

The Touch of Death and the Emergent Loneliness: A Heuristic enquiry into the Impact of My
Teenage Bereavement (The Death of My Parents)”

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On AI: I have sometimes used and accepted suggested corrections from Grammarly.

Introduction

Many people carry around their unprocessed pains, brokenness and emotional distress, which could emanate from different aspects of life. From the perspective of death and dying, the loss of both parents as a teenager can alter one's emotional state as well as impede psychological and, perhaps, professional development (Heinemann, 2023). It is difficult to estimate the impact of the death of a loved one and how long such impact could last during one's lifetime. As a person, I have encountered and am still experiencing the effects of death and the attendant grief and loneliness that emanate from it. It is from this lived experience that I am led to embark on a heuristic inquiry that examines "The Touch of Death and the Emergent Loneliness: A Heuristic Enquiry into the Effect of My Teenage Bereavement (Death of both Parents),".

Even though heuristic research has grown and is still growing, it has not gained much attention from many scholars and researchers (Hjeij, M. and Vilks, A. 2023). Designed and developed by Clark Moustakas, it embraces personal involvement during research and incorporates self-reflection and lived experience to uncover personal meaning (Moustakas, 2015). In this method, Moustakas outlines six non-linear phases. Even though they are non-linear, I shall be adopting a linear outline, and they will be interwoven. I see it as a very enriching, challenging, engaging, and revealing research method. Characteristically, with this method, I am the tool and the instrument of research; as such, all my pains, laughter, frustrations, experiences and biases are part of my data.

Why have I been emotionally unstable since the death of my parents, even though it has been over three decades? Why have I been unable to be as strong as my other siblings in processing my pains and brokenness since the demise of my parents until I engaged in this course? In this inquiry, I discovered that culture played a very important role in my inability to arrive at closure positively. This process is going to evoke a blend of different emotions and feelings, and it is also

an academically fascinating but difficult task. At some point, I thought of changing the topic because it was renewing painful memories, but finally, I got on with it.

Methodology

I will explore the phenomenon identified and drawn from my lived experience in this inquiry. I will focus on the devastating effect of losing my parents in my teenage years. I will show how this post-graduate program of study has helped me with a deeper self-awareness from my personal development groups (Diads and Triads), lectures and consultation with lecturers, supervisions, Clinical placement, journals and personal reflections. I will further articulate how this aspect is significant to me and how it has enhanced my personal and professional growth and development as a psychotherapist. This will be followed by the six phases of the heuristic inquiry as outlined by Moustakas (Initial engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, and Creative synthesis). I will reflect on how each of the phases contributes to my understanding of my chosen area of development. Although the heuristic processes of Moustakas will be used in this inquiry, they will rather be silent and interwoven with the identified phases. The importance of Journals and personal reflections will be shown clearly in the identified area of my development, and I will discuss how my experiences, thoughts, and feelings have evolved. In the sphere of Data discussion and Critical Engagement, while drawing from the different phases of heuristic inquiry, I will show the impact and how much my bereavement has affected me over the years and how this Course has given me a deeper sense of self-discovery, emotional management, and growth. How my experiences and learnings in this inquiry will play out in the Application to Clinical Practice will be conspicuously elucidated.

Integration with Theoretical Concepts with my experience, outcomes, and implications for practice as a therapist will be embedded. The outstanding impact of culture on my identified phenomenon, other areas for further research and lessons learned will be shown in this inquiry. Finally, the challenges and breakthroughs will come before drawing my conclusion.

Deeper Self-Awareness Gained Through Personal Development Group: My Key Area of Growth in the Course

My self-awareness has deepened through authentic engagement with my lecturers in Class and outside of class and active participation in my development group during my studies over the last two years. The Diads and Triads engaged in during my studies were key turning points in my self-awareness. The evaluations and feedback from my teachers have also played a very significant part in my journey. These have helped me to work towards my professional effectiveness in therapeutic practice, allowing me to better understand and relate well with my environment and clients by addressing my own biases, triggers, and limitations.

