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Grief Education in Accredited Counseling Programs: Tools for Integrating Grief Counseling Concepts into the CACREP Foundational Counseling Curriculum

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Grief Education in Accredited Counseling Programs: Tools for Integrating Grief Counseling Concepts Into the CACREP Foundational Counseling Curriculum

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Abstract

Counselors working in a wide variety of settings should be competent in providing grief counseling. The current CACREP (2023) standards include grief education under lifespan development, but grief education can be woven throughout all eight domains of the foundational counseling curriculum. This article explains the foundational grief counseling concepts of attachment theory, the dual process model of grief, meaning-making theory, and adaptive grieving styles and includes suggestions for infusing these concepts into the eight CACREP foundational counseling curriculum areas.

Significance to the Public

The information in this article can help counselor educators incorporate evidence-based grief and loss training across the foundational CACREP curriculum. All people are affected by grief and loss, and competent grief counseling is an important aspect of the work professional counselors provide to the community. Grief and loss education and training will allow new counselors to have increased confidence and ability to provide high-quality grief counseling interventions.

Keywords: grief, loss, CACREP, counselor education

Grief is the process of adjusting to loss and coping with feelings such as anger, bitterness, confusion, disappointment, and hurt caused by loss (Cicchetti et al., 2016; Humphrey, 2009). Grief affects all people, regardless of age, class, race, gender, or ethnicity (Blueford & Adams, 2019; Cicchetti et al., 2016). Although often associated with the death of a loved one, grief can also stem from almost any loss, including the loss of a relationship, career, home, pet, or other significant attachment figure (Doka, 2002; Wheat et al., 2022). Unaddressed grief can interrupt daily functioning and result in mental and physical illness (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2023; Cicchetti et al., 2016; Seamon-Lahiff

et al., 2023). As such, all professional counselors should be competent in grief counseling (Blueford & Adams, 2019; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2023; Wheat et al., 2022). Counselor educators can support counselor trainees toward grief competence by integrating grief concepts and application into coursework (Cicchetti et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018; Wheat et al., 2022).

Despite the universality of grief and the fact that it is relevant in almost every counseling setting, many counselor trainees and professional counselors report feeling underprepared to provide grief counseling (Blueford et al., 2022; Cicchetti et

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al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018). Ober et al. (2012) studied 369 licensed professional counselors from one state in the United States and found that 54.8% of the counselors indicated they had no dedicated coursework on grief. Although 73.2% had at least one course that significantly infused grief content, most professional counselors in the study rated themselves with low competence regarding knowledge to counsel the bereaved (Ober et al., 2012). Similarly to Ober et al., Blueford et al. (2022) interviewed counselors working with clients grieving a death-related loss and found that counselors expressed a need to learn about grief and loss in course curricula. Hill et al. (2018) surveyed counselor trainees in CACREP-accredited mental health counseling programs and found that coursework in grief is associated with greater self-perceived competence.

CACREP works to ensure that counselor education serves as the foundation for the counseling profession from imparting knowledge to creating a unified counselor identity with activities that encourage intentionality and increased counselor competency (CACREP, 2023). The CACREP standards include eight foundational curriculum areas with an aim to represent all the knowledge and skills required of entry-level graduates (CACREP 2015, 2023). Although not mentioned specifically in the 2016 standards, grief is addressed under Lifespan Development in the 2024 CACREP standards. However, grief theory can be woven throughout all eight domains of the foundational counseling curriculum in an effort to increase counselor trainees' knowledge, confidence, and abilities. Although there are many ways to conceptualize grief, Hill et al. (2018) suggested that counselor trainees should be trained in the foundational grief concepts of attachment theory, the dual process model of grief, meaning-making theory, and adaptive grieving styles. These grief counseling theories and frameworks can provide a foundation for effective grief counseling interventions.

