



# McMaster Divinity College

**MS 3P1250/ 5P1340**

## Counseling for the Dying and Grieving

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Spring/Summer 2026  
May 2, May 9, May 23, June 6  
9:30am to 3:45pm  
Online Synchronous

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*The mission of McMaster Divinity College is to develop effective evangelical Christian leaders for the Church, academy, and society through graduate-level education, spiritual development, and vocational formation.*

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## COURSE SYLLABUS

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### 1. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This intensive course is a survey of topics related to counseling the dying and grieving. In addition to frequently being a problem focus in psychotherapy, it is also one of the most frequent roles for the pastor or pastoral counselor to aid those who anticipate death and those who have experienced loss at the death of someone else. The course is designed to challenge the student in exploring their own beliefs and values on death and dying and focus on one particular area in the field of death and bereavement counseling. Subjects include: understanding psychological responses to loss, the processes of grieving vs. mourning, end of life issues and choices, MAID, helping children and adolescents, helping survivors of catastrophic loss and suicide, Biblical and Spiritual resources for death and bereavement, handling questions of Theodicy, using Lament in mourning, and gender and cultural issues in bereavement.

**5P1340 Advanced Students:** A syllabus supplement is available from the Registrar or Instructor.

**Prerequisites:** While previous coursework or experience in general counselling skills is preferred, it is not mandatory to benefit from this training. If no previous experience, reading the textbook by Norman H. Wright prior to the first class, particularly the first 3 chapters, in addition to the course readings below due before the first class, would be recommended as a general foundation in crisis counseling.

## 2. COURSE FORMAT

This intensive course is offered in synchronous, online videoconference format, scheduled on 4 Saturdays of instruction in May and June (total 20 hours), supplemented by asynchronous recorded lectures and other videos (total 6 hours), readings and writing assignments. Class sessions will include didactic instruction, video presentations, and small group and class discussion. Since student participation in live discussion is one modality to ensure we reach the goals of the course, attendance and full participation in each of the four class days is required. Also, because of the intensive format of this course, readings must be completed before class, including the first day of class.

## 3. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

*These learning objectives are coordinated with the expected competencies for CASC/ACSS certified chaplains and pastoral counsellors and the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (\*CRPO competency number is listed. See full text of relevant competencies on A2L for reference).*

### **Knowing**

- To identify the experiences and adaptations commonly experienced in response to death and loss [1.1a, 1.1b, 1.3c, 4.5r]
- To identify the behaviors and to understand the deeper emotional dynamics involved in dying and mourning processes, both psychologically and spiritually [1.1c, 1.1b, 1.2g, 4.5b, 4.5n]
- To identify the specific goals, phases, and techniques unique to counseling those experiencing loss, the dying and the bereaved [1.2a, 1.2d, 1.2f, 4.5h, 4.5i]
- To distinguish the developmental, cultural, religious, and gender differences in how people may experience loss, dying and bereavement [1.1a, 1.1c, 1.5a, 1.5b, 1.5c]
- To distinguish the unique challenges and adaptations involved in doing grief counselling online or over the phone [1.2d, 3.2a, 4.2j]
- To become familiar with the ritual mourning practices of other cultures and religions [1.5.c, 1.5.e]

### **Being**

- To identify our own attitudes, beliefs and values about loss, death and dying [3.4a, 4.3c]
- To explore and discuss for ourselves the important questions involved in coping with loss and with the end of life [3.4a, 1.1c]
- To increase our tolerance in hearing others' pain and being open to the experience of one's own pain. [4.2a, 4.5c, 4.5e]
- To increasingly practice empathic listening skills, effective responses, and appropriate support in all our relationships, especially when these have been affected by crisis and trauma [4.2a, 4.2e, 4.5c, 4.5e, 4.5n]

### **Doing**

- To observe, identify and demonstrate helpful versus non helpful responses in end-of-life situations [4.2a, 4.2e, 4.2g, 4.3b, 4.3c, 4.5c, 4.5e, 3.2a]
- To develop skills in assessing an individual and family's emotional and spiritual well-being and be able to differentiate normal grief reactions from complicated grief adaptations, and their place and influence in the mourning process [1.1a, 1.1c, 1.2g, 1.3c, 4.4a, 4.4c, 4.5f, 4.5g, 4.5r]

- To apply both psychological and theological perspectives in matching appropriate pastoral and counseling intervention to different types of loss and end of life crises, with different populations, and in different cultural, religious and practical contexts [1.2a, 1.2d, 1.2f, 4.2c, 4.5h, 4.5i, 4.5j, 4.5o, 4.5p]
- To identify and critically evaluate both psychological and spiritual resources (reading, spiritual disciplines, other activities) that can be recommended to the dying and the bereaved to help them in their process, distinguishing between theoretical approaches and evaluating efficacy and appropriateness [3.4c, 3.4i, 4.5b, 4.5o, 4.5p]
- To identify referrals for further psychological and medical help when necessary [1.2c, 4.4c, 4.6a, 3.5a]

#### 4. COURSE TEXTS (for purchase information see below)

- A. **Required Textbooks:** You must order these before the first class! See reading assignments. These is available in Kindle/digital version from Amazon.

