



Submodule 8.1 - Application of Attachment Theory in Client Evaluation and Support

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals form emotional bonds, react to separation, and experience the loss of a loved one. According to this theory, early experiences with attachment figures (parents, guardians) shape internal working models, i.e., mental representations of self, others, and relationships, which influence how individuals will handle grief in adulthood. As a GRIEF COACH, it is essential to understand these attachment issues in order to evaluate the specific needs of the bereaved and provide them with appropriate support.

Attachment theory distinguishes four main attachment styles: secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized. People with secure attachments usually have confidence in themselves and others, can express their emotions, and seek support when needed. When dealing with grief, they may experience great sadness, but they are able to mobilize their internal and relational resources to navigate through this challenge. Conversely, people with insecure attachment (anxious-ambivalent, avoidant or disorganized) may struggle more with loss, due to their emotional vulnerability, distrust of others, or feelings of powerlessness.

To assess the attachment style of the bereaved, the GRIEF COACH can rely on various tools, such as the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) or the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR). These questionnaires explore individuals' attachment representations by asking them about their past and present relationships, their emotion regulation strategies, and their ability to make sense of their experiences. The coach can also pay attention to non-verbal clues, such as voice tonality, facial expressions, or body posture, which may reflect

underlying attachment issues.

Once the attachment style is identified, the GRIEF COACH can adapt his or her approach to meet the specific needs of the bereaved. For people with secure attachment, it will primarily be about validating their experience, strengthening their resources, and encouraging them to maintain supportive links with their loved ones. For people with anxious-ambivalent attachment, who may tend to cling to their grief or desperately seek the presence of the deceased, the coach can help them develop their emotional autonomy, tolerate uncertainty, and find new sources of comfort. For people with avoidant attachment, who may tend to minimize their grief or self-isolate, the coach can invite them to reconnect with their emotions, allow themselves to ask for help, and create authentic bonds with others.

A compelling example of the application of attachment theory in grief coaching is Julie, a 45-year-old woman who lost her husband to cancer. In our initial sessions, I noticed that Julie had a tendency to intellectualize her grief, to be very rational and to avoid emotional subjects. She often repeated to me that she had to "be strong for her children" and that she "wasn't allowed to collapse". By exploring her attachment history, I understood that Julie had been raised by a demanding and not very affectionate mother, who valued independence and performance over emotional needs. Julie had consequently developed an avoidant attachment style, characterized by minimization of distress and emotional over-regulation. In our work, I gradually invited Julie to reconnect with her emotions, providing her with a safe space to express and accept them. I also encouraged her to allow herself moments of vulnerability with her loved ones, sharing her grief with them, and accepting their support. Gradually, Julie was able to soften her emotional control, experience her grief more authentically, and form deeper connections with her children and friends.

Implementing attachment theory in grief coaching requires significant relational finesse and the ability to adjust in real-time to the specific needs of the bereaved. It's not about rigidly categorizing them or imposing standardized strategies, but truly understanding their internal operations to provide them with a bespoke support program. The GRIEF COACH must demonstrate great empathy, active listening, and tolerance to complexity, in order to embrace the various facets of the bereaved's experience. They must also cultivate their own inner security and emotional regulation, to provide a stable and reassuring presence to the people they support.

By integrating attachment theory into their practice, the GRIEF COACH has a valuable tool to understand the relational and emotional issues underpinning the bereavement process. They can truly offer a customized support plan that adjusts to the specific needs of each bereaved individual, based on their attachment style and life history. By doing so, they help to strengthen the resilience of the people they support, assisting them in developing internal and relational resources to navigate this challenge. Attachment theory reminds us that grief is primarily a relational experience that involves our past, present, and future bonds, and requires both sensitive and structuring support to be navigated in a healthy and

constructive manner.

Takeaway points:

- Attachment theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals form emotional bonds, react to separation, and navigate the loss of a loved one.
- Early experiences with attachment figures shape internal working models that influence how individuals will handle grief in adulthood.
- There are four main attachment styles: secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized. People with insecure attachments may struggle more in dealing with loss.
- To assess attachment style, the GRIEF COACH can use tools like the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) or Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR), and be attentive to non-verbal cues.
- The GRIEF COACH needs to adapt their approach based on the identified attachment style, strengthening the resources of people with secure attachments, fostering emotional autonomy in those with anxious-ambivalent attachments, and inviting those with avoidant attachments to reconnect with their emotions.
- Implementing attachment theory requires significant relational finesse, active listening, and the ability to adjust to the specific needs of each bereaved individual.
- By integrating attachment theory in their practice, GRIEF COACHES can provide customized support that strengthens the resilience of the bereaved, helping them develop internal and relational resources to navigate through their hardship.