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Grief-Informed Supervision: Practices for Enfranchising Professional Losses Encountered by Supervisees

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There is little research on how professional losses, which can take many forms, influence and shape the counseling supervisee. Unfortunately, counseling supervisees can be at risk for disenfranchised grief necessitating the need for supervision that is attentive to the unique and nuanced experience of grief and loss. Thus, this paper defines disenfranchised grief and illuminates the importance of understanding how disenfranchisement may show up for supervisees. Additionally, the manuscript accentuates how supervision can be used to reduce the impact of disenfranchised grief through specific interventions and strategies. Lastly, a case study is provided to demonstrate how supervision can play a role in lowering disenfranchised grief.

Keywords: grief, supervision, counselor development, disenfranchised grief, enfranchisement

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Grief is an intrinsic and natural part of life. It is a universal phenomenon impacting individuals in individualized and unique ways as humans encounter a wide range of losses throughout their lifespan (Wolfelt, 2006). Grief can impact individuals emotionally, behaviorally, physically, spiritually, and relationally (Bradley & Horton, 2024a; Devine, 2017; Doka, 2008; Wolfelt, 2006). Counselors are not immune to the impact of grief and loss and have few spaces to process professional losses. Consequently, counselors are at risk of encountering disenfranchised grief which is defined as grief that is not validated or loss that gets minimized. Disenfranchised grief often results from a lack of access to support or resources (Doka, 2008).

The process of supervision is a resource that can provide support when counselors experience grief and is posited to be a protective factor from developing disenfranchised grief. Supervision offers numerous benefits for supervisees including, but not limited to, guidance, mentorship, skill development, and assessment of competencies (Bradley & Horton, 2024b). It also provides a space for counselors to process and navigate cases and overall questions or concerns. Professional support in the context of clinical supervision can normalize feelings regarding professional losses (Prado & Waterman, 2017). The purpose of this manuscript is to explore how supervision can function as a protective factor to help prevent disenfranchised grief. The focus will be on exploring disenfranchised grief and providing supervision strategies to reduce the negative impact of professional loss. The incorporation of grief theory and thanatology into supervision results in what we are calling “grief-informed supervision.” Grief-informed supervision builds upon the pre-existing nature of counseling supervision while incorporating theories of grief and thanatology to help supervisees develop enfranchisement in grief.

Impact of Grief on Counselors and the Reality of Disenfranchised Grief

Counselors may encounter a wide range of losses that could be disenfranchised, including but not limited to, losing a client to suicide, losing a client to overdose, having a client move away before treatment is completed, a client terminating sessions unexpectedly, client death from illness, etc. (Doka, 2002). Suicide loss and overdose loss are two prominent examples of disenfranchised grief (Doka et al., 2016; Hill & O'Brien, 2024). For example, overdose loss is a unique grief that necessitates an abundance of support but is often neglected (Hill & O'Brien, 2024). There is recent research by Salpietro et al. (2023) that highlighted the experience of counselors-in-training (CITs) who lost a client to suicide, but it does not delve specifically into how other types of professional losses may result in disenfranchised grief nor does it focus specifically on the role supervision can have in reducing the impact of disenfranchised grief.

The impact of disenfranchised grief (as provided in these examples) does not exclude counselors. However, counselors often face additional barriers in processing the unique nature of disenfranchised loss. Counselors are often taught not to be impacted by the relationship, to be distant, and to manage transference, which does not validate the reality that the therapeutic relationship ends, or how the loss of a client can and does impact the professional. Overall, counselors who are not met with empathy and given supervision space to process their loss may struggle to cope. Counselors struggling with disenfranchised grief may need extra support, and this extra support can occur within the realm of counseling supervision.

