

Grief Therapy: Critique of Traditional Technique and an Introduction to  
Mediumship as a Source of Healing for Normal and Complicated Grief

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**ABSTRACT**

This article will discuss how mediumship may enhance current treatment for normal and complicated grief therapy. Although traditional thought has been to dismiss a longing for a continued connection with the deceased as pathological, recent research has opened up dialogue that confronts this traditional ideology. In addition, the concept of spirituality will be addressed as having merit in the process of healing. This article will examine two main principles of continuing bonds and spirituality as an indication that further study on mediumship as a vehicle for healing of normal and complicated grief should be warranted.

## **HISTORY OF BEREAVEMENT THERAPY**

In life, it seems that certain events are inevitable. One may argue that one of these inevitabilities is loss. With loss, the typical reaction is grief. Although most people experience grief at some point in their life, not everyone experiences grief in the same way. Typical or “normal” grief is a part of life and is a warranted reaction when one experiences loss. With that being said; however, complicated grief has shown to be an incredibly difficult hurdle for individuals to overcome. However seemingly harsh the reaction may be, there are ways of trudging through the suffering to arrive at a place of balance and peace. This article will examine some of the traditional thoughts in the field of grief resolution and offer new ways of overcoming the sadness and depressive-like symptoms that are often associated with grief. Over the last century, the concept of grieving has gained particular interest by psychologists in North America. The modern ideas regarding bereavement stem from the father of psychoanalysis; Sigmund Freud. Freud proposed that for one to rid themselves of suffering as a result of bereavement, one must do “work” via grief therapy. Freud noted in his work “Mourning and Melancholia” that the goal of grief therapy is to psychically free the bereaved from the object of attachment because the object no longer exists; moreover if one were to remain attached to the lost object, it would be considered pathological in nature. (Freud, 1917)

This idea of disengaging the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased has ruled as the dominant position for many clinicians and researchers since the days of Sigmund Freud. Some examples Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, (1969) and William Worden (1982). Although these researchers had separate ideas about bereavement and treatment of grief, they all share a

common theme: The goal in grief resolution is to sever the tie between the bereaved and the deceased.

### **CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO BEREAVEMENT CARE**

In recent years, grief researchers have begun to critique traditional thought and introduce radical ideas surrounding grief therapy. These new approaches are what opens the metaphorical doors for new interpretations of bereavement and new therapeutic approaches which may include a spiritual aspect such as mediumship. An example of a contemporary researcher that has begun to encourage alternate discourses surrounding grief is George A. Bonanno. In his book, “The Other Side of Sadness” (2009) Bonanno critiques the status quo of current grief therapy. One of the main points made in his books is regarding the fact that current paradigms do not give a deep enough description of the multi-coloured, multi-faceted experience that is grieving. Bonanno notes that individualism is important and it is difficult to make a large assumption about human nature even if there are many examples to support a hypothesis. (Bonanno, 2009) Bonanno notes that we as humans are equipped to handle human experience, grief is no exception. Moreover, he notes that humans are resilient to such experiences and individual differences should be accounted for. Individual differences is a major point that seems to be forgotten at times in clinical psychology. Although theoretical models such as Kubler-Ross’s assist researchers and clinicians learn and understand the human mind, there is certainly no uniform bind that ties every mind together. There are similarities in the human condition but homogeneity in is non-existent. Perhaps this is the reason why researchers are stepping away from the traditional “one size fits all” approach to grief therapy and moving towards a more open and malleable way of thinking about healing.

In their book “Continuing Bonds.” (1996), Silverman, Klass and Nickman present a bold thesis that is a counter-proposal to traditional thought. The main idea that is presented is that survivors hold the deceased in loving memory for long periods, often for a life time and maintaining the relationship between the bereaved and deceased is not pathological, but part of the natural experience of mourning. In “Continuing Bonds” There is a study that is presented as evidence for the efficacy of maintaining a relationship with the deceased. In 1992, Roberta Dew Conant did a study that investigated widow`s ongoing attachments to their deceased husbands and a sense of their presence. In this study, widows often felt the presence of their deceased husbands around them and rather than ignoring or severing the connection, they allowed themselves to experience the connection. In many examples, the widow became aware of both realities, although paradoxical, both the image of the living husband and memory of the death occur. What the widow is left with is not a pathology but a sense of inner emotional peace. The point is not to force a continuing bond or force a separation, the goal is to allow for a bond to exist for an indefinite period of time that may last for an indefinite period of time.

### **MEDIUMSHIP AND GRIEF RESOLUTION**

Mediumship can be defined as a practice that involves three individuals. The first is the medium. The medium is the individual who allows information from the deceased to be passed through them in the form of a message; often verbally. The second individual is the sitter. The sitter is the individual who is receiving the message. The third is the discarnate. The discarnate is the deceased individual who is giving information to the medium to give to the sitter.

Mediumship has been prominent in many cultures for centuries. Although mediumship has been prominent for a long period of time, the ways in which the act of mediumship was utilized

had some variability. In a Western context, beginning in Hydesville New York, USA in 1848 Mediumship was first used to communicate with the deceased. As time passed, mediums were able to charge the public money to see them 'perform.' The issue that arose with this is that charlatans often used an interpersonal algorithm to convince the public that the messages they were giving were legitimate when in fact they were not. This type of behaviour led to many stereotypes and discriminatory actions against mediums and for a period of time, mediumship and North America was looked upon as a source of entertainment rather than a source of healing.

