

Using the Creative Arts in Grief Therapy



BY CORRIE INEI

“Sorrow... turns out to be not a state but a process”

C.S. Lewis (1976)

Coming to terms with a loss is one of the biggest challenges one may encounter in a life span. Often the traditional ways of communicating our experience fail. Words seem inadequate and a place to begin too overwhelming to pinpoint. The experience needs expression but an expression that is adequate, socially permissible and honouring of that which is lost. The use of creative processes may embellish a cognitive response to grief that engages the sometimes inaccessible emotive self.

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In this essay I will define the term ‘creative arts’ and the arts can fit with contemporary grief and bereavement research and theory. I will look at how various aspects of the arts can be applied to children, adolescents and adults, those who are instrumental grievers and those who operate in a more intuitive fashion. I will look at example of artists who have used their art to respond and comprehend losses in their own lives and how art appreciation can be used in a counselling setting.

DEFINING ‘CREATIVE ARTS IN THERAPY’

Creative Art Therapies or Expressive Therapies apply the various disciplines of the creative arts – art, music, drama, dance and written communication to the therapy scenario. The client’s imagination is engaged through artistic expression to enhance healing and growth. Emphasis is placed on the process of art making rather than the final aesthetic product. Thus using creative arts in therapy is not for entertainment purposes but as an alternate communication tool of self-expression (what

is... 2001). Most importantly self-expression must be heard and validated by the therapist.

Where I have used the terms ‘art practice’, ‘creative arts’ and ‘end product’ I refer to any of the disciplines of the performing and creative arts.

Though there are specialists in the various artistic disciplines (art therapist, music therapist, drama therapist etc) there is room to adopt the use of the arts by non-specialist therapists. In the realm of grief and bereavement counselling the use of an artistic discipline may be a new way for the bereaved to communicate when words seem inadequate. The arts can transcend cultural differences, be pertinent in different ways through generations and give voice to an otherwise inaccessible inner self.

Give sorrow words, yes, but also paint and glue and hammers and nails and long walks and quiet and music and play and all other possible forms of expression, including silence.

(Schuurman 2002)

CONTEXT OF CREATIVE ARTS THERAPY WITHIN BEREAVEMENT COUNSELLING

The practice of the creative arts in a constructivist and narrative approach can be a great tool for the counsellor to help the client reconstruct meaning in the light of their loss. To give voice to the inner turmoil, unanswered questions and a retelling of events benefits the client’s physical and emotional wellbeing (Pennebaker 1990).

As the bereaved deal with the shock of a new uncharted life in light of a profound loss, transformation takes place through a ‘relearning’ of the world (Attig 1996). This is generally done in an organic way. Feeling though a process often requires little extra professional support as the bereaved learn to love their dead in their absence (Attig 2000). It is when this relearning takes on a regressive rather than a progressive path that intervention and counselling is required. Neimeyer offers some

applications of “narrative repair” (2001) in various forms of self-expression and self-exploration through the use of writing exercises such as reflective journaling, writing narratives from the perspective of others and writing unsent letters. This can be further enhanced by the use of other art expressions as non-verbal communication of a life narrative. For example, the use of drawing as a medium to tell stories enables the client to use a visual language that is able to put some distance between pain, emotion, behavior and themselves. Drawing bypasses the cognitive level yet thought and feelings are still externalized (Malchiodi 1990).

The use of the creative process sits comfortably in the dual process model (Stroebe and Schut 1999) in both the loss and restoration oriented coping strategies. Music for example is generally considered as a form of entertainment or recreation and thus fits very easily in the restoration stressor as a distraction from grief. Because of this association music can gently crossover to a role in active grief work such as talking about or listening to music that reminds the client of the loss.

CHILDREN AND DRAWING

Due to a child’s limited verbal development the arts are a natural bridge to expression and understanding. The immediacy and accessibility of drawing permits the child to access inner issues in a way that can easily be shared with another. As children draw before they can write it is easy to observe that drawing tends to be a natural communication tool to express what can’t be said in words (Bertoia 1993).