Foundational Grief Counseling Concepts

Educational information about attachment theory and adaptive grieving styles can help counselors understand their clients' unique relationships with grief and loss. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) is one of the primary foundations for understanding bereavement outcomes (Hill et al., 2018; Sekowski & Prigerson, 2022). There are three types of attachment styles that develop in the first months of life based upon the consistency and warmth of an infant's caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Secure attachment is fostered when the caregiver consistently responds to the infant's needs; with secure attachment, an individual becomes distressed when the caregiver is away, but is easily soothed when they return. An individual with anxious-ambivalent attachment reacts with strong distress when the caregiver is away and is not easily soothed upon their return. An individual with an avoidant attachment style does not display significant distress when the caregiver is away and is not particularly interested in connecting with the caregiver upon their return (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Individuals with insecure attachment styles may have more difficulty coping with grief and loss than those with secure attachment styles. High levels of attachment anxiety may increase longing for the deceased, which can perpetuate distress (APA, 2023; Maccallum & Bryant, 2018). Avoidant attachment styles can lead individuals to withdraw from others following a loss, which could prevent the resilience factor of social support and the development of new attachments to the living (Maccallum & Bryant, 2018). Additionally, individuals with avoidant attachment styles might also be at greater risk for prolonged grief (Sekowski & Prigerson, 2022). Counselors should take care to assess attachment style when supporting individuals through the grief process and provide attachment-informed interventions.

Counselors might also assess a client's adaptive grieving style, which involves the internal experience of loss and the external expression related to that loss (Martin & Doka, 2000). Intuitive

grievers experience their grief primarily with a heightened expression of emotion and tend to use more present-tense language (Doughty, 2009; Geisler & Dykeman, 2023; Martin & Doka, 2000). An instrumental griever's style is more cognitive with a desire to manage emotions and focus on problem-solving (Doughty, 2009; Martin & Doka, 2000). One can have a blended grieving experience that involves both styles. Blended grievors experience and express their grief in both cognitive and affective ways with one style usually more dominant than another (Doughty, 2009).

After working to understand a client's attachment style and adaptive grieving style, counselors might turn to the dual process model of grief in which stress is understood as the loss itself, as well as the task of adapting to a future without what was lost (Sheehan & Guerin, 2018). The dual process model emphasizes an oscillation between proactively accommodating the loss and a lack of energy toward positive action (Sheehan & Guerin, 2018). Professional counselors can use the dual process model in order to validate feelings and experiences during active grief work (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010). Counselors also help clients look toward the future in their own time (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010). These restoration efforts should not be rushed, and meaning-making might also help clients cope with loss.

Meaning-making is a theoretical framework used to understand how individuals cope with and overcome experiences of trauma and loss (Frounfelker et al., 2020). Meaning-making theory builds from the cognitive theory of stress and coping (Frounfelker et al., 2020; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and is tied to existentialism (Emanuel, 2023). In existentialism, individuals make meaning from life in every moment, and hope for the future is a key component to emotional wellness (Frankl, 1959). Higher levels of meaning-making are associated with lower levels of complicated grief (Pan & Liu, 2021). An effective counselor must make their own meaning of loss and grief before attempting to assist clients in their own meaning-making journeys (Wilson et al., 2020).

Weaving Grief Education Into the CACREP Core

Counselor educators can assist counselor trainees in forming a strong foundation for providing grief and loss counseling. Wheat et al. (2022) found that more CACREP-accredited counselor education programs are offering stand-alone grief courses than 30 years ago, but these courses are often offered as nonrequired electives. Counselor education programs can carefully integrate grief and loss content into the foundational counseling curriculum in order to ensure counselor trainees are learning about this important counseling topic in developmental and intentional ways (Hill et al., 2018; Wheat et al., 2022).

