

Grief Counseling Skills: Supporting Students in a Virtual Residency

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Abstract

Grief counseling is an important skillset for professional counselors. Two counselor educators in an online counseling program describe how they incorporated grief counseling coursework within a virtual residency. They followed grief counseling instruction best practices to facilitate skills training with students. The virtual residency also included skills practices, grief counseling role plays, and guest speakers with grief expertise. Wellness considerations to support students throughout the course and residency are also described.

Keywords: grief counseling, counseling skills, virtual residency

Grief Counseling Skills: Supporting Students in a Virtual Residency

Addressing client grief and loss in counseling is an important skillset for professional counselors (Blueford et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2018; Wheat et al., 2022). Despite grief counseling not being a Council for Accreditation of Counselor and Related Educational Programs ([CACREP] Wheat et al., 2022), counselor educators are called to ensure students learn the foundational skillsets and interventions needed to address grief and loss in counseling (Blueford et al., 2022). Such training can be challenging in an online counselor education program format (Rollins et al., 2022); however, can be achieved with planning and creativity. The purpose of this article is to describe how one online counselor education program faculty facilitated a virtual residency in conjunction with a grief counseling course. The history of the program's residency events, the grief counseling course content, and wellness considerations will be described. University institutional Board Approval was secured to ensure all ethical requirements were followed prior to collecting and analyzing student data.

Virtual residency

St. Bonaventure University's (SBU) remote counselor education program launched in fall 2017 running concurrently with an on-ground program. The program's first and second in-person residencies were in summer 2018 and 2019 respectively. In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted SBU's plans for the third in-person residency. The second author assumed the role of virtual residency coordinator. SBU's first virtual residency was a three-day event centered around the grief counseling course content. Professional speakers presented on a variety of grief and trauma topics. Students were randomly assigned to experiential groups for the third day of residency. A designated leader facilitated the groups with prepared role plays and meaningful activities related to the overall residency focus. Students were evaluated using a

clinical skills rubric and asked to give feedback in an anonymous survey about their experiences in the virtual residency. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

The virtual residency was modeled after the structure of the in-person residencies, yet it allowed for a greater depth of speakers given the remote option and alleviated the costs associated with in-person residency. Previously, students were responsible for transportation, lodging, and meal costs on top of tuition. In 2021 SBU continued to hold a virtual residency. The findings reported in this article are from the program's 2022 virtual residency. Please see Table 1 for student residency enrollment details. The residency coordinator, the first author, utilized institutional grant funds to provide speaker honorariums and to reimburse faculty for the residency related scholarship to include the current article.

Table 1

Residency Enrollment

Year	Number of Students
2019 (in-person)	36
2020	86
2021	108
2022	126

Grief Counseling Concurrent Course

The Advanced Professional Practice of Counseling course ran for a seven-week semester concurrent with the virtual residency experience during week six. The course topic addressed grief counseling interventions and centered around a widely accepted grief counseling text (Wheat et al.,2022), Worden's (2018), *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. The instructors created a learning environment where students explored grief counseling foundational knowledge and skills, while also reflecting upon their personal grief and loss experiences, to include exploration of cultural differences in expressions of grief. Blueford et al.'s (2022) research findings confirm the content areas of focus in our course design, knowledge and skills, personal grief reflection, and cultural considerations, are crucial to foster emergent counselor competence in conducting grief counseling. Worden's Tasks of Grief framework highlights adaptation to loss. Adaptation to loss rather than a stage model of

grief allowed for culturally responsive interventions and paired well with counselor core values of a strengths versus pathologically based conceptualization.

Grief Counseling Interventions. Students learned a variety of grief counseling techniques each week leading up to the residency experience. Examples include the empty chair technique (Erford, 2020), life imprints (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010), and relationship trees (Peterson & Goldberg, 2016). During synchronous live sessions students engaged in grief skills practice role plays to try out various techniques. Live session instruction time focused on selecting appropriate culturally responsive techniques and interventions within the context of the wide variation of grief expression across cultures.

Grief Counseling Assignments. Students completed two assignments prior to the residency event to increase their awareness and reflect upon their own grief experiences. First, they interviewed a professional who works in a grief setting. Students chose from a broad array of professionals to include hospice workers, clergy, emergency medical technicians, healthcare workers, and grief specific professional counselors. Students completed a pre and post interview reflection in their interview write up. After the professional interview, students prepared their individual Loss Timeline, where they documented up to eight losses, by death and non-death, experienced since birth to present age. Each loss was accompanied by the correspondent developmental milestone the loss impacted. Students described their grieving processes, rituals, and overall reflection on how their loss experiences influenced their lives, what resources could have supported their grief processes, and how the losses will impact their work as a professional counselor. Blueford et al. (2022) suggested the grief timeline facilitates self-awareness and offers the opportunity to process their “thoughts, emotions, and experiences” (p. 2321).

Grief Counseling Skills Role Play. The Grief Intervention Role Play, the signature course assignment, aimed to capture student’s knowledge of grief processes, appropriate interventions, and skills application. The assignment was structured in multiple steps. First, students drafted a role play scenario with demographic information of a fictitious client, a presenting grief issue, theoretical grief conceptualization, and a grief intervention. Instructors reviewed each case scenario to approve and offer recommendations as needed. Next, students were partnered with other students in their class and exchanged role play scenarios to prepare for the role play practice and final video recording during the virtual residency experience.

The Virtual Residency Experience

The two-day virtual residency took place during week six of the course. The schedule built in leaders in school and clinical mental health counselor education, wellness interventions, and skills practice sessions. Refer to Table 2 for a full description of the residency schedule.