Children’s drawings as a legitimate expression of a narrative seems to be well recognized. One school of thought believes children with a terminal illness have a pre-conscious knowledge of their illness and outcome (returning health or impending death) that show up in their drawings (Bach as cited in Kübler-Ross 1981 p. 66). A trained therapist is able to interpret their fears, beliefs and emotions and assist the family and child with their

impending death. Though there is much literature on symbolism in children’s drawings there is a danger of misinterpreting and therefore misunderstanding the child’s effort to communicate. A phenomenological approach should be adopted where the artwork is understood in its context and in its own right rather than depending on preconceived causes (Malchiodi 1990 p 35).

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There is less research available on the use of children’s drawings in the context of dealing with grief and bereavement compared to those with a terminal illness and sexual abuse. However, Malchiodi’s use of the drawing process in children’s therapy can be adapted to those dealing with bereavement. As a drawing is executed in the presence of the counsellor, great insight into the thoughts of the child can be gained as questions are asked and the child talks about the various elements of the drawing. The child is then able to externalize the issues they are concerned with through their drawings as they talk about it and the counsellor gains a clearer understanding of the child’s thought processes.

The emphasis lies on the process and development of the art making. How the ideas and thoughts are conveyed is of more importance than the final product and therefore becomes a link between non-verbal and verbal communication. This concept can be applied to other areas of the creative arts such as telling a story with puppets or other ‘play’ scenarios, expression through dance, mime or music making.

RESEARCH REGARDING ADULTS AND GRIEF THERAPY

While the need for non-verbal communication with children is perhaps a logical conclusion there is also relevant application to adults. Though an adult would not so readily talk about an image as it is being executed, a small folio of completed drawings can show common motifs and symbols or a theme that can give greater insight to both client and counsellor.

I found little research of the use of creative arts in grief therapy in relation to adults. A study concerning professionals such as servicemen, police and emergency personnel has looked at the successful use of dramatherapy as a tool to combat Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Winn 1994 as cited in Bannister 2004 p



46). Professions such as these require an instrumental and stoic engagement to others. The nature of drama and role-play enables the client to bypass the need for professional distance and thus able to gain insight into buried feelings and emotions¹.



APPLICATION TO GRIEF STYLES

Individual styles of grieving operate along a continuum with instrumental and intuitive patterns as the alternatives (Walter 1996). For those who exhibit an instrumental pattern of grieving, nonverbal communication may access areas of emotional stress in a non-confrontive way. In a more structured task, with the counsellor stressing the process rather than the end result (the aim is not to be a professional artist/writer/musician), the instrumental griever can be released from the pressure of needing to have a perfect end product and also apply problem-solving skills to work toward the finished task. For example writing a poem about an emotion such as anger by starting with word associations while disregarding the need for formal stylistic measures. As the poem develops the writer has control over the structure of the poem and the words chosen.



Those who are more inclined to an intuitive pattern can use the arts to vent the intensity of their emotions in a manner that the individual may see as acceptable. Art practice may also alleviate confusion and disorientation as the mind focuses on the process and engages the self to interpret as the artwork unfolds.

¹ I was given a box of journals and correspondence from a great aunt who was a nurse in WW2. I read a letter received from her father written in prose form offering an apology and blessing. My mother commented that my grandfather's family were all stoics in nature, undemonstrative and very reserved but they all wrote in prose in their personal correspondence. I'm not sure if this was typical of that generation or peculiar to this family. Anecdotally, this can support the use of artistic means as a way to connect and convey to an otherwise inaccessible emotional state.

ADOLESCENTS

Bereavement and adolescence offers unique challenges. Complex developmental growth and identity issues clash with the difficulties of grief work. One of the biggest issues of teenage development is the role of the peer group and the importance of acceptance. The adolescent may ignore grief in an effort to fit in and be normal. Group work and the way a phenomenological approach to music therapy can greatly assist the grieving teenager.

In a study of a group of six teenagers who had experienced a death up to 18 months two techniques were used that were based on the participant's contributions. The first required the participants to share music that was meaningful. The second was group improvisation using percussive instruments. Between the two activities the therapist mediated discussion being aware of the need to oscillate between activity and words.

The participants found that their sessions were fun and helpful in providing a safe forum to explore and express their experiences. They were respectful of the stories of other group members and recognized the importance of everyone contributing in an honest and confidential way (Skewes 2000).

The demonstration of such a successful model lends itself to extending group work for teenagers across other disciplines such as drama, movement and art. However music is especially suitable as it is something this age group particularly identifies with as a means of expression.

