

Abstract: Secular Bereavement Intervention

It is not uncommon for counselors to see clients struggling with the loss of a loved one. Indeed, there are a number of strategies counselors utilize in aiding clients through the bereavement process, from models that stress progression through stages of grief to cognitive-behavioral interventions. However, few of these models deal directly with the ways in which western culture, and American culture in particular, has evolved to address the concepts of death and grief.

The topic of death has been treated as a sort of taboo in American culture, to the potential detriment of those nearing the end of their lives, as well as the loved ones they inevitably leave behind. Discussion that does occur tends to be religious (or spiritual) in nature, from complex theologies of the afterlife to the words offered as comfort to the grieving. In fact, the majority of common responses to the bereaved fall into this category, and while for some these messages can communicate support and aid in dealing with loss, for others the intended comforting effects may be lost due to religious content. For those without religious belief, opportunities for like-minded support may be few.

Although there are many ways to be irreligious, research suggests that the “nones” are among the fastest growing religious categories in the United States. Still, individuals who so identify in the U.S. live amidst a culture saturated with religion, in most cases represented by some version of Christianity, an identity claimed by over 70% of respondents as of 2014. As a religious minority group, the non-affiliated are especially vulnerable during the grieving process, with some research suggesting that they tend to grieve longer, with less perceived social support, and suffer from more negative outcomes (i.e. depression, anxiety, etc.) than those who hold religious beliefs.

For these reasons, I propose to design a wholly secular bereavement intervention strategy. It is important to note that the purpose of such an intervention would not be to be disparaging to those who deal with grief through spiritual means, but to recognize the underlying content of grief messaging in American culture and to offer a purely secular alternative.

Broadly speaking, this will come in the form of an open group, which focuses on the dissemination of information, the examination of cultural influences and expectations on bereavement, and a supportive atmosphere for the processing of members' grief. Further, the design stresses activism in the form of spreading secular alternatives to religiously-based grief messaging, as well as building connections with organizations with similar goals to broaden available support for members.

Progress will be monitored via the application of a measure of grief processing which includes a subscale on perceived social support. Expected outcomes include expedited and more satisfactorily resolved bereavement, as well as reduced occurrence of depression and other grief-associated complications. A further potential outcome is the eventual dissemination of secular grief attitudes into the larger culture to supplement the prevalent attitudes we see today.