

A Therapist's Grief  
When a Client Suddenly Dies  
By Paula J. Siegel, MFT

Dressed up and looking forward to a night out, I made a final check of my private practice voicemail. Bewildered to hear the voice of a client's spouse, surprise gave way to shock hearing that this client had died suddenly the day before.

I went over our last session in my mind. With a sparkle in her eyes she walked out with her usual goodbye: "See you next week!" This was to be my final 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 chance to say good-bye.

I phoned a colleague from my consultation group who listened empathically as I shared the horrible news. She gently reminded me that I was in shock; 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. I thanked her, we said goodbye, and then I cried. So began my grieving process, a very different journey of grieving than I had ever experienced before.

Ours is a very peculiar profession. While we establish the therapeutic holding for our clients, we also create boundaries to avoid merging with their issues. We develop the ability to anticipate the inevitable ruptures and repairs in the fabric of our therapeutic relationships, to manage the countertransference that is part and parcel of this work. Ultimately the day arrives when the relationship draws to a close, and we do our best to say good-bye well in a facilitated manner.

There are times when our clients end their therapy prematurely. They can abruptly discontinue therapy after many sessions, or cancel after only one appointment. There are infinite reasons why someone might choose to terminate with little warning. We might never learn the reasons.

The sudden unanticipated death of a client is much more difficult. It is horrible to lose a client to a life-threatening illness or suicide. But least we are aware that it could—or would—happen. How prepared can we possibly be for a client's entirely unexpected death?

My life has already been touched by the painful loss of many cherished family members and friends, some who died shockingly from war, tragic accidents and suicide. Each one of these deaths called on my courage to feel the pain of losing someone I loved. 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.

The ethical and legal boundaries of our profession cut me off from these healing opportunities. I was not allowed to connect with my deceased client's family members and community who shared my loss and with whom I could honor my client's life. Denied this intimate connection I felt disoriented with no clear direction on how to proceed. I wondered how her family and friends, after hearing so much about them over the years, were doing. There was no way for me to know.

In discussions with colleagues and searching the literature, I found that therapist's unanticipated loss has not been much explored. One colleague shared—to my alarm—that a supervisor judged her grief 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 fear the accusation that we are “enmeshed” with our client. Who else in our lives do we meet with for an hour every week to discuss issues of such a uniquely intimate and confidential nature? 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. 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. Perhaps such a loss provides us with a unique opportunity to explore our interiors more deeply with self-compassion, gaining a deeper appreciation of impermanence and the preciousness of every relationship in our lives.

### *Legal and Ethical Issues*

Says David G. Jensen J.D. CAMFT staff attorney, “Therapists have a common misconception that when a client dies, everything dies along with them. Confidentiality survives the death of a client.” Confidentiality is waived by the person who is appointed personal executor of the client's estate. If an executor has not been named, this can be a complex issue. 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, maintaining discretion about our relationship with the deceased. Even though the client may have disclosed that he/she was in therapy with us, maintaining a professional boundary is a must.

If a deceased client's spouse requests a session to speak about the deceased, the therapist should exercise caution. The impulse to care for and provide support to the bereaved spouse may be strong, but could lead to a breach in confidentiality of the deceased 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 impedes the healing process, it can deepen and prolong it. Unprocessed grief can leak out unconsciously and even interfere with your work with your remaining clients.

Support groups and peer consultation can be vitally meaningful in our personal grieving process. Use whatever grieving rituals are most meaningful for you. Start by setting aside time for reflection, treating yourself with patience and kindness.

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, the harder it could be to re-

inhabit that therapeutic space with someone new. Preserving this time slot can contribute to your healing by serving as a sort of short-term memorial

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 honored prayer, I felt that, in some small way, I was still supporting my client while also attending to my personal needs.

Keep 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; what you'd like to say to your client and what he/she might say to you in return.

### **Summary**

We are drawn to do the work we do in the world because we are intuitive and empathic beings. In order to help our clients' process and move through their grief, we must also 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, creating the possibility of a greater capacity to experience both the pain and joy of the human condition. By embracing our losses and coming to terms with our own impermanence, we can potentially live more authentically and joyfully doing our small part in "Tikkun Olam" – the Hebrew term for the repair and healing of the world.

I dedicate this article to my client's life and the deep work we did together.