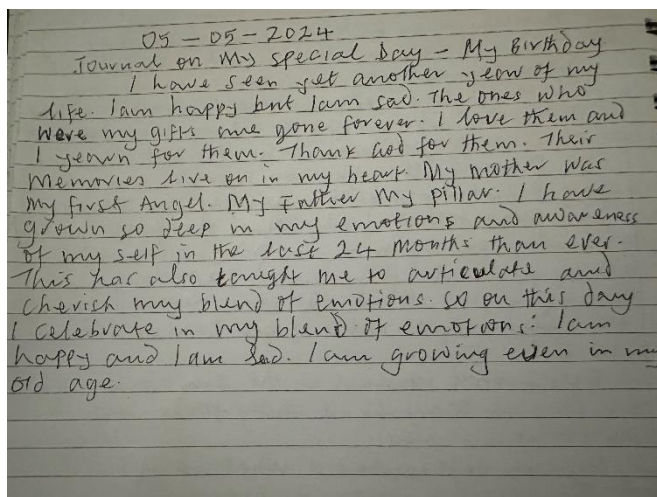


Figure 1: My journal on my birthday reflects my feelings and growth

Before engaging in my course of studies in Psychotherapeutic (Humanistic) at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David in 2022 for the Graduate Certificate, I was not in touch with the reality of my life, especially about my teenage bereavement, which has caused me untold pains and devastation. I had enormous confusion about my feelings and reactions to issues and situations. I was unable to identify what exactly I was feeling and how to go about dealing with these feelings because I was overwhelmed. Sometimes, I cried alone without knowing the reason, and I went deep into my thoughts with tears running down my cheeks. With the help of this course, I can identify areas of growth which have empowered me to engage in this heuristic inquiry, an area of my life that has been enshrouded in darkness and gloom. With this growth in self-awareness, I can now identify, name and articulate my emotions, which was impossible before.

Initial Engagement

The moment of engaging with the question that passionately awakes one's curiosity.



Becoming one with the research question and expressing deep consideration (Maustakas, 1990, p. 27). My childhood recollections are characterised by attachment relationships with my parents and especially my friendship with my mother.

(guy_vincentius, 2025)

Figure 2 My attachment to my mother as reflected on my mind in this initial engagement

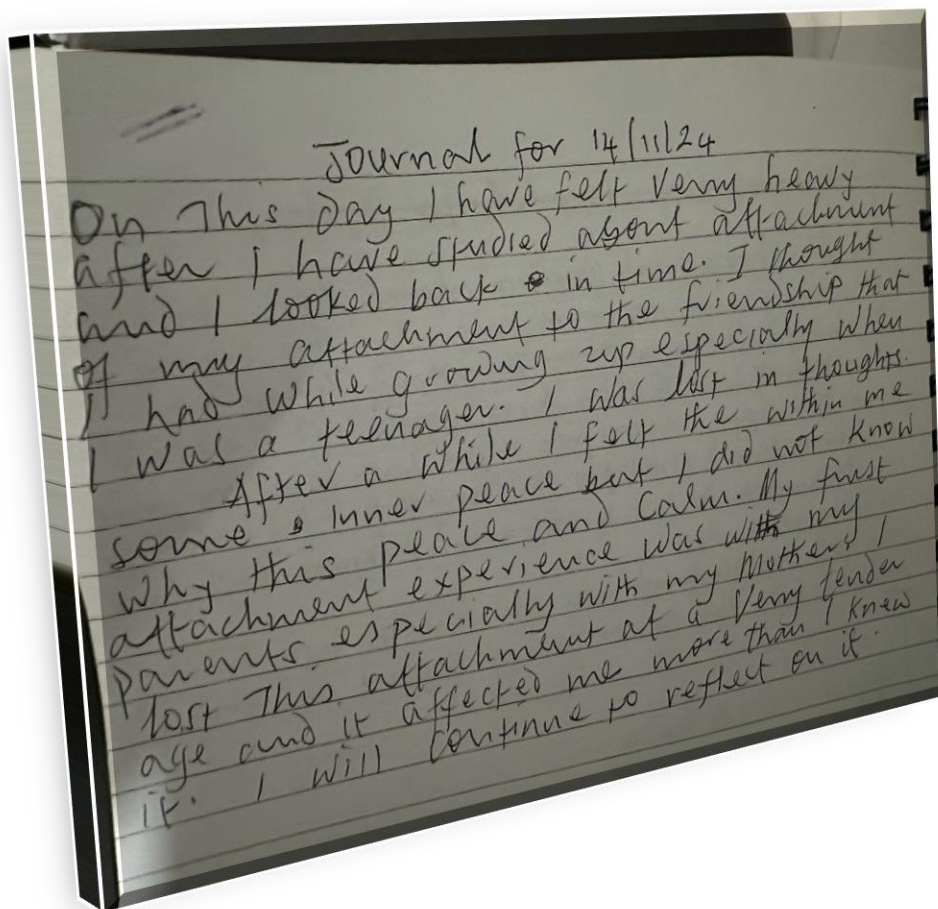
Through these bonds, especially with my mother, I formed a good anchor of emotions to create my emotional strength and fortification. My first separation from that attachment happened (Jamieson, K., 2021)) when my parents decided I had to live with my older brother for my secondary school education but with the promise that they (both parents) would visit me every month, and this slightly compensated for my immediate and envisioned pains of separation from them. However, things took a different dimension and life disintegrated during my first year of secondary school when my mother unexpectedly passed away. Her death signified the beginning of irreplaceable loss and a feeling of indescribable void in every sphere of my existence.

