Grief’s Impact on Psychiatric Well-Being:
Recognizing and Addressing Loss with Youth in Residential Care

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Objectives

Following presentation, the learner will be able to:

- Identify the types of loss commonly experienced by youth in residential care
- Describe the clinical needs of youth dealing with loss
- Describe how an interdisciplinary team can create unique experiences to promote healthy grieving in residential settings
Context of Our Work

- 30 bed locked facility
- Ages 7-17
- Various mental health diagnoses
- \( \approx 75\% \) in state custody
- Average LOS: 4-9 months
- Within a pediatric hospital
Context: Interdisciplinary Team

Disciplines contributing to care include:

- Social Work / Therapist
- Speech / Language Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Teacher
- Therapeutic Recreation
- Mental Health Specialist
- Psychiatrist
- Nursing
- Music Therapy
- Art Therapy
- Spiritual Care
Part 1: Loss and Youth in Residential Care
What is Loss?

• Something or someone once valued being “taken away irrevocably” (Balk, 2011)

• Grief vs. loss
Types of Loss

- Things
- Situations
- Living Beings
- Places

Disenfranchised Losses
What’s in the Literature?

Significant literature on bereavement in youth without confounding mental health issues

Significant literature on loss and psychiatric illness in less restrictive outpatient settings

Very limited literature on loss with youth in residential settings
What’s in the Literature

Youth in residential treatment centers often...

• Are prone to pathological responses to loss
• Experience more losses
  NOTE: Being put into residential itself is a loss/separation
• Have incomplete or inactive grief
• Face complex grief situations
• Feel loss is an important clinical issue

(Bright, 2002; Cates, 1986; Farley, 1984; Seley, 2014; Tomori, 2000; Wallis & Steele, 2001; Young et al., 2009)
Yet...

Loss is often overlooked or avoided in residential treatment.

We found zero [0] studies that systematically look at best treatment for addressing loss with this population.

(Cates, 1986; McFerran, 2010)
Clinical Needs of Grieving Youth in Residential Care

- Recognize / accept loss
- Integrate loss into life
- Is the youth ready?
- Education
- Safety
- Process
- Permission to grieve
Part 2: Clinical Case Examples
Cheryl

- Teen Female
- Residing with Family
- Suicidal behavior
- Type of Loss: Miscarriage
A Portrait of Cheryl

**Strengths:**
- Talented dancer
- Motivated
- Insightful
- Mature
- Smart
- Peers viewed client as “a leader”

**Challenges:**
- Irritability
- Inconsistent family support
- Sometimes quiet/guarded
- Low frustration tolerance
How did the loss manifest itself and affect treatment?

• This loss was previously undisclosed, hence care providers had no way to incorporate bereavement care as part of treatment

• Unexplainable emotional void

• Loss of hope – She had emotionally invested in being able to creating an ideal family; the miscarriage dashed those hopes

• Conflicted family relationship made more complicated by distrust surrounding this loss and the failure to acknowledge it
Cheryl, cont.

**Initial Treatment Goals:**

- Music Tx: Safe self-expression
- Spiritual Care: Address grief and loss
- Therapeutic Recreation: Increase Coping and Self-Expression
- Art Tx: Increase Coping
An Interdisciplinary Approach

- **Music Therapy:**
  Piano playing expressing grief, hope

- **Spiritual Care:**
  1:1 sessions
  identify / discuss phases of grief
  Theater Workshop
  Movement Workshop
An Interdisciplinary Approach

- Therapeutic Recreation:
  - Fernside™ - Grief support groups
  - Off-site dance classes
  - Teaching dance to peers
  - Horticulture

- Art Therapy:
  - Art projects symbolizing child
  - Stepping-stone

- Interdisciplinary collaboration on
  - Service of Remembrance
Loss-Treatment Outcomes

