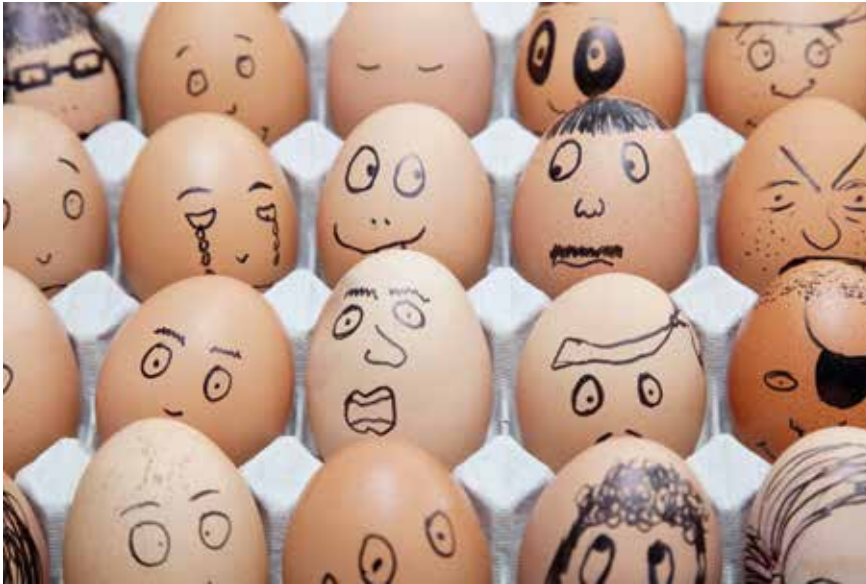


# A Creative Approach to Bereavement Support in Groups

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## Abstract

This article gives an overview of the role of the creative arts therapies when dealing with bereavement. It outlines the value of bereavement support groups in supporting people through loss and it includes a brief case study of group bereavement support, based on the Dual Process Model of Stroebe and Schut.

## Introduction

William Shakespeare, the English playwright, knew something about the landscape of grief. His only son Hamnet died aged 11. In the play King John, written shortly afterwards, a woman, Constance, distraught at the death of her own son, describes her grief:

*“Grief fills the room up of my absent child,  
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,  
Puts on his pretty look, repeats his words,  
Remembers me of his gracious parts,  
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form”* (2009, Act 3, Scene IV)

In another of Shakespeare’s plays Macbeth, the character Macduff, after hearing of the death of his wife and children states;

*“Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak, whispers the oer-fraught heart, and bids it break.”* (1992, Act 4, Sc 3).

Interestingly, Shakespeare here talks about male grief and the importance of finding ways to ‘give sorrow words’. This has relevance for all who are dealing with a significant loss. His point, as therapists will readily understand, is that if you do not, or cannot, find ways to express your grief, it will come out in other ways. It will end up breaking your heart. Literature,

such as that by Shakespeare, is a resource that can help us to know that we are not alone in our grief. It also provides something more.

Along with other art forms such as music, art, drama and movement, literature can offer us creative options for expressing our grief. Robert Niemeyer (2014) highlights his experience of working in psychotherapy with people who are bereaved and how they naturally use the “vocabulary of the arts” to help them find their way in a changed world. Sometimes words are not enough, or perhaps there are no words to describe the experience of our grief. Yet we can be moved by a piece of music we hear, a painting or photograph that we see, or a creative activity that we engage in. The arts provide us with creative, yet indirect, ways of engaging with our grief. This indirectness is important. It allows us a certain distance from the rawness of our pain-and this is not necessarily a bad thing.

## The Grieving Process

Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) Dual Process Model (DPM) of coping with significant loss highlights that effective grieving involves a natural oscillation between two types of coping. Loss coping deals with engaging with the pain of the loss, while restoration coping deals with adjusting to life now without the person who has died. Effective grieving involves a natural oscillation between these two. This means engaging with the pain of our loss and also separating or distancing from it. If this

natural oscillation gets blocked or interrupted, people can experience difficulties in their grief (Costello, 2012). The aim of bereavement support in such cases is to help to re-establish the natural oscillation between engaging with, and separating from, the pain of the loss (Stroebe and Schut, 2010).

