CHECKLIST OF STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH GRIEF

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CLIENTS FOR WHOM THE TECHNIQUE IS APPROPRIATE

Presenting clients with a history of trauma and loss with the present Checklist of coping strategies can help mobilize resilient and adaptive responses for a broad range of survivors. However, it is not intended as a stand-alone intervention for complex loss or trauma, and is restricted in its written form to adults with at least a 6th grade reading level.

DESCRIPTION

In the aftermath of experiencing traumatic events and personal losses, 5% to 20% of survivors evidence prolonged and complicated grief and traumatic bereavement, often with accompanying adjustment difficulties (Pearlman et al., 2014). Although the remaining proportion of survivors is affected, they evidence more robust resilience and are able to continue functioning (Meichenbaum, 2013).

One factor that distinguishes these two groups is the nature of the coping strategies that they employ. We have identified a list of coping strategies, taken from the treatment literature, clinical experience, and focus groups with survivors and their mental health providers, and incorporated them into a self-report “Checklist” (see Neimeyer, 2012; Rando, 1992; Shear & Gorscak, 2013). This Checklist (see Appendix XX.1) can be used with all classes of survivors, including individuals experiencing prolonged and complicated grief reactions due to the loss of loved ones some time ago, as well as with individuals experiencing recent traumatic bereavement, as described in the case below.

First, survivors complete the Checklist, indicating which coping strategies they have employed. This can be done either alone or with their healthcare provider. Then, they discuss with their-provider the items they used and examine how, when, and in what ways they have proven helpful. A key aspect is to have survivors identify other Checklist
items that they might wish to try, and more importantly, what barriers might get in the way of using them.

This format may also be used when facilitating a group of survivors, by having each member fill out the Checklist before the group meets, and then discussing which coping strategies they chose and how they used them. In this way, survivors can learn from their peers how coping strategies might be helpful and worth trying.

In this approach, assessment and suggestive interventions are interwoven. Filling out the Checklist per se is not the most helpful feature, but rather it is the subsequent discussion and implementation that are critical to the recovery process. The Checklist acts as a catalyst and a self-selected guide to negotiate the mourning process and to bolster resilience. The Checklist helps the bereaved begin a healing journey whereby they can develop a new identity and narrative including examples of a number of "RE" verbs, such as re-framing, re-claiming, re-connecting, re-solving and re-building their lives (Meichenbaum, 2013).

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Tom, a 44-year-old mechanic, had always thought of himself as a happy person. He enjoyed his work and was dedicated to his wife Susan and their children. Susan had difficulty controlling her diabetes, which required that Tom be a caretaker of both his children and his wife, a role he took on willingly. One day, with no sign to her husband, Susan slit her wrists in the bathtub. When Tom found her several hours later, the blood-filled bathwater was still warm.

Tom’s traumatic bereavement was such that he was unable to care for his children or return to work. After a month, he sought professional help and was
diagnosed with PTSD. Tom had a particularly overwhelming sense of helplessness, so key to his recovery was instilling a sense of self-efficacy, which made him an ideal candidate for the “Checklist of Strategies for Coping with Grief.”

After stabilization, Tom was introduced to the Checklist. He felt “safer” completing the Checklist with someone, so he and his provider reviewed it together over the course of several sessions. Tom reported that some of the items he had tried were helpful, and he was encouraged to continue those activities. In particular, he found most useful the comfort and help from others such as his siblings.

He identified several new items he would like to try and possible ways to modify items that he thought might be helpful. The provider also suggested modifications that Tom might try, for example, as Tom’s faith was shaken, he suggested new ways that he could reconnect with his spirituality, such as poetry and meditation.

As Tom went through the Checklist, what emerged was evidence of resilience and fortitude, despite his traumatic loss. He had a “toolbox” of things he could use by himself, which empowered him, decreasing his sense of helplessness. He found that he turned to the Checklist around anniversary dates and particularly troubling events, even years later. In essence, the Checklist served as relapse prevention tool.

Although Tom required professional trauma treatment, the Checklist allowed him to take charge of his own recovery, bolstering his resilience.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Checklist provides individuals who are at different phases of their mourning process an opportunity to "take stock" of their present coping strategies and to consider other potentially useful strategies. A discussion about the Checklist with their provider
can encourage individuals to ask themselves, "What can help with my grief now?" It can also help individuals identify coping strategies that can be employed "down the road," when emotional upsurges or sliding into negative self-talk with its accompanying dysfunctional emotions occur, or when preparing for high-risk situations such as anniversary events, thus minimizing being “blind-sided” by unexpected thoughts and emotions.

Research can be conducted to determine the potential usefulness of the Checklist of Strategies for Coping with Grief as a supplemental tool to varied interventions. We welcome feedback on the content and use of the Checklist.

REFERENCES


Appendix XX. 1

CHECKLIST OF STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH GRIEF

Donald Meichenbaum, PhD and Julie Myers, PsyD

The process of grieving is like going on a “journey.” There are multiple routes and people progress at different rates. There is no right way to grieve, no one path to take, no best coping approach. These grief coping strategies list some of the pathways that others have taken in their journey of grieving. It is not meant to be a measure of how well you have coped or how you should cope, since there is no one way to manage the pain following the aftermath of the loss of a loved one, no matter what the cause of his or her death. Rather, the strategies listed are suggestions of things you might consider doing to help you on your journey.