ART AS EXPRESSION OF SELF

For those who practice an artistic expression, a natural element of processing a loss consists of a cathartic element in their chosen endeavor. There is much documentation of artist's who mode of expression have almost become an assimilation of themselves as they comprehend and process their experience. Neil Finn talks about the suicide of Crowded House band member Paul Hester and the role of music in their expression of grief.

“Well, we...played at his service down here at Ripponlea. And Mark (Seymour) was there as well, and we did quite a lot of playing that night actually. And actually, it was incredibly kind of powerful, and good, you know, the music was really good.”

Neil Finn interview on Enough Rope 2007
(Jacoby 2007)

Likewise Australian contemporary sculptor Linde Ivimey uses her medium to exercise her deep emotional loss



and acceptance of her infertility. Her work has a deeply disturbing edge but evoke such beauty and presence. "I had to get the demons out of my mind," she says of the work (Crawford 2003).

Artist Janet Goodchild-Cuffley states, "Painting is my way of healing" (Liz Porter 2007) as she comes to terms with the suicide of her daughter. Her work include those with titles such as "Birthday Wish – I Want my Daughter Back" and "Woman Falling into the Abyss of Grief". "Absence" portrays herself looking at a landscape of a setting sun with a heart shaped hole in her chest.



Absence (2002) Janet Goodchild-Cuffley - Used with permission.

C.S. Lewis' journal, "A Grief Observed" in which he explores the path of bereavement on the death of his wife (referred to as H.), not only enabled him to gain insight into the agony of grief but also generously allows the reader into his suffering.

Thought after thought, feeling after feeling. action after action, had H. for their object. Now their target is gone. I keep on through habit fitting an arrow to the string: then I remember and have to lay the bow down.

(Lewis, 1976 p. 55)

ART APPRECIATION AS A TOOL FOR GRIEF WORK

I have talked about creative processes being successful tools of non-verbal communication and healing as the client actively engages in art making however art appreciation can also assist the healing process in a counselling setting. Our society and culture has richly benefited from the by-products of individuals trying to

quantify, reason, fight and explore the meaning of grief. These can be a poignant resource to those who are in the midst of the experience. Sandra Bertman (2000) argues the case for using evocative images of grief in a therapeutic setting. She suggests that images that reflect internal suffering and pain such as Edvard Munch's work, as opposed to a pretty landscape that normally decorate the walls of medical/counselling rooms, are a great starting point for the bereaved to identify with and talk about.

Images, words, music and performances that shock, help us to acknowledge that life can be pretty awful at times. Those who are experiencing the 'at times' benefit from knowing they are not alone, others have gone before them, and their experiences are validated. A response to another's work can elicit great insight into one's own belief and experience as one examines the artist's interpretation.

A response to an artwork is obtained not through osmosis but through direct involvement and discussion. The individual must observe or experience the artwork as an individual before expressing a response. Others may influence the outcome or interpretation but it is still one that is less open to a particular viewpoint being imposed on an individual. There is more than one way to interpret an artwork even between the artists to the viewer (Smith 2007). This concept can be utilized in a counselling setting by prompting discussion. Why does the client feel this way toward this artwork, how would they change it, what elements do they like or dislike, is this how they felt when they went through something similar.

Speculation on the one piece by a number of people within the social structure of the grieving client or group work can build a dialogue that parallels the loss experience. This builds an understanding of meaning making in interpersonal relationships within that family or group setting. The recognition of a wide variety of responses to an artwork can become a metaphor for understanding the variety of reactions to grief and loss.

CONCLUSION

The application of the creative arts in a therapeutic setting is only limited to the degree of creative thinking of the counsellor. With the aim of the counsellor to come along side and assist those that are bereaved, the creative arts can be a natural extension of



providing a safe haven to explore, examine and rework the client's experience and emotional response in a fresh way.

Non-verbal communication can offer the bereaved a more rounded holistic approach to an overwhelming situation. The arts can make a detour past a cognitive response to the sub-conscious emotive self that may help access the relearning and sense making of living a life in light of a significant loss.

■ Corrie Inei

I have just complete my Graduate Diploma in counselling through Kingsley (graduating through SCD) and am continuing with a Masters degree half way through next year. I come from a fine art background.

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