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Existential Art Therapy in Children's Bereavement Groups: Development of a Method

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2019

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Art Therapy

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Abstract

Children and adolescents who have experienced the death of a family member are faced with the emotional journey of grieving their loss, which may be accompanied with existential concerns about life and death in general. Bereavement programs serve to connect children with others who know what losing a family member is like. Art therapy can be used in these bereavement groups to express and give shape to the emotions and memories the participants have. It is a non-verbal way to reflect and find meaning that can come from post-traumatic growth. This capstone thesis project explores an art therapy method for bereaved children and adolescents that draws upon theories in existential therapy. This method was incorporated into bereavement programming for 15 individuals age 4-18 and the results are discussed in this capstone. *“Grief never ends... But it changes. It’s a passage, not a place to stay. Grief is not a sign of weakness, nor a lack of faith. It is the price of love.”*

— *Author Unknown*

Existential Art Therapy in Children's Bereavement Groups: Development of a Method

Introduction

Comprehending and coming to terms with the impermanence of life is a vast and daunting concept for anyone. As children age, they experience the loss differently during each stage of development, making it a life-long process rather than something that can be worked through once (Gao & Slaven, 2017). Children may grieve in spurts, “transitioning from deep sorrow to laughter sporadically and within a short period of time” (Gao & Slaven, 2017, p. 122) or they may become parentified and be afraid to express their grief because they are worried about how their caregiver will respond. Gao and Slaven write on the best practices in children's bereavement services, which includes being honest with children, avoiding euphemisms, normalizing their grief, offering peer support, and using expressive therapies.

Art therapy is often used in children's bereavement programs and can be beneficial in a variety of ways. Although existentialism is a concept that is too abstract for many children, those who are faced with the death of a parent or sibling must confront ideas about existence and death prematurely. Art therapy offers a way to express what something feels without needing to put it into words. “All artworks have an existential quality, and all art processes are connected to the basic human experience of life” (Moon, 2009, p. xvii). Art allows the artist to try to make sense and find meaning in internal sensations or the world around them and it can be used as a metaphor for what is happening in one's life.

For this capstone thesis project, I explored children's bereavement programming through an existential lens and developed an art therapy method that connects to this perspective. This was implemented at the bereavement center where I am completing a 10-month internship. Before starting my research and implementation of my method, I took time to examine my

assumptions and biases about my research topics. One assumption that I had is that art therapy can be used as a way to express existential concepts that may feel too vast to convey in words. I believe this because of my own practice with art making around feelings of impermanence, change, and loss. This is another factor that will vary greatly from person to person but my hope is that some clients will be able to connect to the metaphors present in artmaking.

Additionally, the factors that drew me towards an internship at this site, as well as the work I do each week, evolves around my assumption that bereavement services are beneficial for children who have lost a loved one. I understand that each child and family is unique and the same services may help some more than others. I believe that the programs are generally helpful in increasing insight into grief emotions and feeling connected to others. The goal is not to diminish the hard emotions surrounding the loss but rather to work through them in a supportive environment and honor the memory of the person who died.

Literature Review

Bereavement

In reviewing bereavement, it was important to consider the development of bereavement theories and their implication in counseling. Early models, such as Freud's grief theory, emphasize the detachment from the deceased over time to return to normal (Lister, Pushkar & Connolly, 2008). However more recent research considers trauma theories, attachment theories, and cognitive process models and offers a different perspective to grief and the attachment to the person who died.

In contrast to earlier stage models, The Dual-Process Model suggests that the bereavement process involves an oscillation between two types of stressors: loss-oriented and restoration-oriented (Lister et al., 2008). The loss-orientation involves a focus on the grief, which

may include rumination of the circumstances of the death and emotional responses. The restoration-orientation happens when a bereaved person focuses on their new roles or identities and other changes that may result from the secondary losses.

The Meaning-Reconstruction Model suggests that the relationship to the person who died is re-defined over time and is never complete (Lister et al., 2008). "When a person dies suddenly, unexpectedly, or at a young age, the schemas or assumptions are threatened leading to a process of rebuilding" (Lister et al., 2008, p.247). In this model, the narrative truth of the bereaved person is important in making sense of their circumstances and reconstructing meaning in the story of their life. This process of rebuilding is central in the process of grieving.

