

Exploring Grief: An In-Depth Analysis of Bereavement Counselling in The Initial Phases of Loss



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Background: Existing bereavement research studies primarily focus on the bereavement counselling experience which excludes the initial few months post-death. While research indicates that counselling may not be advised in early-stage bereavement (Schut & Stroebe, 2005; Machin, 2014; Dodd, 2019) or should be confined to those at elevated risk (Machin, 2014; Newsom et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2016), bereaved people may self-refer or be referred within this period for counselling services. The lack of research into early-stage bereavement counselling and the focus on interventions for those at higher risk leaves a gap in the knowledge base for informing therapists when engaging with clients who are recently bereaved.

Aim: This research aims to examine bereavement counselling through the experience of qualified therapists during the initial 6 months post-bereavement to develop a better understanding of the implications in clinical practice.

Methods:
Qualitative study was conducted using 6 qualified therapists working in bereavement services with average 11 years clinical experience. Semi structured interviews were performed using open ended questions regarding participants' experience of early bereavement counselling. Thematic analysis conducted post interviews to identify key themes.

Discussion: Acknowledging that grief is normal where an acute response may occur in the early months, there may be an argument for providing counselling, bearing in mind the client's specific needs and choice in availing of support. This may prevent potential escalation of the grief response and support the client's coping during this intense period. While the client may be served by engaging with helplines or reading supportive material, the unique offering of a trained therapist within a trusting relationship may provide additional benefits above this.

Conclusion:
Participants did not identify risks associated with early-stage bereavement counselling. At the essence of the therapist's approach, is respect for the client's autonomy in deciding to seek assistance and of their individuality. There is an acknowledgement that through societal shifts there may be a gap in supports during the grieving process. Through empathetic listening by the therapist in a confidential, non-judgemental space, the bereaved person is held in a supportive embrace. This initial connection may facilitate the client's coping and prevent escalation into prolonged grief at a later stage. The counselling may be brief rather than over an extended period to satisfy the initial needs of the bereaved person. The research this type of counselling does not pathologize the client's condition but recognizes the need for specific support at this challenging time.

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Results:

Reason for Client's Early Attendance	
Shock and Distress	3/6
Feeling Disconnected	4/6
Lack of Supports	4/6

Therapists' Qualities	
Respect for client's autonomy in coming	6/6
Therapist empathy and compassion	6/6
Relationship of client and therapist	5/6

Goals in Early Bereavement Counselling	
Support for Wellbeing and Risk Check	4/6
Release of Emotions	6/6
Safe Space	6/6
Normalising the Experience	4/6
Education & Signposting	5/6

*Total Number of Research Participants = 6

Therapists' View of Early-Stage Bereavement Counselling	
In favour of counselling at any stage	6/6
Client's choice to attend (autonomous decision)	5/6
Propose a few sessions rather than therapy	5/6

Reference:
Mackey, A. (2024). Exploring Grief: An In-Depth Analysis of Bereavement Counselling in The Initial Phases of Loss. [Unpublished degree dissertation]. Middlesex University.