The concept of disenfranchised grief has become well-established within bereavement research and practice but was first introduced by Dr. Kenneth Doka. Doka

defined disenfranchised grief as a unique type of grief that is not socially acknowledged, when the griever's relationship with the deceased is viewed as minimal, the grievers' grief response is viewed as abnormal or not socially appropriate, or the way the death occurred is stigmatized (Doka, 2002, 2008). Doka (2002) initially developed the concept of disenfranchised grief by researching the experiences of men whose ex-partners had died. The definition and examples of disenfranchised grief have expanded to include types of loss and grief that go beyond death loss, such as the loss of an ex-spouse or pregnancy loss (Doka, 2008).

There has not been explicit research on how disenfranchised grief shows up for counselors in supervisory spaces. However, according to Doka (2008), disenfranchised grief can occur when the relationship they have with the deceased is not seen as valid or the relationship between the griever and the deceased is minimized. The relationship between a client and counselor is viewed as a professional one and thus may be viewed as "close enough" to encounter grief or it may even be considered inappropriate to grieve for the death of a client. Unfortunately, this can result in supervisees having few outlets to express and have their grief validated. Consequently, there is a need for supervision that is "grief-informed" to provide support, empathy, and space to process the loss of a client.

Grief-Informed Supervision: Definitions and Challenges

In general, counseling supervision serves a variety of purposes in the counseling profession including gatekeeping, skill development, and assessment of dispositional fit for the profession. Supervision can facilitate self-awareness and develop multicultural competencies in counselor trainees (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Hiatt, 2022; Hook et al.,

2016; Parcover & Swanson, 2013). Supervision has a role in validating the emotions of supervisees who are experiencing normative emotional processes, such as grief.

Grief-informed supervision encompasses the supportive nature of supervision. However, grief-informed supervision also includes knowledge of grief theory and related terminology. Grief-informed supervisors acknowledge the fact those counselors experiencing disenfranchised grief often are at risk for complicated grief as they have a lack of support and resources. Grief-informed supervision also involves specific techniques that tangibly provide creative and innovative outlets for supervisees to verbalize and express the unique elements of grief. Overall, supervision is a natural space for support to occur as supervisees look to their supervisors for support and guidance. Grief-informed supervision builds upon this and adds knowledge of and practical implications of grief theories and innovative strategies to help grieving supervisees work through their grief.

Challenges

Grief-informed supervision, defined as support for supervisees and knowledge of best practices in theory and technique related to grief, is limited and a relatively new phenomenon (Hiatt, 2022; Wheat et al., 2022). Unfortunately, grief is often neglected in the counseling supervision space due to both a lack of specialized training and resources (Wheat et al., 2022). For example, supervisors may not have awareness and training in contemporary grief theories, such as Continuing Bonds, and rely on outdated models of grief, such as the Kubler-Ross stage model (Kubler-Ross, 2014).

Unfortunately, stage models of grief may unintentionally harm individuals who are grieving by suggesting that grief proceeds in a linear fashion (Corr, 2015; Wheat et

al., 2022). Contemporary theories such as Continuing Bonds assert that connections between ourselves and the people we have lost do not diminish but are rather maintained over time (Klass et al., 1996; Klass, 1999). Additional challenges supervisors may face in working with supervisees navigating professional losses include feeling rushed to meet demands and pacing of having numerous supervisees if they are working at larger agencies (Klass, 1999). Despite these challenges, grief-informed supervision can contribute to enfranchisement.

Enfranchisement in Grief: A Solution

Enfranchisement in grief can function as an antidote to the adverse impact of disenfranchised grief. Enfranchisement in grief is a validation of various aspects of the grief process. Examples of enfranchisement can include verbal acknowledgment of emotions surrounding grief and space to process the nuances and confusion normative within the grief process (Pitcho-Prelorentzos & Mahat-Shamir, 2022). Specifically, verbally discussing grief and emotions associated with grief attempts to correct and counter the empathic failure of disenfranchised grief providing dignity to both the griever and the grief experience (Doka, 2008; Pitcho-Prelorentzos & Mahat-Shamir, 2022). Additional examples of enfranchisement in grief include validation of feelings, space for rituals, opportunities to locate and find support, and being provided needed resources to help feel less isolated (Doka, 2008; Pitcho-Prelorentzos & Mahat-Shamir, 2022).