We suggest that you look through this list and put a mark by the coping strategies that you’ve tried. Hopefully, these strategies have helped you. But if you feel that you could use a little extra help, we suggest that you look through the list and then choose some new items that you would like to try. You may find them helpful, and you can add them to the strategies that you’ve already tried. This list is intended to help you discover new ways that you can move forward on your journey through the process of grief. If there are things you have done that you have found helpful that are not on this list of coping strategies, please add them at the end so we can share these with others.

**Sought comfort and help from others**

___1. I examined the thoughts that kept me from seeking help from others, such as the beliefs that “I am a burden to others,” “No one can help me, no one understands,” “I have to do this on my own,” “I should be stronger,” “Listening to the grieving stories of others will make me feel worse,” or “People are tired of hearing about my loss.”

___2. I reached-out to family, friends, elders, or colleagues for comfort and companionship, but gave myself permission to back-off when I needed time alone.

___3. I took the initiative to reach-out to folks from whom I might not normally seek help. I looked for new friends in church groups, social groups, work, school, or I went on the internet to find others who experienced a similar loss. I made a list of these supports to turn to when I was struggling or experiencing pain.

___4. I forced myself to be with people and to do things, even when I didn’t feel like it. I put something on my calendar almost every day, with back-up plans.

___5. I allowed myself to tell people how much I loved, admired, and cared for them.

___6. I hugged and held others, but felt free to tell people when I did not want to be touched.

___7. I learned to grieve and mourn in public.
8. I shared my story with others who I thought would appreciate and benefit from it. I told anyone who would listen to the story of the deceased, even if they had nothing to say back.

9. I gave and received random acts of kindness.

10. I connected with animals and nature, for example, the deceased’s pet, a beautiful sunset, hike, or garden.

11. I cared for or nurtured others. For example I spent time caring for my loved ones or children.

12. I found my faith or religion comforting. I participated in religious, cultural, or ethnic mourning practices, such as attending church services, sitting Shiva, participating in a Wake, celebrating the Day of the Dead, visiting a memorial shrine, etc.

13. I sought help from organized supportive bereavement groups, hospices, religious groups, grief retreats, talking circles, or groups specific to the way the deceased died, such as cancer support groups or survivors of violent loss groups, such as suicide or homicide.

14. I sought help from mental health professionals. For instance, attended counseling sessions or took medications as advised by my providers.

15. I read books written by others who have coped with the loss of a loved one. I read about the grieving process, loss, and advice books about other issues that arose.

16. I made a list of all the professional resources that I could use in a crisis, such as suicide hotlines, mental health crisis lines, mentors, clergy or imam, or mental health providers.

17. I decided not to walk through the grieving process alone, so I visited websites that focus on the grieving process (Refer to the list of websites at the end of this checklist.)

Took care of myself physically and emotionally

18. I examined the thoughts and feelings that kept me from taking care of myself physically and emotionally, such as guilt, shame, sense of lost self, and loss of the will to live.

19. I established routines of daily living. Although things were different, I made new routines and did not berate myself when I was not “perfect.” I maintained personal hygiene, medical care, healthy nutrition, and regular sleep.

20. I reconnected with my body through exercise, yoga, Tai Chi, or expressive arts, allowing myself time to get stronger.

21. I recognized that my brain needed time to heal and for things to improve, so I forgave myself when I made mistakes, became distracted, couldn’t remember or understand.

22. I avoided the excessive use of alcohol, tobacco, recreational drugs, and caffeine as a coping mechanism.

23. I relinquished avoidance and learned to face my fears by engaging in life. I participated in activities that had meaning and kept me occupied, such as work, hobbies, crafts, singing or dancing.

24. I allowed myself to pursue and feel positive emotions, such as compassion toward myself and others, expressions of gratitude, and emotions of love, joy, awe, and hopefulness.
25. I recognized and labeled my feelings, viewing them as a “message” rather than something to avoid. I accepted and dealt with these emotions, understanding that the less I fought them, the more I was able to handle them.

26. I regulated my strong negative emotions using slow smooth breathing, coping self-statements, prayer, or other mood-regulating techniques.

27. I allowed myself time to cry at times and gave words to my emotional pain. I distinguished feelings of grief from other feelings such as fear, uncertainty, guilt, shame, and anger.

28. I expressed difficult feelings through writing and talking to supportive others. I used journaling, reflective writing, letter or poetry writing, or other expressive arts of scrapbooking, dance or music.

29. I engaged in gratitude activities, such as telling others how much I appreciate their love and support, reminding myself of the things that I am thankful for, and being grateful that I knew the deceased.

30. I established a safe and comforting space for myself, either physically or through imagery.

Stayed connected to the deceased and created a new relationship, while recognizing the reality of the loss.

