



When working with terminally ill clients, we are invited to come face-to-face with death itself. If we have not taken care of our own feelings about death, along with understanding the needs of a terminally ill client and how we will respond to them, then we risk being uncomfortable and not fully present for our client as they near the end of their life's journey. So how can we better prepare ourselves for this rewarding yet often challenging area of therapeutic work?

ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

It is particularly important to understand the concept of anticipatory grief and how this might impact your client. Anticipatory grief is when someone grieves for their losses in advance of these happening. It could include feelings of dread, sadness, rage, denial, depression and distaste. Even moments of joy, relief and happiness are not unknown. The impact of loss in all its forms is likely to come into play: the loss of identity, job, purpose in life, physical ability, mental capacities, friendships, and so on.

It is important to remember that you

Life before death

JANE DUNCAN ROGERS PROVIDES SOME POINTERS FOR THERAPISTS WHO ARE NEW TO WORKING WITH TERMINALLY ILL CLIENTS



yourself may experience a sense of loss in advance of your client dying. Being aware of this in advance will mean you can understand and process some of your own thoughts and feelings more easily.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPERVISION

It is surprisingly easy to underestimate the impact of supporting someone who is dying, especially if you start treating them when they are still relatively well.

A supervisor's job is to support you in relation to the work you are doing with your clients. It is time that you take for yourself, to explore themes or issues that may arise in connection to what is being presented by your client, whether that's in the form of physical ailments, psychological ones, or both.

Supervision is also crucial for when death is sudden, which is something I learned early on in my practice as a counsellor. I had seen a young man with health issues and family challenges. After around eight sessions, we were forming a working alliance and he was making good progress.

One day, he didn't turn up for his session, so I decided that if I hadn't heard anything by the following week, I would make some gentle enquiries. A few days later, I received in the post a cheque he had paid me, returned from his bank with 'deceased' stamped on it. This was how I discovered he had died.

I was catapulted into shock. Without breaching his request for confidentiality, I could not find out what had happened. This was my introduction into the importance of supervision – I contacted someone immediately and was able to have a few

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sessions to talk this through. With many more years' experience under my belt now, I realise that it would have been better if I had already had a supervisory relationship in place.

If one-to-one supervision is not possible or is cost-prohibitive, peer supervision is another option and will be especially helpful if others in the group are experienced in such matters.

WHAT TO SAY?

Wondering what to say to someone who is terminally ill is a common concern.

However, in a session with your client, it's important to not shy away from asking specific questions. Generally speaking, it is much better to be able to say, for instance, 'How poorly are you?' or 'How long do you think you have?' than to skirt around the issue and be left wondering what is going on. By asking these and other specific questions, you will be affirming the trust established between you both, increasing the therapeutic alliance and your ability to be fully present for your client.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

It is important to be adaptable and flexible in the face of the uncertainty that a terminal diagnosis brings. Structures of safety and routine can become even more important. Your client knowing you are there for them, consistently, at the same time and same day each week or month, may turn out to be crucial. Consider what to do regarding home or hospital visits, changes of appointment and payment issues. Be aware of both verbal and non-verbal cues as you agree next steps with your client.

FACING YOUR OWN DEATH

Facing up to your own death is a crucial part of working with terminally ill clients. It can be done safely when you consider the many practical actions that need to be taken to prepare well for a good ending. While it appears to be just addressing necessary administration, such as a will, living will, and power of attorney, in fact, there is plenty of provision for you to address any hidden feelings about dying, death and grief when this is done in the wider context of creating an end-of-life plan.

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FEELING OUT OF YOUR DEPTH

What if the client asks questions or starts to talk about things that you feel ill-equipped to deal with? Again, self-awareness is key and, also at this point, lack of ego. If you feel out of your depth, you need first to be honest with yourself and acknowledge that fact. Then there are several things you can do:

- Refer the client on to someone you feel is better able to help them.
- Visit your supervisor to explore what is going on for you.
- Keep seeing the client but encourage them to also see a counsellor or specialist in the field.

To be able and willing to do this, you need to have developed your own internal supervisor, and take action on what you

hear, sense and see from that place. This is not a good time to think you can cope when you know deep down that you can't.

SAYING GOODBYE

Finally, you may not know when it is the last time you will see your client. You may have a chance to say goodbye, you may not. This means living with uncertainty and not knowing. This is challenging for many, so it will help if you have explored your own feelings about loss, goodbyes and not knowing.

If you are uncomfortable with any of these areas, sooner or later events will conspire to show this to you. Being aware of this in advance, knowing how you might cope, and having a good supervisor to support you will all help. **ii**



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