



# Personality and Grief:

## A Unique Perspective of Mutual Impact

**MyNHPCO Bereavement Professional Community Chat**  
**May 2019**

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# Personality and Grief: A Unique Perspective of Mutual Impact

*MyNHPCO Bereavement Professional  
Community Chat*

*May 1, 2019*

# Today's Speaker



Paula Bunn,  
LMFT, FT

- The Elizabeth Hospice

# Learning Objectives

1

Explain and demonstrate the mutual impact of grief and personality styles

2

Predict instances in which bereavement could diminish the ability to function among those with rigid personality styles

3

Identify a practical approach for supporting those whose personality is a significant factor in the healing process





# Personality and Grief



What is **GRIEF**?

an individualized  
and normal  
response to loss

the inward  
experience of a loss

Grief has emotional,  
cognitive, physical,  
behavioral, social, and  
philosophical/spiritual  
dimensions.

What do we mean by BEREAVEMENT ?

a state of living with a loss

a state of having experienced the death of someone to whom one feels attached

the adjustment that results from that loss

a normal process a person goes through when someone dies.

We recognize  
COMPLICATED Grief

when the grief  
process does not  
follow the  
expected pattern

It is distinguished from a  
simple grief process by its  
severity, duration, and  
the person's level of  
functioning

# Grief

Simple  
grief



Complicated  
grief

# Mediators of Grief

Who is the person  
that has deceased

How the person died

Personality  
variables

Existing social  
support system

The nature of the  
attachment

Concurrent stressors

# Personality and Grief





# Role of Supportive Relationships in the Grief Process



# Role of Supportive Relationships

*The degree of perceived emotional and social support from others is significant in the grieving process.*

*While social support can lessen the blow of a loss, it does not accelerate the grief process.*



(Worden, 2009)