### Creative Arts and Grief

The creative arts can help people with this process by providing varying levels of indirectness or distance from our emotional pain. For example, in a bereavement support group context, discussing the lines above from the plays King John or Macbeth enables a bereaved person to engage with grief but at a certain level of distance from their own loss, whereas bringing in a memento of the loved one who has died will provide less distance and bring the person much closer to their own grief.

There is evidence that this type of intentional use of individual arts forms can be effective in helping people cope with bereavement. Music is perhaps the most established with a number of studies highlighting its value to children (Rosner, Kruse et al., 2010), adolescents (McFerran-Skewes and Erdonmez-Grocke, 2000; McFerran 2011) and adults (Hilliard, 2001; Yun and Gallant, 2010; O'Callaghan, McDermott et al., 2013). Art is similarly recognised (Ferszt, Heineman et al., 1998; Chilcote, 2007), as is Drama (Curtis, 1999; Dayton, 2005), though to a lesser extent. There is also some evidence of the combined use of different arts activities in bereavement support interventions (Kirk and McManus, 2002; King, 2003; Near, 2012), while Rogers (2007) and Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) provide helpful guides to the use of different types of creative arts activities in bereavement support.

### Bereavement Support Groups

While many of these activities are used on a one to one basis, the focus of this article is on their use in a group context. Groups are an established means of providing care and support to people who are bereaved (Corey and Corey 1997; Lorenz 1998; Kirk and McManus 2002; DeLucia-Waack, Gerrity et al. 2004; Rogers 2007; Maruyama and Atencio 2008; Dyregrov et al. 2013) Some of their advantages include:

1. The normalisation of one's grief experience through meeting others in similar situations
2. Peer support and learning from each other
3. Reducing isolation
4. Information exchange
5. Gaining knowledge and learning new skills.

Bereavement support groups can take time and effort to set up, but once properly established and run, they can be an effective support environment for people who are bereaved (Dyregrov, Johnson et al., 2013; Mc Guinness et al., 2015).

In 2010 the Irish Hospice Foundation and St Francis Hospice Dublin piloted a number of bereavement support groups using creative arts (McGuinness and Finucane, 2011; McGuinness et al., 2015). The model used was an eight session closed group based on the Dual Process Model of Stroebe and Schut (1999) outlined above. The sessions also included a psycho-educational component and were designed to help participants to move between engaging with, and separating from their grief. A range of different creative arts activities were used to facilitate this by varying the emotional distance from participants' grief. Table 1 below outlines the themes and activities

used in each session. It also describes the emotional distance provided by the art activity as either low, medium or high.

The use of creative arts activities in these groups was shown to be effective in enabling participants to move between engaging with their grief and separating from it (Mc Guinness et al., 2015), as the following participants' comments indicate:

*"My experience of grief is not something that will stop but that it is now part of my life; it will be an ongoing process from now on. Although it may change with time but it will always be with me and this is what I have learned to expect and accept."* (Participant 12), (Mc Guinness et al., 2015).

*'By understanding that grief (is) . . . a continual journey of carrying the loss forever but with good times and bad times. It's a constant adjustment to the changes. Plus, that it's ok to go with the tough days and be accepting and gentle with myself. It's also ok to be happy also.'* (Participant 17), (Mc Guinness et al., 2015).

### Case Study - The Bereavement Bake-off Group

In 2015, this creative arts bereavement support group model was run in a community setting outside of a hospice environment. The group was run in collaboration with a local bereavement support organisation. Seven people; two men and five women attended the group. One participant had lost a sister, another a mother and the remaining five had lost partners or spouses. The group engaged well with some of the arts activities – journal writing, use of photographs, memento ritual and salt jars, while choosing to postpone or not do others (six-part story making, use of literature).

