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Applying a non-pathologising approach to grief following substance use bereavement

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My Approach

- Counselling psychology and the centrality of **social justice** and a focus on **human rights**
- Why is a **non-pathologising** approach to psychological distress important?







An alternative to psychiatric diagnosis for the intersection of grief and substance use:

Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF)

- What has happened to you? (POWER)
- How did it affect you? (THREAT)
- What sense did you make of it? (MEANING)
- What did you do to survive? (THREAT RESPONSE)
- What access to resources do you have? (STRENGTHS)



(Boyle & Johnstone, 2020)



What has happened to you?

- Ideological power
- Interpersonal power
- Legal power
- Economic power
- Biological power





How did it affect you?

- Threatened identity
- Threatened sense of security and safety
- Threatened social belonging
- Threatened value base





What sense did you make of it?

- "I should have prevented the death."
- "I failed them."
- "People think my loved one deserved to die."
- "I cannot trust anyone again."
- "I'm disgusting for feeling relieved"



What did you do to survive this threat?



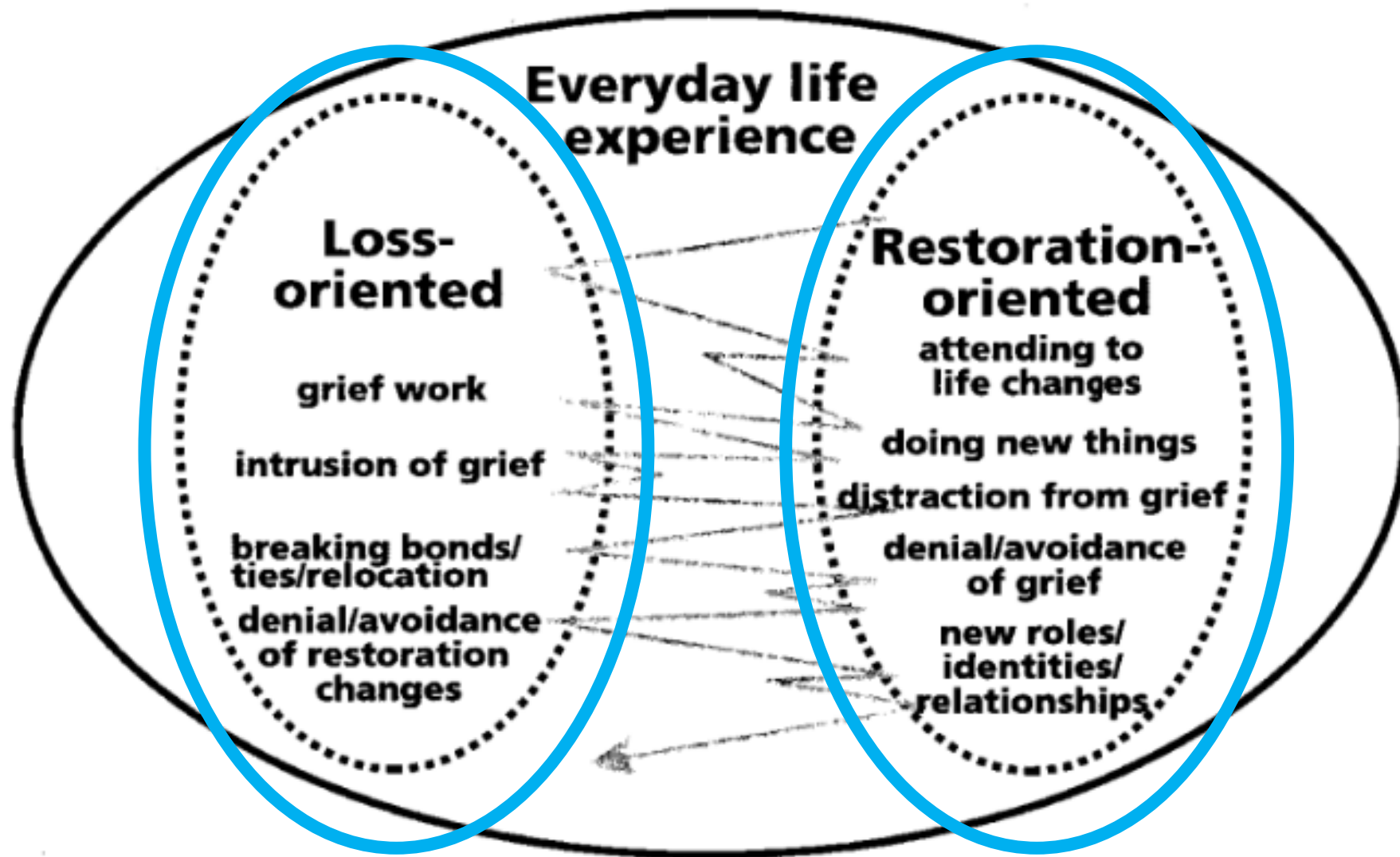
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- **Avoiding** reminders of the death.
- Emotional **numbing**
- **Hypervigilance** about the safety of self and remaining family members.
- Social **withdrawal** to avoid judgement.
- **Suppressing** grief to protect others.
- Maintaining intense bonds with the deceased through **rumination** or searching for explanations





(Stroebe & Schut, 1999)



Anna, mid 30s

Presenting issues: intense sadness, guilt, anger, disrupted sleep and social withdrawal

Reason for seeking therapeutic support: Reports feeling 'stuck' in grief since the death of her older brother who died 6 months ago following an opioid overdose.

Therapeutic approach: PTMF approach to grief therapy that recognises Anna's distress as understandable responses to traumatic loss, stigma and powerlessness.

Case Study

Tailored therapy: important considerations



- Taking a non-pathologising approach
- Validating the impact of the stigma around substance use
- Acknowledging both the loss and the prolonged adversity that preceded it
- Exploring meanings surrounding guilt, responsibility, and shame
- Understanding avoidance and emotional distress as protective responses to threats
- Supporting reconstruction of identity following years of caregiving or crisis management
- Helping clients develop compassionate alternative narratives about themselves and the deceased
- Strengthening social connections and addressing experiences of disenfranchised grief



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Any questions?