

# **UTILIZATION OF SELECTED GESTALTIC IDEAS AND PRINCIPLES IN BEREAVEMENT COUNSELLING IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Covid 19 pandemic has brought up many challenges and opportunities since its outbreak in Wuhan, China the last quarter of 2019, chief among the challenges has been handling the many deaths arising from the disease. For instance, in Kenya close to 5000 people have succumbed to the disease based on the statistics from the ministry of Health. The situation in many African countries has been worsening every day despite the many interventions and health guidelines, the pandemic continues to claim lives Many developing countries are ill equipped in terms of Resources and qualified personnel to treat, stop transmissions and mitigate its impacts while the support from more developed nations such America, United Kingdom among others have been dwindling over time hence Covid 19 continue to contribute to many deaths in African continent. The purpose of this study is to elaborate the benefits of Gestalt therapy in order to support families going through bereavement occasioned by Covid19 disease and other related ailments in Africa and specifically in Kenya. Gestalt theory was originated by Fredrick perls (1893-1970). The foundation of this theory is that people must be understood in their whole

contextual environment. The paper explores the ideas and principles embedded in this therapy such as living currently, personal responsibility, awareness, holism, figure and ground among many. Additionally, the study seeks to determine the counselor's role which has been ignored in this situation, ethical and legal issues as well as relevant techniques. It has background in content analysis of related literature and private practice experiences spanning over 15 years. The study findings conclude with a suggestion on expanding the scope in the bereavement psychotherapy since what is practiced presently in many communities is more of spiritual related.

**Key Words:** Utilization, Gestalt, Bereavement, Counselling, principles, Covid19

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background to the study**

Gestalt is a German term which means configuration or the whole. According to Gestalt perception should relate to the total nature of the situation including the viewer, the thing being viewed and the complex background surrounding it (Corey,2005). Nothing is seen in isolation but as they relate to the immediate environment.

Perl (1969) asserts that clients who come for counselling are in states of existential crisis and the need to take personal responsibility for their existence. Bereavement and mourning are such crisis situations that brings with it lots of questions with no answers available. The theory has been used in various fields to support varied purposes. For instance, it has been used widely in Education for holistic curriculum development. It has also been used in group dynamics. In this paper the therapy is used to support clients going through grief. The advantages of using Gestalt counselling in the bereavement process include:

- It can be used in both individual and group sessions
- The therapy focuses more on the whole characteristics that can influence the bereaved individual.
- The therapy acknowledges the past as the foundation stone for understanding the now moment of the client.
- It emphasizes the doing and experiencing, critical components to support the grieving clients
- It provides pathways for growth and fulfilment necessary for the bereaved persons.
- Direct contact and open expressions of feelings is the seed required for the healing of the injured soul.
- The focus on emotional feelings as opposed to rationalization is an added advantage.

Bereavement circumstances evoke greater and complex emotions not witness in other crisis situations. Modern counsellors are faced with challenges as they interact with clients as to which theory is suited to address the needs of a particular clientele. Whichever the theory is chosen should focus on addressing the problems of the clients holistically. Gestalt psychotherapy is appropriate for this topic due to inherent benefits stated above.

Bereavement counselling is increasingly becoming an essential care giving service due to the many deaths arising from Covid 19 and other diseases. According to World health organization (2021) over 4 million people have died of Covid 19. It is an infectious disease which has been mutating over time and the one that is more virulent at the moment is the delta variant which originated from India.

In Kenya, the Ministry of Health, (2021) latest reports indicate over 5000 people have succumbed to the disease. Each family has had or experience someone infected or died of the virus. When the virus was identified in Kenya and the first death reported it was the ministry of Public Health officials who were responsible for the burial and was done hurriedly in the night following stringent protocols developed by ministry of Health. The dead body was literally dumped without due regards to cultural and family rites. This added anguish and grieve to the family that was bereaved.

Mbithi (1992) elaborates the African rituals on the disposal of the corpse where the family was deeply involved which ultimately brings the satisfaction that the dead was given due respect. In the Ministry of Health guidelines there was no time to prepare the family to accept what has befallen them. Fear engulfed everyone pastors, counsellors, leaders and others. With

the passage of time new protocols on burials have since been developed which incorporates the family, community and the government in a process thereby lessening the militarized practice that characterized the onset of the disease.