This situation escalated when my father fell ill, following my mother's demise, and after three years, he also died, thus denying me parental figures during my teenage years. When my father passed away, I was inundated with a surge of questions as to what was next for me in life. Why were my pains and frustration deeper and more palpable than those of my siblings? My self-awareness at this point progressively grew shallower, and this followed me to adulthood until I started these studies. These informed the purpose of engaging in this heuristic inquiry. It is an attempt to understand how these losses have affected and shaped my growth, learning and development. I also wanted to know why it seemed like I was the most impacted by the death of our parents among my siblings and my family.

Immersion

Immersion employs a complex level of interaction with the topics in which reflection and self-experience of the selected theme form a part (Moustakas, 2015). For this inquiry, I have

immersed myself in my subject of investigation by reviewing and reflecting on my journals and memories of my parents passing away and how I am coping with the reality of these losses. Here, I realised that everything connected with this subject of inquiry ranging from immediate family members, my self-dialogue and self-searching, meetings and venues of meetings, and those who made things very difficult during my mother's funeral, past and current difficulties and fears of the unknown, formed my raw material for staying with and for maintaining a 'sustained focus and concentration'(Moustakas, 1990, p.28).



Journaling has helped me record and preserve the feelings, ideas, and observations in my identified problem and puzzlement under review. It was during this training as a Psychotherapist, especially during diads and triads, that a new feeling about my bereavement emerged from an unexpected angle. These moments empowered me to stay with sorrow and solitude, which helped me to integrate the question more deeply.

Furthermore, the immersion phase included clinical observations and reflections from my interactions with clients who experienced similar losses, which stirred up and deepened my

reflection (Mihalache, 2019). They made me see how necessary it was to bracket my experiences to keep focused, remain in the moment, and be very professional.

Incubation

This is the moment of my research process that I have tagged the ‘On and Off’ times. It is that time of withdrawal, the moment when active participation and involvement with my research questions are paused to enable the real subconscious to cope with the learned material (Brisola and Cury, 2016). At this moment, I engaged in other activities that were not directly related to the identified question or phenomenon, bearing in mind Micheal Polanyi, who asserted that ‘discovery does not ordinarily occur through deliberate mental operation and calculated effort’ (Polanyi 1964, cited by Moustaka 1990).

As I was incubating, I drew some key moments in my life and listened to some completely different kinds of music, which I would ordinarily not do. I was able to oscillate between grieving, loneliness, and my professional life (Sultan, 2018).

During my incubation, although I was detached from my question of inquiry, I realised that I was experiencing an expansion of knowledge because, in this period, themes that came up for me include: the universality of grief, people's methods of dealing with it, and the possibility of change during the process of grief. I also took note of my emotions, feelings, vulnerability, and strength. According to Moustakas, incubation is a process in which a seed has been planted (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). These experiences became ‘new seed’ for me.

