

CNL-518 Topic 8: Bereavement Across the Life Span

Directions: One's understanding of death and the bereavement process changes over the life span. Using the matrix provided below, summarize how individuals perceive the loss of a loved one throughout the lifespan. Create a short vignette for each age group and include the role of spirituality and/or Christian principles in the process. Include developmentally appropriate, ethical, and culturally relevant counseling interventions for promoting resilience and optimum development and wellness. Each stage should include at least one scholarly citation. Write in complete sentences. The first stage has been completed for you as an example. Include at least two peer-reviewed, scholarly sources and an APA-formatted reference page.

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Baby and Toddler	Perception of grief: Based on Piaget's theory that characterizes children's concepts as egocentric, a baby's perception or cognition of grief would be limited to a sense of fear and loss due to separation anxiety (Slaughter, 2005).	Vignette: The baby's mother unexpectedly dies after a short illness. The baby had bonded and was feeling safe with their primary caregiver; however, the loss creates stress and confusion for the child. The brother and sister of the mother become the baby's guardians, but the baby is not bonding well with them. The new guardians seek support at their local church by requesting prayer and seeking fellowship.	Counseling interventions: To support the family system, structural family therapy would provide opportunities for conceptualization and restructuring of the new family system through a family therapy map. The family therapy map is different from a genogram because it considers intrafamily dynamics, social and life context stressors (Calapinto, 2019). The family therapy map provides a visual representation to better explore patterns of behavior, interactions, and possible protective factors.

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Preschool Age	Perception of Grief: Children's understanding of death depends on their culture and cognitive development (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2023). Preschoolers often think death is temporary and mysterious, like a spirit that appears suddenly at night and takes you away. The child may think their loved one went to sleep and is not going to wake up. These children are in Piaget's preoperational stage, which includes magical thinking and egocentrism and they have difficulty understanding abstract ideas.	Vignette: The child's grandmother passes away and she was a big part of the child's life. Their parents tell them that grandma is in heaven now with God and that she is healthy, happy, and safe. They get the child a Christian book about death and dying called, "Someone I Love Died" and read it with the child when they go to bed at night. Then they talk about fond memories of grandma and say prayers and ask God to protect grandma and tell her they miss her. This comforts the child and reduces anxiety. The child feels connected to their grandmother through memories and faith.	Counseling interventions: Preschoolers typically lack the verbal skills to express difficult emotions. Child-centered play therapy aligns with the child's developmental stage, and helps them express feelings and ask questions about their grandmother's death through storytelling, drawing, sand play, and toys (Authoracare, 2025). It uses familiar music, toys, or stories from the child's culture and respects their family's values and beliefs. Caregivers are involved in ways that match their cultural traditions and parenting style. The child can make up stories where they are in control of what happens, and it can help them regulate their emotions and build resilience. Incorporating spirituality, like using Christian stories, helps the child find comfort and meaning and reassures them. It also involves the family strengthening their ability to support the child and helps maintain emotional connection.

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Grade School Age	Perception of Grief: Around 5 to 7, children transition from Piaget’s preoperational stage to the concrete operational stage, and they start to realize death is permanent, affects everyone, and the body no longer functions (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2023). Young children may regress, feel guilty, or deny the death. Older kids may show anger, have issues at school, or have physical symptoms like stomach aches. As they grow, they gain better coping skills and may shift between grief and regular activities.	Vignette: A third grader loses his father in a car accident. Initially, he seems quiet but like he is adjusting well. He continues to attend school and play soccer. However, a couple of months later, his teacher notices he seems angry and withdrawn and cannot focus in class. He complains that his stomach hurts all the time. He tells his mother he is mad at God for taking his father away. The boy can express his thoughts and feelings through his faith, helping him see that God is not punishing him but is with him in his pain. Scripture can provide comfort. The boy and his mother can share Bible verses about eternal life. This will reinforce that his dad is with God and still part of his life through faith. This spiritual support can help the boy feel safe, build coping skills, and find hope.	Counseling interventions: Cognitive-behavioral play therapy that is grief-focused provides creative activities that can help the boy express feelings like guilt or anger and thoughts like, “God took my dad.” It includes cultural toys, art, and stories, respects family beliefs and values, and involves caregivers in familiar ways. CBT and creative activities support his faith and include his family, which can help him feel secure and supported. This therapy addresses maladaptive thoughts and behaviors from grief, helps children adapt to their new life, and reduces the risk of anxiety or depression (Breen et al., 2023; Cognitive, 2025). The boy can do creative activities like creating a memory box to feel close to his dad (Marlow, 2025). He can decorate it and fill it with special things of his dad’s, and talk with his mom about what they mean to him. He can also journal. Writing will allow him to express his thoughts without talking and release emotions.