Additionally, enfranchisement develops understanding, validates the depth of suffering, creates space for the expression of hurt, and can increase self-efficacy in the griever (Doka, 2008). Within grief-informed supervision, principles from thanatology and grief theory are implemented to support supervisees navigating disenfranchised grief. The

goal is to illuminate the protective nature of enfranchisement as an antidote to disenfranchised grief by: (a) normalizing feelings related to the professional loss, (b) integrating supervision interventions to use in processing grief, including ritual activities, and lastly, (c) creating safety to explore issues of transference and countertransference. All of these are done within the supervision space.

Using Clinical Supervision to Enfranchise Professional Grief

Normalizing Feelings

According to Prado and Waterman (2017), professional support in the context of clinical supervision should normalize feelings regarding professional losses. Broadbent (2013) observed that when supervisees are heard and validated by their supervisor, they are more apt to verbally process their emotional reactions to loss. One example of a loss that counselors may experience is client suicide. However, this is not the only professional loss a counselor might encounter. For example, counselors may also encounter professional losses such as a client moving, terminating counseling, and a client's illness or death (Young, 2006). In instances of professional loss, counselors may doubt themselves and their clinical skills. However, with all professional losses encountered by counselors, counselors can experience profound sadness and isolation and may benefit from the normalization and validation of their feelings (Young, 2006).

Intervention: Normalizing Feelings

The supervisee can be introduced to a children's book called *The Rabbit Listened* (Doerrfeld, 2019), which highlights the many ways our support people, after loss or trauma, may inadvertently say the wrong things or be quick to give advice. The supervisee who is sharing about a professional loss, such as losing a client to suicide or

illness, may fear that their supervisor will give them a lot of advice when what they desire is a supportive presence. In the children's book, the rabbit is a character who resists the urge to give advice and instead allows the normal emotions of grief to be expressed (Doerrfeld, 2019).

First, the supervisor can invite the supervisee to read the book. Then, the supervisee will share the types of advice they have been given about grief and loss. The supervisee can then share if they have been able to discuss their professional loss. Next, the supervisee can discuss whether those pieces of advice have helped process their emotions or if they have not been helpful. The supervisee can then respond to the following reflective journal prompt: What support do you need right now as you begin to process this loss? The supervisee will be invited to share anything they can think of that might be helpful to them. If the supervisee is comfortable, the supervisor and supervisee can discuss the journal exercise together and identify how the supervisor can support the supervisee's unique needs related to the professional loss. In addition to normalizing feelings, supervision can also enfranchise supervisees navigating professional losses by providing opportunities to engage with and create ritual expressions of their loss.

Shattering Assumptions

Counselors are not immune to the "shattered assumptions" that can occur when loss happens, as loss in general creates shattered assumptions that force the development of new realities (Janoff-Bulman, 2010). The theory of shattered assumptions was developed by Janoff-Bulman (2010) who opined that humans, including professional helpers, do not let go of core assumptions easily. The idea that the world is good, the divine is benevolent, and the self is good and worthy of good things is something that

orients the individual's whole reality. The process of grief, including that which manifests after a professional loss, can make counselors question those schemas, and in turn, their realities.

Counselors experiencing professional loss may experience shattered assumptions regarding their professional successes when a client unexpectedly ends sessions. A schema or belief may exist that good counseling also is dependent on the counselor strengths, and thus, poor outcomes means that that the counselor is not doing good work. A supervisee may worry that if a client prematurely terminates sessions, they must not be a good counselor or doing good work or else their clients would not be terminating early (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019).