It is important for counselor educators to ensure that courses are not too dense or overwhelming. It might be helpful for counselors to start with the concept of disenfranchised grief and build toward the addition of death-related grief (Wheat et al., 2022). Disenfranchised grief refers to any type of grief not commonly acknowledged by society (Doka, 2002). It will be helpful for counselor trainees to learn to identify grief and loss related to topics such as pet loss, loss of physical health, the bittersweet loss of sending a child to college, or even the loss associated with graduating from a counseling program. These relatable subjects might help counselor educators developmentally scaffold toward the more challenging topics associated with death and dying. Suggestions for weaving grief education into the CACREP core are outlined in the next section based upon the 2024 CACREP foundational counseling curriculum, which aligns with the 2016 CACREP curriculum but with slightly different language.

Professional Counseling Orientation and Ethical Practice

Developing counselors are to learn about the multiple roles and functions they will perform across areas of specialized practice (CACREP, 2023, 3.A.2.). Counselor trainees should be taught about limits to their competence and their ethical

obligation to become competent in order to effectively serve clients (ACA, 2014, A.4.a.). The ethical principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence are especially relevant to grief counseling. Because grief is a universal experience, counselors should be equipped to provide therapy related to grief and loss (Blueford et al., 2022; Cicchetti et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018). In applying beneficence to grief and loss, the public should feel confident that any counselor they access will be able to effectively address grief and loss issues.

Counselors should uphold nonmaleficence and avoid any action that might cause harm to clients (ACA, 2014, p. 3). Interventions that are not evidence-based could potentially cause harm to clients. If a counselor lacks confidence in grief and loss counseling and chooses to refer a client with these concerns, it can create an alienating experience in which the client perceives their grief as too much for the counselor to handle. Counselor trainees should be taught grief counseling modalities that are based in science and grounded in theory (ACA, 2014, C.7.a.; Gamino & Ritter, 2012). Counselor trainees should be guided through an exploration of basic grief and loss competence and should be able to identify when it is ethically appropriate to gain further specialization or refer clients as needed.

Social and Cultural Identities and Experiences

All individuals are unique; counselors should have general knowledge of a client's culture while also assessing for accuracy and fit throughout the counseling process (Sue et al., 2022). Counselor trainees should have a strong understanding of the influence of heritage, cultural identities, individual experiences, and beliefs that have an impact on individuals' worldviews, help-seeking behaviors, and coping behaviors (CACREP, 2023, 3.B.1., 3.B.2., and 3.B.3.; Hill et al., 2018). Counselor trainees should learn how to assess and embrace every client's unique worldview and how to resist the temptation to apply traditional Western models of grief to all clients. Counselor trainees should also learn to recognize that something viewed as a loss

to one individual might not be perceived the same way by another.

Every individual will understand life's rhythm of grief and loss differently (Frounfelker et al., 2020). Counselor trainees should be educated about how to help clients make meaning of their grief and look for a way forward (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010). Additionally, although individuals make meaning in their own ways, global meaning-making gives individuals a sense of purpose and order (Frounfelker et al., 2020). Global meaning is a belief system (often founded in religion) that helps individuals make sense of life's ups and downs, including a belief that there is order and purpose in the world (Frounfelker et al., 2020). Counselors should work to understand every client's unique worldview, while also connecting clients to views that are common across the world, such as helping others to help oneself.

Lifespan Development

In a lifespan development course, an instructor can have counseling students explore grief and loss in human development and lifelong adjustment (Harris, 2011). Classroom exercises can provide counselor trainees with opportunities to make meaning of their own losses, which is a prerequisite before helping clients do the same (Wilson et al., 2020). Additionally, the use of therapeutic exercises in class creates a parallel process demonstrating how such interventions might be helpful with clients. One such exercise might be a lifeline of losses in which counselor trainees track their own significant losses throughout time (Hill et al., 2018). Such losses might be typical grief experiences (e.g., death of a loved one), or disenfranchised losses such as graduating and moving away from home or the loss of a pet (Doka, 2002).

