

Invisible Grief: Addressing the Needs of Lesbian Widows

Vicky Whipple

Introduction

This article discusses the commonalities and differences between heterosexual and lesbian widows, then outlines how professionals can better respond to grief issues in the lesbian community. The specific needs of lesbians are not addressed in traditional grief literature (Becvar, 2001; Wolfelt, 1992), although books on disenfranchised grief include lesbians (Walter, 2003). Even books about counseling the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community (Perez, DeBord, & Bieschke, 2000; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002) either do not discuss counseling a lesbian whose partner has died or mention it only briefly. The few books available to the lesbian community are anecdotal in nature (Bono, 2002; Butler, 1991).

This article, then, is critical to beginning the process of training informed, sensitive counselors to work with widowed lesbians. It explains to readers the unique problems lesbian widows encounter and suggests how counselors can address those concerns.

For counselors unfamiliar with lesbian relationships, this article clarifies issues that lesbian widows face that are not faced by married widows. For counselors already working with lesbians, this article will increase sensitivity to the trauma of being widowed and offer concrete suggestions of how to effectively support these widows.

Heterosexual and lesbian widows have many things in common. They have both experienced the pain of losing their significant other. They both face the need to create a new life for themselves as single

women in a coupled world. Both find that those who have not been widowed themselves do not really understand how incredibly painful the experience is. Likewise, others do not understand the length of time it takes to grieve (Davidson & Doka, 1999; Walter, 2003; Whipple, 2003).

Despite these commonalities, however, there are significant ways that lesbian widows differ from heterosexual widows. One has to do with the nature of the relationship itself. Women in general are more relationship-focused than men, and a lesbian relationship involves the intense connectedness of two women (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002; Seem, 2001). Having to deal regularly with heterosexism and homophobia can also draw lesbian partners closer together (Ossana, 2000; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Thus, the loss of a partner profoundly shakes the surviving lesbian's world and sense of self.

Lesbian widows encounter hassles with the legal system that straight women do not face because lesbian relationships are not legally recognized (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Even if her partner left a will and signed over power of attorney to her, the lesbian widow may be denied legal and financial rights automatically accorded to heterosexual widows (Whipple, 2003).

The loss of a "friend" is not accorded equal status with the loss of a husband in our society, the legitimacy of the relationship itself unacknowledged (Walter, 2003). While a heterosexual widow may receive cards and words of comfort from colleagues and neighbors, lesbian widows who are not out at work or in their community for fear of losing their job or housing will not receive such support.

In addition, organizations currently providing bereavement groups automatically offer support services to married widows while very few groups exist for lesbians, and then only in large cities. Even health services working solely with lesbians rarely offer such groups (Walter, 2003; Whipple, 2003). Yet talking to other widows is considered one of the most effective ways to cope with grief (Lund, 1999; Walter, 2003).

Many books address the needs of heterosexual widows (Caine, 1990; Felber, 2000), but not a single book exists dedicated solely to lesbian widows, although I am in the process of writing such a book

(Whipple, 2003). In the absence of professional and written support services, many lesbians turn to their friends, family, and/or the local lesbian community for support (Walter, 2003; Whipple, 2003). There are complications to doing so, however. Even the most supportive family and friends do not necessarily understand the grief process or how to be supportive. Few lesbian health services offer widow support groups. And lesbians not well-connected to their local community suffer in isolation, the worst way to face the grief recovery process (Lund, 1999; Walter, 2003).

There are several ways that the unique needs of lesbian widows can be addressed. Assisting lesbians with creating a new life after their partners' deaths must take into consideration whether or not the lesbian is out and to whom and whether or not she wants to come out to others at this time. Counselors will also need to assist widows with defining a new place for themselves as single women in the local lesbian community (Walter, 2003; Whipple, 2003).

From a postmodern perspective, the lesbian widow needs support for a grief process that involves reconstructing meaning of her experience (Walter, 2003). Helping widows develop rituals, memorials, and ways of coping with anniversary dates are part of that meaning-making process (Walter, 2003; Whipple, 2003).