Counseling supervision can be a space to reframe shattered assumptions which is beneficial to clients and counselors. Shattered assumptions can be confusing and disorientating, but two interventions will be described below that can be used to cope with shattered assumptions and as a way to enfranchise professional losses experienced by grieving supervisees. The negative impact of disenfranchised grief can cause disorientation. The theory of shattered assumptions is one way to describe this disorientation. The authors provide two interventions to facilitate coping and processing of shattered assumptions and the corresponding disorientation experienced by grieving supervisees. The two interventions explored are an expressive arts activity called the grief landscape and a pebble activity.

Intervention: Grief Landscape

The supervisor can model how ritual expression can be a way to process and reframe the shattered assumptions of loss. Stricke (2016) provided an example of how to

use ritual with both supervisees and clients describing how grieving supervisees can use nature imagery to describe their loss. For example, one individual may draw mountain ranges with steep peaks and others draw a dark forest difficult to traverse. The imagery and metaphors evident in this activity created space for validation and expression as attention is spent on the unique grief experience of a grieving individual. This intervention is enfranchising because it allows the bereaved supervisee to process professional losses through creativity and gives voice and an outlet for disorientation, confusion, and other emotions associated with grief.

Intervention: Pebble Activity

In a second intervention described by Prado and Waterman (2017), the supervisee is asked to bring a pebble or rock into session. The supervisor encourages the supervisee to describe aloud the characteristics of the pebble or rock. Following the description, the supervisor invites the supervisee to share thoughts and feelings around any of the following: the recent loss of a client, the conclusion of supervision, or the termination of counseling. Next, the supervisor asks the supervisee to verbalize their thoughts and feelings "into" the rock, which symbolizes the externalization of the experience. Finally, the supervisor asks the supervisee to place the pebble or rock someplace emblematic of the loss, which is a symbolic release (Prado & Waterman, 2017). This intervention helps enfranchise loss by providing an outlet for expression and a concrete way to move forward with the professional loss being navigated by the supervisee. In the case study below, we exemplify how grief-informed supervision might progress to help a supervisee enfranchise their grief following a professional loss.

The Case of Scout: A Hypothetical Supervision Dilemma

Scout is a 30-year-old, White, female supervisee who is provisionally licensed as a professional counselor. She reveals that a client she had seen for 4 sessions had terminal cancer and died. Scout was prepared to help her client navigate having a terminal illness but admits she feels surprised by how much this professional loss has impacted her.

Scout shares a wide range of emotions including anger, confusion, apathy, and fatigue. Scout is ashamed that she does not feel like coming to work and she is worried this professional loss has impacted her ability to be present with her other clients. Scout shares she has not been able to talk about the loss with anyone due to confidentiality, and as a result, her normal coping mechanisms have been inaccessible. She has also struggled to define exactly what would be helpful to her in navigating this loss and is fearful that if she admits how much she is struggling she would be seen as less professional or as a bad counselor.

As her supervisor, you introduce Scout to the term disenfranchised grief, a new term for Scout. You ask if she identifies with the term and if the barriers to losing a client as a counselor have created a sense of disenfranchisement for her. She replies that she indeed identifies with the term and that having language normalizes her experience and gives her permission to grieve. To continue to normalize Scout's grief, you invite her to grab a piece of paper where you ask her to write on the top: "I give myself permission to grieve," and have her write three ways she could allow herself to grieve this loss. She writes down the following: I give myself permission to grieve by allowing myself to rest and use my paid time off.

As the supervision session goes on, you share with her a children's book entitled *The Rabbit Listened* (Doerrfeld, 2019). You place some quiet music on while Scout reads the book. You notice she is tearing up as she reads and when she finishes reading, she lets out a big sigh. After she closes the book, she shares that she was worried that if she brought up how the professional loss was impacting her in supervision, she would be met with lots of advice and prescriptions for grief. You encourage her that supervision can be a space for compassionate presence, as embodied in the Rabbit character in the book (Doerrfeld, 2019).