At the moment the families are the ones organizing for the burial though observing the 72 hours' period between time of death and burial. In many hospitals such as Nairobi, Kenyatta, Moi Teaching and referral some trained pastors and counsellors are allowed in to the isolation wards where the Covid 19 patients are recovering for prayers and counselling. While some pastors regularly visit families to comfort, console and even prepare them for any eventuality that may arise from the infection, the role of trained counsellors are hardly noticed in the bereavement process.

The purpose of the study is to find out the work of the counsellor in the bereavement process before and after death targeting the individual clients and families using the principles and ideas of Gestalt Theory.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study is based on secondary data through a review of the available literature related to the topic and private practice experiences dealing with bereaved families and individual clients.

### **Currently Living**

During the time of bereavement, the tendency for the clients to get fixated in the past is high. This can block the path to recovery and healing. For the gestalt counsellors the past has gone and the future has not come hence what clients has at hand is the present to experience fully. The counsellor brings the client to terms with what has happened and that this is real and will not change. Dealing with denial is critical at this stage. Lierop (1992) while commenting on this concept asserts that clients should avoid unnecessary intellectualizing but experience the reality of the moment. Living in the present entails the client recognizing that a loss has occurred in the family and this is the situation now.

Perls (1973) demands that clients experience themselves as fully as possible in the here and now both to understand the present manipulations and contact boundary disturbances and to re-experience the past problems and use them to deal with the present challenge.

Though it is important for the counsellor to identify the elements in the past that disturbs the client the whole purpose is for the client to move from the past to the present. The past challenging traumatic experiences and situations should be used as a stepping stone to enhance growth in the absence of the significant departed person. Counsellor should listen and identify aspects in the past which are unresolved which the client can navigate through as part of building the pattern of living in the present. These aspects can form part of the counselling sessions to assist the bereaved client. The present moment presents the client with

resources (books, people, friends) that can be used. Working through the issues of the client in the present requires the understanding clients culture, religious resources, education, beliefs systems among others.

The past life according to Gestalt is manifested through unfinished business. This involves issues the deceased was dealing with before the onset of death. This includes personal visions, family issues, projects, relationships, education, and loans. Nothing is taken for granted at this level. Through free speech and unrestricted expressions, the client brings to fore all issues that were not done in the past requiring the attention in the present. Significant persons can be suggested to undertake the pending issues.

The unfinished business can interfere with the effective functioning in the present hence the need to deal with it as an aspect of bereavement counselling. If the unfinished business is not properly done it can be the source of resistance to the healing progress as it may lead to some psychosomatic ailments. It will require a lot of social support skills from the counsellor to address embedded unfinished issues. Unfinished business may come in form of dreams that might require interpretation. Perls (1969) alludes that life is a series of unfinished Gestalts. Most people would rather avoid experiencing painful emotions of the past and therefore get stuck. Skills such empty chair, confronting, open ended questions, summarizing, role play among others are the gateway to this unfinished baggage. Counsellor builds the internal support systems of the client so as to detach him or her from the past.

### **Figure and The Ground**

Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951) defines figure as the focus of interest. In this study the figure is the bereaved client or clients affected by the loss. The bereaved may be the spouse, child, parent, siblings, relatives etc. The closer the departed person to the bereaved the more the pain and the more the counselling support needed. The counsellor should observe the cues that indicate the extent of the loss to the grieving person and design interventions based on specific targeted needs of each. Both the individual and group counselling styles may be applied. The figure is the key component and the foundation of gestalt counselling related to bereavement.