Illumination

Illumination is a natural process that occurs when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition. According to Maustaka (1990), 'Illumination opens the door to a new awareness. O'Hara has corroborated this by explaining that it is the period of enlightenment where people understand the traces between life events and professional development (O'Hara, 2020). Contemplating the illness and death of my father helped me develop the notion that grief is not similar among people. During this phase of my research, a large funeral procession plot suddenly came to my mind and caught my attention in a rather unusually significant way. I have been carrying out funerals in procession regularly as part of my pastoral care, and why this made a significant difference is a question that has lingered in my mind.

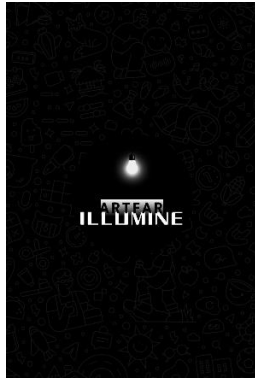
As this happened, I suddenly remembered the whole process of the interment of my mother and all that happened during this stage of her funeral.



(istockphoto, 2025)

Figure 3 : A reflection of the funeral procession came to my mind.

When my mother was interred, I was asked to leave the graveside: it was not allowed culturally, they said. It was regarded as a trauma for a child of my age (11) at that time to witness either of the parents being interred. All these years, this has never occurred to me until I engaged in this assignment.



(Figure 4: This photo reflects how my mind was illuminated. I got it from my brother's WhatsApp display)

My mind has been greatly illuminated, as this plays a major role in my inquiry. This is one of my 'Aha!' moments! This could be part of the reason why I seem to be struggling with getting closure with the death of my mother and how my father's death followed, leading from one loss to another. The impact of my absence from my mother's internment is an opening for further investigation into the role of culture or traditional beliefs in teenage bereavement in Africa.

Explication

This phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, to understand its various layers of meaning. I was determined to engage fully in the emotional and psychological aspects of my identified phenomenon. I used focusing, indwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure.



Figure 6: Using this Image of a Carpenter and workers focusing on wood and his tools to produce beautiful pieces of furniture.



Figure 5 The beautiful furniture produced due focusing

(Istockphoto, 2025)

I practised concentrated attention to enhance awareness of my feelings, thoughts, beliefs and internal frame of reference as I engaged in this research. Since this phase entails an elaborate discussion of the things that were realised during illumination to give clearer explanations (Tudor, 2023), I went ahead and had further conversations with my siblings and some key family members whom I know still cherish the memories of my parents to know what they were feeling and compare to what was going on for me. I ruminated about my interactions and the words of my parents to me and all that my mother had promised me. The moment of the news of the death of my parents played back in my mind as well as all the feelings, shocks, freezing moments and devastation that accompanied them. This was a dark moment for me in this work.

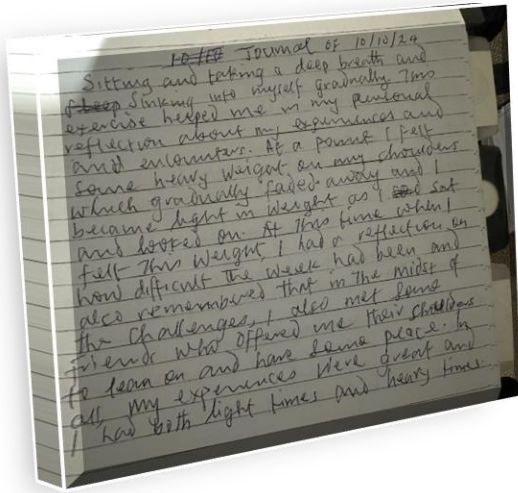


Figure 7: This journal reflects my mood at this point in my writing.

Through this inquiry and my new level of self-awareness, I had to replay all the events that took place when I had to witness the funerals. I consider the roles and effects of culture here. Many African Cultural beliefs and practices, in my estimation, have not made bereavement and grief bearable in many instances. My father was equally forbidden by the same cultural principle that a man could not be allowed at the internment of his wife. This was the beginning of my father's illness and led to his death.