Another assignment that might be helpful would be an autobiography detailing a counselor trainee's own development and how it has been affected by grief and loss. In this exercise, counselor trainees are able to experience the emotional benefits of validating and exploring both loss-related grief as well as disenfranchised grief, and they learn a

therapeutic activity they can use with their own clients. Different theoretical frameworks can be used to process grief experiences, and counselor trainees can be encouraged to reflect upon their losses, the evidence-based approaches to addressing grief and loss, and what worked for them (Hill et al., 2018). Additionally, counselor trainees should reflect upon client factors that might make some grief and loss interventions more appropriate for certain populations.

Career Development

Developing career counselors should learn ways to support clients seeking educational and occupational opportunities while also coping with issues of grief and loss. Counselor trainees should understand approaches for conceptualizing the connections between work, socioeconomic status, overall wellness, and trauma-related life roles and events (CACREP, 2023, 3.D.2.). Counselor educators can provide examples of holistic career counseling intake assessments that can lead to understanding the client in context and identifying losses that might be related to their current career situation. Death of a loved one has been found to impact a griever's ability to return to work and to work successfully (Wilson et al., 2020). Grief and loss reactions can stem from career-related events such as involuntary job loss or difficulty finding a job after graduation (Van Eersel et al., 2020). These often disenfranchised losses can lead to complicated grief, which is connected to maladaptive coping and low self-esteem (Van Eersel et al., 2020). Comprehensive intake assessments can help counselor trainees identify when career counseling interventions should be grounded in grief counseling foundations.

Counselor trainees can be asked to write a paper about evidence-based practices for addressing traditional and disenfranchised grief and loss in career counseling. Counselor trainees might be asked to create a career counseling treatment plan that leverages the therapeutic relationship and addresses overall mental health in addition to specific career needs. Counselor trainees might be asked to participate in mock sessions that allow

those in the client role to connect with a career counseling client's needs. In the counselor role, counselor trainees can learn to take cues from clients to determine if they are ready for exploration of grief and loss topics in the context of career counseling. If clients display an unwillingness to dig into grief and loss topics in the context of career counseling, counselor trainees should provide psychoeducation and focus on strategies for improving client access to career opportunities (CACREP, 2023, 3.D.11.).

Counseling Practice and Relationships

Counselor trainees must learn how to facilitate effective counseling relationships (CACREP, 2023, 3.E.8.). Grief counseling requires not only a foundation of trust, but an ability to resist the temptation for counselor trainees to immediately resolve an individual's grief (Blueford & Adams, 2019). Instead, counselors can rely on the dual process model in order to help clients process their emotions over time while working to find hope for the future (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010). To facilitate this process, counselor trainees should be taught the foundational counseling skills, such as reflections and validation, as well as the core conditions of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard (Walsh, 2022).

Counselors can work to form secure attachments with clients in order to facilitate a strong therapeutic relationship and to model this attachment for relationships outside of counseling. Attachment theory is helpful as a counseling intervention with clients who have experienced the loss of a loved one. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and the dual process model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010) promote an exploration of a client's attachment to the deceased and the ability to integrate a new understanding of life without the attachment figure (Blueford & Adams, 2019). Narrative therapy allows clients to rewrite their stories and emphasizes the journey rather than any outcome (Peri et al., 2016). This approach allows grieving clients to survey the past, present, and future and to view their grief externally instead of viewing oneself as the problem.

CACREP standards emphasize that we train counselor trainees on crisis intervention and trauma-informed strategies (CACREP, 2023, 3.E.20.). Another unique experience to consider when providing grief education to developing counselors is that of anticipatory grievers. This population is hard to reach and even more difficult to define. In general, anticipatory grief is associated with caring for a loved one who has a chronic illness or is aging, and death is anticipated in the somewhat near future (Rogalla, 2020). Understanding the meaning that individuals place on their anticipatory experiences is key to determining the potential for mental health challenges (Rogalla, 2020). Active grief work includes seeking triggers in order to experience and process the emotions associated with grief, and restoration efforts include finding gratitude for the positive experiences and hope for the future (Carmack & DeGroot, 2013; Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010).