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Adolescence /Teenage Years	Perception of Grief: Losing someone close can be very upsetting and confusing in the adolescence stage which includes forming identity, emotional sensitivity, and the need for belonging (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2023). It is a time of personal and physical change for teens. Grief at this age can lead to guilt, health issues, low self-esteem, substance use, poor school performance, relationship problems, and even suicidal thoughts. Studies reveal that adolescents respond to a loved one's death in complex ways. Some mature quickly, while others question their worldview, seeing life as unpredictable. This period pushes them to find meaning in the loss as they continue to form their identity (Farella & Gobbi, 2021). Because fitting in is so important, younger teens may avoid talking about their grief so they do not stand out, which can lead to physical symptoms like headaches that reflect deeper emotional pain.	Vignette: A 15-year-old boy recently lost his grandmother, who helped raise him and was a spiritual mentor in his life. Since she passed, he has become withdrawn, is struggling to focus in school, and questions why God allowed his grandmother to die. He was raised in a Christian household and previously found comfort in prayer and attending church youth groups, but now he avoids both. He shares that he feels distant from God and guilty for being angry with Him. His parents who are also grieving, encourage him to talk to a counselor and go to church with them.	Counseling interventions: Grief-focused CBT gives teens a safe space to share their feelings, make sense of their thoughts, and learn healthy ways to cope with loss (Anwar, 2023). It supports their need for privacy, includes family when helpful, and honors their cultural and spiritual values. This helps them grow stronger and feel more grounded through the healing process. In counseling, the boy is taught to express his feelings and explore his faith through scripture and creative activities like a memory bracelet. He designs his own leather bracelet and wears it to help him feel connected to his grandmother when he feels lonely and misses her (Marlow, 2025). He learns that grief and questioning are a normal part of healing and spiritual growth (Meyer, 2022). CBT helps him to recognize and challenge negative thoughts that may be contributing to his grief (Charlie, 2025). With encouragement, he begins to reconnect with his faith and community, gets stronger and starts having hope and a deeper sense of identity. The counselor also tells him about The Resilience Songwriting Program, which helps grieving teens express

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			emotions, learn coping skills, and connect with their peers through music (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2023). With support from music therapists, they write songs to process grief, improve self-esteem, and find meaning.
Adulthood	Perception of grief: Adults often see grief as a personal process that affects their emotions, identity, and daily life. Their response is impacted by life experience, culture, and spiritual beliefs. Some try to stay strong, while others view grief as part of healing. Young adults often feel more strongly about death because they are just starting to build their lives. They may see death at this stage as unfair, taking away someone's future. As a result, they are more likely to experience prolonged grief and mental health challenges (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2023). Adults may move through stages like denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Washington, n.d.), though everyone grieves differently. People may go through the stages in a different order, skip some, or feel grief again later in life. They may	Vignette: A 45-year-old man loses his wife to cancer. He has two children. His wife fought a long battle, and he tried to be strong for his family, but now he is overwhelmed with loneliness, sadness, and anger at God. He wonders why God did not answer his many prayers for healing for his wife and he begins to question his faith. He still goes to church, but his heart is not in it. He feels distanced from God and is not sure how to move forward without his wife, as a single parent. He feels fearful and even guilty for still being alive.	Counseling interventions: The man receives emotional support through grief counseling. His counselor uses culturally sensitive CBT to help him challenge negative thoughts and manage grief, promoting acceptance and resilience (Charlie, 2025). They also employ acceptance and commitment therapy to help the man stop avoiding his emotions and instead accept them as normal reactions to his loss and take steps forward (Cleveland, 2024). He explores his grief through faith and is reminded that doubt and sorrow are part of healing, and even Jesus grieved. Scripture helps him feel God's presence in his pain. He writes prayers and letters to his wife and to God, which helps him express his emotions. Friends occasionally visit to share memories with his wife over dinner and offer connection and comfort.

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	struggle to believe the loss, feel angry or blameful, wish to reverse it, withdraw in sadness, and eventually find peace. Grieving involves accepting loss, facing pain, adjusting to life without what was lost, and holding on to meaningful memories. Denial and avoidance are common but true healing comes from facing emotions and slowly rebuilding life. Remembering good moments can bring comfort and support emotional healing. The death of a child can be particularly hard and some may never recover (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2023). Losing a partner in young adulthood can be traumatic, not just because of the loss, but because it often happens unexpectedly. Losing parents is also a significant loss.		Over time, his faith becomes a source of strength. He joins a support group at his church called GriefShare, where he meets other Christians who have lost their spouses. While counseling is helpful, deeper healing often comes through shared support (GriefShare, 2025).
Late Adulthood	Perception of grief: Loss is common in older age. While most people cope over time, some develop complicated grief, with strong symptoms of depression, ongoing grief, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress. (Buur et al., 2025). Older adults who lose a child or grandchild often experience deep, lasting grief and may struggle to fully come to terms with the loss, even decades later (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2023). Losing a partner is a very	Vignette: A 75-year-old widow feels deep sorrow after losing her husband of 50 years. The silence at home is deafening, and she often asks God, “Why now?” Still, she turns to her faith for comfort. She finds hope in scripture. Her church supports her, and hymns bring her peace. She journals and prays to cope with her grief. Over time, her pain becomes lighter. She begins helping other widows, saying, “Grief is	Counseling interventions: Older adults are deeply affected by grief. Most of them experience normal grieving, but some develop prolonged grief or major depression and may need special therapy (Colvin, 2021). Grief counseling for older adults should be respectful, age-appropriate, and culturally sensitive. Approaches like reminiscence therapy and life review help them process loss and reflect on meaningful memories to

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	personal and unique loss, especially after a close, long-term relationship. Society often expects the grieving person to mourn for a certain time and then let it go. If they show interest in dating too soon, others may judge them. While the mourning period is not formally defined, many see a year as acceptable.	love with nowhere to go, but I give mine to God now.” Her faith doesn’t take away the loss, but it gives her strength and renewed purpose.	find purpose (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2023). Interventions should match their pace and abilities, including spiritual beliefs, family traditions, and supportive rituals. Creative tools like storytelling, music, and family involvement can support healing. Strong, meaningful relationships are especially helpful in the first two years after a loss (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2023). Other research shows social support has a limited impact, and support networks may grow early on but shrink over time. What matters most is the quality of support. Individual counseling can help older bereaved spouses talk about their feelings, which lends to less depression and fewer problems with daily functioning. CBT is effective in helping people understand their loss, manage emotions, find meaning in the death, and help with complicated grief reactions (Buur et al., 2025). Older adults can use exposure exercises, grief education, and letter writing to traverse their grief. Family sessions can be incorporated and follow-up is recommended. For older adults, therapy should consider memory

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			difficulties and the stress of handling new daily tasks.

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