Counselling should focus more on the questions such as what and how of the behaviour of the grieving person. For instance, what behaviour is demonstrated and how it is demonstrated should be the concern of the counsellor. The figure may demonstrate strong attachment to the deceased because of the support whether material or social they received from the departed which may no longer be forth coming. The counsellor should address this gap by reassuring the client of alternative support systems including the government, the family, community and endless spiritual support. Existential questions such the meaning of death, life after, the future should be answered based on the belief systems of the clients. Existential questions from the client can give impression on the kinds of emotions abiding in the client that may give rise suicidal tendencies and even depression. Stress levels should also be checked. Referral to spiritual authorities identified in the counselling process is recommended to deal

with more complex life issues. Imposition of spiritual values to the client is discouraged or introducing spiritual matters when the client is clearly uninterested.

Clients may be asked to role play the deceased in order for them to experience fully while the counsellor identifies the parts that need to be closed or the dots to be filled. Attention is also given to the tone of voice, posture, facial speech of the client. Non-verbal cues are more important than what the client is saying. Giving positive directions and goals is the ultimate aim of the gestalt counselling.

### **Ground or background**

This refers to the setting or context (Jones, 1995). It can also be the total situation surrounding the client. Many things surround the bereaved clients. These could be people, cultures, religious things, family beliefs, customs, government policies, science and technology. All these can influence the client being counselled. In the process of counselling the counsellor can test the impact of each one of them and determine the therapies best suited to be applied. It requires more intensive multi sessions process that goes beyond the burial plans of the departed. Individualized counselling can do better but still clients with similar grieve patterns can experience group psychotherapy.

### **Awareness Continuum**

According to Corey (2005) awareness includes knowing oneself, accepting oneself, knowing the environment and being able to make contacts. Bereaved clients should be made to understand themselves and how they can contribute towards the quick recovery from the loss or how they can worsen the problem. Awareness can mean being sensitive to the I AM person. They need to be made aware that there are situations in life that are beyond their control hence even if they get depressed they can't change loss. The counsellor should be firm while creating awareness on the part of the client. Counsellor clarifies the resources, potentials, strengths within the clients that can be used to support their wellness. A tool can be developed to provide insights into the client's life which they can fill and the counsellor can analyse and make concrete conclusions regarding the level of awareness.

The I statement can be critical for the counsellors during the process of grieve counselling where at some point the counsellor can do some self-disclosure to foster the client's confidence and make clients to feel they are not alone in this journey. The right balance should be established between too many disclosures which may threaten the client and too little which may not be beneficial at all. The client can also be made to understand their environment which may include other people. Helping the client to move from external to internal environment is key. External support may include the deceased person so that gradually the client should be anchoring on themselves. Counsellor need to gradually detach the client from the deceased through a more emphatic process. Most of the challenges the client goes through emanates from too much attachment to the departed person hence a lot of counselling should revolve around the detachment.

The counsellor should endeavour to address client's domains such as physical, emotional and social if they can be of benefit to the client. Referral can be done where the counsellor feels overwhelmed or professionally inadequate to handle a given area in the client scheme of things. For instance, severely depressed or sick clients may be referred to psychiatrist or physicians while those with deeper existential questions may be referred to spiritual authorities of their choice. Proper awareness emerges in the context of the I level of personality. Full awareness may lead to reintegration of the parts making the whole. Counselling therefore enhances awareness. Yomtef and Simkin (1989) stated that the only goal of gestalt therapy is awareness. Awareness is enhanced when internal conflicts are resolved through dialogue.

Some of the characteristics of a client who is self-aware include;

- Ability to take personal responsibility for their actions
- They are self-esteemed.
- Ability to withstand frustrations.
- Possess no self-destructive tendencies.
- Good at forming new friendships.
- Accepting pleasant and unpleasant situations.
- Living in the moment.
- Positive living.

## **HOLISM**

A human being is a unified person consisting of the mind, body, spirit. Perls (1969) denied the mind body split opining that a person is holistic in nature. Counsellor should look at a person as one whole and not fragmented. Counsellors attempts at putting together the fragmented parts of the client in order for the client to see clear pictures of themselves. People's actions are sources of their behaviours which produces the kind of person being counselled. Emotions and cognitions should be seen as complimenting in making the person as one whole.

Gestalt counsellors should look at the bereaved clients as holistic individuals that are packaged with their feelings, cultures, ethics, beliefs, values, emotions, traditions among many. These are parts that can be combined to form one whole individual being observed. Perls (1973) and Jones (1995) contends that counsellors demonstrates that humans do not perceive things in isolation but organize them through perceptual processes in to meaningful wholes.

