



Courtney Stewart

### A career and a specialty touched by mom

**L**icensed mental health counselor Courtney Stewart contacted me from her private practice, called Healing with Time, in Florida. When I discovered that her specialty was grief and loss, I couldn't help but think about my own recent past, when I lost my mother, my sister and my dog of 15 years during one brief period of time. I was very interested in how Courtney does this difficult work every day. Read her story and discover the answers for yourself.

**Rebecca Daniel-Burke:** Tell readers about your current counseling position.

**Courtney Stewart:** I am the owner and founder of Healing with Time LLC, a private counseling practice specializing in the treatment of grief and loss. My primary tasks include conducting individual, marital/couples and family counseling and marketing the practice and our services in the community. I also provide business consultations for counselors who are interested in starting a private practice.

**RDB:** What led you down the path toward a career in counseling?

**CS:** When I was about 13, my best friend, with whom I am still close, had a huge crush on a boy, and I spent many hours listening to her and offering her advice on what to do about her feelings for him. After this, I became the one everyone came to with their problems, and I got really good at helping them. I asked my mom if there was a job I could do that involved listening to the problems of others, and she told me, "Sure, that's what a counselor does." From that time on, my path was set! I went through high school, college and, finally, graduate school without looking back, and I couldn't be happier with my choice.

**RDB:** How did grief and loss work come into the picture for you?

**CS:** I often tell others that my mom gave me my career and my specialty. My mom died four days before I started graduate school after a 15-year battle with multiple sclerosis. I was faced with the choice of whether I wanted to take the one-year break they allowed at my school. After giving it some serious thought, I decided that my mom would *kill me* if she knew that I delayed graduate school because of her, so I decided to start the program. They say that graduate school changes you, and I experienced that firsthand. I think I would be in a much different place in my grief right now if I had taken a year off.

I really began to develop my grief and loss specialty while completing my internship at a residential treatment center. One day when I was struggling to find a topic for group, I asked one of the staff counselors for guidance. He asked, "What is a topic that you feel you can talk about comfortably?" I immediately responded, "Grief," and my specialty was born. Clients come to me now because they see on my website that I lost my mom. I think it allows them to feel more connected with me and that on some level I can understand what they are going through.

**RDB:** Are there specific techniques or strategies you find helpful when you work with clients who are grieving or experiencing other forms of loss?

**CS:** The biggest thing for me when working with clients is being there and listening as they go through the ups and downs of loss. A large part of my work involves educating clients on the grieving process. Understanding the process assures them that what they are thinking and feeling is not weird, crazy or abnormal.

I also find techniques such as journaling, the empty chair technique, cinema therapy and bibliotherapy very helpful. I encourage

my clients to use rituals to stay connected with what or whom they lost. An example would be to honor birthdays, anniversaries or other special dates that remind them of the person they have lost. Self-care, regular exercise and eating a well-balanced diet are also very important.

**RDB:** As you look back on your career in counseling, what has been your favorite position?

**CS:** My current position is my favorite. I truly enjoy my work in private practice, both the direct care side and the business side. I learn something new almost every day. My office is full of counselors and other healing professionals. We all support each other as a group rather than competing with each other for referrals. This makes coming to the office each day a very enjoyable experience. Not many people can say they are doing their dream job. I feel very lucky to be able to say that I am actually in my dream job.

**RDB:** Which theoretical orientation do you gravitate toward and why?

**CS:** I would say my three main theoretical orientations are existential, person-centered and reality therapy. Existential speaks to me regarding responsibility and finding meaning and purpose in life, which is a large part of the grieving process. It is important to me to hold my clients accountable for their role in creating their current situations and their responsibility to find a way out. I enjoy person-centered because of the emphasis on establishing a trusting relationship with your clients and being genuine with them. Reality therapy allows me to be upfront, honest and direct with my clients as I guide them toward finding their own path.

**RDB:** Who saw something special in you early on and valued you as a unique individual? Who are your heroes?



**CS:** My dad has always been my biggest fan and encouraged me to do what I wanted, even if he did not necessarily agree with my choice. He has always believed that I would be successful no matter what obstacles I encountered. My husband has also been a huge source of support for me over the years. He was with me before, during and after my mom's illness and death. He encouraged me to start my practice after graduate school because he knew that was my dream. Although he does not work in the counseling profession, he has a great understanding of human behavior, and he is often the first person I turn to when I need feedback on business decisions.

As for heroes, I have two. The first would be my grandfather, Papa. He was one of the kindest, most knowledgeable men I have ever met. My Papa was a well-known pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and he loved his job. I am still in awe of and inspired by his eternal positive attitude, his nonjudgmental stance on almost everything, his large group of friends who adored him and his love for music and singing.

My second hero is the lead singer of Green Day, Billie Joe Armstrong. He lost his father at a young age, which was the inspiration for his song "Wake Me Up When September Ends." After my mom died, I heard that song for the first time and was amazed because it explained *exactly* how I felt. There is a chapter about him in the book I am writing.

**RDB:** Has being in the field of counseling been transformational for you?

**CS:** Absolutely! After graduate school, I was a different person. I believe that counseling has taught me to be true to myself, has increased my confidence and has also taught me how to be accountable for my actions. I am much more in tune with my emotions, and I stand up for what I believe. Experiencing my clients as they heal has been transformational and has increased my love and respect for this profession.

**RDB:** What lessons have you learned from the mistakes you made along your career path?

**CS:** In the beginning of my career, I made the mistake of expecting my clients to have "lightbulb moments" in every session. I quickly realized that this was neither possible nor realistic. After

identifying this error in thinking, I became much more relaxed during sessions. Some clients just need to talk in session, some need guidance, and some just need to cry. Each client is individual in [his or her] needs and preferences, and I trust clients to tell me what they need.

**RDB:** Is there a saying you try to remember when the going gets tough?

**CS:** My favorite saying of all time is "Everything happens for a reason." When times are tough, reminding myself of that saying seems to help. I only have control over a certain amount of things in my life, and if I cannot do anything about a negative situation, then I do my best to let it go.

**RDB:** Your work must be intense at times. What ways do you find to take care of yourself?

**CS:** I really enjoy reading, so I make sure to read for at least 30 minutes to an hour every morning before going to the office. I make it a priority to spend quality time with my husband, family and friends on a regular basis. Music is very therapeutic for me, so a lot of my driving time is spent with the music blaring and me singing at the top of my lungs. And I treat myself to some retail therapy quite often as well.

**RDB:** More than 50,000 American Counseling Association members receive *Counseling Today* each month. Is there anything I have left out that you want them to know about you and your work?

**CS:** I truly love my work and feel blessed to go to work every day and see positive changes in my clients. For all of the new graduates, I encourage you to embrace this profession for all it has to offer and be willing to learn whenever possible. This field has so many amazing opportunities, and I look forward to seeing our profession grow and change over the years. ♦

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