

Israel and Palestine in the therapist's office: How counselors support people without taking sides

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War and politics can cause serious mental anguish and trauma, even for people thousands of miles away from a conflict. Counselors who

specialize in loss and grief may well meet clients who have lost relatives in conflicts such as those in Ukraine and the Middle East.

How do we work on the side of our grieving client without taking sides in a conflict?

Counseling should be a safe and confidential space for clients to express their true feelings, particularly about complex topics. For counselors to create this space, they must be both politically aware and self-aware and have a healthy relationship with their own clinical supervisors.

Politically aware counselors recognize that the [emotional issues](#) bringing clients to counseling often [cannot be separated](#) from political issues—poverty, discrimination, violence and war.

Dealing with personal bias

Therapists are human. They will have strong feelings where they perceive inhumanity, injustice, and oppression. Nevertheless, they can work with people affected by war from either side of a conflict.

Counselors and psychotherapists adhere to ethical codes that inform their work. The British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy's [ethical code](#) expects a therapist to be aware of strong feelings, including perceived injustice, which could affect the therapeutic relationship with their client.

The ethical bereavement counselor eschews their bias. They can work with an Israeli, a Palestinian, a Ukrainian, or a Russian, even with their personal perceptions of the rights and wrongs of the politics of a particular conflict.

Difficulties arise, however, when the counselor is unaware of biases they

may hold. [Unconscious bias](#) is a prejudice against a person, group, or culture which is outside of the practitioner's awareness and is a recognized issue in health professions.

Because this could negatively contribute to the counseling relationship, a therapist's work is supervised by a peer, an experienced practitioner generally with a diploma in [clinical supervision](#). In most countries, including the UK, clinical supervision is mandatory throughout a therapist's career to ensure their clients are kept safe.

If a counselor has any feelings that may affect their relationships with clients, they discuss it with their supervisor. This is an opportunity to reveal unconscious behavior and harmful biases.

Once these have been discussed in supervision, the counselor may decide that they favor one side in the conflict and that it would be unethical to take on a new client bereaved by war. If the relationship was with an existing client, the counselor might decide that they couldn't work with the new bereavement and instead support the client in finding another counselor.

However, bias doesn't always mean ending the client relationship. A counselor with sympathies towards Ukraine in the face of Russian military aggression may still feel able to counsel a bereaved Russian [wife or mother](#).

Supporting the client without taking sides

Many bereavement counselors follow the model of person-centered counseling. This approach helps clients explore their own feelings and reach their full potential (rather than a counselor solving their problems for them).

One of the [core conditions](#) of person-centered counseling is not judging the client for their words and actions. The client may express vengeful thoughts about the "enemy" who killed their loved one, and here the counselor treads a difficult path.

When the counselor listens without judging, the client may interpret this as the counselor taking their side. They may even post about their therapist's support on social media, which would compromise the therapist's neutrality. A counselor may need to be explicit about supporting the client's grief and understanding their feelings without taking sides in the conflict.

For some people bereaved by war, [activism becomes part of their grief](#). Parents of victims or soldiers in a war may [campaign for justice](#) for their child. Counselors may raise with the client the possibility that activism is masking or delaying the grieving process. They may also need to be explicit that their support for the client's grieving approach is not the same as supporting their cause.

Empathy and trauma in counseling

Counselors are trained in using the skills of empathy. A bereavement counselor learns to feel what it's like to learn that a lost relative died in a [terrorist attack](#), was crushed under the rubble of an apartment block, or bled to death after being hit by a mortar bomb.

Hearing one side of the atrocities, along with graphic news coverage, can [vicariously traumatize](#) the counselor, leading to strong emotions, [compassion fatigue](#) and even the risk of developing a partisan position.

It is just as important for counselors to take care of their own responses to war and [conflict](#). Counselors are urged by their profession to practice [self-care](#), which can include regular emotional support with the

therapist's clinical supervisor. Even counselors need counseling.

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