ROLE PLAY #2: Assessment and Counseling With a Grieving Client

**Counselor:** Well, thank you for coming in David. I'm wondering how I can help you today. **David**: Well, I don't know. I'm pretty anxious about being here and I wasn’t really sure that I wanted to come at all but my friends told me that it was really something I needed to do so….

**Counselor:** So you're anxious about being here and your friends convinced you to come.

**David**: Yeah.

**Counselor:** Tell me more about that.

**David**: Well, I can't remember how much I told you on the phone when I called to make the appointment, but my wife died about six months ago and since then I've really been…I mean I really miss her and, uh, and it's been hard for me to kind of do things.

**Counselor**: So you’ve been going through a really hard time? It has been really hard.

**David**: Yes.

**Counselor**: I can even see as you talk about it that you're really sad, and it's difficult for you to talk about it.

**David:** Yeah. Yeah, she was everything, you know? We met in high school and dated all through high school and then uh…she was just everything, you know? There was very little that we did apart from each other except my work. And we traveled together and she did so many things too that I'm just really left without any kind of person to do those things and so now I'm kind of feeling helpless too. But I’ve missed time from work and the house is kind of a wreck. I can't cook so…you know. And it seems so weird because all my friends who are my age, it's the men who go first, you know, and so this seems weird on top of all that. How did I get to be left? **Counselor**: So you have so many things on various levels. You’ve shared your life for a very long time since your early teens. And what I hear you saying also is that she's been the one who did a lot of the things in the house and paid the bills, and a sense of meaningless in your life right now, a sense of lacking direction in terms of where to go without her in your life.

**David**: Yeah, just the little stuff like somebody told me how to cook eggs. Just stick them in the microwave. And so I did and they blew up. You know, it’s like I do all these little disasters when I try to do anything in the kitchen other than just heat up frozen dinners. She was a great cook and I feel incompetent.

**Counselor:** You feel incompetent. How is it like for you to be in this place where you are realizing that a lot in your life was dependent on her and that without her it's really hard for you.

**David:** Do you mean in this space? You mean right here right now?

**Counselor**: Yes, in this space right now.

**David:** It’s…I shouldn't have to be here, I mean I should be able to manage this on myself and so, you know, I don't feel very good about being here.

**Counselor**: So I hear almost a conflict there between where you are and where you would like to be in terms of being able to do things for yourself. I should be able to take care of myself and I shouldn't have to ask for help.

**David:** So yeah, I'm not comfortable.

**Counselor:** And yet you're in a place where you need that help, if I recall the conversation we had on the phone. Your friends asked you to come in. Your friends threatened to take you to the hospital and that's what led you to come in.

**David**: Yeah. Yeah, so here I am but, you know, but I just don't feel great about it.

**Jane:** You don't feel great about it?

**David**: Yeah, I should be able to manage my life and get on with things, it's been six months. I should be able to be getting over this and moving on.

**Counselor:** What would that look like for you? What would give you the sight that you are continuing with your life?

**David:** I don't know. My friends tell me I should get out and maybe try to meet some new people, you know, new women, and I can't think about that.

**Counselor:** It's too soon for you?

**David**: Yes, it's bizarre. I can't imagine ever doing that.

**Counselor:** Now you’ve talked about what your friends are saying. I’m wondering what David, what you are thinking.

**David:** I don't know. It's been just…I don’t know. It’s been day to day and I just go. It's hard for me to even think about the future and what my life would look like when every day is so sad. And …I'm just trying to put one foot in front of the other.

**Counselor:** So what I hear you saying is it might be helpful if we focused on just getting you through the day. Is that like something you'd like to work on?

**David:** That could be helpful. It could be helpful. Yeah. Yeah.

**Counselor:** So just let's go back to then, let’s talk about today. Yes. And I know that you’ve struggled with getting out of bed and being able to do something other than just stay there and feel sad and yet today you woke up. Today you came in here. Tell me how the process was like for you.

**David:** Well, it's kind of like going to work, you know, when there's something that’s expected of me I can usually get it together to go and do it. So I knew I had to come so the business about being up and getting up and getting dressed and trying to find something to eat and then getting here for this appointment kind of gave me some structure for the day. Do you know what I mean? **Counselor**: So structure for the day?

