

A Therapist's Grief When a Client Suddenly Dies

By Paula J. Siegel, MFT

Dressed up and looking forward to a lively night out at a gala fundraising event for our local school district, I made a final check of my private practice voicemail for the day. Bewildered to hear the voice of a client's spouse, surprise gave way to shock and disbelief hearing the news that this client had died suddenly the day before.

I heard myself gasp, "What!?!!" pressing the one key on my phone to play the message again. I must have heard wrong. Completely shocked, unable to move away from my desk, I had to listen to the message several times. My mind started racing. I had just seen her this past week. She seemed to be doing well, turning an important corner in our long-term work together. And now, she was gone. "Oh my God, I can't believe this," I heard myself saying out loud repeatedly. She was just alive and now she's not. Yet she was still so alive in my psyche.

I felt raw, open, and impotent.

I went over and over our last session in my mind. She had smiled, a sparkle in her eyes, as she walked out with her usual goodbye: "See you next week!" This was to be my final, and lasting, impression of her. I wanted to go back in time and re-explore her health issues. Was there something I could have caught that might have saved her? I wanted the details about how she died and what was happening to her now. Where was she? Was anybody with her? Was she being taken care of? My ongoing role as the good mother was highly activated, in fact amplified by the news of her death. I wanted the chance to say goodbye.

I phoned a colleague from my consultation group and shared the horrible news. She listened empathically as I expressed my disbelief and my confusion. She gently reminded me that I was in shock and that this was a natural part of the grieving process. I took in her insightful words, reminded of the many times I had endured the death of a loved one. We talked a bit more, I thanked her and we said our goodbyes. And then I took a deep breath and cried. So began my grieving process. What was to come would be a very different journey of grieving than any other I had experienced before.

In its own way, ours is a very peculiar profession. While we establish the therapeutic holding for our clients, we also create boundaries around our own personal material to avoid merging with their issues. With experience, we develop the ability to anticipate the inevitable ruptures and repairs in the fabric of our therapeutic relationships, to manage the transference and counter-transference that is part and parcel of this work. We become skillful at recognizing and navigating this territory. Ultimately the day arrives when the relationship draws to a close, and we do our best to say goodbye well in a facilitated manner.

Unfortunately, there are times when our clients end their therapy prematurely. They can abruptly discontinue therapy after many sessions, or they might call to cancel after only one appointment. There are infinite reasons why someone might choose to terminate with little warning. We might never learn the reasons. We struggle to accept this, and we get plenty of opportunity to practice.

The sudden unanticipated death of a client is much harder to accept. It is horrible to lose a client to a life-threatening illness or suicide. But in those cases, we are at least aware that it could-or would-happen. How professionally prepared can we possibly be when a client's death is entirely unexpected?

My life has already been touched by the difficult and painful loss of many cherished family members and friends, some who died shockingly from war, accidents and suicide. Each one of these deaths called on my courage to feel the pain of losing someone I loved, to face the reality of life's impermanence through the process of grieving. In the shelter and comfort of my family, friends, and larger community, I looked at photographs, told stories, and listened to others share their memories. These are necessary components that nurture the gradual repair of the internal fabric ripped apart by the death of a loved one. Being able to grieve in such a loving and supportive environment has allowed me to fully embrace and respect the transient nature of life.

The ethical and legal boundaries of our profession cut us off from these healing opportunities. We are not free to connect with the deceased's family members and community who share our loss and with whom we would honor the life of the person who has died-if we could. Denied the intimate connection with my deceased client's larger community, I felt confused and disoriented with no clear direction on how to proceed. I wondered how her family and others I had heard so much about over the years were doing. There was no way for me to know.

Discussing this with my colleagues and searching the Internet, I found that the issue of therapist's unanticipated loss has not been much explored. One colleague shared-much to my alarm-that a supervisor judged her grief for a deceased client to be co-dependent. Is our profession ill equipped to face these questions? What makes us so uncomfortable in considering the unique demands of a therapist's grief?

Perhaps we hesitate to reveal the depth of our grief in our professional circle for fear of the accusation that we are "enmeshed" with our client, with whom we had a uniquely intimate connection. Who else in our lives do we meet with for an hour every week to discuss issues of such a very personal and confidential nature? How can we not be so deeply affected by such a loss? Our need to express our grief at the sudden death of a client is real and worthy of being affirmed and supported.