Creative Synthesis

Creative synthesis represents the culmination of the heuristic inquiry process, where the insights and themes are integrated into a cohesive narrative (Sultan, 2018). This phase was an integration of the fact findings and the development of a broad conception of how my teenage parental bereavement has influenced my existence and profession as a psychotherapist. It also involved generating ideas and exploring how these ideas can be implemented in clinical-related

practice, for example, enhancing empathy, ensuring safe climates for the clients, and including reflective practices in the clinical processes (Brisola and Cury, 2016).

I explored my inward life and acknowledged the major concepts that underline creative synthesis, which are the tacit dimensions, intuition and self-searching. Getting in touch with the reality of myself through deeper self-awareness is the bedrock of my inquiry. Standing very significant, for me, in this inquiry was the initial lack of knowledge of the depth of the impact of how death has touched me and its attendant impact on me has left me confused for many decades. I was searching for meaning and exploring my emotions without making any progress. I could not understand what had led to my continuous darkness, brokenness and gloom until I started studying Counselling and Psychotherapy.

One very significant developmental change happened during a personal therapy session when I had a surge of feelings about my parent's demise. This time, I let myself weep to the full extent of my sorrow, painful and fragile emotions. This emotional release was very therapeutic and, at the same time, offered new lenses through which to view everything deeper as intermittent grieving has shaped my sense of self – it is my moment of catharsis.

Another discovery was made during the clinical placement, where I met clients with similar encounters in their teenage years. Such interactions pushed me to analyse my emotions more and find out how my studies in this program and my past have shaped my attitudes toward interacting with clients. By enduring the grief involved in turning the memories over in my mind, I gained the opportunity to address my clients with a deeper sense of congruence, empathy, and therapeutic presence.

Journals and Personal Reflection.

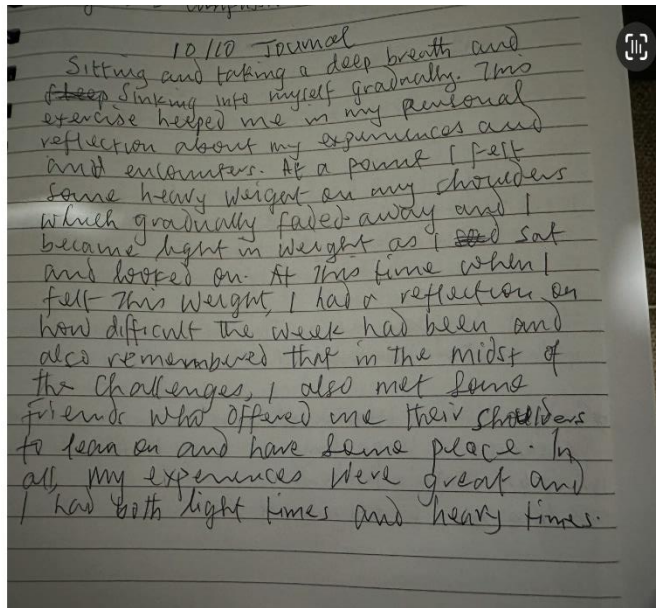


Figure 8 My Journal of 10/10/24

The line between personal reflections and journaling is very thin - they are highly intertwined. When I began the Graduate Certificate Course in Counselling and Psychotherapy in the year 2022, I started noticing the emphasis from the teachers on journaling, and I could see that journaling serves as a profound instrument for personal transformation. From a very personal experience and understanding, I see that journaling has brought about consistent growth in my self-awareness, enabling me to gain insight into my inner world, which I could relate to, and understand my emotional responses and develop the capacity to identify patterns (see my journal, fig. 8 above). A very classical example is that it was during this course that I started writing and keeping journals that relate to my bereavement and the feelings associated with it. Journaling has been a great tool as I am growing in my clinical placement, experiences in therapy, and supervision.

