


# Grief and the Expressive Arts: Practices for Creating Meaning. Barbara E. Thompson and Robert A. Neimeyer (Eds.). New York, NY: Routledge, 2014, 312 pp.

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Grief is a universal experience, yet is insufficiently understood in counselling and psychotherapy. Loss is not an experience to be solved or resolved. Grieving has no clear end, and fostering acceptance does not reduce the suffering of loss. There is a dearth of services in Australia for bereaved and grieving people, and there is far greater attention paid to trauma than to grief and loss.

Barbara Thompson and Robert Neimeyer have made a significant and creative contribution to the field of grief work with their edited book published by Routledge in 2014. From the haunting drawing on the cover to the final epilogue poem (*Ghosts move through this house . . .*), readers are introduced to diverse methods for creatively accessing and articulating the depths of grief and loss. This beautiful book contains photographs, poems, song lyrics, rituals and resources for processing grief and accessing experiences that cannot be adequately expressed in everyday language.

The book is structured into five parts which encompass 57 chapters. Part 1: *Building the frame* (five chapters) provides the theoretical and practice foundation for using art and expressive therapies with grief. Stand out features of Chapter 1, written by Neimeyer and Thompson, are lists of implicit questions for processing the event story of death (Table 1.1, p. 5): for example, “Who am I in light of this loss, now and in the future? How does this experience shape or reshape the larger story of my life?” and the relationship to the deceased (Table 1.2, p. 6): for example, “Where and how do I hold my grief for my loved one in my body or my emotions, and how might this evolve into an inner bond of a healing kind?”.

Part 2: *Doing the work* (36 chapters!) is the heart of the book. It includes an extensive and rich array of art and expressive therapy modalities: music, creative writing, theatre, dance, visual arts (including film and photography), body-oriented, and multimodal approaches. The application of these modalities is demonstrated with diverse client

populations: Holocaust survivors; women who have been trafficked for sex; bereaved adults, parents and children; and people diagnosed with terminal cancer. Each chapter is structured in the same way: a description of the approach, a case study, variations and adaptations, and concluding thoughts. This structure is very accessible for practitioners working with grief, and methods can be readily translated into practice.

Part 3: *Art and reflexivity* (five chapters) provides moving examples of people's personal grief journeys, and provides agency and voice for the bereaved. Strouse, a mother bereaved by suicide, maps her active grief process through a series of collages; Renzenbrink, a dislocated therapist experiencing loss, describes her method of working with photographic images of ephemera, "flutterings" (p. 198), as metaphors for loss and life's fragility; Hill, a woman who experienced pregnancy loss, describes the use of memorial tattoos to "make grief visible" (p. 204); enso art journaling is described by Jennings, a daughter affected by her mother's cancer; and a somatic approach to expressing and healing grief is described by Beauchamp, who lost her partner to cancer. These chapters document the use of diverse forms of art and creative expression for self-healing.

Part 4: *Programs* (seven chapters) describes formalised programs and resources around the world which address the experience of people dealing with grief and loss. This includes a chapter by Sands on group programs for adults bereaved by suicide; Dalton and Krout's chapter on using song writing to express loss with bereaved children and young people; Gold's outline of creative writing with young people in detention or psychiatric hospitals; Dahlstedt's application of expressive arts to heal traumatised veterans and members of their community; music therapy with bereaved children described by Hilliard; Li and Chang's beautiful chapter on a grief healing garden and rituals for bereaved parents in Taiwan; and Hamblen's outline of a structured group program for bereaved young people and their families, using art to explore grief experiences.

Part 5: *Research* (three chapters) presents current research projects and the empirical base for expressive therapies. Artra examines the meaning making process for war veterans using an interpretive/constructivist methodology. Wogrin, Maasdorp and Machando examine the experience of caregiving with professional caregivers in Zimbabwe, using drawings to convey emotional experiences using the metaphor of rivers and other symbols. Torres, Neimeyer and Neff provide a literature review of qualitative and quantitative studies and conclude there is a "promising beginning" (p. 289) in gathering evidence for the efficacy of expressive therapies. They recommend further mixed method research as most effective for establishing the efficacy of therapeutic processes.

Dunphy, Mullane and Jacobsson (2013), in their PACFA-funded literature review, also investigated the evidence for the effectiveness of expressive therapies, and found there was a modest body of research, which is limited by small samples and lack of follow up of

the effects of interventions over time. However, they also concluded that there is evidence for the effectiveness of expressive art therapies for a range of physical and psychological conditions.

Thompson and Neimeyer's book is a wonderful contribution to the expressive therapies field, bringing together a range of practices and research from around the world. While many art therapy books have been published in the last 20 years, this book is groundbreaking in the diversity of approaches and a focused application to grief.

The overall coherence of the book could be improved by an overarching and reflective narrative for each of the five divisions, to weave together these diverse approaches and experiences, and to draw out principles, commonalities and differences in methods and their theoretical underpinnings. Chapter 57, *Persephone in the Underworld*, written by Thompson and Neimeyer, concludes the book, however it is subsumed into the research section. In this conclusion, they write:

The expressive arts can foster a deep communion, an experience of the universal in the person and of being in a place that is timeless and interdependent. With an attitude of openness and curiosity, it is possible there to discover something new and unexpected, and make visible that which is often invisible and beyond words (p. 292).

This book is a considerable achievement, and would be a useful resource for counselling and psychotherapy students, academic teaching staff, practitioners, and those who are experiencing grief and loss.

## References

Dunphy, K., Mullane, S., & Jacobsson, M. (2013). *The effectiveness of expressive arts therapies: A review of the literature*. Melbourne, Australia: PACFA.

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