took a keen interest in the topic and became an avid enthusiast of my work. Being an incredibly good writer himself, he offered his editorial skill to tackle my sentences when they grew too clumsy, paring them down to size with precision. I have benefitted not only from his love and support of my professional development, but also from his coaching on how to be a better writer. He has shown how every sentence can be written and rewritten for clarity and simplicity, and then rewritten yet again.

Lastly, no project of this magnitude would have been possible without the aid of the hundreds of bereaved persons who have looked to me for support in moments of anguish. They have shown me cherished moments of connection with those who have died and have asked that this love not be forgotten. Their courage to persist and to continue creating newly forged paths has inspired me. Their love has required precious attention and has obligated my heart to find a new way of talking. My ultimate aim in writing this book is to restore what death has threatened to take from them—the desire to hold dear the best of their connections with their deceased loved ones. Remembering that our stories outlive our bodies has optimistically guided my thoughts, my life, and what I offer to the reader in this book.