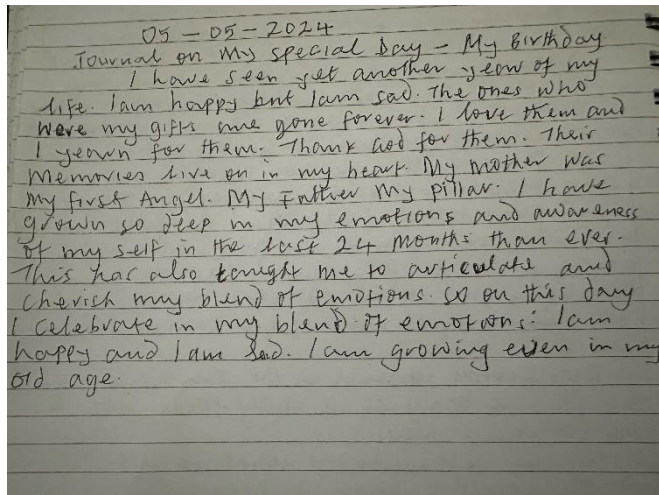


Figure 9 This journal helps to examine my growth

When I write my thoughts down, I can examine them more objectively (see Journals Fig. 9 and 11). It is a very meaningful strategy to manage my stress and anxiety when they arise. This is how my thoughts have developed and evolved as I journeyed on this program. It is a lifetime asset.

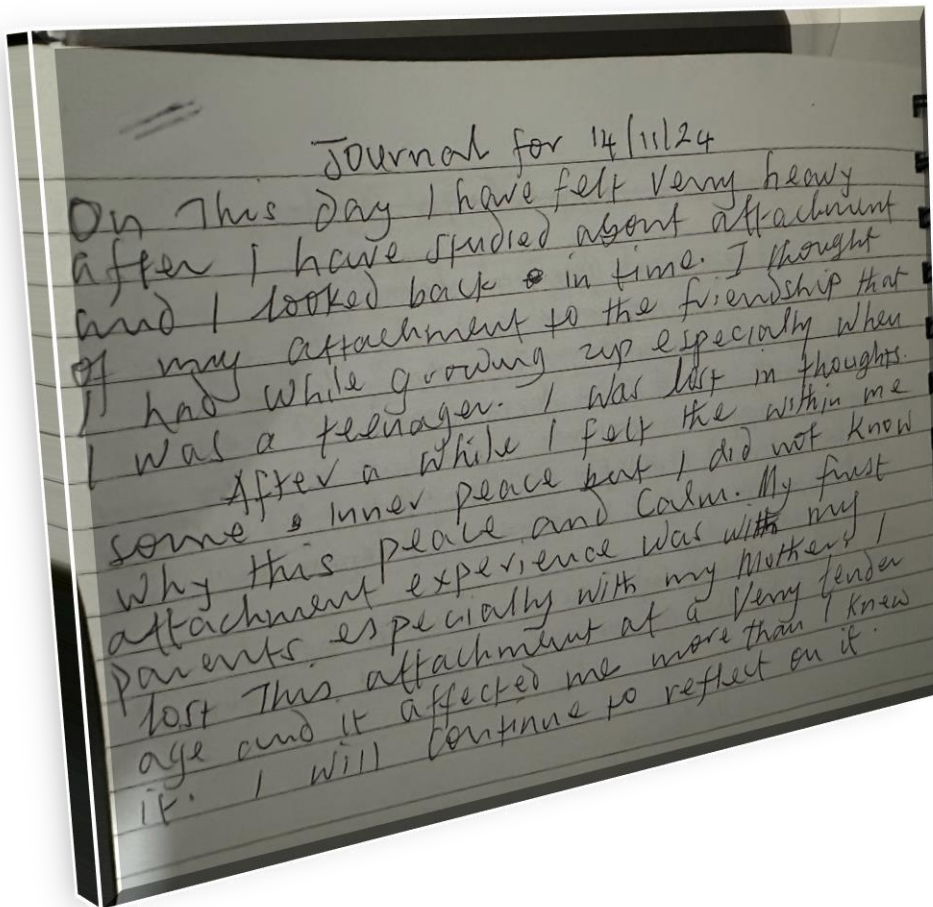


Figure 10 My reflection on attachment with my parents

Discussion of Data and Critical Engagement

The immersion phase revealed that the deaths of my parents were not two individual traumatic occurrences but multiple-layered occurrences that reconfigured my experiences and my life (Harris and Ho, 2022). Analysing the experience of the death of my mother during my first year of secondary school was emotionally difficult for me. The kind of attachment I had developed with her, on which my early emotional and psychological development depended, suddenly terminated, leaving me stranded and insecure. I found that although I was surrounded by family members who showed me empathy and care and actively listened to me, I retreated into silence,

incapable of articulating the magnitude of my loss. As my reflections showed, there was not a withdrawal of support but the loss of the ability to give voice to that pain in the face of such an overwhelming experience (Carson, 2023).

