

Chapter 46

Flying With Eddie: Complicated Grief in the Military

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over 2.4 million American service men and women were deployed overseas between 2001 to 2011. Families of these service members include over one million spouses and two million children under the age of 18. There is a growing need for counselors to understand the mental health needs of military service men and woman, and the unique aspects of military culture. This chapter will demonstrate how to practically apply the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) to counseling work with the military population through a case study.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE

Case Description

Eddie calls my private practice office for counseling, stating that he recently lost a friend in an accident and people are urging him to talk with someone. He states he is in the military and does not want to see a counselor on base because he does not want anyone to find out he is in counseling. He is tearful on the phone and asks for the first available time slot. I previously served fourteen years in the military as an aviator before becoming a counselor. I schedule him for an intake the very next day.

Eddie arrives promptly at the office in jeans and a collared shirt. He is groomed, though his eyes are swollen and red. He appears nervous as I invite him into the counseling space. When asked what brings him into counseling today, Eddie tears up. Eventually, he blurts out that his best friend, who was in the same aviation squadron as him, died. A week ago his friend was completing an annual flight evaluation in marginal weather, and Air Traffic Control lost radar on the airplane. Three days later the plane was found in the ocean underneath the area where the plane had been operating. Both pilots died in the incident.

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Since that time Eddie reports difficulty sleeping and eating. He reports increased use of alcohol. He no longer drives his own car but instead drives his best friend's car around. He is in shock about the mishap and is angry the squadron has started to continue normal operations. Eddie states that he knows the squadron needs to continue workups before they leave on their six-month deployment in three weeks. He is not sure whether he can go on this deployment, whether it is safe for him to fly an aircraft under these circumstances. He is concerned that if he does not go on this deployment, it will impact his career. "I just can't get myself together!"

I utilize a biopsychosocial assessment during the intake session to assess the psychological, social, and cultural factors that impact Eddie. Eddie is from a middle-class background, in which his parents urged him to seek scholarship opportunities for college. Eddie is a white male who entered the Naval Academy after high school. Upon his graduation from the Naval Academy, he entered the pilot training program in the Navy and became a helicopter pilot. He has served as an active duty officer for five years and is currently on a tour of sea duty that is three years in duration. Eddie is 27 years old, identifies as Catholic, and is a Lieutenant (O-3) (Redmond et al., 2015) in the Navy. He is scheduled to leave for deployment onboard a ship in three weeks. He has been married for five years and has no children. He and his wife live off base. He states no family history of mental illness or substance use. Eddie reports this is the first time he has experienced a significant death in his life. Eddie reports that there are some negative aspects of the military, but overall, he enjoys his occupation and lifestyle.

Literature Review

The military as a social institution has a distinct culture, and within the larger culture, subcultures are based on an individual's affiliation with a specific branch of the military, such as the Navy, Air Force, or Army, etc. (Branson, 2017). In April 2019, the Navy reported a total force of 332, 507 active duty members and 101, 018 reserve members (www.navy.mil). Men and women who are part of the Navy are involved in various careers that include aviation, navy seals, search and rescue, medical, cryptology, meteorology, navigation, explosive ordinance disposal, etc. (www.navy.mil). A unique aspect of the Navy is the sailor's experience with "shipboard life" during their sea tour, which they rotate with a shore tour (Wilcove, Schwerin, & Kline, 2009, p. 446). During a sea tour a sailor typically leaves for a six-month deployment on board a US Fleet ship or submarine, and is forward deployed to strategic locations around the globe.

Redmond et al. (2015) summarized the structure and culture of the US military for those who may not have an understanding of that culture. Service members learn military cultural norms during their indoctrination training, which teaches military personnel how to think, communicate, and interact with each other. Individual thinking transforms from individualist to collectivist thinking that focuses on completing the mission. Service members learn a new communication style, which emphasizes professionalism in greetings (e.g., using *sir* or *ma'am*), and common military terms and acronyms (e.g., *galley* means *dining room*; *O-6* stands for *Captain*) (Redmond et al., 2015). Additionally, service members learn new ways of interacting, in which salutes replace handshakes. Rules of interaction focus on following a chain of command and maintaining professional relationships with coworkers.

Within the military culture, a member's social status depends on the subculture with which they identify. Subcultures include differences common to many groups of people such as gender, sexual orientation, social class, race, ethnicity, and age, but there are additional subcultures in the military (Branson, 2017). Each service branch has a distinct culture, and rivalries exist between services, as evidenced in

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