Analysis and Application of Case Study

Scout may value having had the time to process her loss in supervision but it would be important for the supervisor to ask if the time spent in the supervision session was helpful. The supervisor could consider using the following question(s) to assess the benefit of the supervision session: (1) in what ways do you feel that you had adequate space and time to process your loss in the supervisor session (2) describe how you are feeling in bringing issues related to professional losses to your supervisor after you had an opportunity to do so in this session, and (3) please share specific examples of how you feel more empowered and equipped to support grieving clients after talking about issues related to grief in supervision, and (4) what would have made the supervisory session more helpful?

Application for Counselor Education

Though this piece is not geared towards counselor educators, counselor educators could address gaps in grief curriculum in counselor education programs through conversations on disenfranchised grief. Grief content is often limited in counselor

education programs, and this leaves supervisors and supervisees alike often grappling with how to navigate the challenges of navigating professional loss. Thus, providing opportunities within the counselor education curriculum to discuss grief and the many ways it shows up could be a helpful tool for counselors moving forward.

In a human growth and development or lifespan course, students can be given a lecture on how loss can occur at various points across the lifespan and how those losses are often disenfranchised (Hooyman et al., 2021). Loss is normative across the lifespan as children may experience pet loss, parent loss, incarceration of family members, sibling loss, and divorce (Hooyman et al., 2021). Young adults may encounter traumatic loss, such as the loss of a friend, sibling loss, divorce, and breakups (Hooyman et al., 2021). Older adults may encounter losses, such as spouse loss, chronic health challenges, and loneliness (Hooyman et al., 2021).

Students can be provided case studies on various losses throughout their counselor education program. Students could be invited to consider how these examples of loss are disenfranchised and what solutions could exist to mitigate the negative impact of disenfranchised grief. This could be done via journaling, small group discussions, and/or case study presentations.

Counselor educators could also use the Case of Scout in a practicum and internship course to introduce students to the theory of disenfranchised grief by asking students to reflect upon how Scout is encountering disenfranchised grief. Students could also be encouraged to consider how the topic of disenfranchised grief has come up for them and their clients. Clinical supervisors could also use the Case of Scout as an example for supervisees of disenfranchised grief. Supervisees could subsequently be

asked to discuss how they would broach the case, and if there are any parallels they have experienced in their clinical caseload or their own life. If supervisees are hesitant to broach the topic verbally they could journal about the case and reflect via writing how they would approach the case.

Ethical Considerations

There are several ethical considerations to ponder when developing a paradigm of grief informed supervision. The grief informed supervision model proposed is attentive to the importance of enfranchising professional losses encountered by supervisees. Two will be explored in this section: (a) supervisor scope of practice and (b) supervisee impairment.

Scope of Practice

When a supervisee comes to a supervisor with concerns over a professional loss, the lines between supervisor roles may become blurred (Smythe et al., 2009). For example, the supervisee may unintentionally be seeking support that is more aligned with the role of a counselor versus a supervisor. According to Bernard and Goodyear (2019), there is a power dynamic and evaluative component within the supervisory relationship which makes the role of supervisor distinctly different than that of a counselor.

The supervisor can still enfranchise the experience of the supervisee by having open and validating conversations in which the supervisee is encouraged to identify challenges inherent in navigating their professional loss while also being encouraged to seek counseling. It is a difficult balance to enfranchise and balance the ethical duty to protect the public from impaired counselors (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). There is a paucity of research on how to do this, but the development of rapport between supervisor

and supervisee can engender space for professional losses to be validated and for the supervisee to feel safe to inquire with their supervisor about when to seek professional help that goes beyond the scope of counseling supervision (Smythe et. al., 2009).