The unexpected passing of my father a few years later only added to this unhealed pain, together with the loneliness that had become my new steady companion as the years went by. My thoughts highlighted, for me, the relationship between death, grief and loneliness as my father's health deterioration was directly connected to my mother's unavailability. The man who had stood by me, guided me, and been my strength of support in all moments of weakness and hardship seemed to lose control over himself emotionally and physically after the death of my mother. Reflecting on such memories through immersion made me realise how my father's sorrow had worsened his deteriorating health, which in turn increased my feeling of hopelessness while mourning (Rose, 2024). This meant for me a progression from one bereavement to another and a sign of never-ending grief, loneliness and devastation. This is why, even as I engaged in this inquiry, I broke down in tears from time to time, and weakness invaded my body.

The incubation phase provided a background for implicit thinking, which had become evident in the themes of loneliness and attachment (Jones, 2024). Reflecting on the times when I was not able to show my sadness, I realised that the root of this was a fear of being vulnerable. My training as a Psychotherapist has elevated my understanding, and in this research, I could measure the depth of growth in my emotional management. This growth has been possible because of my therapy sessions, classes, and personal development groups.

During incubation, I reflected on the disparities in how my siblings and I processed the same losses. They seemed to have coped better than me, and I found myself developing disturbing circles of thoughts and questioning myself if there was something wrong with me or if I was just

unable to handle such intense emotions. Smith (2023) explains that every person may have his or



her way of grieving and that more attention should be given to the psychological and socio-physical aspects of this phenomenon. I have therefore settled for the fact that I am different from everyone, and everyone is different from me.

Figure 11: This music represents my feelings, emotions and thoughts

(guy_vincentius,2025)

My mother created in me an unshakeable emotional shield and a feeling of a future filled with endless possibilities and opportunities. On the other hand, the love and warmth associated with a father figure was also demonstrated in my interaction with my father, which presented a different level of grief, pain and devastation when he passed away. In this research, I further realised the depth of the impact of my parents on me. This will help me in my Clinical practice as I access and engage with Clients. We all grieve differently!

Application to Clinical Practice

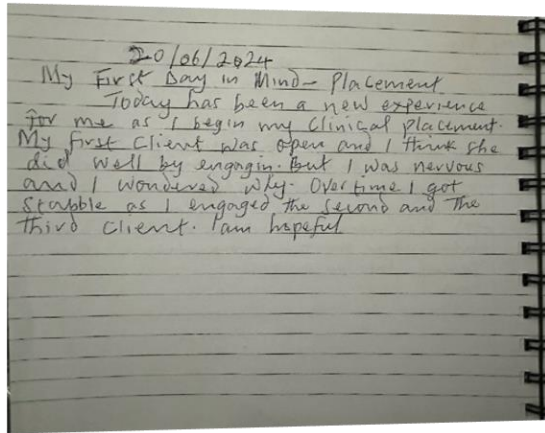


Figure 12: This is my journal on my first day of placement in Newport Mind

Engaging in this personal inquiry informs and enhances my clinical practice in different ways. As a person, I have gained several insights into bereavement, loss, grief, and pain. I have also gained some experience in my studies, therapy, and supervision. These have helped me in my engagement in clinical placement. My interventions and therapeutic approaches to my client and practice are enriched by my experiences from my bereavement and heuristic research, but I have done this in a professional and client-based manner, putting into consideration all the guiding principles and ethics of my profession.

