

SPIRITUAL DEVOTIONALS

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Clients for whom the technique is appropriate: Homicidally bereaved individuals, although modifications of the materials could easily enable its use with other violently- (e.g., suicide, war crime, or fatal accident) or non-violently bereaved individuals. Spiritually inclined grievers will glean the most from this technique; however, its basis in the Christian sacred text may make it less suitable for those of other faith traditions or grievers who do not espouse faith.

Description

Human beings frequently strive to make sense of loss and subsequent grief through spirituality or religion. For many believers, faith sustains them through what can be one of life's darkest moments—the loss of a loved one. Faith can facilitate an ordering and re-ordering of emotional experiences that initially feel random and cruel, transforming them into something that, at least from God's vantage point, has divine purpose and eternal meaning.

Conversely, although God and the spiritual community might seem closer and more tangible than ever during the mourning period, some survivors struggle severely in existential terms, finding it to be a doubt-filled time of spiritual unrest. When spiritually inclined individuals are unable to accept the death, struggle to make sense of their loss, or lack reassurance for either the immediate future or the hereafter, questions abound, and faith swings on a pendulum between belief and doubt. When experienced within the context of bereavement, Shear and her associates (2006) refer to this as *complicated spiritual grief (CSG)*—a spiritual crisis in mourners' relationship with God such that they struggle with disruption of spiritual/religious activities and

experiences, a sense of discord, conflict, and distance from God and at times from members of one's spiritual community. Burke and her colleagues (in press) found that homicidally bereaved individuals who struggled the most with their grief were also the ones who struggled the most in terms of their relationship with God. Specifically, such grievors wondered what they did to receive God's punishment, questioned God's love and power, and felt abandoned by the church. Unfortunately, little exists in the way of specialized interventions available to target bereavement-induced spiritual crisis.

One exception to this neglect is Elacqua and Hetzel's (2010) book of *remembrance devotionals*, originally designed for survivors of homicide loss, but easily adaptable for the treatment of many types of losses. Whether the mourner's faith has been strengthened or challenged as a result of the loss, the purpose of this biblically based collection is to invite the reader to explore the depths of the Christian scriptures, on an intentional quest for increased closeness to God through specific Bible verses, and the personal testimonies and prayers offered by like-minded others who have suffered similarly.

Each weekly devotional consists of two pages, where on one side a photo with a short inspirational message, often featuring scriptural verses, is offered, below which is a weekly calendar with room to write notes, and a scripture which reinforces the main point of the devotional. On the adjacent page is the reflective account of an author who has felt the pang of irreplaceable loss, and yet has managed to find some comfort in his or her faith. Fully God-centered, without exception, all entries point to the "only Hope...there is" (Elacqua and Hetzel, 2010, p. 3). As a graphically pleasing manual, this devotional set can be used as an in-session exercise, with the clinician (or the client) reading aloud the current week's entry regarding a relevant aspect of loss (e.g., forgiving the perpetrator, overcoming sleeplessness, rebuilding a

new life), with prompts for discussion. Equally, the devotionals lend themselves to homework over the course of a week, especially when utilizing the calendar portion that allows for jotting down important events, specific struggles, or names of supportive others. In both cases, use of the devotionals helps clients become aware of the emotions that arise during the process of meditating on loss and grief and on the comfort that comes through scripture. Practical assignments focus on trauma symptoms and how to deal with them, questioning and doubting, the rippling effects of loss, forgiveness, emotional anguish, and more, which collectively promote spiritual sense making in the wake of horrendous loss.

Case study

Michael, age 56, recalls all too clearly the day some ten years earlier when he first got the news that his son, Cedric, had been shot and killed. "It was," he recalled, "like a furious storm or tornado appearing out of nowhere." Drawing on one of the devotionals, he wrote, "My experience was quite like that of Jesus' disciples when one day, they were in their boat, and "[w]ithout warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat" (Matthew 8:24). Jesus was sleeping in the boat. The disciples woke Jesus up saying, "'Lord, save us! We're going to drown!'" Jesus' reply to the disciples was also His Words to me, "You of little faith. ... " (Matthew 8:26). Indeed, my faith had weakened. Cedric's death was a dark, dreary, stormy time in my life for a very long time.

I could not let other people know or see that my faith was deteriorating because I thought I had to be strong and carry this burden for my family. I was wrong in my thinking. I learned that this was not something that I was to carry nor should I try to carry it. God's Word tells us to "Cast your cares on the LORD . . ." (Psalm 55:22). Jesus calls us to come to Him when we are weary and burdened (Matthew 11:28-30).

Though the sun was shining outside, it was still so dark in my heart because of the hurt, the trauma, the grief, and the pain of losing a child to homicide. I stayed in the church, trying to see or hear if I would ever see the sun shine in my heart again. I even became involved in Victims to Victory, a Memphis, Tennessee, organization and support group that enables survivors of homicide to find comfort through Christ Jesus. As time passed, I saw the dark clouds slowly moving and drifting away day-by-day.

I had read and heard the story of Jesus and His disciples being in the storm, many times. However, it never dawned on me that the disciples had forgotten that Jesus was right there in the storm with them. The same thing happened to me; I forgot that Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, was right there with me in the middle of my storm. Now, I know, and I have been assured by Jesus Christ himself, that no matter what storms come my way, He is right there with me. John 14:16 reads, "...I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever." Jesus is my life in the storm.

Father God in heaven, I thank You for being there in my storm, even when I forgot You were there. I thank You for moving the dark clouds and allowing the sun to shine in my heart again. Thank You for allowing me to be a father. Thank You for always being there no matter how dark or stormy it gets. Continue to bless and guide me, that I may be a blessing to someone else." Michael concluded by meditating on the Inspirational Message: "During a storm, if Jesus asked you to get out of this boat and walk (on water) to Him, would you?" as well as the Reflection Questions: "What specific burdens do you need to cast unto the Lord? Do you believe Jesus is in the midst of the storm with you? Tell Him how you feel."

Concluding thoughts

Death can give rise to a myriad of spiritual questions. Grievors who turn to God, their faith community, and/or aspects of their religion to cope often find comfort and strength. Other believers—those who cannot find their way out of the dark pit of grief, who feel God’s absence more acutely than His presence, whose questions for God are seemingly left unanswered or are answered insufficiently, who view God as the neglectful parent, powerless or uninterested, who are left feeling alone even while surrounded by a community of fellow believers—experience a crisis of faith. Despite their pre-loss level of religious engagement or faith in God, when tragedy strikes in the form of loss, many religious mourners take comfort in the kind of spiritual assistance found in remembrance devotionals.

References

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