The Psychotherapist Meets Death: Perspectives on Clinical Education in the Area of Death and Dying

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The Psychotherapist Meets Death: Perspectives on Psychological Literature and Clinical Education in the Area of Death and Dying

LeeAnn Bartolini, Ph.D.
Dominican University of California
Interest in Topic

- Teacher: Teach course on Death and Dying for past 20 years
- Private Practice: Personal Story
- In 2010 wrote and presented paper for conference In Hong Kong on Death: Philosophy, Therapy, Medicine titled: "The Clinician Meets Death: Psychological Perspectives on Being with the Dying"
How rare is this death thing anyway?

“I read this book as a therapist wanting to stimulate my own thinking around death in the consulting room since it is rarely out of it.”

Exploratory Research Question

- How much activity is there in broad area of clinical psychology associated with death and dying in psychotherapy?
- Activity defined as:
  - Publications in psychinfo
  - Graduate schools offering courses in death and dying
Background

• Many books and articles written on how therapist’s can work with the terminally ill and dying

• Explosion of publications post work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross (1969)

• Abundant publications when the focus is the patient
## Death in Psychotherapy: Focus on The PATIENT - Publication Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of focus</th>
<th># of Publications in Psyinfo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working with terminally ill patients</td>
<td>169++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychotherapy with the grieving/bereaved patient</td>
<td>1100++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with suicidal patients</td>
<td>2460++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients reactions to psychotherapist's death</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(sudden, terminal illness, suicide)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Death in Psychotherapy: FOCUS on the PSYCHOTHERAPIST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of focus</th>
<th># of Publications in Psyinfo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychotherapist personal exp. with death (own loss &amp; bereavement) and practice</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of suicide of patient on the therapist</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The dying or ill therapist while practicing</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The psychotherapist’s reaction to death of terminally ill patient</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The psychotherapist’s reaction to sudden or unexpected death of patient</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Graduate Clinical Education

• Looked at 45 Graduate Clinical programs in US and England
• First 30 were drawn from rankings in US News and World Reports
• Remaining 15 were random California professional institutions and 5 schools in England
Findings… (shocking)

• Only 2 public institutions offered a specific course on Death and Dying

• 1 professional school
  – UCLA
  – U of A
  – Adler School of Prof. Psy, Chicago

- However, many courses on aging, life span development where some discussion of Death and Dying may occur
What is explanation?

- Students will already have content
- Students will receive content in supervision
- Intuitive, no one needs content
- Denial of death in profession/life (Becker, 1973)
- More focused on psychopathology than normal life experiences
- Psychotherapists do not like to write (different than researchers)
- Minimization of impact of death on psychotherapist
- Less inward focus (than outward on patient)
- Associated with other issues in literature (e.g. counter-transference, burn-out)
- Associated with other topics in education: suicide, aging, developmental
- Psychotherapist’s will seek own consultation/supervision
References

• Sign up if you want emailed list of literature by topic under: Death in Psychotherapy: FOCUS on the PSYCHOTHERAPIST