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LOSING FAITH: THE PROCESS OF CONVERTING TO ATHEISM

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Jennifer J. Jacobi

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The current study examines the process of converting to atheism and the counseling issues associated with it. It is argued that conversion to atheism can be conceptualized according to the model of religious conversion that Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo (1999) suggested. Research on atheism is reviewed in terms of how it fits into the stages of this model, and implications for counseling are discussed.

Losing Faith: The Process of Converting to Atheism

For as long as psychology has existed as a field of study, researchers and therapists alike have recognized the importance of clients' religious and/or spiritual beliefs and have theorized about and investigated the relationship between those beliefs and mental illness. The results of these investigations have taught counselors that, for better or for worse, a client's religion and/or spirituality can have a significant impact on the issues he or she brings to the counselor, how he or she perceives the counselor, and how effective specific interventions are for him or her. Indeed, Worthington (1989) asserted that "...psychologists can benefit in assessment and counseling of clients...by understanding the religious development of many of their religious clients throughout the life span" (p. 555).

As a part of this current trend toward assessing and addressing clients' religion in the counseling process, much has been written about believers of many faiths. However, those who have completely rejected religion have been relatively neglected in the literature (Heiner, 1992). Just as it is important for counselors to understand the unique values and concerns of their religious clients and how these values and concerns influence the counseling process, it is equally important to understand those of atheists. Worthington (1989) pointed out that religious clients are often very sensitive about their beliefs and fear being misunderstood by a secular counselor, so it is very important for the counselor to be knowledgeable about the role of religious belief. Atheists, as an oppressed minority in America (Heiner, 1992), may also be afraid of bringing up their beliefs, so it is at least as

important with atheists as it is with religious clients that the counselor be knowlegeable and understanding.

Although some atheists are raised outside of a formal religion, many of them are raised with some informal belief in a god that they later reject, and most atheists are raised inside a formal religion and later "convert" to atheism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997). This conversion presents some of its own challenges, and because it is such a common experience among atheists, it is important for counselors to understand it. Counselors can be most helpful to their atheist convert clients if they understand both the process of conversion and the specific challenges within each stage of that process. Currently, to the author's knowledge, no models of conversion to atheism exist. However, models of conversion from one religion to another that may provide a good framework for developing a model of conversion to atheism do exist, such as the one that Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo (1999) suggested.

Defining Atheism

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2001) defines an atheist simply as "one who denies the existence of God" (p. 72). However, this definition is far from universally accepted, even among atheists themselves. Further complicating this, the term *atheist* has been used since the Middle Ages as an insult toward anybody who rejects any part of Christian doctrine or who is seen as immoral, regardless of what that person actually believes about the existence of a god (Heiner, 1992).

The two main concepts that any definition of atheism needs to clarify are what constitutes belief (or disbelief) and what constitutes a god. In the debate

about belief, the most inclusively extreme argument is that anybody who does not definitely say that a god exists is an atheist. This would include those who say they do not know whether a god exists, those who do not care about the question enough to answer it for themselves, and those who are too young (or not mentally competent) to understand or think about the question of the existence of a god. The most exclusive argument is that only those who are absolutely certain that no god exists are atheists. Likewise, definitions of *god* can range from the exclusive "supreme, anthropomorphic being who created the universe" to the inclusive "power greater than oneself."

A simple solution to the problem of whom researchers should consider atheists is to include anybody who calls himself or herself an atheist. When Oser (1991) did this, though, he found significant variation in his atheist subjects' reasons for and conceptualizations of their atheism. He identified four varieties of atheists: developmental atheists, social or ecclesiastical atheists, philosophical atheists, and easy atheists. Developmental atheists are those who, as a natural part of their religious development, have rejected their previously held ideas about religion and who, while in transition between old and new beliefs, consider themselves to be atheists. Social or ecclesiastical atheists are people who identify as atheists because they have left formal religion. Individuals who have thoroughly examined their former beliefs and, as a result, reject the idea of a god are philosophical atheists. Those who simply do not care about religion and are disinterested in the questions of meaning associated with religion are easy atheists.