31. I examined the feelings and thoughts that kept me from forming an enduring connection with the deceased, such as the fear of what others would think of me, guilt, shame, humiliation, disgust, or thoughts of anger, revenge or being preoccupied with my grief.

32. I participated in practices, such as visiting the grave or memorial site, celebrating special occasions, prayer and candlelight vigils, public memorials, or commemorative services.

33. I commemorated the deceased’s life with words, pictures, things, or created a small place of honor for the deceased, which I could visit any time I chose.

34. I thought about what I received from the deceased and the legacy and mission to be fulfilled. I became involved in a cause or social action that was important to the deceased or myself.

35. I created a legacy such as planted a tree, started a scholarship or charity in the deceased's name, started an internet blog, or launched new family or community practices.

36. I allowed myself to talk to the deceased and allowed myself to listen. I wrote a letter to my loved one and asked for advice.

37. I asked for forgiveness, shared joys and sorrows, and constructed a farewell message.

38. I accepted that sadness was normal and learned how to be with my grief. I learned how to contain my grief to a time and place of my choosing. However, I understood that intense upsurges of grief may arise unexpectedly and without warning, and I developed coping strategies to handle such events.

39. I used imagery techniques, shared stories and photos of my loved one, or purposefully used reminders such as music or special routines to recall positive memories. I cherished and hung onto specific, meaningful possessions (objects,
pets, etc.). I actively reminisced, holding onto our relationship in my heart and mind.

40. I reached out to help and support others who are grieving for their loved ones. Helping others is a way to reengage in life and combat loneliness and tendencies to withdraw and avoid social contacts.

Created safety and fostered self-empowerment

41. I examined the thoughts that fuel my fears, avoidance, and the belief that I cannot or should not feel happy and that things would never get better.

42. I took a breather and gave myself permission to rest knowing that grieving takes time and patience, with no quick fixes.

43. I identified memories that trigger or overwhelm me and disengaged and/or established boundaries by limiting people, places, or things that cause me stress or overwhelm me so that I could address them one by one, in my own time. I learned to say “no” to unreasonable requests.

44. I identified important activities, places, or things that I was avoiding due to fear of my grief reactions. I slowly reintroduced them or allowed myself to choose those I never wanted to encounter again.

45. I began to think of myself as a “survivor,” if not a “thriver” of my own story, rather than as a “victim.” I reminded myself of my strengths and of all the hard times that I have gotten through in the past.

46. I wrote out reminders of how to cope and put them on my fridge, cell phone, or computer. I looked at them when I was struggling and reminded myself of ways to be resilient.

47. I created a plan about how to cope with difficult times. I learned to anticipate and recognize potential “hot spots” of when things are most difficult. I rated each day on a 1 to 10 point scale on how well I was doing. I asked myself what I can do to make things better and increase my rating. I worked on increasing the number of good days compared to the number of bad days.

48. I avoided thinking “This is just how it is,” realizing that I have choices no matter how hard life is. I came to recognize that emotional pain can be a way to stay connected with my loved one.

49. When I was overwhelmed by negative memories of the past, I avoided “time-sliding” into the past. a) I “grounded” myself to the present by refocusing my attention on the environment around me, b) I changed my self-talk by telling myself “I am safe and that this will pass,” c) I controlled my bodily reactions by slowing down my breathing, and d) I oriented to people’s faces, voices or touch or called for help from a friend.

Moved toward a future outlook and a stronger sense of self

50. I examined the thoughts and feelings that kept me from moving forward, such as “I am dishonoring the deceased by getting better,” or “I am leaving him/her behind,” or “Feeling happier means that he/she is no longer important to me,” or that “My love for him/her is fading.”

51. I regained my sense of hope for the future. I worked to reestablish a sense of purpose, with meaningful short-, mid-, and long-term goals. I asked myself, “Is it
okay to be okay?” and decided to create a life worth living, taking control of my future.

52. I worked on regaining my sense of self-identity, knowing that my life had changed, but that I am still me. I focus on what is most important. I developed new goals and action plans, consistent with what I value.

53. I created purpose by keeping the memory of the deceased alive in others. I kept others aware of the circumstances of the death, so that some good could come from the loss. I transformed my grief and emotional pain into meaning-making activities that created something “good and helpful,” for example Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention.

54. I use my faith-based and religious and spiritual beliefs to comfort me and move on. People hold different beliefs, such as "My loved one can continue to influence the lives of others in the world," or "My loved one is no longer suffering and is in a safe place," or "We will be reunited in the future."

55. I examined the reasons why some of the activities that have been helpful to others in the grief process were not helpful for me, and what I can do to help myself further in the journey through grief.

Other coping activities or strategies I have used to cope with my loss

___________________________________________
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___________________________________________
___________________________________________

Please feel free to let us know if you have any comments about this list, so we can be of assistance to others like yourself. You can reach the authors by e-mail at dhmeich@aol.com or at Julie.Myers100@gmail.com

Helpful websites:
www.griefnet.org
www.compassionatefriends.org
www.dougy.org
www.taps.org
www.missfoundation.org
www.afsp.org/coping-with-suicide
www.opentohope.com