Group Counseling and Group Work

Group counseling is an effective treatment for those experiencing issues of grief and loss in the school and community setting (Hess-Holden et al., 2017; Tillman & Prazak, 2018; Tripa et al., 2021). Group supports have been helpful for people experiencing traditional and disenfranchised grief. In general, counselor trainees should learn therapeutic factors in group work, approaches to group formation, and appropriate group counseling settings (CACREP, 2023, 3.F.3., 3.F.5., 3.F.7.). In group counseling coursework, counselor trainees can be encouraged to learn group counseling techniques that integrate evidence-based approaches for grief work, specifically (Hill et al., 2018). The dual process model, along with psychodynamic theory and narrative therapy, can be especially effective in the group setting (Larsen et al., 2023).

Counselor educators can ask counselor trainees to develop a group counseling plan for working with clients experiencing a specific type of loss in a specific setting. For example, one counselor trainee might develop group counseling materials for youth in schools who have lost a parent. Another counselor trainee might develop a group for adults

in the community whose children have recently moved out of the house. The combinations are endless, and counselor trainees can apply basic group counseling skills associated with identifying a need, selecting an appropriate setting, forming a cohesive group, and applying evidence-based interventions.

Assessment and Diagnostic Processes

In an assessment course, an instructor may introduce counseling students to various types of loss and grief assessment tools that they can use in their future counseling work or have students identify and critique a relevant grief assessment instrument and present the psychometric information to the class. Culturally-responsive counselors should be trained to identify psychometric properties of assessments and the norming sample from which they were collected (ACA, 2014, E.8.). Counselor educators can choose loss and grief assessments (see Table 1) to demonstrate general assessment principles and to explore assessment in the area of grief, specifically (Fitzgerald, 2000).

Counselor educators might also choose to highlight assessments that can help counselor trainees identify clients' attachment styles or adaptive grieving styles. Counselors can learn about adult clients' attachment styles using a trusted inventory such as the Adult Attachment Styles Questionnaire (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Or, counselors can use the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Infants and Toddlers to understand social and emotional risk and protective factors in youth (LeBuffe, & Naglieri, 1999). Trusted assessments can help counselors understand their clients, issue appropriate diagnoses as needed, and provide competent counseling interventions.

Counselors should learn about grief-related disorders and how assessment measures can help clinicians understand a client's presenting concerns. Three common disorders associated with grief and loss include adjustment disorder, prolonged grief disorder, and major depressive disorders (APA, 2023). Uncomplicated bereavement is a condition

Table 1*Grief and Loss Assessments*

Inventory Name	Population	Citation
Adolescent Grief Inventory (AGI)	Adolescents	Andriessen et al., 2018
Grief Cognitions Questionnaire for Children (GCQ–C)	Children	Spuij et al., 2017
Hogan Inventory of Bereavement–Short Form (Children and Adolescents; HIB-SF-CA)	Children and Adolescents	Hogan et al., 2021
Inventory of Prolonged Grief for Adolescents (IPG–A)	Adolescents	Spuij et al., 2012
Inventory of Prolonged Grief for Children (IPG–C)	Children	Spuij et al., 2012
Inventory of Youth Adaptation to Loss (IYAL)	Children and Adolescents	Kaplan et al., 2022
Loss Response List (LRL)	Children and Adolescents	Wheeler & Austin, 2000
Ambiguous Loss Inventory Plus (ALI+)	Adults	Comtesse et al., 2023
Coping Assessment for Bereavement and Loss Experiences (CABLE)	Adults	Crunk et al., 2021
Grief Experience Inventory (GEI)	Adults	Sanders et al., 1985
Grief and Meaning Reconstruction Inventory (GMRI)	Adults	Gillies et al., 2015
Hogan Grief Reaction Checklist (HGRC)	Adults	Hogan et al., 2001
Texas Revised Inventory of Grief (TRIG)	Adults	Faschingbauer et al., 1987
Traumatic Grief Inventory-Self Report Plus (TGI-SR+)	Adults	Lenferink et al., 2022