Worden, J. William, PhD. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Springer, 2018. (309 pp)

Mitchell, Kenneth R., & Anderson, Herbert. *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*. Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1983. (167 pp).

- B. **Recommended Book:**

Wright, H. Norman. (2011). *The Complete Guide to Crisis and Trauma Counseling: What To Do and Say When It Matters Most*. Bethany House: Minneapolis, MN. (449 pp)

Also see A2L for extended bibliography of recommended books.

Please read the Personal Integration Paper assignment and consider ordering the additional book you will need for this project prior to the first class. You can use books on the recommended book list and/or use another based on the professor's approval.

- C. **Additional Articles:**

To supplement lectures, additional articles are provided on the class website on A2L.

Other articles possibly may be added depending on class interest and trajectory.

Some are required (see schedule below) while others are posted on A2L as optional resources for the class.

#### 5. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

<b>Summary:</b> Class Participation, Asynchronous Activities	
& Reflection Questions/Journal	10%
Book Review	20%
Personal Integration Paper	30%
Case Analysis Final Exam	40%

*Grading Rubrics/Standards are posted on A2L as appropriate to assignment.*

**A. Class Participation, Journal, and Asynchronous Activities: - 10% of grade**

Attendance and participation in class discussions is very important to the student's learning in this course. In addition, completion of asynchronous activities, such as watching or reading 6 hours minimum of online, asynchronous video material and additional resources, is expected as part of your participation. Completion of journal (see below) and a self-assessment of your asynchronous activities is part of the evaluation for this part of the grade.

**B. Written Assignments:**

***All assignments MUST be formatted in Microsoft Word and submitted online through Avenue to Learn (A2L) on the class assignments page.***

**1. Reflection Questions/Journal, due June 13<sup>th</sup> (included in participation grade)**

A journal with reflection questions is provided on A2L. Questions are organized according to assigned readings and class content. This is also provided to help you process your response to the course, since it can remind us of our own losses and challenges. Write your personal responses approximately every other day (20 questions over 42 days), integrating your reflections with ongoing reading and class material and discussions. These are personal notes – there is no length expectation, and they will be turned in for participation credit, but not read or graded. Upload your completed Journal by June 13<sup>th</sup>, allowing time to also reflect on the last class.

**2. Book Review – 20% of grade, due July 10<sup>th</sup> (6-8 pages)**

This paper will allow you to focus in depth on the subtopic of your choice within grief counselling. You will survey and critically review a book that you can incorporate into your practice and/or as bibliotherapy with dying or grieving counselees. Please review the section in Professor Mutter's paper on writing a Critical Book Review for general guidelines and also refer to the "25 Expanded Tips for Writing a Great Psychology Paper" document, both posted on A2L.

- Chose a subtopic and/or population of interest or setting. You may have in mind the varied situations you may have in a general pastoral ministry, or a hospital chaplaincy for example, or working with a specific population or type of bereavement.
- Choose a book that is relevant to this subtopic of interest. A recommended bibliography is given on A2L. You may choose a book that is not on this list, with the approval of the instructor.
- Read the book in *entirety*.
- Write a 6–8-page paper, critically reviewing the book you have chosen. Write in professional style, as if you were submitting this to a journal.

**Format:** You do not need a cover page. Give a title to your review, centered as Primary Heading, and your name. Then list the Book, as a bibliographic reference in MDC style (See Mutter's example). Then start the body of your paper.

1. **Introduce:** Why did you choose this book? Explain the subtopic or population you have chosen and this book's relevance for your context or ministry.
2. **Summarize:** the main themes and elements of the book.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** Use some critical analysis to demonstrate your understanding of grief and the mourning *process* as you have learned it in this course in your discussion. For example:
  - How does it address the needs of a dying or bereaved individual specifically in this subcontext?
  - Compare to Worden and Mitchell & Anderson: e.g., What mourning tasks does it address? What grief counselling principles does it aid or add to?
  - How does this book differ from or complement the main texts of the course in terms of understanding the grieving process? What further details or emphases does it give that are helpful?