In May of 2013, I conducted research in Stansted, England that involved mediums. While conducting my interviews, the notion of grief arose rather often. Although initially, the research was intended to explore how humans receive knowledge in extra-ordinary ways, by the end of the research, I began to wonder if there is potential for healing to take place through mediumship for one who is in a state of suffering.

The first interview I conducted was with a man who sparked my interest in thinking about mediumship as therapeutic when he spoke about a woman who was in a 'depressed' state who left without the negative emotional baggage she had walked into the room with. "A woman came a few weeks ago looking depressed and by the time she left she was happy and bubbly and that really touches you and you see the difference when people are really touched by the contact."

This simple concept made me wonder further into the types of situations in which mediumship could be an effective tool for healing. This remained a question in my mind until an interview with a woman who was speaking about her own experiences with grief while being a medium and how this has affected her in a positive way.

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It definitely helps with the grieving. I mean I still grieve the same just as anyone else even though I know they are a spirit because even though I can talk to them and I know they're there, it's still a change. It's like your daughter moving over seas and all you've got is the phone call. So you don't have the emotions and the physical thing. So the relationship changes and its sort of like the end of a relationship that starts in a different form There is definitely a sense of loss but there's also the knowledge that you'll meet again. And its not a final end and that definitely helps.

In this context, the medium who said these words is not speaking about helping someone with grief, however; the hypothesis that mediumship may help others does not seem a far-fetched given the reasons why the idea is proposed. In the quotation above, the woman notes that having the mindset that there is no cessation of relationship helps with the grieving process, specifically she said it is like having a daughter moving over seas and all you have is a phone call. You may not have the physical presence but the knowing that you are potentially able to reach out to that person gives strength to grieving mind. In the following quotation, the medium speaks about his experience with grief, although slightly different from the prior medium, he notes that having the understanding of where your loved one is going does help overcome the suffering accompanied with grief.

I think when someone dies that's close to you, you still have the grieving, you still have the emotion but you have a bit of a security leeway because your beliefs support the fact that they are still there. My grandfather was close to me and he died last year and it was very emotional grief and about three to four weeks later I was walking to a demonstration and a medium gave me some contact from my grandpa so it was emotional because it was the first I have heard from him but when you know where they're going or have an idea of where they're going it seems to give an understanding.

Although the validity of the process mediumship has not been proven by scientific methods, there are many instances where mediumship has aided people in recovery. Fritz Heider (1958) was a psychologist that first introduced what is known as “attribution theory.” Attribution theory is essentially concerned with the notion that individuals attempt to interpret what others are doing and the attribution that people associate with a certain behaviour will ultimately affect their own cognitions. This concept may be extrapolated to events as well. A short thought experiment can demonstrate attribution theory. Imagine there are three men in a room, when suddenly the roof caves in. The first man assumes that there is faulty architecture, the second assumes there is a natural disaster that made the roof cave in and the third assumes it is an act of a deity. All three men are experiencing the same phenomena, however each of them will feel differently about the event given how they are interpreting it. Mediumship is a good example of how attributions make a large difference in human experience. If one believes truly that the information given to them is accurate and legitimate, then it leaves room for not only continuing bonds but also a shift in the mindset of the individual receiving the message, which would possibly include healing the open wound of grief.

Although continuing bonds through mediumship is a rather new idea in North America, the concept has been prominent in societies elsewhere for quite some time. In the Buddhist context, it is known that ordinary people become a Buddha only when they die. (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996) This idea acted as a spring board for new ideas surrounding what happens after death and some Japanese began to think of their ancestors living in peace in the “Pure Land.” At first glance, it may seem intuitive to make the comparison that the Pure Land is similar to what Christians call Heaven. The distinct difference between the two concepts, however; is that the Pure Land is accessible by the living. According to Anthropologist David Plath, the Japanese



interpret spirits and the Pure Land as both spatially and temporally present both then and now. The spirits are available for contact and although spirits are seen as being able to come and go as they wish, they are seen as co-existing besides the living. (Plath, 1964) In this context, continuing bonds has shown to be an effective way to minimize the grief reaction because at its core, the concept of life after death and continuing the relationship is an expression of love and bonding that transcends death.

In North America, rituals such as those in Japan are not common. Perhaps by adapting ideologies from schools of thought other than those in which we have grown accustomed, growth and healing can occur on a larger scale. By allowing mediumship to embed itself in grief therapy, the potential for healing may increase.

In addition for allowing continuing bonds to take place, mediumship adds another axis to healing, which is spirituality. Although traditionally, spirituality has thought to be a concept that exists only in religious contexts, it is becoming a concept that has been widely assessed in the health care system. There has been rigorous testing done regarding the effectiveness of spirituality on mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and other forms of mental distress. One study showed that just the very notion of “spirituality” in one’s life during episodes of grieving is more important to the healing process than the actual content in which the term is contained. (Marrone, 1999). What that translates to is that spirituality, regardless of the type or definition, aids in the healing of grief.

Mediumship at its very core inadvertently confronts a major existential question of what happens when we die. If mediumship as a practice is valid in nature than that would mean that in some way, consciousness continues post-mortem. This idea to some may be psychologically

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troubling, however to many suffering with intense or complicated grief reactions, the idea that the relationship still has potential to carry on may serve to comfort. Although Mediumship alone may not be the whole answer to healing those struggling with grief, it may serve to be an asset in addition to current grief therapy. In addition to the allowance of continuing bonds, it also serves as a potential answer to existential questions surrounding where a survivor's loved on has gone.

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