Such grief is not simply another variety of countertransference, a trigger of our past losses. Of course a client's death can-and will- evoke our personal history of loss and attachment. But we have authentic relationships with our clients and so we experience authentic loss-and need and deserve to process it. Perhaps this provides us with a unique moment in which to explore our interiors more deeply with self-compassion, gaining a deeper appreciation of impermanence and the preciousness of each one of our relationships in our lives.

Legal and Ethical Issues

Once a client dies, confidentiality can only be waived by the person who is appointed personal executor of the client's estate. This can be a complex issue if an executor was not named in the client's will, in which case the court must appoint one. Family members must seek legal counsel for this process. The client's rights still continue and the case file must be held for the seven-year period.

We may attend our client's funeral or memorial service. We must maintain discretion about our relationship with the deceased in our public interactions with others. Perhaps the client had disclosed that he/she was in therapy with us, but maintaining a professional boundary is a must, even if others in the client's community and family knew of us.

If a deceased client's spouse requests a session to speak about the deceased, the therapist should exercise caution. The tug to care for and provide support to the bereaved spouse may be strong, but this could lead to a breach in confidentiality of the client's work in therapy. This can be considered on a case-by-case basis, but it might be advisable to refer the spouse to another therapist.

What a bind we are in! This essential need to connect with the grieving community and family members is in direct conflict with our professional legal and ethical guidelines. The very boundaries put in place to protect the client's privacy mandate that we maintain confidentiality even when our client has died. We must contain all of this and grieve privately, finding alternative, creative ways to process our grief.

Suggestions for Grieving Therapists

Denied access to these typical means of processing grief, a choice to carry on with "business as usual," minimizing grief, not only doesn't allow the healing process to move, it can instead deepen the pain, prolonging it. Unprocessed grief can find its way out in unexpected, unconscious ways, even interfere with your work with your remaining clients who are depending on your ability to be fully present for them.

Support groups and peer consultation can be vitally meaningful in our personal grieving and healing process, but it is important to use whatever grieving rituals can be most meaningful for you. Whatever choices you make, start by setting aside time for reflection, treating yourself with patience and kindness.

Coming from the Jewish tradition, I lit a memorial candle and chanted the Kaddish (mourner's prayer) for my client. The growing Jewish mystical community believes that the vibrations of the words of this sacred blessing actually assist the person's soul in its transition from this great mystery to the next. Reciting this familiar and honored prayer, I felt that, in some small way, I was still supporting her while also attending to my personal needs.

You may want to leave that client's appointment time open until you feel ready to fill it. The longer you had worked with your now deceased client at a given time and place, the harder it could be to re-inhabit that therapeutic space with someone new and not be impacted by the awareness of your loss. Preserving this time slot can serve as a sort of short-term memorial; a way of contributing to your own healing.

You may want to express your feelings by keeping a journal with your personal thoughts, poetry, or artwork. Possible areas to explore may be: the meaning that came from the work you did with the client; how s/he impacted your life; what you'd like others to know about this person if you could talk about him/her; what you would like this client's family members to know about him/her if you could share this with them; imagining your client sitting with you in a place that feels safe and comforting, what you'd like to say to him/her and what s/he might say to you in return?

Summary

We are sensitive, intuitive, and empathic humans. This is why we are drawn to do the work we do in the world. In order to help our clients process and move through their emotional pain and grief, we must also respect and be mindful of our own. By embracing and creating time and space to acknowledge the impact of our attachments and our losses both personally and professionally, we are empowered to be more fully present for our clients.

In grieving, the heart breaks open, allowing for the possibility of gaining a greater capacity for both the pain and joy of the human condition. We can achieve a more respectful and humbling relationship with impermanence.

By honoring the important role grief has played in my life, I am aware of living each day more fully, experiencing a deeper and clearer presence with my clients, and recognizing the unique gifts each individual brings to the world. When we embrace our losses and come to terms with our own impermanence, we can potentially live more authentically with joy while doing our small part in "Tikkun Olam" - the Hebrew term for the repair and healing of the world.

I dedicate this article to her life and the deep work we did together.

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