*Support your analysis* by giving specific references in comparing/contrasting (with APA style reference in text): E.g., "Although so-and-so (date, pg. #) suggests there are 5 phases of mourning, this book suggests to the reader 6 phases (pg. #) which are ...."
4. **Critique:** Was there anything you disagreed with or was uncomfortable? What is missing? Is there any situation in which it would be contraindicated/not helpful? *Give a rationale for this opinion!*
5. **Integration and Conclusion:** What appealed to you most about this book? What are the most helpful, unique elements of the book? How will you use this? Discuss its best application - what kind of client or congregant it would be most helpful for, how and when you would use it in your bereavement counselling approach (Eg. Early, middle, end stage of mourning) *and why*.
6. **Bibliography:** List reference sources you may have used in your analysis, including Worden. You do NOT have to list the book you are reviewing again here.

### 3. Personal Integration Paper - 30% of grade, due July 24<sup>th</sup> 8am (8-10 pages)

This paper will integrate what you have discovered about dying and grieving from (1) your Journal, (2) the course textbooks and class material, and (3) your chosen book reviewed.

- What is your understanding of loss and death now, and how will this influence your ministry to others and in your own life?
- Include your beginning formulations of an integrative "theology of loss" and the approach you would like to take in counselling the dying and grieving.
- What interventions fit with your evolving approach?
- What areas do you feel you need or want to explore further in your professional development? In what areas are you aware of countertransference or discomfort that represent edges of growth?

Be sure to reference the specific sources used in your reflections and synthesis in the body of your text ("who said you could say that?", "where did you get that from?) using APA style (author last name, date, page number if a quote), but use MDC style for your bibliography.

#### 4. Case Analysis Open-Book Final Exam – 40% of grade due June 26<sup>th</sup> 8am (approx. 20 pages)

This is an **open-book, take-home examination** to be **developed in the first 8 weeks of the course**. The case example and specific questions will be provided by the first day of the course on A2L. Focused responses should be grounded in Worden's task-based model, and demonstrate clinical reasoning in assessment and intervention approach, in developing a responsive, culturally sensitive, and ethically grounded treatment plan. Where appropriate, responses should also integrate scripture, theology, and/or pastoral considerations in meaning-making and dealing with spiritual crisis and show awareness of possible counter-transference factors. You should cite Worden (2018) and other course materials where appropriate using APA format in the body of your text (name, date, page #). Length guidelines are provided for each question (approximately 12-20 pages total), but depth and quality are prioritized over volume. Use professional, case-based language. This is an applied counselling exam, not a theology exam.

#### 6. COURSE and INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES – *Note that not adhering to these expectations may result in reduced grades or being dropped from a class or the program.*

**A. Contact and Availability:** I am available for one-on-one consultation in-person briefly after class and also on Zoom by appointment. Otherwise, students may contact me at [drcathryn.harris@gmail.com](mailto:drcathryn.harris@gmail.com). *Please make sure you put "Grief Counselling" in the subject line of any email to rapidly identify your communication.* I try to reply by email within 1-2 business days, but because I also work full time doing clinical work, I may only be able to reply Friday through Sundays, so please check your email for a response on weekends. Phone numbers for the professor and the GA for technological emergencies during class are provided on A2L.

**B. Communication and Mandatory Use of A2L:** Check your email and the online platform for the course on "Avenue to Learn" (A2L) regularly for updates, schedule changes, and supplementary materials. Many important communications with the class are made through A2L, so make sure you sign up for email notifications from A2L. On A2L you will also find the slides for each lecture (often updated the night before!), extra resources to be successful in the course, asynchronous assignments, and the place to submit your written work. Without a doubt, it is your responsibility to regularly log into the system to check for updates. .

**C. Submission of Written Work:** A digital copy of all written materials in **MICROSOFT WORD** format must be submitted online **through Avenue to Learn** by their due dates (do NOT send by email). Late submission of assignments may be deducted points for every late day (each 24 hours or portion thereof after due date). Students are expected to adhere to the page range for written assignments. All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) **must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines** for Essays and Theses except where explicitly indicated in assignment instructions. This is posted on the A2L platform for this course. Pay attention to assignment instructions! Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

**D. Academic Honesty & AI Usage:** Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one's own (regardless of the means of its production, including AI) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student's dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

**A special note about using AI:**

All work submitted must be your own. Use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, etc.) is prohibited for all assignments, discussions, and assessments unless explicitly authorized by the instructor. There may be value in using an AI tool to help you locate and collate references and resources or to help you "tidy up" your English grammar, usage, and mechanics, especially if English is not your native language. *However, using AI to create content for you in this manner, and then submitting that content as if you created it, is considered plagiarism.* Violations of this policy will be treated as academic misconduct under institutional guidelines.