Clearly those who identify themselves as atheists can differ considerably in their atheism and in what their atheism means to them. Some people who identify as atheists, such as some of the social atheists, seem to mean it not in the dictionary sense of not believing in God, but in a sense more related to its common usage as an insult, such as not subscribing to a particular organized religion. Even dictionary atheists vary considerably, though, because the only defining principle of atheism, after all, is disbelief in a god, which leaves considerable room for interpretation and application within an individual's life. With all of the variation in definitions and meanings of atheism, every researcher must identify which meanings are most important.

Americans who say that they do not believe in God, however they might define *believe* and *God*, all have certain things in common. They are all setting themselves apart from the vast majority of Americans, 96% of whom say they believe in God (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). They are also taking on the responsibility of finding their own answers to the questions religions typically answer, including questions of meaning in life and morality. Regardless of the specific beliefs an individual has, this process has common psychological causes and effects that counselors working with these converts should be aware of. Hence, the current research uses a fairly inclusive definition of atheism that includes those who say that they do not believe in a god as well as those who say that they do not know whether they believe in any god, regardless of how they define *god*. It only excludes those who call themselves atheists in a sense related

to its usage as an insult and those who can not or will not even consider the question of whether a god exists. All of the atheists included in this definition have the aforementioned characteristics and challenges in common, so although atheist converts may respond to these challenges in different ways, they share a common process of conversion to atheism.

The Process of Conversion

Very little has been written specifically about converting to atheism, and most studies of conversion have focused on Christian sects and Judaism (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). However, what has been written about conversion in general can be applied to conversion to atheism. For example, Worthington (1989) stated that most serious and long-term conversions happen during adolescence as a result of the new cognitive capabilities developed at that time. This is consistent with what Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) found in their study of atheist converts--on average, they converted between the ages of 12.5 and 15.9.

Likewise, Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo (1999) suggested a stage model of conversion that seems consistent with research on atheism. Their first stage, *context*, consists of the historical, religious, social, cultural, and personal factors that define the parameters of the conversion process. Studies focusing on the relationship between atheism and the social context and on the relationship between atheism and attachment styles can be applied to this stage. Stage two, *crisis*, is something that creates dissatisfaction with the current religion and

inspires the convert to start looking for solutions elsewhere. For Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1997) subjects, this consisted of their initial questions about their religion that they were unable to get satisfactory answers to. Stage three, *quest*, involves actively wrestling with the crisis in an attempt to resolve it, which, for Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1997) subjects, was a period that averaged three years during which they grappled with their doubts about their family religions. The first three stages only involve leaving the original religion, which is a process that both religious converts and atheist converts go through, so it is easy to see how these stages can apply to atheist converts.

The fourth stage, *encounter*, is harder to apply to atheistic conversion, and currently existent research on atheism does not seem to address it. It involves exposure to the new religious option for the first time. Stage five, *interaction*, also seems more difficult to apply to atheistic conversion. It involves an exchange between the convert and the new religious community, and this is when the convert begins to adopt new beliefs and behaviors. Although some atheists, such as the ones Heiner (1992) interviewed, join organizations that help them establish new beliefs and others seem to establish this dialogue over the internet, many atheists may still figure this out on their own or through reading. This is another stage that is relatively neglected in the research on atheism.

Stage six, *commitment*, is when the convert completely accepts the new religious option as a part of his or her identity and is accepted by other members of the religion. Heiner's (1992) research illustrated how some atheists affiliated

with others and redefined their relationship with the broader community based on their new identities. This suggests that this stage does apply to at least some atheists. The last stage is *consequences,* during which the convert examines the effects of the conversion and how well they work for him or her. Wilson and Sherkat (1994) depicted how this stage applies to some atheist converts in their examination of people who left their family religion and later went back.

Although the research on atheism has clearly not addressed all of these stages adequately, it does provide evidence that atheist converts experience them, though sometimes in different forms than religious converts experience them. Thus, it is important for counselors to understand what each stage of the model involves and the concerns that atheist convert clients may bring to counseling sessions as a result.