**David:** Yeah. But if I'm just left to myself I have a really hard time creating that.

**Counselor**: Creating that structure. Yeah. Okay. So almost like if there was a sense of structure that could help you through this period that could give could give you the impetus to wake up and to go to work and to get out of the house.

**David**: Yeah, I'm not sure I'd like it but it would get me moving, you know? So that might be helpful. That might be helpful.

**Counselor:** And you know, and I hear what you’re saying in terms of not liking it because it has been a hard time for you.

**David:** It's been hell.

**Counselor**: And you miss your wife dearly but I also sense from you a desire on one level to continue living. It might not be fun but to continue living.

**David**: Yeah, there have been times I'm not sure.

**Counselor:** You’re not sure?

**David:** Well there have been times, yeah. I'm not saying I would do anything but sometimes I do think maybe it would be easier just to not have to go through another day.

**Counselor**: What has gotten you through those times?

**David**: Well I could never do anything to hurt myself, you know, I mean I couldn't purposely do anything. But I'm just saying it’s like I just… the days just pass. I'm not sure there's anything I’ve done except when there have been things that have been expected of me so I've managed to go out and meet my obligations, you know.

**Counselor:** I hope you don't mind if I step up just a little and ask you a couple more questions about not doing anything. When you talk about not doing anything, what do you mean? What does that mean for you?

**David:** I don't get dressed. I stay in my pajamas. I don't eat much. I hang around the house. I may go into the living room another and turn on the television just for noise, just for something to be there and… the day goes. The day goes. And I go to bed and do it again, unless I have to go to work. And there are even some days when I haven't been able to get it together for that. **Counselor**: Something that crossed my mind, and please correct me if I'm wrong, when you said I could never do anything I wondered if there had been times when you considered harming yourself in some way in order to get out of feeling the pain.

**David:** No, no.

**Counselor:** That is not what you were referring to?

**David:** No. It would sometimes be easier to not have to do, to not have to do another day but I would never consciously do something to hurt myself. You don't have to worry about that one.

**Counselor:** I was just going to hope that if you ever had those thoughts that we could talk about it.

**David:** Yeah. You know, one thing my friends are always asking me or making suggestions about what I need to do to get on with my life you know, they're pushing me into, I don't know, doing things. Always calling me up inviting me to play golf or whatever and … but there aren't any of them that I can think of that have sat down and had a conversation like this with me and asked me about me instead of telling me. There haven't been people who’ve been asking me about what my life is like or what I want.

**Counselor**: About not asking you, and today we have an opportunity to talk about that, what’s going on, but you’ve also said that you have never been asked what you want.

**David:** Yeah.

**Counselor:** So in those moments….

**David:** I’ve never thought about that.

**Counselor:** You’ve never thought about that, yeah. Is it something you’d like is to think about right now? To just consider what do you want?

**David:** What a question. I don't know, life has always just seemed to kind of happen and my wife always had kinds of ideas about things that we would do. I let her take the lead on most of that, you know? So I have enjoyed all the things that she talked about and wanted to do but I'm not sure even she asked me, what do I want?

**Counselor:** So for the first time here you are without your wife in a very long time, without someone who came up with the ideas of what needed to happen. For the first time you really need to come up with the ideas for yourself. That's scary. That's scary for you.

**David:** Yeah.

**Counselor**: Yeah and yet I sensed a longing behind those words that is a part of you that doesn't like to come up with some ideas, to come up with some suggestions.

**David:** Hmm. I have no idea what…I have no idea what I want.

**Counselor:** It's a very new place for you to be in where you're making the decisions on your own.

**David:** I always wanted to live by the ocean.

**Counselor:** Live by the ocean? Tell me about that.

**David:** Well, there's just something about the water that draws me. You know, I've always been, I've always loved water. I love boats, I love sailing, I love all those things but, you know, never had the time or the money.

**Counselor**: So if that was something that you are thinking about now?

**David**: I can't even envision that. I mean that would just be just a big, that would be huge… big change.

**Counselor:** A big change?

**David:** Yeah.

**Counselor:** And that's scary for you, envisioning you the possibility of changing from what life has been to what life could be.

**David**: Yeah. And Louisa hated the water, you know, so I can't imagine, I don't know.

**Counselor:** So you stayed away from the water for that reason?

**David:** Well, I mean that’s what couples do for each other. They don't make the other person do things that they don't want to do, you know?