**E. AODA:** In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the content of this course is intended to be accessible to all students who are enrolled in the course, including those with disabilities. If a student requires accommodation to participate fully in this course, that student is to contact SAS at McMaster University, who will then work directly with the McMaster Divinity College Registrar to negotiate reasonably appropriate accommodation for the student. The MDC Registrar will communicate with faculty regarding necessary accommodations. Please note that an accommodation is not retroactive and must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation.

**F. Gender Inclusive Language:** McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSVue (2022), TEV/GNB/GNT (1976), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

**G. Online Synchronous Course Conduct Policy:*****Attendance & Participation***

- This course meets live online at the scheduled times.
- Attendance and active participation are required.
- Join the session on time; late arrivals disrupt the class and may affect your participation grade.
- Sessions may be recorded for review, but recordings do not replace live attendance.

***Technology Requirements***

- Ensure you have a reliable internet connection, a device with audio and video capability, and the course platform installed (e.g., Zoom, Teams).
- Test your connection before class.
- Keep your microphone muted unless speaking to reduce background noise.
- Use headphones when possible, for better audio quality.

***Webcam & Environment***

- Unless otherwise instructed, enable your webcam for the duration of the class session.
- Dress in casual but appropriate attire.
- Minimize distractions in your background. Virtual backgrounds are acceptable if professional.
- Disable all computer-generated sound schemes or other electronic annunciation systems.
- Refrain from texting or conducting cell phone conversations while in session. Should you need to maintain contact with family members and/or your ministry or employer, please turn off the ringer so as to avoid disturbing others; upon receipt of an urgent call, you may discretely excuse yourself from the session, but notify the GA or instructor on chat that you have an emergency.

***Netiquette and Professional Conduct***

- Use the “Raise Hand” feature before speaking; avoid interrupting others.
- Keep chat messages on topic; avoid ALL CAPS, sarcasm, or humor that could be misinterpreted.
- Stay focused—do not multitask during class.
- Be respectful and courteous in all interactions. As a counselling and ministry preparation program, we expect that you use the same good communication skills as required in the counselling room or ministry. Many non-verbal cues that we use to interpret communication are not present online; therefore, it is especially critical that we be mindful of how our written words will be interpreted. As instructor, it is my responsibility to monitor communications to ensure that all students feel comfortable expressing their views. Most if not all courses at MDC are devoted to the interpretation of Scripture. Invariably there will be disagreements; these disagreements must be discussed and negotiated in a respectful manner. This applies to individual and group communications involving the instructor and the others enrolled in the course

***Accessibility***

- This course is committed to providing an inclusive learning environment. If you require accommodations, please follow the instructions in the Student Handbook.
- Live captions and accessible materials are available upon request.

***Privacy***

- Class sessions may be recorded for educational purposes and shared only with enrolled students. Recordings must not be distributed outside the course.
- Respect the privacy of peers: do not share images, voices, or contributions outside the class environment.



## 7. COURSE OUTLINE: LECTURES, READINGS AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

*(Due on class date indicated)*

**PREPARATION FOR DAY ONE:** (see resources posted on A2L under “Content”, “Day One”)

(\*\*For those with no previous training in counseling, please **Read Wright**, Chs 1-3)

**Read Worden** – Introduction and Chs. 1 through 3 plus Ch. 5

**Read Syllabus**

**Read Article:** “5 Mistakes Pastors Make in Helping Grieving People”

**Read** Handout on Small Group Practice Exercise for Day One

### **SCHEDULE DAY ONE: MAY 2nd**

#### **Lecture Topics:**

<b>9:30 am</b>	<b>BEGIN</b>	<b>Introductions and Introduction to the Course &amp; Assignments</b>
10:00		<b><u>Understanding Grief and Mourning</u></b>
		Basic Definitions and Concepts
10:45	(15 min break)	
11:00		Understanding Normal Grief
		Understanding Complicated Grief
<b>12:15</b>	<b>LUNCH – 45 mins</b>	
<b>1:00pm</b>	<b>BEGIN</b>	<b><u>Listening to Grief: General Intervention Principles</u></b>
		Key Foundations for Grief Counseling I:
		Approaches, Tasks and Principles of Grief Counseling
2:15	(15 min break)	
2:30		Key Foundations for Grief Counselling II:
		Presence and Companionship
3:00		<b>Small group practice</b>
3:30		Debrief and wrap up
<b>3:45</b>	<b>END</b>	

