

## A "READER'S THEATER" INTERVENTION TO MANAGING GRIEF: POSTTHERAPY REFLECTIONS BY A FAMILY AND CLINICAL TEAM

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"Anne" and "Fred"\*

*The sudden and accidental death of a child can be one of the most devastating events in the life of a family. This paper describes one couple's reflections of their grief and mourning following the death of their adolescent son as well as the clinical team's reflections of therapy. The uniqueness of this paper is that it offers a "reader's theater" intervention that enabled further change to occur. The clinical team used a belief model, emphasizing that altering constraining beliefs is at the heart of healing from such tragedies as sudden death (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). This approach is operationalized through therapeutic conversations be-*

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\*The couple who co-authored segments of this article wish to remain anonymous. Our clinical team would like to emphasize that the couple were major contributors to this paper. Without their participation, this paper could not have been written. Their willingness to participate in the co-authoring process has assisted us to better understand the experience of grief following the death of a child, to understand and acknowledge what was useful in therapy, and to consider the value of utilizing a reader's theater to reflect on the therapy process.

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tween family members, clinician, and clinical team. Interventions such as reflecting teams, therapeutic letters, and "homework tasks" were used to modify or challenge constraining beliefs of both the family members and the clinical team members. However, the intent to co-author a paper with this couple provided the serendipity intervention of a "reader's theater" that further served to identify, affirm, and solidify facilitating beliefs.

Most clinical articles are written by professionals about their work with individuals or families. The core of this paper, however, was co-written by the clinicians *and* the couple about their collaborative work together during 10 sessions over a 10-month period. The couple was referred to the Family Nursing Unit (FNU), an outpatient education and research clinic at The University of Calgary, by their family physician for assistance in coping with the death of their son, which had occurred approximately six weeks prior to the first session. During the ninth session, one of the clinical supervisors invited the couple to participate in co-writing this paper with members of our clinical team. The couple readily agreed but preferred not to have their actual names appear on the manuscript. Instead, the pseudonyms "Ann" and "Fred" were chosen.

During the second last session, it was agreed that the clinician, the graduate nursing student, and the husband and wife would each write about their experiences of the collaborative therapy process. This would serve as the rough draft and core of the paper. At that time, we, the clinicians, believed that co-writing the paper would provide therapeutic value to the family and, secondarily, a learning opportunity for the team. However, the profound experience of the husband, wife, clinician, and student was not *writing* the reflections but *reading* them to one another at the culmination of therapy. This profoundly dramatic and moving process became the most unique aspect of working with this family. This process, which can be likened to a "reader's theater," was serendipitous as the husband and wife, the clinician, and the student each wrote and subsequently read aloud their reflections on the family's story of grief and the therapy process. The couple reflected on their emotional and physical suffering and their responses to a practice approach that focuses on beliefs (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). In actual theater, a reader's theater may be defined as the vocal dramatization of a script by a group of readers with minimal use of gesture, action, or stage props. In the therapy process described here, everyone sat together in the therapy room and one by one read his or her reflections aloud while others listened without interruption or comment. Each witnessed and affirmed the other's experiences and altered beliefs. The reader's theater illustrates the healing power of unconditional presence. A reader's theater is different from a recitation by one voice; it is multiple voices layered, each voice in the context of other voices. It is not a stringing together of posttherapy ideas but rather a reflective and deliberate authoring of family and clinicians' experiences shared in a respectful, nonjudgmental, and nonhierarchical manner.

Following this reader's theater, another meeting with the couple was arranged to work on the manuscript. In addition, the clinical supervisors involved with this family provided input into the final paper.

### *The Family*

The family consisted of Ann, age 53, and Fred, age 56, who experienced the sudden and accidental death of their 17-year-old son, Jeremy. The couple were simultaneously experiencing the ongoing 10-year estrangement of their eldest daughter Jennifer, age 30.























