



B. Tammy Bartel (2016)

Family bereavement, relational grieving, and continuing bonds

BY TAMMY BARTEL, RCC

I am a bereaved mom and a clinical counsellor. One preceded the other. After the sudden death of my 15-year-old daughter in 2005, I embarked on a journey I never imagined. Bereavement came like a thief in the night, and it threw our family into disarray. This devastating event and the resulting death of one of us dramatically changed our family. Our lives were shattered to the core. This single event changed the course of my life forever. I began seeking answers to the unanswerable, and in this search, I

decided to go back to school.

I had a deep desire to know more about loss, death, and bereavement, and I chose a research study focused on family bereavement and relational grieving. Not only did I investigate grief theory and models, I also explored studies conducted on bereaved families. What I found was that most studies were done with individuals as participants who spoke for the whole family. This intrigued me. I wondered why studies had not been conducted with more family members. What I discovered was a gap in the extant

literature.¹ Studies were needed on family bereavement with the family as the unit of analysis.² And thus emerged my thesis topic addressing the lived experience of families grieving the loss of a family member together.

My study explored the relational dimensions of grieving within the family unit. Three courageous families bereaved of a child participated. Using the Qualitative Action-Project Method developed by Richard Young (UBC) and colleagues, individual and joint interviews were conducted with family members.³



**EIGHT
COMMON THEMES**
in how families grieved
together⁴

Intentional turning towards the loss and facing the grief

Participating in mourning events and seeking out support

Implementing ongoing rituals and remembrances

Experiencing joy and sorrow simultaneously

Recognizing and allowing for different grieving styles of family members

Sharing a pervasive pain and awareness of the life-long process

Looking for ways to heal and finding meaning in each other's shared grieving

Sharing an ongoing connection to the deceased child that connected them to each other

The uniqueness of this method was that family conversations were videoed with no researcher in the room. Data analysis illuminated family grieving processes and clearly demonstrated that grieving is an interactive process with individual, dyadic, multi-adic, and community levels of processing (see diagram).

Family bereavement following the loss of a child is a devastating, life shattering event that initiates a family grieving process. This process is pervasive, inescapable, and ongoing. Family members who maintained an ongoing continuing bond with their deceased child felt more connected to each other. Research has only just begun to give attention to this. Research conducted on the bereaved family as the unit of analysis is critical to understanding and caring for this population.⁵

For more from Tammy Bartel, RCC, see "A Pandemic of Grief" on page 22.

Being anti-racist and anti-oppressive

The role of language

BY NATASCHA LAWRENCE, RCC

Language is important. As counsellors, we understand the power of words. We use words to help our clients connect feelings and link experiences and to foster insight and integration. Depending on how you wield it, language can promote healing and empowerment or it can cut down and destroy.

Being mindful of our language is more important than ever. The events on both sides of the border have highlighted the reality of systemic racism and oppression. Language, particularly on social media, has been used to spin the perspective in favour of the oppressors. Language is the easiest way to change our input into these systems.

It may seem tedious, cumbersome, and even pointless to focus on words that seem innocuous. This is not about being politically correct nor is it about the intent of the language. If your language is called out, pause and notice what comes up for you. If you feel the need to defend and justify, you may engage in racial gaslighting. Rather, can you be curious, listen, and focus on the experience and felt sense for the person who has had the courage to speak up? Can you trust their expertise? Can you not use your privilege to speak about experiences you have not felt within your own body?

When we are called out, it can be a beautiful gift. It is in the discomfort that we can examine our own biases, prejudices, and racism, and learn and move towards the opportunity for change. It is our responsibility as counsellors to be

more than against racism — we need to be for anti-racism and anti-oppression. We can be helpful, loving people, who need to learn how to speak differently because we were raised in colonial systems that promote racist, oppressive, and indifferent language.

It is the responsibility of the counsellor to unlearn racist stereotypes, language, and behaviour. It is not the oppressed person's job who has spoken up to teach you.

There is a direct link between microaggressions and microinvalidations and the use of language to justify biased, bigoted, and hateful ideology used as the smokescreen to defend systemic aggression, violence, and murder. Racism and oppression exist within the systems we live and work in. In British Columbia and across Canada, racism and oppression are not just historical — they occur right now within our own mental health field every day.