**Counselor**: Yeah. And for the first time it's you alone, you and your leads.

**David:** I miss her.

**Counselor:** It's hard. You know I heard you speak today about how hard it is for you to make this transition to a life without your wife, who you have known since you were a teenager. Just how much you miss her and how difficult it is for you to move on without her and yet in the last few minutes I also had you begin to contemplate what it might be like without her and yet finding that very difficult to consider. I'm hoping that in the next couple of sessions we can find a way to continue processing what this transition is like for you and also begin to explore what possibilities may lie ahead for you. Does that sound like something that you'd like to do?

**David:** Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I’ll kind of have to trust you for a while that this may help. I'm not sure. But I really do appreciate the way in which you’ve listened and understood.

**Counselor:** And I appreciate you coming in today. I know that it's not easy but I hope you can find the courage to come in again.

**David:** Thanks.

**Counselor:** You're welcome.

**FEEDBACK/DEBRIEFING SESSION**

**David:** You were great. So much for not being evaluative in feedback sessions but I've really felt both understood and like there were some glimmers of possibilities for the future, you know, so thanks.

**Gary:** Jane, the deep empathy and just your total connection and following of where David was I thought was really clear and moving and also helped him to move. And with that I was noticing how you chose to kind of then focus from the kind of broader feeling into staying with and where he was in terms of his day. Can you say what you were noticing in that movement too?

**Jane**: Yes. I was definitely very intentional in communicating my empathy to him and communicating that I understood what he was talking about and how hard this experience was for him. And especially during the session when he raised the question of no one really ever asks him how it is like. They just want him to move on so I really wanted to create a space where he could talk about how it was like for him at this moment in here to really allow him a space to really express his own emotion and his own transitional process.

**Anne**: Yeah, right, it was the empathy that was just clearly there and also that sort of balancing and listening to where he is and encouraging him to have a voice to make decisions for himself that it was that real gentle realizing that he was not quite there yet. And just, you know, you used a lot of real basic counseling skills, you just, you were there with him reflecting paraphrasing, which was really fun to see how you just use those skills to stay with someone.

**Jane**: That was very intentional I really, this was a client I’ve talked to on the phone and made phone calls with and so deliberately really wanting him to feel understood. Really wanting to provide a space for him where he could really explore and share what was going on with him and not feel the pressure to immediately make a decision or the pressure to immediately move on. **Gary**: Jane I’ve heard you in some other conversations talk about your interest in existential moments and here your client was in the grief of the loss of his wife as well as trying to begin to see what his life was going to be outside of that relationship and you focused in on what his day to day struggle was. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about holding both of those moments and needs together?

**Jane**: I didn’t really realize that this client’s friends are very significant, play a significant role in his life. Indeed it’s because of his friends that he came in for counseling and that his relationship with his wife had been very meaningful for him and significant and so I deliberately also tried to create a space where he could talk about the meaning of his life for him right now and to talk about his own possible needs right now considering the shifts in his relationships and the shift in meaning in life for him.

**Gary:** With that, in this kind of life or death moment, you very carefully noticed when David was making suggestions about whether or not he could go on or wanted to go on and with that, when he said I wouldn't consciously hurt myself and again can you speak a little bit to attending to and then having to do some assessment of risk factors?

**Jane**: That was a very significant moment and if you notice the client moved on really fast and then brought us back and in the back of my mind as I walk through it with him, I was going through all the risk factors there. Asking myself is this client suicidal? Do they have a plan? Is this something that they might be considering now or could it be lying there latent to be considered later? So really thinking about it but at the same time asking him the question to see where he was with it and being very cautious not to amplify that moment but at the same time to give it significance and talking about I hope if this comes up it is something that we can talk about. And it was definitely something I made a mental note that I want to focus on this and I want to look at it in this section and subsequent sessions.

**David:** So you are not afraid of asking the direct questions about this in pursuing what my thinking was in this regard and, you know, I think I experienced that, I knew that. And I also mostly felt the connection and that for the first time in a long time somebody was listening to me and really genuinely interested in who I was, not the expectations of everybody else, but just me. So in the midst of my grief there was a sense of perhaps some glimmers of hope about a life down the road.

**Jane**: Yeah and in this situation being careful with that as well to help you begin to sensehope or a different way of being like not to be so… not to emphasize on that so much that I seem to trivialize how hard it is for you to be where you are right now.

**Anne:** It’s a nice balance.

**David**: Thanks folks. Thanks.