Similar to the meaning reconstruction model, the continuing bonds theory honors the "ongoing attachment to the deceased" (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p.11). This can be experienced by missing the person, remembering them, talking to the person who died, feeling their presence, holding onto important belongings, and honoring their virtues. "Sense of Presence Experiences and Meaning-making in Bereavement: A Qualitative Analysis," explored a study about continuing bonds. The study interviewed people who have experienced sensing the presence of their loved one or internally continuing the relationship to see correlations with post traumatic growth (Steffen & Coyle, 2011). This article provided an in-depth look at themes present for 12 individuals. Some of these themes include: feeling that the person who died is not completely lost, emotional benefits from sensing the presence, viewing the person who died as a resource as a spiritual being, existential insight and spiritual/religious growth.

Existential Perspective

Existential perspectives can aid in facing the unpredictability of life and try to create meaning in the time we have. Existential therapy encourages the individual's freedom to choose

how to interpret their situations and become the authors of their own life (Story, 2007). Story provides an overview of the history of existential philosophy, existential psychotherapy, and existential art therapy. For the purposes of this capstone, I will focus on Irvin Yalom's approach to existential psychotherapy because of his influence on Moon's theories on existential art therapy (Moon, 2009). Yalom believes that the four main human concerns are death, isolation, meaninglessness and freedom. They are "essentially the heart of all clinical work" (Story, 2007, p. 24).

Bereavement programs can be viewed with these concerns in mind. The main purpose of the programs is to support people dealing with death loss. This may include helping children understand what this means, or on a deeper level, explore how grappling with death feels like in societies that wish to avoid the topic. Moon draws upon Yalom's theories of death among the other existential concerns. Yalom described how life and death are interdependent – that death lies just below the surface of life and is a primal source of anxiety (Moon, 2009).

Another fundamental goal of bereavement programs is to remove individuals from the feeling of isolation that sometimes accompanies grief and bring about connection to others who understand what losing a family member is like. While existentialism acknowledges that we are fundamentally alone and responsible for our own lives (Moon, 2009), knowing that the adversity and loss that one faces is not happening to them alone can diminish some of the feelings of isolation.

Losing a family member can also exacerbate the feeling that we live in a world that is "random and senseless" (Moon, 2009, p.10). As humans, we long for a sense of purpose but existential anguish can happen in these moments of meaninglessness. In bereavement groups, a focus on personal narratives and post-traumatic growth can provide one way to explore meaning-

making in the face of tragedy. Through detailed case studies, Yalom found that “meaning in life can be a natural byproduct of living a life engaged with others and committed to a purpose” (Overholser, 2005, p. 187). Bereavement groups can facilitate conversation about these issues.

Buddhist perspectives on life and loss can also provide a framework to explore existential themes such as the impermanence of life and participants can look at their own stories through this lens (Neimeyer & Young-Eisendrath, 2015). Neimeyer and Young-Eisendrath provide three spiritual laws of existence for participants to consider, including:

- (a) the universality of stress and adversity (i.e., bad things happen to everyone); (b) the condition of constant change that is the nature of our life and world; and (c) the fact of our complete interdependence, that we are always embedded in a context that lies largely out of our control. (p. 265)

When we can see the universal nature of these principals, we can begin to explore the challenge in the human experience to create meaning in moments of change.

Bereavement groups that are structured for peer sharing and support allow participants that are at different points in their grief journey to share with newer members about their experiences of change and adversity. Acknowledging that there is no “right way” to grieve is important and individuals can share about the similarities and differences in their grief that they have experienced in a nonjudgmental environment.

Art Therapy

“The Therapeutic Effectiveness of using Visual Art Modalities with the Bereaved: A Systematic Review” evaluates the literature on 27 studies using visual art in bereavement.

Weiskittle & Gramling (2018) write:

Visual arts' frequent use in the field is congruent with available historical context.

Mourning and grief in funeral rituals often employ visual art to express loss, love, and remembrance across cultures. In addition, visual memorials are often created for remembrance, documentation, and healing for family and community of the decedent. (p. 11)

When reviewing the use of art in a therapeutic context, the study found that visual art may be helpful in developing skills to adapt to bereavement such as making sense of the death, finding meaning, and preserving the legacy of the person who died. There is less evidence to support the impact it has on negative grief symptoms such as the pain from the loss. "Thus, grief therapy is sometimes considered a preventative approach to bereavement, to buffer possible manifestations of impaired functioning, rather than the traditional aims of psychotherapy for direct alleviation of targeted symptoms" (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p. 18).

For the development of my method, it was also important to explore existential art therapy approaches in particular. Moon (2009) defines existential art therapy as "a dynamic approach to the therapeutic use of arts processes and imagery that focus attention on the ultimate concerns of human existence" (i.e. death, isolation, meaninglessness, and freedom.) The creative process of using the arts can "deepen communications and offer insights beyond the realm of linear logical verbalization" (Moon, 2009, p. xix). The intention is not to label or pathologize clients but rather to use a metaphoric approach and engage with the human need for expression with a sense of wonder.