Think back to your education and training — the methodologies you practise from, the teachers you had, the books you read — how many were written and created by BIPOC? The research articles you studied — how many focused on the experiences of BIPOC folk and were conducted by BIPOC researchers?

This article could have provided a list of problematic words and phrases that

should be avoided. I am aware of my privilege and did not want to speak about experiences that are not my own. It is the responsibility of the counsellor to unlearn racist stereotypes, language, and behaviour. It is not the oppressed person's job who has spoken up to teach you. Do not add to their emotional load. Instead, start your retraining with articles, workshops, and courses led by BIPOC folk and organizations.

In our field, we must be careful of optical allyship. Coalition work requires the commitment to decolonize mental health and dismantle systems of oppression while acknowledging our positions of institutional privilege and power.

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FAMILY BEREAVEMENT REFERENCES, PAGES 4-5

- 1 Breen, L. J., & O'Connor, M. (2011). Family and social networks after bereavement: Experiences of support, change and isolation. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 33, 98-120.
- 2 Nadeau, J. W. (1998). *Families making sense of death*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- 3 Young, R. A., Valach, L., & Domene, J. F. (2005). The action-project method in counselling psychology. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 52, 215-223.
- 4 Klass, D., & Steffen, E. M. (2018). Continuing bonds in bereavement: New directions for research and practice. New York: Routledge.
- 5 Breen, L. J., Szyllit, R., Gilbert, K. R., Macpherson, C., Murphy, I., Nadeau, J. W., Reis e Silva, D., Wiegand, D. L., & the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement (2018). Invitation to grief in the family context. *Death Studies*.

OTHER SOURCES

- Bartel, B. T. (2016). Death ends a life, not a relationship: Family bereavement, relational grieving and continuing bonds. Master's thesis. Trinity Western University (Canada). ProQuest.
- Bartel, B. T. (2019). Families grieving together: Integrating the loss of a child through ongoing relational connections. *Death Studies*. doi: 10.1080/07481187.2019.1586794

RESOURCES

IF YOU ARE COMMITTED TO THE ANTI-RACISM AND ANTI-OPPRESSION JOURNEY, START WITH THIS LIST OF A FEW RESOURCES.

The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power by Desmond Cole (2020, Double Day Canada)

White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism by R. DiAngelo (2018, Beacon Press)

They Call Me George: The Untold Story of Black Train Porters and the Birth of Modern Canada by Cecil Foster (2019, Biblioasis)

Micro-Aggressions and Their Effects on the Therapeutic Process by N. Granger (Society for Humanistic Psychology, 2012: <https://www.apadivisions.org/division-32/publications/newsletters/humanistic/2012/10/microaggressions>)

If You Want To Be Anti-Racist, This Non-Optical Allyship Guide Is Required Reading by M.C. Harper (*Vogue UK*, 2002: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/non-optical-ally-guide>)

Indigenous Peoples Terminology Guidelines for Usage (Indigenous Corporate Training Inc., 2006: <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-terminology-guidelines-for-usage>)

21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act by R.P. Joseph (2018, Port Coquitlam, BC: Indigenous Relations Press)

San'yas Indigenous Cultural Safety Training (<http://www.sanyas.ca/>)

Racial Discrimination and Mental Health in Racialized and Aboriginal Communities by K. Kafele (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2004: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/race-policy-dialogue-papers/racial-discrimination-and-mental-health-racialized-and-aboriginal-communities>)

The Role of the Behavioral Scientist in the Civil Rights Movement by M. L. King Jr. (*Journal of Social Issues*, 2018: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/features/king-challenge>)

Decolonizing Academia: Intersectionality, Participation, and Accountability in Family Therapy and Counseling by T. McDowell and P. Hernández (*Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 2010, 22(2), 93-111)

Undoing Racism. The People's Guide to Undoing Racism (<https://www.pisab.org/>)

Microaggressions: Intervening in three acts by A. Thurber and R. DiAngelo (*Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 2019, 27(1), 17-27)

TRACC (trauma response and crisis care) for Movements (<https://www.tracc4movements.com/>)

Microaggressions in Psychotherapy by T.D. Williams, L. M. Shamp, and K J. Harris (*Psychotherapy Bulletin*, 2017 52(4). <https://societyforpsychotherapy.org/microaggressions-in-psychotherapy/>)