Context and Crisis: Causes of Conversion

Socialization

One of the most common background factors that research on religious beliefs has focused on is socialization. Particularly, the family seems to play a key role in this process. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) and Kelley and De Graaf (1997), for example, found that the best predictor of a person's religious beliefs is his or her family's religious beliefs, and Hill and Hood (1999) asserted that total rejection of parental beliefs is rare. However, Kelley and De Graaf (1997) also found that while the influence of family beliefs is strong, in religious nations people tend to be more religious, regardless of family beliefs, but in more secularized nations, religious belief tends to depend more on family beliefs. They also found that the United States is the most religious country in western civilization, which

means that in order for an American to convert to atheism, he or she must defy the socialization of both his or her family and his or her culture.

Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) also theorized, though, that the atheist converts they interviewed were responding to values they had been socialized to believe in that were more powerful than religion--particularly dedication to the truth, however unpleasant it may be. They observed that extremely religious families often teach their children to stand up for the truth no matter what others might say. They concluded from their study that although their subjects appeared to defy socialization, they may have actually been successfully socialized to have the broader values they learned from their religious upbringing rather than the content of the religion itself.

Emotional Causes

Religious belief is thought to involve both emotional and cognitive elements. Hill and Hood (1999), in fact, described religious faith as cognitive structures built on an affective base. They traced this idea back to Freud's view of religion as a neurotic delusion that embodies human hopes and fears and his view of God as a projection of the ideal father figure. They argued that the nature of a person's religious beliefs reflects unconscious affective processes.

The Freudian view of religious belief as affectively based has inspired many researchers to investigate the relationship between attachment style and religious belief. Kirkpatrick (1997, 1998) conducted two major studies of adult attachment style and religious change using two different populations of Americans. In both studies, he found that people with an avoidant attachment style are more likely to identify as atheist or agnostic. However, in his 1997 longitudinal study, he found no differences in negative religious change (losing faith) among people with the different styles of attachment. This suggests that the quality of a person's relationship with his or her parents may affect religious beliefs in adulthood, but the

relationship is not entirely clear.

Granqvist (1998) also studied attachment style and religiousness with a Swedish population and found that securely attached people will generally be similar to their parents in their religiousness, but the religiousness of insecurely (both avoidantly and anxiously) attached people generally is independent of parental religiousness. This effect was stronger for paternal attachment than for maternal. Although it is not clear whether these results are generalizable to Americans, it also supports the theory that the quality of the parent-child relationship is an important factor in conversion to atheism.

Although they did not study attachment style, Wilson and Sherkat (1994) examined the parent-child relationship also. They found that "children who were close to their parents while in high school not only are less likely to rebel, but are more likely to return if they do so. . . . Lack of closeness and contact have created a religious gap between parents and children, rather than religious differences creating a distant relationship" (p. 155). This again supports the idea that a distant parent-child relationship is often a factor in the decision to leave the family religion.

Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) also asked their subjects about their relationships with their parents. The subjects generally came from very close families, and most reported few difficulties with parents, though some reported "unfair strictness" of parents. This finding contradicts the others, but it is unclear why. Although the research on the relationship between religiousness and the parent-child relationship is not entirely consistent, it does suggest the possibility that it takes a certain amount of emotional separation from one's parents to completely reject their belief system.

Intellectual Causes

Although emotional factors such as attachment style may prepare a person to convert to atheism, it is generally an intellectual dilemma that sparks the crisis that

starts the whole process. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) found that almost all of the atheists they interviewed reported only intellectual reasons for conversion, including contradictions in the Bible, the conflict between evolution and creationism and other conflicts with science, teachings about homosexuality, and, especially for female Catholics, sexism. When nobody was able to give them satisfactory answers to their questions about these issues, further questions arose. Their subjects said that they valued truth and personal integrity, and when they found that they couldn't believe anymore, they left the church despite the emotional costs.

Heiner (1992) also found that his atheist subjects mostly had intellectual reasons for leaving religion: religion did not measure up to specific claims, did not achieve empirical validity, contradicted the believer's expectations or values, or threatened the believer in a way that did not make sense. Again, these subjects appear to have been more interested in truth than in the emotional comfort offered by the church. It seems, then, to take a combination of emotional and intellectual factors for a person to choose atheism over the religion she or he grew up with.