# Mediators of Social Support

Support Satisfaction

Social Role Involvement

Religious Resources and Ethnic  
Expectations

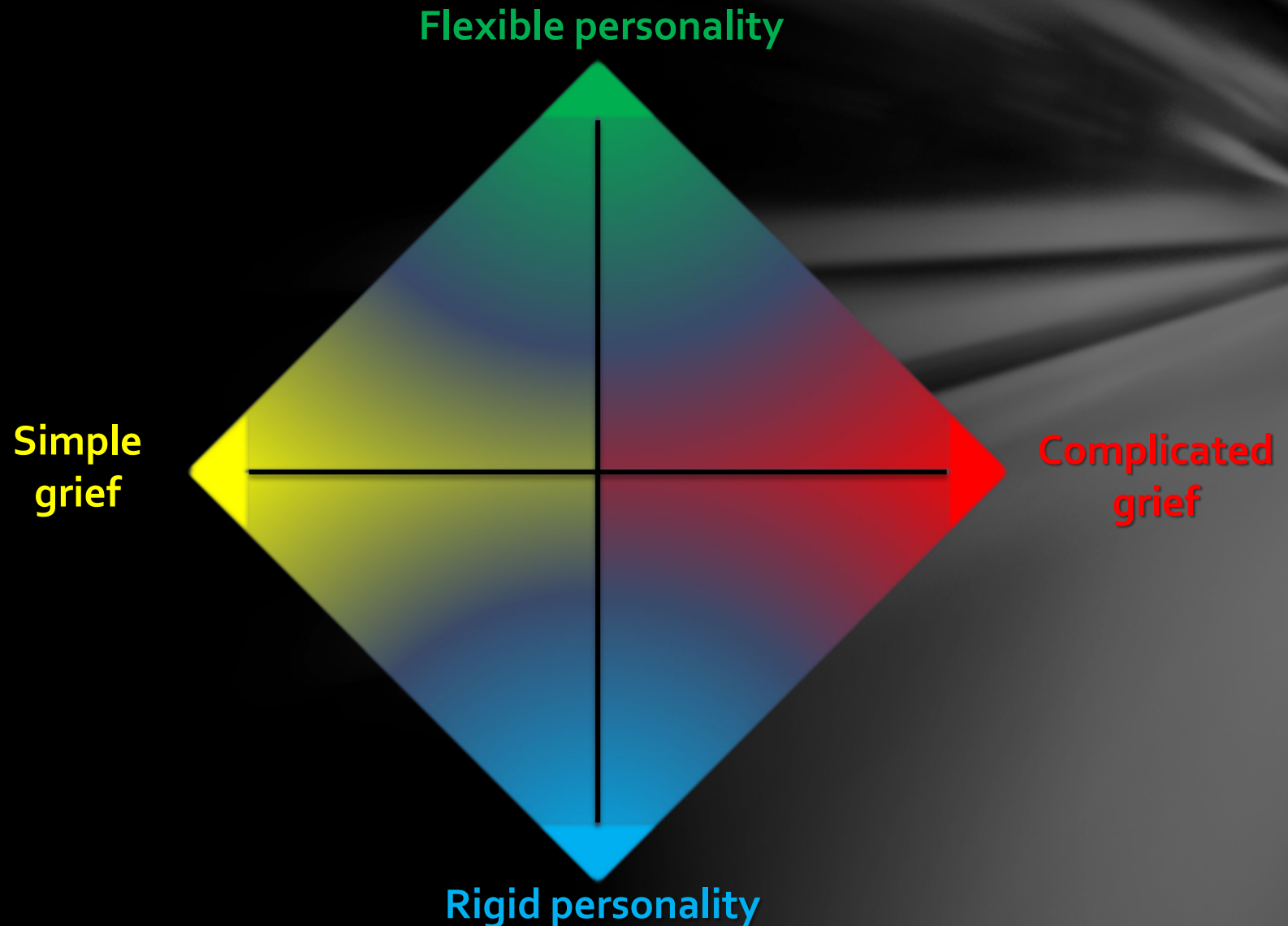
# Personality

Flexible personality



Rigid personality

# Effects of Personality on Relationships





# Case Study & Interventions

“Joseph”

# Demographics

Joseph was a 72 year-old, Caucasian, heterosexual, widowed male

Spouse/Patient, died after 16 days on hospice service

Married 23 years (3<sup>rd</sup> marriage); 1 adult stepson

High socioeconomic status

No spiritual belief system

Atypical course of counseling in hospice context: 2 years and 2 months

# Presenting Problems

Initial assessment: High bereavement risk

No appetite, Losing weight, Insomnia

Anxious, Lonely, Overt anger, Short-term memory loss

Risk factors for complicated grief:

Living alone, inadequate coping skills, familial conflict, impacted by stepson's reported chemical dependency

And – avoided internal grief process by projecting anger and blaming stepson.



# Personality Traits, Behaviors & Strengths

Arrogant

Demanding

Lack of empathy

Entitled

Poor problem-solving behaviors

Saw others as "letting (him) down"

Accepted no responsibility for relational conflict

Blame-shifting

"Victim"

Rigid

Intelligent

Poor communication skills

Excessive story-telling in graphic detail

"Self-righteous"

Attractive

# Approach and Interventions

- Managing vs treating his personality style

- Most important factor: Ability to form a relationship with therapist

Other factors that contributed to success:

- - Time (2 years)
  - Motivated (eventually)
  - Could partially acknowledge his role (eventually)

# Approach and Interventions



Tolerated transference & countertransference



Patient with storytelling and pace



Accepted client's reason for counseling



Not overly nurturing; not overly attached stance

# Approach and Interventions

- ❑ Avoided trying to prove a point or criticize
- ❑ Avoided confronting his “specialness”
- ❑ Allowed him to “teach” or “enlighten” me
- ❑ Chose one behavior & ignored other behavior/personality deficits
- ❑ Framed solutions as ways of getting what he wanted

# Summary of Therapeutic Approach

1

## Behavioral techniques

- Reinforcement
- Extinction

2

## Conversational techniques

- Questions that helped him see consequences
- Constructive feedback after support & empathy

3

## Diagnostic Reframing

- Reframed desired behavior as a better version of his personality style

# Summary and Conclusions

Supportive relationships & personality mutually impact one another and directly affect one's grief experience.

Awareness of interplay between personality & grief allows one to better support clients.

Supportive relationships are often detrimentally affected by personality styles, especially with complicated grief.

# Summary and Conclusions

## Helpful interventions:

- Behavioral Techniques
- Conversational Techniques
- Diagnostic Reframing

(Lester/Cross Country Education, G. 2014. Personality disorders and the DSM-5. Brentwood, TN: Cross Country Education)



# Next Steps



Future discussion and  
research in this area

# Questions?



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