How does the client perceive death, human beings, destiny, life after, and religion are key components in filling the gaps in existence due to the death of loved ones? The counsellor should answer these existential questions in a way the client can make sense of the chaotic situations they are in. The client comes in with memories, expectations, fears, anxieties, hopes all need to be combined and addressed in order to emerge with holistic person able to withstand the loss.

### **Counsellor's Role**

- Gestalt Counsellors support the bereaved clients to move away from other people to supporting themselves fully. Training clients to be responsible about their destiny and to stop blaming others should be entrenched in the counselling process.
- The counsellor begins by visiting the bereaved and getting to know them well including their closeness to the departed, maintains personal contacts including the phone numbers. Counsellors should seize the opportunity as a chance for human service and not wait to be invited. Pastors usually take this place with urgency hence counsellors should not be left behind in this noble activity. It is an opportunity for them to display their skills and make themselves known in that field. Counsellors attempts to guide clients on deep questions such as where the dead lives, here after, destiny of the soul, remembering the deceased.
- Counsellors help clients to touch their organismic existential centres. This entails going deep in to their sense of who they are in life. Terms such as j am what j am being commonly used in assisting clients to know themselves. Clients who understand themselves are self-supporting.
- Gestalt views counselling set up as an experimental enterprise where the counsellor tries out what is best for a particular client and monitoring their level of progress.
- The counsellor assists the bereaved clients to express their feelings, frustrations, hopelessness and to come up with their own interpretations of what has happened. Counsellors do not interpret for the clients but dwells so much on what and how of their behaviours being noted in the counselling sessions.
- Counsellors helps clients to re-experience the past in order for them to understand the present and build on the future. This can be done through techniques such as empty chair, role play and others. Through this they gain rich awareness of themselves.
- Non -verbal cues is critical while counselling bereaved clients. Gestalts believes that non-verbals are key in accessing deep thoughts and feelings of the clients during the process of bereavement counselling and afterwards. Verbal information is less meaningful in gestalt counselling.
- Counsellors assist the client to adjust the environment in which the departed one is no longer present. For instance, to build new relationships, essentially rebuilds himself or herself again. The counsellor retools the client to experience live fully and to grow healthy.

### **Counselling techniques and skills**

#### **Listening**

The skill of listening is paramount while working with bereaved client to make them opens up to the counselling session. Irrespective of which orientation the counsellor leans towards listening is the gateway for all other skills. Poor listening skills or lack of it may block the client from opening up and could lead to some form of resistance. Some counsellors called it Gestalt, reflective, emphatic, attentive or active listening. Listening while observing the bereaved client is key to understanding what is not being said.



Counsellor can make notes on what is difficult to be mentioned and by using summarizing and minimal prompts helps clients to bring out the pain. It may take several sessions to deal with the concerns but the counsellor need to exercise patience. From the group sessions it is possible to tailor made some matters for specific clients and help them in the individual sessions. Listening to the main issues and ignoring the non-issues, joining dots or closure is critical. Listening to the what and how and not why.

### **Staying with the feeling**

During the bereavement process clients will encounter some unpleasant memories, pain and feelings arising from the loss. Some clients can get stuck with these feelings or try to escape. The counsellor can utilize client's behavioural reactions to understand more about their coping patterns and assist them master the best strategies consistent to their abilities to overcome the loss. An experienced counsellor may want the client to remain with the feeling and experience it fully in order to understand the dimensions of what they are going through at that time. It is also possible for the counsellor to identify categories and levels of the feelings exhibited by the client and address them adequately. This will help the client to deal with the pain uniquely in future without trying to take flight. Counsellors will help the client to adopt positive ways to cope with the grieve process

