



## COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL COUNSELING OF UNRESOLVED GRIEF THROUGH THE THERAPEUTIC ADJUNCT OF TAPESTRY-MAKING

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This paper describes counseling work with a client whose presenting problems could be framed as unresolved grief. An integrative approach was taken to therapy, with cognitive behavioral adjuncts brought into an essentially client-centered perspective when relevant. In collaboration, the client and counselor discovered the therapeutic value of creating an image in tapestry. This experience appeared to help the client come to terms with past losses. The therapeutic aspects of the creative activity are analyzed from different theoretical perspectives.

### Introduction

The client work discussed in this paper is unusual in two respects. Firstly, the client's grieving process was guided in part by cognitive behavioral principles. Secondly, a creative arts adjunct to verbal counseling was conceptualized within a cognitive behavioral framework. While cognitive and behavioral theories are increasingly used to guide brief forms of psychotherapy and counseling, there are few published accounts of griefwork being informed by these perspectives. Cognitive behavioral approaches appear almost entirely missing from the creative therapies literature except in the field of music therapy (Bunt, 1994).

The therapeutic use of art is perhaps more commonly informed by psychodynamic or client-centered principles, and the later discussion will examine aspects of the therapeutic process from these contrasting

perspectives. These insights illustrate the value of an "integrative" approach to therapy.

Practitioners whose work is grounded in a specific theoretical perspective may come to accept its sensitizing concepts as "given" and taken for granted. Yet all theories are filters for our complex experiences, serving to highlight some aspects for attention, and relegating other aspects to background. Counselors and clients may discover fresh insights from examining their experiences from more than one theoretical viewpoint.

The client's problems were interpreted as unresolved grief and so some analysis of this problem from a cognitive behavioral perspective is presented. The key objectives of cognitive behavioral counseling are outlined, followed by application of these principles to a creative arts process of tapestry-making.

### Analyzing Grief

Grief is a complex experience, and may be provoked by a wide variety of loss and separation experiences (Parkes, 1985). Grief reactions commonly include feelings such as sadness, anger and guilt; cognitive problems such as inability to concentrate, obsessive reflections about the lost object and memory losses; behavior disturbances such as social withdrawal, disturbing dreams and crying; and physical sensations such as tightness or emptiness in the stomach, shortness of breath and hypersensitivity to environmental sights and sounds.

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There are a variety of theoretical perspectives to guide counselors or therapists in working with grieving clients, and an integrated approach may be beneficial (Barbato & Irwin, 1992). Different interventions may be helpful according to the client's position in the grieving process. Initially, the task of the counselor is to listen to the client's story and accept the painful feelings which arise (Staudacher, 1987; Worden, 1982).

While nonjudgemental listening is important to help the client disclose painful experiences, it may not provide sufficient conditions for the resolution of grief, particularly for clients who experience chronic or masked grief (Worden, 1982). In chronic grief, the response to loss is prolonged and perhaps marked by limited emotions (such as intense sadness or anger). In masked grief, the person may not attribute ongoing psychological difficulties to the grief process, and may indeed avoid all references to or reminders of the loss. They may have been supported in this avoidance by the family, leading to the "cognitive incubation" of grief (Eysenck, 1968; Gauthier & Marshall, 1977). The therapist may need to discover ways of helping the client to recontact the range of emotions experienced by the loss so that these can be worked through and some greater resolution achieved.

#### Grief from a Cognitive Behavioral Perspective

There are relatively few accounts of therapists working with grief from a cognitive behavioral perspective (Gauthier & Marshall, 1977; Kavanagh, 1990; Mawson, Marks, Ramm, & Stern, 1981; Ramsey, 1979). How may the cognitive behavioral perspective be relevant to griefwork? The cognitive perspective (Beck, 1976; Stern & Drummond, 1991) emphasizes the role of ongoing, unwarranted negative thoughts and assumptions in perpetuating problems such as depression. For those who are grieving a loss (be it of a person, possession or valued aspect of the self), the event itself may be very real and not open to reinterpretation. However, the person's responses to that loss, including thoughts of regret, self-blame and so on, may work against resolving grief.

At a cognitive level, there are similar targets whether working with grief or depression more generally. Beck (1976) noted how depressed clients tended to hold negative cognitions about the self (as deficient, blameworthy, and so on), the world (as lacking essentials or as invalidating valued assumptions), and the future (as promising nothing but fur-

ther strife, guilt, helplessness, and other unpleasant experiences). The therapist is likely to assist the client in identifying and challenging this so-called "negative cognitive triad."

The behavioral perspective emphasizes how behavioral patterns and habits come to be maintained in the long-term by subtle rewards, including attention from others, and relief from anxiety. In the context of grief, avoiding reminders of the loss and inhibiting expression of feelings, may reduce the burden of sadness in the short-term. However, in time, the person may become "entrapped" by their avoidance behavior. The fears of examining their loss experience intensify and their grief reactions may become more prolonged. The foundations of exposure therapy and systematic desensitization rest on the premise that confronting anxiety-provoking situations is a potent way of reducing their threat value (Marks, 1987). In cases of grief, it has been noted that individuals with complicated and prolonged responses to loss frequently avoid reminders of the lost person or situation. Some counseling interventions (such as inviting the client to bring mementoes, photographs and other "linking objects" to the session) aim to revive memories of the loss and associated emotions (Volkan, 1972). Such techniques can be viewed from a cognitive behavioral perspective as helping to challenge avoidance (and the long-standing "cognitive incubation" of anxiety).

There is a common misinterpretation that cognitive behavioral therapy is only concerned with intellectual responses to situations and is highly directive. The varied interventions can be highly eliciting of strong emotional expression, and the therapist needs to be able to "hold" these emotions within a strong empathic alliance (Newell & Dryden, 1991).

#### Working with Grief Through Experiential Processes

Cognitive behavioral forms of therapy frequently include behavioral "projects" as homework. The client may most readily challenge long-standing cognitive assumptions about the self and the responses of others by trying out new behaviors. Experiential creative processes may help the client to access buried feelings and test their cognitive "landscape" of assumptions and expectations. However, the therapeutic use of art is rarely included within cognitive behavioral therapy.

From a cognitive behavioral perspective, creative activity may facilitate clients in gaining awareness of

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