



Building Professional Excellence- Part 2
Session 11: Adolescent Grief: Developmental and Cultural Considerations
Webinar Follow-up Question and Answer Session with Laura Wheat

1. Question from Teodora Tecu

Is there a link between grief and overeating behavior in adolescents?

Answer from Presenter

I'm not familiar with any research around that particular link, but it would not surprise me if they were linked for some adolescents. If that was something I suspected in my client, I would think about what that particular behavior is about for the client, what the function is. It could be soothing of anxiety, or an impulse control problem, or an addiction, or perhaps making oneself unattractive so that no one gets close, which is something we sometimes see in survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Any of those could be byproducts of loss as well. So for instance if an adolescent loses a friend, part of dealing with the sadness and anxiety and general stress she might feel with that loss could be eating, and then if it's the only coping mechanism she has, she may do it too much and end up overeating or even bingeing.

2. Question from Teodora Tecu

What behavior can be considered abnormal grief?

Answer from Presenter

What we refer to as "abnormal grief" under several names (e.g., complicated grief, prolonged grief, etc.) in general is grief that has gotten stuck or is unabating in intensity. Typical grief tends to start out with a high intensity, comes in waves after awhile, and then the intensity of the waves decreases as the mourner learns to adapt, resituates the relationship with who/what they lost, and finds ways to remember that are comforting. In "abnormal" grief, the intensity level tends to stay the same, keeping people stuck in pain. So if you are working with an adolescent who doesn't seem to be getting any better or making any meaning of the loss, or who continues to deny the loss long after you might normally expect, you might suspect complicated grief. Particularly if the teen says to you something like, "I'm just stuck! I'm just not getting any better!" and it has been 6 months or longer since the loss. That 6 month marker is not a hard and fast rule, more like a rule of thumb. Anywhere from 6 months to a year after a loss is when people typically start to heal or at least be able to tolerate and deal with the loss. But if that's not happening, now you switch over to more intensive therapy focusing on what is keeping the adolescent stuck.

3. Question from Teodora Tecu

What is the key element which helps create the bound between adolescent-counselor, which helps the adolescent be vulnerable with the counselor?

Answer from Presenter

Wow! I am not sure there is one definitive answer to that question, but for me, it comes down to presence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard. If your way of being with a given adolescent consistently embodies those things, they will generally feel safe enough to expose their vulnerable souls. Even "tougher"



kids will open up if they feel held by you and if they sense that you are fully present and available with them. Depending on an individual teen's life circumstances, some may take longer than others, some will test you and push the limits of your patience, but I think the key is consistency. Be an adult in their lives who is genuinely interested in listening to them. It doesn't hurt, too, to treat them as an equal, as a partner in the counseling relationship, rather than as the passive recipient of counseling (particularly if someone else initiated the counseling rather than them).

4. Question from Nisha Talwar

No matter how much I feel good about this topic, I continue to struggle when kids just shut down when questioned about their grief? Any particular technique I could utilize.

Answer from Presenter

For me, it's actually not about techniques. If I'm having trouble connecting with a kid, which usually I recognize as frustration with them or panic about knowing what to do next, that's when I actually stop doing any kind of technique and return to relationship building. I've found that if the relationship is not there, if it's not solid, a kid definitely will not expose their grief because it's too painful to share it with someone who might minimize it or not understand. So I would say perhaps think about refocusing on the present and going back to empathic, relationship building skills, approaching the client from a more equalized place in which they're a partner in their counseling rather than having counseling done to them by a random adult. Focus on rebuilding the therapeutic relationship, and the client will feel safer and more comfortable revealing deeper things like their grief. I would emphasize that even when that relationship is on solid ground, though, that the approach to working with the client's grief should be congruent with that. So coming from a place of curiosity about what it's like for them, exploring it alongside them, rather than attempting to make them reach a goal you came up with, will be more effective in the long run. It will take patience, and it may take a lot of work, but it's worth it!
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5. Question from Elizabeth Haines

I have a client (15) who suffers from Post-Concussive Syndrome and suffers from extensive pain and anxiety from this. She is clearly in a grief process regarding who she once was versus now. Any experience with this?

Answer from Presenter

That's really fascinating! Unfortunately I don't have any experience with that, but it makes a lot of sense. Anytime someone is forced to lose a part of their identity, there is the possibility of grief. Even normal things like growing up and becoming can involve loss – just ask all those early twenty somethings who like to color in coloring books or watch “adult” cartoons! ☺ So if I suddenly can't do something that meant a lot to me, or if I am suddenly not who I was before, certainly I would grieve that loss. I wish I was more familiar with the specifics of Post-Concussive Syndrome to be able to speak more directly to your question. I'm guessing it would be an important part of helping her deal with her syndrome and mourn her losses to help her find hope in the future, to decide to focus on her strength and her resilience as part of her character. This would be a balance to her sadness about the person she was that she can't be now.



6. Question from Stacy Newton

What are CAT and TAP cards?

Answer from Presenter

Great question! I was so intrigued by the original question about using them with grieving kids that I didn't explain what they were! Sorry about that! ☺ "TAT cards" was referring to the cards used in the Thematic Apperception Test, a projective personality assessment for adults; I believe the CAT (Children's Apperception Test) was developed later, but it's the same basic principle. In case you're not familiar, the cards are merely pictures of people (TAT) or animals (CAT) doing things, and the person undergoing assessment is instructed to tell a story about what's happening in the picture. It's very psychodynamic. I think the cards themselves could be used creatively to help kids – particularly younger ones – tell the story of their grief if it's a more comfortable way for them to talk about it at first. But I would definitely not use them for any sort of assessment or measure of grief or of their healing, since that is not the purpose for which those tests were developed.

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