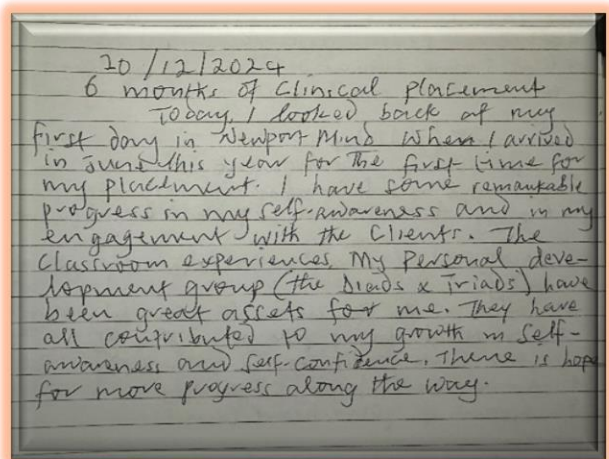


Figure 13: My Journal on my 6 months in placement

Given the role played by cultural beliefs in my inquiry and having seen the level of impact that has made on me, I have become cautious and sensitive to the cultural tenets of clients when I meet them in my Clinical placement. For example, I have a client who is currently undergoing the trauma of the death of her late husband. From a cultural perspective, she must remain in the house while her husband is being interred. From my insight and personal experience of my bereavement and different cultural demands, I have identified cultural factor as a part of her current crisis. In addition to other skills, I have decided to explore the skills of focusing and the empty chair approach as some of the approaches to explore as she looks for closure. I also realised that I must be mindful of my professional boundaries and be cautious not to project my own emotions onto the client. In this inquiry, the ability to understand that grief is diverse is valuable in improving my practice and creating more culturally competent therapeutic engagement.

Integration with Theoretical Concepts: Empathy, Congruence, Unconditional Positive Regard.

Every therapeutic theory finds its root in this (Maden, 2024). In the therapy room, I see how empathy and understanding play a key role. My therapist offered me unconditional positive regard, which enabled me to fully express my emotions. I was able to explore my feelings and thinking processes and look at the possibility of personal growth. The non-judgemental space that I encountered in the therapy room gave me the courage to share my experiences without the fear that I would be unduly criticised or misunderstood. In the person-centred theory, I know that my grief is unique, and so is the journey. This was respected and supported by my therapist, who helped me. To help me facilitate my healing process, I could see that the therapist was actively present to me and actively listening to me, and by so doing, I saw myself trying to embark on a healing process that is meaningful to me. As a therapist, my encounter in the therapy room also aligned with the theoretical concepts that I have learnt over these years in this program, and this will help me in my practice when I meet with clients in the therapy room as a practitioner.

I can only self-actualise when I take personal responsibility for my actions and decisions. As a therapist, I must encourage clients to take responsibility for their actions and decisions as this will lead to personal growth and an enhanced sense of healing and self-awareness. This is the responsibility that I owe to myself and others.

Challenges and Breakthroughs:

The very first breakthrough for me was that I thought I would not be able to complete this inquiry because of all that it entails, but I am glad to have completed it. This research is both energy and time-consuming as it involves a very prolonged period of reflection, self-dialogue, exploration and intense commitment.

During this inquiry, I had different emotions at different times. Sometimes, I smiled as I reminisced about my relationships and some key moments with my parents. There was a time when I had to abandon this research because of the level of pain that was emerging for me. The cognitive efforts required for me to engage in this inquiry led to mental fatigue from time to time. The ‘Aha’ Moment! My breakthrough was discovering that culture was a major impediment to my ability to access closure to my parents’ demise. Because of this breakthrough, I have concluded that our cultures can make us and can also break us.

Conclusion

This heuristic inquiry has given a broad analysis of how teenage parental bereavement affected my personal and professional identity. Very fundamental for me was the role played by the very impactful decision that was culturally based during the death and burial of my parents. This is an area for further research. Thus, two universal experiences, grief and loneliness, are profound difficulties.

Overall, this inquiry has set the importance of the right knowledge in seeking help in times of emotional distress and when confusion looms large. This is very evident as I reflect on the role played by my study of Psychotherapy and Counselling on my self-awareness and how to seek help

and guidance. The heuristic research method, though challenging and entails all-around rigours, is ultimately very rewarding.

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