Counseling Issues

Clients in these stages of the conversion process may be experiencing confusion about and disillusionment with their families' beliefs. They may want and benefit from opportunities to talk with people with a variety of perspectives on the particular questions they are asking. They may also be feeling conflicted about wanting to believe in the family religion but not being able to. As they move more toward rejecting their old beliefs, they may feel a sense of loss, especially if they are also losing a religious community and/or a part of their culture. The degree to which they feel this loss may depend on how involved they were in their family religions and how important that was to them. These clients may also have a hard time reconciling their questioning and inability to believe with their self-images if they have been taught that unbelievers are evil or that it is virtuous to accept religious

religious teachings on faith, even if those teachings may not always make sense. Counselors should be prepared to help clients through their struggles with their questions and their feelings about those questions.

Quest

As Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) found in their research, the transition from the family religion to atheism is not immediate. After the convert starts questioning, she or he typically spends three years searching for answers. Many of their subjects reported that they had "lost their compass in life, their answer to everything" and "lost the comfort and security that firmly held religious beliefs can bring" (p. 25). They reported feeling isolated and confused during this time. Similarly, Heiner (1992) noted that transition to unbelief involves uncertainty, self-doubt, and anomie. Although little research on this stage of atheistic conversion exists, it appears that it is often a difficult time, especially since many, including Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1997) subjects, perceive their loss of faith as something that happened to them rather than as a voluntary choice.

Counseling Issues

In this stage, atheist converts tend to feel lost and confused. They often are searching for answers, and many are not sure where to look for their answers. The process of investigating other perspectives and philosophies that the atheist convert may have started in the crisis stage may intensify in this stage. The counselor may need to help the convert identify ways of investigating new ideas such as talking to others with different beliefs, reading books, and looking on the internet. In this stage, the counselor may have a great deal of power to influence the convert. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) noted that a one-sided exploration of ideas that includes only religious ideas is more likely to result in religious answers to the convert's questions. The counselor, then, has the potential to influence the client in one direction or the other through recommendations about whom to talk to and what

to read. A counselor truly dedicated to helping the client find his or her own answers needs to be careful to encourage the client to investigate a variety of religious and non-religious ideas.

Encounter and Interaction: Defining New Beliefs

Defining Morality without Religion

One of the challenges of living without religion is defining a moral code. Oser (1991) found that his atheist subjects tended to justify their moral reasoning in terms of social ideals. Without a god to tell them how to behave, they instead looked at how their behavior affects others. Similarly, Heiner (1992) observed that the atheists he studied used their atheist group to provide situated morality, which is morality focused on the here and now and on humanistic ideals. This is congruent with Kirkpatrick's (1999) suggestion that morality, whether religiously based or not, tends to be founded on the evolved instincts of reciprocity in social exchange. This researh suggests that atheists tend to look directly at the social principles involved and not bother with the "middle man," God.

Finding Meaning in Life Without Religion

Yalom (1980) suggested that another challenge of atheism is finding personal meaning in life because there is no cosmic meaning. Likewise, Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) believe that spirituality may provide "an overarching framework for living, one that integrates other goals, reduces conflict, and offers the individual a sense of higher purpose and coherence in life" (p. 912). Without religion, and sometimes without spirituality, to provide a higher purpose, atheists are left to find personal meaning. Yalom (1980) thought that they tend to do so through altruism, dedication to a cause, creativity, hedonism, and self-actualization. He especially thought that altruism, dedication to a cause, and creativity are meaningful because they relate to other people, which corresponds with a morality based on social principles.

Benzein, Saveman, and Norberg (2000) studied what gave healthy, non-religious Swedes meaning in life. They found that meaning was usually related to "awareness of one's possibilities in life, the possibility of being able to make good and meaningful choices to gain independence, freedom, and inner peace" (p. 308). It was also related to being a part of something bigger (i.e. part of the earth's evolution or part of one generation among many that will live on past oneself), setting goals for oneself and others and expecting positive outcomes, interpersonal relationships, and escaping from difficult life situations. Many of these seem to correspond with Yalom's (1980) ideas about how atheists can find meaning in life. They find meaning in the here and now and in human achievement.