Creating grief support groups specifically for lesbians would be a positive step to take where possible, but in the absence of the ability to provide this service, counselors can assist widows with creating support networks for themselves. Unlike heterosexual widows, however, family is not necessarily where lesbians find support (Walter, 2003; Whipple, 2003). In addition, the counselor may need to educate lesbian friends about how to be supportive, and widows may need skills for responding to inappropriate or unhelpful remarks made by others (Walter, 2003; Whipple, 2003).

Dealing with legal and financial hassles due to their legally unrecognized relationship adds another layer of loss to the lesbian widow's grief process (Walter, 2003; Whipple, 2003). Counselors can lend emotional support and provide information about local resources. Finally, counselors and the counseling profession can take the lead in providing more written resources for lesbian widows.

Acceptance of lesbians and their relationships is an understood “given” when working with this population (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Counselors, however, will also need knowledge of both grief counseling and the lesbian community beyond what is provided in this article in order to act on any of the above recommendations. Further training in these two areas would, therefore, be necessary (Walter, 2003).

Summary

Although there are some commonalities between lesbian and heterosexual widows, lesbians face unique challenges. The relationship between two women is generally more intense than between a man and a woman, and homophobia and heterosexism in society tend to draw lesbian partners even closer together. Thus the loss of a partner shatters the lesbian’s world. In addition, lesbians encounter hassles with the legal system because their relationship is not recognized as a legal marriage. Lesbians who are not “out” at work or to their families won’t have the seriousness of their loss validated by others. Few professional resources are available for lesbian widows, and well-meaning friends or family may not understand how to be supportive.

Counselors working with lesbian widows can address these needs in several ways. Working sensitively around the issue of whether the widow is out or not and to whom is important; counselors must be careful to not push lesbians to seek support from family or others who have not been accepting in the past. Counselors can empower lesbian widows to create new meaning in their lives and, at the same time, develop rituals of remembrance to make a place for the deceased partner in that new life. There is also a great need for more support groups and written materials to assist lesbian widows.

Conclusion

If individual counselors will educate themselves about lesbians and the unique needs of lesbian widows, they will be able to work

with this population more sensitively. If the counseling profession as a whole makes a commitment to create more support services for this population, the grief of lesbian widows will be validated rather than remain invisible.

References

- Becvar, D. S. (2001). *In the presence of grief: Helping family members resolve death, dying, and bereavement issues*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Bono, C. (2002). *The end of innocence: A memoir*. Los Angeles: Advocate Books.
- Butler, S., & Rosenblum, B. (1991). *Cancer in two voices*. Duluth, MN: Spinsters Ink.
- Caine, L. (1990). *Being a widow*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Davidson, J. D., & Doka, K. J. (Eds.). (1999). *Living with grief at work, at school, at worship*. Washington, DC: Hospice Foundation of America.
- Felber, M. (2000). *Finding your way after your spouse dies*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press.
- Lund, D. A. (1999). Giving and receiving help during later life spousal bereavement. In J. D. Davidson & K. J. Doka, (Eds.), *Living with grief at work, at school, at worship*. Washington, DC: Hospice Foundation of America.
- Ossana, S. M. (2000). Relationship and couples counseling. In R.M.Perez, K.A. DeBord, & K.J. Bieschke, (Eds.), *Handbook of counseling and psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Perez, R. M., DeBord, K. A., & Bieschke, K. J. (2000). *Handbook of counseling and psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Ritter, K. Y. & Terndrup, A. I. (2002). *Handbook of affirmative psychotherapy with lesbians and gay men*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Seem, S. R. (2001). Feminist family therapy: For heterosexual couples and families only? In K. M. May (Ed.), *Feminist family therapy*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Walter, C. A. (2003). *The loss of a life partner: Narratives of the bereaved*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Whipple, V. (2003). *Invisible grief: Experiences of lesbian widows*. Manuscript in preparation for publication.
- Wolfelt, A.D. (1992). *Understanding grief: Helping yourself heal*. Levittown, PA: Accelerated Development.