### **Empty chair technique**

The empty chair is one of the experimental designs that Gestalts advocates for in the process of counselling. Essentially it is a form of trying out what will work or examining scenarios. It is a method which requires the client to externalize what they are going through. In one instance the bereaved can assume the top dog while in others can take up the underdog. Top dog and underdog are two opposing sides. An example of the top dog is the moralistic, good or excellent part while the underdog is the opposite which may come in form of inferiority complex or the bad sides. Top dog and underdog are always conflicting parts. Gestaltic counsellor will favour exploiting those aspects client opposes. What the client could be opposed to gives deeper meaning of client's philosophy of likes and dislikes. The client can also role play the deceased person in the presence of the counsellor where the counsellor notes the extent of the loss and the ensuing unfinished parts that needs to be completed. This can guide a framework for future sessions with the client. The role play enhances awareness on the parts of the client. The non-verbal cues or body language can indicate the conflicting parts which should be dealt with in counselling.

### **Self-disclosure.**

This is a skill in which gestalt counsellor reveals their fears, feelings, or even frustrations. This make the bereaved clients appreciate that they are not alone in that situation and that other people have worked this journey before. The counsellor only discloses those parts that foster the clients understanding themselves which heightened the recovery process. Perls

(1970) proposes the sharing of personal problems and life experiences. The principle behind the disclosure is that it helps the client to outgrow the concern.

### **Dreams**

Perls (1970) regarded dreams as the royal road to the integration. People will experience dreams in one time or the other. The content of the dream is the key factor in gestalt counselling. Which people, objects, situations appear in the dreams should be clearly analysed thematically and communicated. Dreams that may appear to a bereaved client could be loaded with the love lost, life fears, unfinished business, present and future problems. Proper interpretation of the dream is critical in freeing the client from the fears. Perls (1970) outlines a four staged process in dream counselling.

- i. The client relates the dreams
- ii. The client retells the dream
- iii. Client sets the scene of the dream
- iv. Client acts the dream

Counsellor need to take notes of these dreams so as to identify problems exhibited through dreams which can be handled in the bereavement counselling process.

### **Ethical principles in Bereavement counselling**

- Safety awareness  
Gestalt counsellors encourages clients to be aware of themselves and their environment. The presence of Covid 19 in our midst should be made aware to the client as regarding symptoms, causes and interventions. Counselling process should be both preventive and curative. Sensitization on washing hands, correct face masking, avoiding handshake and crowded places should be intensified. Vaccination as per the MOH regulations is supported. Treatment for sick Covid 19 positive clients after testing is recommended.
- Confidentiality should be assured to the clients while at the same time clarifying the dimensions in which confidentiality can be breached.
- Clients should be prepared well through counselling on the positive Covid 19 results so that they accept results and seek treatment including quarantine, isolation and hospitalization.
- Handling the stigma associated with Covid 19. Clients who are infected or affected should not be discriminated at all. Quality services should be rendered to the clients even while in isolation. Denial of services is both illegal and unethical.
- Respect and integrity of the client should be assured despite the reality of imminent death.
- Burial rites should be done cognizant of government protocols and clients family values.
- Counsellor should be real and honest in all dealings with the bereaved clients.
- Referral for specific clients who exhibits conditions that may necessitate attention from other professionals should be urgent.

- Since counselling the bereaved is very intensive and exhaustive it is recommended that counsellors go for supervision by trained counsellor supervisor at least once a week.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- i. That Gestalt social support principles and ideas are critical in the bereavement process and the healing arising from the loss. Counsellors are encouraged to use them.
- ii. It is recommended that counsellors should be more visible than has been in the bereavement period and not relinquishing the function to spiritual leaders alone.
- iii. The rich mix of cultural, government protocols and spiritual resources be applied in the burial process so that there is closure.
- iv. Counsellors should continue the sensitization of clients on the need for adherence to Covid 19 protocols at all times.
- v. Diverse literature should be written on the area of bereavement counselling to demystify the phenomenon.
- vi. Continuous follow up of the bereaved clients to address further aspects that may lead to post - traumatic stress disorders and other challenges.
- vii. 7.Counselors are recommended for more speciality training on the area of bereavement counselling to cope with increasing number of grieving clients adequately.
- viii. 8.Counselors should entrenched creative arts such as drawings, guided imagery, writing, poetry and varied plays to foster client's self-awareness.

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