Some of the sessions were quite difficult for some of the members

**Table 1: Themes for the 8 sessions**

Session	Psycho Educational Theme	Creative Arts Activity	Distance from grief experience
1	General points on Grief, Introductions and getting to know each other	Introduction to Journal writing Verbal expression	High
2	The grief process and why it is different for each person.	Exploring loss through Photographic images.	High
3	Theories of grief	Exploring loss through the six part creative story making method	High
4	Secondary losses	The use of literature e.g. C.S. Lewis A Grief Observed (1961)	Medium
5	The importance of remembering - Sharing mementoes and memories.	The use of ritual through bringing personal mementoes (e.g. syringe driver, cigarette packet, piece of jewellery, photos) and creating a sacred space.	Low (Fulcrum Session)
6	The impact of grief on the family.	Using excerpts from drama scripts to explore family relationships, e.g. scenes from Dolly West's Kitchen by Frank Mc Guinness(1999)	Medium
7	Spirituality - How have your values and beliefs been affected by your loss?	Participants bring and share personal spiritual aids which help them – e.g. prayers, readings, poetry – walking in nature – meditation	High
8	Preparing for transition. Looking ahead and ending ritual.	Final ritual - art making through the creation of a memory jar using coloured chalks and salt.	High

(use of photographs and memento ritual). During the photographs session when participants were very aware of their loss, one of the members who had brought along some cakes that she had made, offered to share them with the group. As a facilitator I wasn't sure whether to go with this or not. As facilitator, one voice in my head was saying "this is not quite what the plan is - maybe we should stay with the pain" and another was saying "this might be just what people need". In the end, I decided to go with sharing out the cake and it turned out to be a pivotal moment for the group. In subsequent sessions, without any prompting, different members of the group brought in cakes or treats that they had made and shared them out

in the sessions. This became an important part of the group's identity and the way that it worked. For the last session, the group decided to have a celebration and everyone brought something in to share with the others. It was like a bake-off - there were so many cakes and treats, and people ended up taking home more than they came with.

### Process Evaluation

In their evaluations after the group, all of the participants said that they found the group 'helpful' and that it was 'just what they needed'. As one person commented on what was most helpful to her: "The comfort and support of other group members and facilitators."

I believe that the use of creative


arts activities in this bereavement support group was helpful in enabling participants to explore their grief in a safe way. These activities may also have helped participants to access their own creativity and resourcefulness.

In hindsight, while the bereavement group set out to use creative arts activities to help people come to terms with their grief, it was the members' own creativity; expressed through their baking and caring for each other - which was the most memorable feature of this group. The use of creative arts activities can certainly make a contribution in supporting people who are bereaved, especially in a group context. They are not though, an end in themselves, and need to be seen and used in the service of the person or persons who are bereaved. In this context, one of their most useful benefits may be in enabling clients to access their own creativity and resources.

Using different creative arts activities in bereavement care can be of help to a client in their grieving process. However, a counsellor or therapist needs to be mindful of how an activity may impact on a client and also the timing of its use (See Rogers, (2007) and Thompson and Neimeyer, (2014) for advice on the use of different creative arts activities). As in counselling and psychotherapy in general, it is important to remember that the client(s) know best. This is particularly so in the use of creative arts activities. Some people like certain activities and others don't. It is important to discuss any potential use of creative arts activities with clients and allow their free choice in whether to partake or not.

### Conclusion

Bereavement and grief are in many

ways about change and things coming to an end. While this is a natural and normal part of life – it is not necessarily an easy process – particularly when that ending involves the finality of death. Coming to terms with a significant loss in our lives takes time and a lot of adjustment. In these periods of adjustment there are many twists and turns and at times they can feel like they will never end. The creative arts can help us to navigate and find our way through these experiences. Using creative arts activities in a bereavement support group can provide participants with elements of a map for navigating the strange landscape of grief. They can also help participants to access their own internal compass of creativity. For those who have the privilege of working with people who are bereaved, the creative arts offer many approaches that could be helpful. Perhaps their greatest benefit is in helping people to access their own creative sources to integrate their losses and find new life. 

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