Another way that communities tend to create meaning for themselves is through rituals. In his research, Heiner (1992) found that the group of atheists he studied created their own rituals revolving around the expression of their beliefs. This was a way in which they took pride in their identities as atheists.

Coping with Death Anxiety without Religion

Yalom (1980) also believed that death anxiety is a defining aspect of human existence and that most people cope with that anxiety through religion. He believed that it is necessary for every atheist to find some other way of coping with death anxiety. Likewise, Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) found that a few of their subjects reported increased death anxiety as a result of their abandonment of religion. Florian and Mikulincer (1993) also found that religious Israeli soldiers who had been in combat reported less death anxiety than non-religious ones.

However, Lundh and Radon's (1998) research suggested that self-report may not be an accurate way of measuring death anxiety. They found that religious subjects reported less death anxiety than atheists or agnostics, but Stroop tests, which have shown differences in other kinds of anxiety levels, showed no differences in death anxiety between any of the three groups. They suggested that

religious subjects are motivated to portray themselves as having less death anxiety because they think that religion is supposed to reduce their death anxiety.

Westman (1992) also challenged Yalom's idea that atheists and those who do not believe in an afterlife will have more existential anxiety. She examined how existential anxiety relates to religiosity and to a variety of concepts of death. She found no differences in any of her groups, suggesting that atheists seem to have the same amount of death anxiety as anybody else has.

Counseling Issues

During this stage, clients may be experimenting with a wide variety of philosophies and moral systems trying to find one that fits who they are. If they accept the idea of spirituality, they may be looking for new ways of expressing that. If they are unable to find personal meaning in their lives, some become depressed by the thought that there is no cosmic significance to their lives and may need help finding personal meaning. As a part of this process, counselors may need to help clients develop new rituals or give new meaning to old rituals.

Although it seems that atheists experience the same level of death anxiety as religious people do, Lundh and Radon's (1998) results suggest that atheists' death anxiety may be a greater concern for them. In the case of atheist converts, it could be that as they lose their sense of cosmic meaning in life, they become more aware of their own mortality and become preoccupied with death anxiety. Counselors may need to help clients see the connection between their search for meaning and their death anxiety.

Commitment: Defining Relationships with Others

Affiliation with Other Atheists

Religion appeals to and satisfies a fundamental need for relatedness (Hill & Hood, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 1999). It appeals to the human tendency toward in-group/out-group thinking, and acceptance in a religious group helps to establish a

new religious identity. It seems logical, then, that atheists might seek others of their kind to fulfill this need. Heiner (1992) studied a branch of an atheist organization and noted some benefits that affiliation with other atheists had for its members. They found support from others who were oppressed, neutralization of deviance, comfort in sharing with others who had the same way of thinking, and a decreased sense of isolation.

Aside from organizational affiliation, atheists may seek personal relationships with other atheists. However, atheist men may find it difficult to find atheist women to date and/or marry. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) found that when they drew their sample from a population that was 58% women, 56.5% of their atheist subjects were men, which indicates that the majority of atheists are men. Wilson and Sherkat (1994) had similar findings. Many more men leave their family religion than do women. "There are simply more religious women for men to marry than there are religious men for women to marry" (p. 158).

Alienation from the Dominant Culture

Developing an atheist identity can create a sense of alienation from the dominant culture. As Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) noted, 96% of Americans believe in God, and as Heiner (1992) observed, atheists have been marginalized throughout the history of western society and continue to be marginalized today. Although atheists are generally no longer burned at the stake, they continue to be banned from holding public office in some states, have "In God We Trust" imprinted on all of their money, and have been told by President George Bush, Sr. that he does not consider them citizens of the United States and does not believe that they are capable of patriotism (Heiner, 1992). Given the attitude toward atheism expressed throughout the dominant culture in America, it is not surprising that many atheists develop a sense of alienation.