- Identified loss as significant event, versus prior minimization due to lack of acknowledgement by family members
- Better able to recognize, understand, and articulate her hopes for her own future
- Personal empowerment: She designed and implemented the Service of Remembrance
- Increased sense of having a supportive community based on peer/staff solidarity at Service of Remembrance
Benefits to Overall Treatment

• Increased patience, understanding and empathy
• Increased self-esteem and claimed her “personal voice”
• Increased self-advocacy
• Increased capacity to disavow that which she understood to be untrue
• Increased willingness to share thoughts and emotions, presumably due to increased levels of trust
Rose

- Teen Female
- Residing with family
- Suicidal gestures
- Types of loss: Personal identity, innocence
A Portrait of Rose

**Strengths:**
- Creative
- Innate skills in the expressive arts
- Individualistic
- Willingness to be emotionally vulnerable
- Friendly

**Challenges:**
- Safety
- Co-dependence / parental enmeshment
- Mood dysregulation
- Over-reactive
- Poor boundaries
How did the loss manifest itself and affect treatment?

- Inability to connect with grieving parts of herself in a healthy way; grief manifested via self-harm
- Loss of identity- her behavior would shift depending on surroundings
- Innocence- Often presented as much older than she was
Initial Treatment Goals:

• Music Tx: Safe self-expression
• Spiritual Care: Engage in spiritual practice
  Explore spiritual concepts & beliefs
• Therapeutic Recreation:
  Increase Self-Esteem
  Improve coping/self-expression
• Art Tx: Increase Communication
An Interdisciplinary Approach

- **Music Therapy:**
  - Instrumental improvisation
  - Songwriting
  - Dancing and movement to music

- **Spiritual Care:**
  - Theatre Workshop
  - Movement Workshop
  - Drumming prayers
An Interdisciplinary Approach

• Therapeutic Recreation:
  Individualized interventions
  Leisure recreation
  Personal identification apart from illness
  Horticulture and animal therapy
  Community re-entry

• Art Therapy:
  Altered book
  Drawing, collage, layering
An Interdisciplinary Approach

• Interdisciplinary collaboration
  With consent of verbal therapist, recreational therapist and art therapist took her trauma narrative work and helped her express and explore her trauma through artistic means.
Loss-Treatment Outcomes

• Gained insight into how her trauma-related loss impacted her sense of personal identity

• Explored her “true self” through the arts

• Connected with emotions that had gotten buried and began to reclaim these parts of her identity

• Ability to take on a leadership role in areas of personal strength, particularly in the performance arts (theater, movement)
Benefits to Overall Treatment

• Increased range of coping skills
• Ability to appropriately interact with others in community service situations
• Increased mood regulation
• Greater insight into the need for personal motivator (goal) to create a sense of personal drive and maintain a healthy lifestyle
A Unit in Grief

- 12-18 years old
- Males and females
- Variety of losses within the group
- Multiple impending loss anniversaries within a close period of time
A Portrait of the Unit

**Strengths:**
- Peer “leaders” on unit
- Youth had functional trust with each other
- Strong treatment team buy-in and support
- Unit staff trustworthy
- Confident follow-up support would take place

**Challenges:**
- Most needy grievers were least “popular”
- Trend emerging: grief “competition”
- Creating “fairness”
- Prior resistance in youth to address grief
- Some griefs part of a traumatic experience
How did the loss manifest itself and affect treatment?

- Grief themes emerging as part of groups focused on other themes / topics and in individual interventions
- Youth comparing their loss against another’s loss, “ranking” them
- Increased angry outbursts and expressed anxiety surrounding impending loss anniversaries
- Increased reactivity to peer statements
A Unit in Grief, cont.