that might be a focus of clinical attention and describes a grief reaction that is within normal limits. This condition is specifically associated with the death of a loved one (as opposed to disenfranchised grief), and the grief might exacerbate other mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety (APA, 2023). Counselor educators should provide students with assessments to differentiate between the diagnostic criteria often

associated with grief. Additionally, counselor trainees should be empowered to identify interventions that will support clients toward wellness.

Research and Program Evaluation

Research regarding loss and grief encompasses both the impact of nondeath losses and death-related

losses, as well as appropriate interventions (Griese et al., 2012; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). In a research class, counselor educators can review and discuss various methodological and ethical issues associated with loss- and grief-related research studies. Individuals and families who have recently experienced a loss are in a vulnerable position, and researchers should ensure that the potential benefit of any research outweighs the risk (Carmack & DeGroot, 2013; Steeves et al., 2001). Extending beyond methodology, counselor trainees should be trained to be responsible consumers of grief research. Counselor trainees should be reminded about psychometric properties of assessments and how the norming sample compares to the demographics of the client population at hand. Counselor educators should work to help counselor trainees develop culturally-responsive intervention strategies based upon sound research and assessment practices (CACREP, 2015, 2023).

Counselors should be able to identify ways in which they will access peer-reviewed research upon graduation. For example, counselor educators can highlight that membership in the university's alumni association might provide access to the library database, and membership benefits in professional associations include access to that association's peer-reviewed journals. Additionally, trustworthy open access journals should be identified in class.

Implications

In this article, specific suggestions are provided to integrate grief and loss education into all eight areas of the CACREP foundational counseling curriculum. The inclusion of these topics across all core areas is essential if educators are to effectively prepare counselor trainees to assist the bereaved in a variety of settings and circumstances. Without these specifics, counselor education programs might focus on the basic requirements to successfully complete existing coursework and pass licensure exams. However, this focus fails to prepare counselor trainees to address a part of life that

affects all people (Blueford & Adams, 2019; Cicchetti et al., 2016). In order to do no harm and to uphold the ethical principal of beneficence, counselor trainees must learn to address grief and loss issues that affect an individual's family life, work life, relationships, and daily functioning.

Furthermore, supervisors must acknowledge with their supervisees that part of preparing for counseling the bereaved involves discussing unique situations of grief and loss, such as the anticipated grief of a loved one due to prolonged illness, pet loss, miscarriage, and the loss of one's previous identity as it relates to various life changes. Supervisors should create a safe space that normalizes these issues to allow supervisees to ask questions and explore their own grief and loss experiences to determine how these show up in their work with the bereaved. Counselor trainees should be encouraged to identify areas of potential bias and control for instances of countertransference in their work.

Conclusion

The CACREP (2015, 2023) standards promote counselor identity and ensure that counselor trainees receive the information they need in order to successfully support clients toward wellness. Grief is specifically addressed under lifespan development (CACREP, 2023, 3.C.13.), and researchers have found a need for additional grief and loss considerations to be woven across the CACREP core (Blueford et al., 2022; Cicchetti et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2018; Ober et al., 2012; Wheat et al., 2022). Specifically, counselor trainees should learn about attachment theory, the dual process model, meaning-making theory, and adaptive grieving styles (Hill et al., 2018). Counselor trainees should have repeated opportunities to apply grief and loss theory to practical content areas. In this article, concrete ways to integrate grief and loss theory and intervention into all eight CACREP (2023) content areas are provided. Counselor educators are encouraged to consider ways in which this important information can be conveyed to

counselor trainees so that they are best prepared to work with the universal phenomenon of grief and loss.

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