Chapter 12

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.

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 ordnance disposal,