**PREPARATION FOR DAY TWO:** (see resources posted on A2L “Day Two”)

**Read Worden** – Chs. 4 and 6

**Read:**

- Abraham, E. & Wakem, M. (2021, unpublished) “*Medical Assistance in Dying*”. (17pp)
- Veritas Publications. “*End of Life Care: Ethical and Pastoral Issues*”, Bishops Committee. on Bioethics. Ireland: 2002.
- Piper (2021) “How Can I Serve the dying?”, web blog, for discussion in class
- Maclean (2005) “Pastoral Care for the Terminally Ill”, web article, for discussion in class

**Watch Video:** Bev - A Front-Line Worker dealing with End-of-Life Issues (1 hr 20 mins)

**SCHEDULE FOR DAY TWO: Saturday May 9<sup>th</sup>**

**Topics:**

<b>9:30 am BEGIN</b>	<b>Check in: Reflections and Questions since Last Class</b>
<b>10:00 am</b>	<b><u>Understanding The Dying Person and the Process of Dying</u></b>
<b>10:45 (15 min Break)</b>	
<b>11:00</b>	<b><u>Listening at the End of Life</u></b> End of Life Choices: Life Sustaining Measures, Medical Assistance in Dying
<b>12:15 LUNCH – 45 mins</b>	
<b>1:00pm BEGIN</b>	<b><u>Listening to the End of Life</u></b> Continued
<b>2:15 (15 min break)</b>	
<b>2:30</b>	<b>Case Study:</b> Small Groups Discussion and Processing
<b>3:15</b>	Class Discussion and Questions
<b>3:45 END</b>	

**PREPARATION FOR DAY THREE:**

**Read Mitchell & Anderson (entire book)**

**SCHEDULE FOR DAY THREE Saturday May 23rd**

<b>9:30 am</b>	<b>BEGIN</b>	<b>Check in: Reflections and Questions since Last Class</b>
10:00 am		<b><u>Understanding Spiritual Crises</u></b> Types of Spiritual Crises
10:45	(15 min Break)	
11:00 am		Beliefs about Suffering & Making Meaning
<b>12:15</b>	<b>LUNCH – 45 mins</b>	
<b>1:00 pm</b>	<b>BEGIN</b>	<b><u>Listening to Meaning</u></b> Spiritual Interventions: Encouraging Resiliency Lament, Gratitude, Forgiveness and other Spiritual Interventions
2:15	(15 min Break)	
2:30		Small Group Discussion TBA
3:15		Questions and Class Discussion
<b>3:45</b>	<b>END</b>	

**PREPARATION FOR DAY FOUR: June 6<sup>th</sup>** (see resources posted on A2L, "Day Four")

**Read Worden: Chapters 7 to 9**

**Watch Videos:** Cross Cultural Perspective videos (posted on A2L) (2 hrs)

**Read: The Book of Job**

**Read Articles:**

- Dykstra, Robert C. (1990). *"Intimate Strangers: The Role of the Hospital Chaplain in Situations of Sudden Traumatic Loss."* (18pp)
- Van Deusen Hunsinger, Deborah. (2011) *"Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel and Pastoral Care."* (18pp)
- An article on the Book of Job (TBA)

**SCHEDULE FOR DAY FOUR: Specific Situations and Populations**

**Lecture Topics:**

<b>9:30 BEGIN</b>	<b>Check in: Reflections and Questions since last class</b>
10:00	<b><u>Listening to Disenfranchised Grief:</u></b> Pregnancy Loss, Suicide, Other Situations
10:45 (15 min break)	
11:00	<b><u>Listening in Traumatic Death:</u></b> War, Catastrophe, Murder, Domestic Violence
	<b><u>Listening to other Ages:</u></b> Mourning in Children and Adolescents
<b>12:15 LUNCH – 45 mins</b>	
<b>1:00 pm BEGIN</b>	<b><u>Listening to other Languages:</u></b> Spiritual Care in Diversity
	<b><u>Listening through Technology:</u></b> Telephone and Online Counselling
	<b><u>Listening and Self-care:</u></b> The Effect of Loss on the Pastor and Pastoral Counselor
2:15 (15 min break)	
2:30	<b>Job's Counsellors:</b> Small Groups Discussion and Processing
3:15	<b>Wrapping up:</b> Course Evaluation, Class Discussion and Questions
<b>3:45 END</b>	

**ASSIGNMENT DEADLINES:**

**Friday June 12<sup>th</sup> 8am: REFLECTION PAPERS DUE**

**Friday June 26<sup>th</sup> 8am: CASE ANALYSIS EXAM DUE**

**Friday July 10<sup>th</sup> 8am: ANALYTICAL BOOK REVIEW DUE**

**Friday July 24<sup>th</sup> 8am: PERSONAL INTEGRATION PAPER**