



COVID-19, MENTAL CONDITIONS & EMDR GRIEF and MOURNING

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Grief is the reaction a person has to loss, and **mourning** is the process of adaptation to the loss. A loss, especially when it is sudden, unexpected, and violent; can be traumatic, and complicate the grieving process.

Loss and Trauma

The trauma of a major loss, in terms of the Adaptive Information Processing model (Shapiro, 1995, 2001, 2018) may result in result distressing memories becoming maladaptively stored. The loss can be so distressing that other adaptive information encoded in other memory networks (such as positive memories of the loved one) cannot be accessed, experienced, and felt. This can result in a sense of “I can’t connect” to the deceased because the emotional pain is so overwhelming. EMDR reprocessing facilitates the expression, experiencing, and discharge of the pain that comes with loss. This is necessary for the eventual linking in of positive, adaptive information. Consistently, clinicians who use EMDR therapy with mourners consistently observe the emergence of positive memories of the deceased with its associated affect (Solomon & Rando, 2007, 2012, 2015). The heartfelt, positive memories form an adaptive inner representation (Fairbairn, 1952; Solomon, 2018) that provides a sense of connection to the loved one. Hence, the mourner can move from “I cannot connect” to “I can connect”.

Complicated grief and mourning

Grief and mourning can be complicated not only by traumatic circumstances, but also by past unresolved trauma, loss, or attachment related memories (early childhood interactions between child and caregiver that form the basis of attachment style). Attachment style plays a significant role in how people adapt to loss and explains the individual differences in grief and mourning (Kosminsky & Jordan, 2016). The loss of a loved one can activate the responses and feelings that were experienced in childhood when there was separation from an attachment figure. Consequently, in complicated grief and mourning, the EMDR clinician needs to identify and reprocess unresolved trauma, losses, and attachment related memories underlying the mourner’s response to the loss.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Covid-19 has led to a plethora of losses for individuals, communities, states, countries, and the world at large. “These layers of losses include death of loved ones, potential life-threatening illness, loss of physical contact with family and friends, loss of employment and financial security, loss of familiar routines and future plans, loss of safety and predictability, loss of control, and loss of personal freedoms.” (Solomon and Hensley, 2020 p.1). Also, death resulting from Covid-19 may involve risk factors that can complicate grief and mourning. It can be sudden (the person dying shortly after being infected) painful, and loved one’s are not able to say good-bye in person, all of which are risk factors for complicated grief. Further when a death occurs, funerals and other meaningful events have to be conducted online, and there is limited ability to have in person comfort from family and friends. The stress of Covid-19, can trigger previously unresolved trauma, losses, and past developmental issues. For example, the loneliness and isolation resulting from Covid-19 circumstances can trigger past memories of abandonment and being alone.

Three layers of grief

First of all, the loss itself can be overwhelming. Secondly, death resulting from Covid -19, involving risk factors (e.g. sudden and painful death) can complicate the grief and mourning. Thirdly, current circumstances due to COVID-19, including the personal day to day disruption of everyday living, compound the trauma of the loss. The interaction of these three factors can interfere with adaptation to the loss.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMDR THERAPY

EMDR therapy can target the trauma of the loss, including the moment of a) initial impact, such as finding out about the death b) moment of realization (when it was realized the death is real, such as seeing the body being lowered to the ground at the funeral), and c) distressing images (hospital scenes of suffering). Covid-19 related risk factors (distressing images of suffering, no face-to-face visits) add to the distressing memories that need to be reprocessed. If grief reactions and/or going through the mourning process is blocked or complicated, then past traumas, losses, and developmental memories relevant to attachment should be identified and reprocessed.

The personal impact of Covid-19 limitations, including social isolation, disrupted schedule, enhanced feelings of vulnerability, lack of control, and economic consequences are real stressors that can further tax a mourner. A treatment plan that includes coping with the reality of personal circumstances is important. EMDR therapy can be helpful targeting the initial personal impact of Covid-19 (e.g. “the moment my supervisor called me and said not to report to the worksite”; as well difficult moments (e.g. hearing about all the deaths and watching distressing news footage). Current response to Covid-19 circumstances can trigger past unresolved issues, which need to be identified and reprocessed.

Three pronged protocol

Along with memories underlying current response to the loss and Covid-19, present triggers need to be reprocessed, with future templates provided for each trigger. As always, the client needs to be assessed for readiness for EMDR memory reprocessing.

Integrated framework to enhance adaptation to loss

EMDR therapy needs to be integrated within a wider therapeutic framework. Providing education on grief and mourning, coping strategies, problem solving, affect management strategies (as necessary), and an overall trusting and collaborative therapeutic relationship are crucial in helping the mourner through the difficult times of adapting to a significant loss compounded by the stressful circumstances of Covid-19. EMDR therapy is a paradigm of resilience. The three-pronged protocol is a paradigm of resilience. With the successful processing of a negative experience, adaptive, self-enhancing perspectives emerge, which guide future behavior.

References

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