In his study, Heiner (1992) found that members of one atheist organization ritualized their expression of hostility and alienation toward the dominant culture by writing letters to newspapers that made fun of Christians and the Bible. They also expressed to each other feelings of superiority related to being intelligent enough not to be "duped" by religious ideas the way most of society had been, being able to think for themselves, and acting morally without the extrinsic motivation created by the promise of an afterlife. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) also observed that most of their atheist subjects were above-average students and in gifted and talented programs in high school. If this is representative of atheist converts in general, it might add to their sense of intellectual superiority over most other people and contribute to their sense of alienation. Worthington (1989) suggested that a person's "zone of toleration" might become constricted shortly after religious conversion, which means that when a person first converts she or he may feel more alienated from people whose beliefs are unlike his or her new beliefs because of his or her intense focus on the new religion. This could partly explain why some atheists feel this way, and getting past this sense of alienation is an important challenge for atheist converts.

Counseling Issues

Atheist converts in this stage are often seeking other atheists with whom they can form relationships. Because atheist organizations are not nearly as common as religious organizations and because many atheists do not advertise their beliefs for fear of rejection and oppression, it can be hard for them to find each other. This can contribute to feelings of loneliness, alienation, and isolation, and counselors may need to help clients find alternative ways of connecting with other atheists, such as internet chat rooms. Once they have found other atheists, they may develop a strong sense of belonging to this in-group and may have some difficulty relating to members of the dominant culture who are members of an out-group. They may

bring to counseling concerns about relating to religious people and defining themselves in opposition to religious people.

Consequences

Family Relationships

Developing an atheist identity has some consequences that the convert must constantly re-evaluate and cope with, and they can be very painful. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) and Heiner (1992) heard from their subjects about deterioration in relationships with parents and extended family (i.e., grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, cousins) after the subjects converted to atheism. Wilson and Sherkat (1994) also noted that when atheists who left the church as teens became adults, they started to identify with their parents more and sometimes went back to the church. Problems in these important relationships clearly can be significant enough to motivate the atheist convert to go back to his or her family's religion.

Family of Procreation

Another motivator that Wilson and Sherkat (1994) found for converts who went back to their family's religion was starting their own families. Wilson and Sherkat speculated that such converts tend to want a moral system with which to raise their kids and have not yet developed a moral system without religion, so it is easier just to go back to what they grew up with. Likewise, men tended to convert to the religion of their wives when they got married. Wilson and Sherkat believed that because they have difficulty finding atheist women to marry, atheist men often marry religious women and convert, even if only in name, to their wives' religions.

Gender Patterns

Wilson and Sherkat (1994) also found gender differences in who tends to go back to the family religion after having rejected it. They found that males were much more likely to go back than females, and they theorized that this is because it is much more of a statement for women to leave the religion in the first place. They

noted that women are expected to be more religious and get a lot of their power through their religious roles, so rejecting religion might be a part of a larger rebellion against the traditional feminine role. This idea is consistent with Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1997) finding that women often rejected the family religion because they objected to its sexism.

Counseling Issues

Atheist converts in this stage may discover new consequences of their conversion as they move through major life events such as marriage, the births of children, and the deaths of loved ones. Most of these life events are closely tied to religious rituals and meanings and can provoke further evaluation of atheistic beliefs and their consequences. Also, as the atheist convert realizes that she or he can no longer, for example, participate in religious wedding ceremonies with the same sense of meaning, she or he may have to renegotiate his or her role in such events, which in turn can have an impact on family relationships and friendships. The new atheistic beliefs can in this way put enough strain on important relationships for the convert to re-evaluate his or her beliefs. Counselors may need to help these clients sort out for themselves whether their new beliefs are worth it.

Conclusion

Although atheists have been relatively neglected in the existing literature, and the process of converting to atheism has not been examined in its entirety, the research that does exist seems to support the idea that atheist converts undergo a complex conversion process similar to the one religious converts experience. As with any major change in a person's life, this process presents its own unique challenges that clients may bring to counseling. When counselors understand and appreciate this often difficult process, they can better help their clients make this important transition and cope with its aftermath.

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