Boundaries

Related to the scope of practice is the issue of boundaries. Supervisors can easily slip into the role of "counselor" (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019) especially if the supervisee is emotional or in distress. Supervisors could benefit from attending professional development to address any gaps in their knowledge around grief and loss. A supervisee who broaches the topic of grief may express intense emotions and thus supervisors may need to reflect upon what their role is in this unique situation. For example, the supervisor may reflect and ask the following: (1) Am I fulfilling my role as a supervisor or have I slipped into the role of counselor and how do I distinguish between those two? (2) How might I encourage my supervisee to seek professional counseling to help process their loss if that is warranted? (3) How do I balance the boundaries between offering support and the evaluative component of supervision? Consultation on the part of the supervisor would be a good plan of action if they are unsure if they are broaching the boundary with their supervisee between counselor and supervisor.

Impairment

In a study by Salpietro et al. (2023), counselors who did not receive support after a client died by suicide reported impairment. Impairment was described as impacting the counselor both personally and professionally. Examples of impairment included: seeing fewer clients, feeling disconnected from clients, feeling isolated, and desiring not to work with clients who expressed any level of suicidal ideation (Salpietro et al., 2023). Despite

the possibility of impairment after professional losses, support by a supervisor was noted to help protect the supervisee from experiencing impairment (Salpietro et al., 2023). Though the study was limited to suicide loss and cannot be extrapolated to a wider example of professional losses, supervisors need to note that professional loss could result in impairment and pursue being intentional about offering enfranchisement to supervisees.

Implications for Supervisors

Supervisors play a critical role in supporting counseling supervisees navigating professional losses, particularly when these losses result in disenfranchised grief. Because such grief is often unrecognized or minimized, supervisees may struggle with complex emotions that, if left unaddressed, can impact their professional development and clinical effectiveness. Supervisors must create a safe and validating supervisory environment where supervisees feel comfortable discussing their experiences of loss without fear of judgment. This includes normalizing grief reactions, acknowledging the legitimacy of professional losses, and fostering self-compassion in supervisees as they process their emotions.

To effectively support supervisees experiencing disenfranchised grief, supervisors can integrate specific interventions into supervision. Reflective discussions, guided journaling, and processing the emotional impact of losses in case conceptualization can help supervisees gain insight and resilience. Additionally, supervisors can model self-awareness and emotional regulation strategies, demonstrating how to navigate grief in a professional setting. By adopting a grief-informed approach, supervisors not only help

supervisees manage their own experiences of loss but also enhance their ability to support future clients facing grief and loss in their counseling work.

Future Research and Considerations

The depth and breadth of this manuscript are limited as additional research on supervision and grief is needed. We propose that future studies, including a survey sent to supervisors in which various grief theories are listed, and supervisors indicate their familiarity with said theories could provide insight into the level of education that supervisors have when it comes to contemporary grief theories. Moreover, qualitative interviews could be conducted with supervisees where a semi-structured interview occurs to assess the level of education, level of comfort, and experience with grief. There is also little research on whether supervisees navigate professional or personal losses differently. These future studies would strengthen our argument that providing enfranchisement in supervision for grieving supervisees reduces the impact of disenfranchised grief.

Additional research could also be conducted to create clear definitions of grief-informed supervision. Surveys could be distributed to supervisors who have certifications or additional training in grief counseling where they could describe and list what would constitute effective grief-informed supervision. It might also be helpful to develop a better sense of how comfortable supervisors are generally with contemporary grief theories and their ability to explain those to supervisees. A survey could also be given to currently practicing supervisors that ask them to rank on a scale from 1-5 their familiarity with grief theories. This would help gauge gaps in knowledge, areas needed for future training, and the development of curriculum in counselor education programs related to grief content.

Conclusion

Counseling supervisees may encounter disenfranchised grief when the normal emotions associated with loss are viewed as deficits or unprofessional. When supervisors implement grief-informed supervision, supervisors have the opportunity to reduce the deleterious impact of disfranchised grief. A supervisor is crucial in creating a welcoming space for supervisees to feel comfortable bringing issues surrounding grief and loss into supervision. This also aids in preventing the supervisee from becoming impaired. In conclusion, supervisors operating through a grief-informed supervision lens can support their supervisees to enfranchise grief following a professional loss.

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