Table 2

Virtual Residency Program

Day 1	Day 2
Presentation: Traumatic Grief	Presentation: The Use of Play in Grief Counseling
Presentation: School Counselors Response to Grief and Trauma	Preparation for Grief Counseling Role Play Sessions
Grief Counseling Skills Boot Camp	Grief Counseling Role Play Session Recordings
Presentation: Counselor Wellness and Professional Sustainability	Grief Counseling Session Debrief
	Residency Mindfulness Closing Session

Guest presenters, all practicing counselors and counselor educators with specializations in grief and trauma, provided rich topical guidance on skills and dispositions. On the first day of

residency, students met with their residency instructor for a two-hour skills practice session. They role-played various grief counseling techniques covered during the course content. They also met with their role play partner to practice for the role play session recording assignment.

Grief Intervention Role Play

During virtual residency day two students met with their preassigned role play partner to record their grief counseling session. The recording, along with student reflection, was reviewed by course instructors to identify counseling skills and confirm successful implementation of the grief counseling intervention. Directly after the counseling role play session students completed a survey about their perceptions of the role play experience.

Student Feedback. The post role play session survey asked students three open-ended questions: 1) Describe what went well in your grief intervention role play, 2) Describe one area of growth for your clinical skills, and 3) Please share other comments about the role play experience. We categorized the student responses ($n=81$) into similar themes. The main themes emergent from question one were *demonstrating empathy* and *completing the intervention successfully*. Comments reflective of *demonstrating empathy* included the following:

- “I feel like I was able to listen to my client well and make them feel heard and validated.”
- “My ability to validate grief and client’s feelings.”

Comments correspondent to *completing the intervention successfully* included:

- “I felt like I was able to explain the Empty Chair technique, help facilitate the client throughout the technique and have them reflect on some of the themes expressed during the session.”

- “What I think went well during the role play was the way I was able to help my client restructure her negative thoughts and feelings to be more positive and hopeful.”

Two main themes pertinent to question two, areas of growth, were *refining counseling skills* and *remaining in the moment*. Student comments connected to *refining counseling skills* included:

- “I need to get better at reflecting client responses, paraphrase, silence, etc.”
- “Summaries of sessions and closings. This is definitely a weak area for me.”

The second theme, *remaining in the moment*, is exemplified by the following student responses:

- “I struggle with the very humane challenge of listening to the other person without thinking about what I’m going to say next.
- “Taking time to be silent and put my thoughts together.”

Student responses to the general comment question revealed overall satisfaction with the role play experience during virtual residency. Students found the skills practice sessions and role play assignment supportive of their overall ability to engage in grief counseling. Many expressed appreciations for the practice sessions and variety of grief techniques incorporated throughout the course. Example overall feedback comments include:

- “As much as I sometimes dread doing demonstrations, I feel like I truly learned from this one. This was a great addition to Residency and I was happy to put the skills into action.”
- “This was a great experience. I especially enjoyed the skills boot camp and the opportunity to practice with my partner before the actual recording.”

Wellness Considerations

We intentionally integrated wellness content and activities throughout the course and two-day residency to model professional sustainability for students navigating emotionally laborious content. In so doing, we attended to the American Counseling Associations' (2014) mandates for wellness. Coincidentally, the residency took place around the time of a racially motivated mass shooting near the institution. Aware of the racially traumatic nature of the tragedy and its impact on all students and especially those identified with the Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities (Basma et al., 2021), course instructors allowed space within live sessions to acknowledge the trauma and identify strategies for students to navigate through the course. Other wellness efforts included 1) live session debrief where students could chose to share their experiences of completing the grief timeline, 2) a guest counselor educator presenter who led students through professional sustainability strategies, 3) a post role play debrief live session, and 4) a guest presenter who offered mindfulness-based activities in the residency closing ceremony.

Implications for Counselor Educators

Grief counseling skills are an important component in counselor education (Blueford et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2018). Several implications from our virtual residency program can be implemented in both in-person and virtual instruction. Blueford et al.'s research findings (2022) confirmed many of the approaches we implemented are supportive of counselor-in-training confidence in grief counseling. Specifically, they highlight how grief counseling model instruction paired with self-reflection on student's own grief and loss experiences aid in perceptions of readiness to offer grief counseling. The virtual residency and concurrent instruction offered a solid theoretical grief counseling model, Worden's (2018) Tasks of Grief

framework, and facilitated through various assignments (ie. Grief Timeline, professional interview), student exploration of their own grief and loss experiences.

Another implication was the caliber of the presenters and topics. We invited professional counselors and counselor educators who specialized in grief and trauma to share their knowledge with residency students which allowed for a richer in-depth experience. Community engagement with professional counselors with grief expertise can increase student exposure and is a meaningful by-product of virtual residency. The final implication highlights the importance of incorporating wellness considerations throughout the content (ACA, 2014). One potential risk of implementing grief counseling education is student overwhelm or re-traumatization when re-examining the losses in their life. The intentionality of infusing wellness practices paired with instructors modeling those practices throughout residency allowed students the opportunity to maintain self-care when working with their own sensitive experiences.

Conclusion

The authors outlined how to teach a grief counseling interventions class in an online program paired with an intensive residency. The course instruction and assignments aimed to teach clinical grief counseling theory and skills as well as encourage student exploration of their own personal grief and loss experiences. The corresponding virtual residency facilitated grief counseling skill development through practice and role plays. Professional counselors and counselor educators from the community presented on grief counseling, trauma, and wellness topics during the residency. We attended to student wellness and self-care to support their growth as counselors-in-training throughout the course and residency event.

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