**Intervention Goals:**

- Create an intervention that involves all youth and covers a broad range of griefs
- Create a safe, therapeutic environment
- Educate on grief as a universal experience
- Honor all griefs as having significance
- Provide opportunity for both disclosure and non-disclosure
Intervention: A Three Part Ritual

Educate: Briefly teach about grief experience

Name: Four categories of grief
- Explain concept and “hard truth”
- Written list of griefs (place in bowl)
- Opportunity to verbally share

Contain and Create Community:
- Concept of hope/joy despite grieving
- Move written lists from bowl to pillar
- Peers symbolically “carry” others’ griefs
- Music building solidarity - “Lean on Me”
An Interdisciplinary Approach

- **Music Therapy:**
  Instrumental improvisation during list writing
  Selections created to hold, contain, and support emotions
  Closing song set theme for moving forward, reinforce unity

- **Spiritual Care:**
  Lead ritual
  Speak truth – grieving is hard work
  Express hope for future
An Interdisciplinary Approach

- Therapeutic Recreation: Present to provide support and solidarity. Reinforced importance of grief expression.
- Art Therapy: Follow-up by utilizing creative arts for lament.
An Interdisciplinary Approach

- Interdisciplinary collaboration

  Music therapist and chaplain collaborated to create the ritual

  Additional disciplines attended and participated in the ritual, including
  Mental Health Specialists
  Therapist
  Nurse, Advanced Practice Nurse

  All disciplines committed to follow-up support
Loss-Treatment Outcomes

- Youths’ conscious recognition of loss which had previously been subconscious
- Staff learned of previously unknown youth losses
- Youths’ increased ability to recognize grief and loss and to differentiate them from other feelings
Benefits to Overall Treatment

- Diminished grief-related acting out on unit
- Increased expressions of empathy among youth
- Increased appreciation among staff regarding youths’ levels of grief
Part 3: Recommendations for Addressing Loss
Organizational Integration of Loss-Treatment into Overall Care

Incorporate grief/loss in existing program

Create unit group

Group Series

Collaborations

Outside community group

Educate
How Clinicians Can Aid Youth in Processing Loss

1:1 Dialogue
Journal
Artwork
Poetry
Ritual
Memory-making
Part 4:
Wisdom from the Trenches
Encountering Resistance from Treatment Team Members?

- “Why are you talking to the kids about death?
- “They come back from grief group sad and upset.”
- “They are already depressed, you’re going to make it worse.”
Addressing Treatment Team Resistance

If not here, then when / where?

Therapist D.H.:
“What better place is there to do it? If they decompensate, here we have all the expertise and resources to help them get through it.”
Addressing Team Resistance

- Increase understanding on how grief contributes to on-going emotional state
- Important to address grief, not ignore it
- Delayed grief can be emotionally damaging
- In grieving, we learn about ourselves
- Youth will experience other important losses in his/her life.
- Creates model for grieving future losses and coping with other strong emotions
Increasing Your Comfort in Addressing Loss as a Clinician

1. Be conscious of your own losses and grief process.
2. Familiarize yourself with typical losses in your setting and ways to address them.
3. Begin with small steps (institutionally); get others onboard.
Ways to Increase Youth’s Comfort Addressing their Loss

- Normalize the experience of grief (stages)
- Encourage grief expression, which sometimes requires granting “permission”
- Assure them they are not “stuck” in this place forever
- Approach the topic using expressive arts and/or areas they enjoy
- “Reward” youth for their hard work
The Importance of Ritual

- Provides structure for naming/proclaiming the loss yet creates a boundary that promotes safety
- When others participate, the griever experiences both support and solidarity
- A well-crafted ritual can
  - guide the rhythm of the grieving process
  - personalize the grief within the context of that individual’s life
  - acknowledges the universality of human grief
Recommended Resources

- “Angel Catcher” and “Angel Catcher for Kids” grief journals
- “Fire in My Heart, Ice in my Veins”-Enis Samuel-Traisman
- “My Grieving Journey Book”- Paulist Press
- “Reactions”- Alison Salloum: A Centering Corporation Resource
- “A Book for You From Kids Like You”- Fernside Resource
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References


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