Method

Layered Paintings

The method I have chosen to adapt and implement at a children's bereavement center involves layered process painting, which was originally inspired by the spirit of el duende, developed by Cassou and Cubley (1995), and introduced to the art therapy field by Aviva Gold (Miller, 2012). Miller (2012) explains:

As described in Gold and Oumano's (1998) text, the artist creates a space for symbolic dialogue by working on one continuous painting and allowing imagery to be painted over in layers, with nothing discarded. All imagery is welcomed and continual attention is paid to the tensions that arise and how they are expressed artistically. An innovative aspect of this method is to photograph the progression of the painting, which captures its evolution in tangible form and often becomes a catalyst for the artist to access deep material of professional and personal identity. p. 168

I have chosen this method because of the connections I find with an existential perspective of confronting death and experiencing impermanence and change over time. This method is modified for this population with a directive that focuses on the timeline of grief experienced by each individual. Clients are asked to represent their grief along different points on the timeline to reflect on how their experience may have evolved over time. It can allow a client to notice aspects of post-traumatic growth that have come from enduring the pain that comes from grieving a family member. Going back to the day that their loved one died is a challenging task but each time it is expressed, they can integrate the experience into their narrative, this time with a visual representation.

Participants

This method was implemented with four different bereavement support groups with participants ranging in age from four-years-old to 18-years-old. The groups were broken down

into three parental-loss groups including a children's group with three 4-6-year-olds, a boys group with three 11-13-year-olds, and a girls group with five 15-17-year-olds. There is also one sibling-loss group with four children and adolescents aged 13-18.

Implementation

Each client was given an 11 x 14-inch canvas and offered a choice of acrylic paints, oil pastels, and magazines for collaging. This method was introduced to the groups with the following prompt:

“For this next project, we will be working on creating layered paintings. During the next three groups, we will add one layer to the painting each time. We can take photos after each layer to see what changes and what stays the same. You can think of each layer as a different point in the timeline of your grief from when your person first died to where you are now. Today, can you all think back to when your person first died? Can you use colors, shapes, or images to show what that time felt like to you?”

Each consecutive layer will summarize this prompt but ask the participants to focus on a different point in the timeline of their grief. The second layer will be the midway point from when their person first died to where they are now. An image of the timeline may be helpful to allow clients to visualize the different points in time. The final layer will ask them to think about where they are currently and how that could be represented on their painting.

Results

	Layer 1	Layer 2	Layer 3
Prompt	Can you think back to when your person first died? Can you use colors, shapes, or images to show what that time felt like to you?	Can you think of the midway point in your journey from when your person first died to where you are now? Can you use colors, shapes, or images to show what	Can you think of where you are now? Can you use colors, shapes, or images to show what that time felt like to you?

		that time felt like to you?	
4-6-Year-Old Group Participants	Client A Client B Client C	Client A Client B Client C	Client A Client B Client C
11-13-Year Old Boys Group Participants	Client D Client E Client F	Client D Client E Client F	Client D Client E Client F
Sibling Loss Group Participants	Client G Client H Client I Client J	Client G Client H Client I	Client G Client H Client I Client J
15-17-Year Old Girls Group Participants	Client K Client L Client M Client N Client O	Client L Client M	Client K Client L Client M Client N Client O

4-6-Year-Old Group

Client A

For her first layer, Client A asked for a variety of colors including pink, purple, blue, orange, and brown. She used a large brush and painted mostly vertical brush marks blending the colors together on her canvas. While the prompt was repeated several times, she described her painting as “pretty mermaid colors.” This was congruent with other instances in the group where she had difficulty following along with the topic.

Layer two was introduced to this group with the image of the timeline to help them visualize the different points in time. However, when the canvases were distributed, the unanimous reaction was that they had already finished these paintings. Client A was encouraged to try adding on top of her first layer. She chose similar colors and added a few brush strokes on her canvas, declaring she was finished within a few minutes.

Client B

Client B listened carefully to the prompt and asked for blue and black paint. He painted brushstrokes over most of the canvas with both of these colors. He described that he was painting the "black hole in his heart" that he felt when his father died.

Client B had a similar reaction to layer two as Client A. When asked to give it a try, he chose blue and black paint again and covered more of his canvas with those marks. When prompted with discussion questions, the Client B had difficulty engaging and he expressed that he had interest in working on another art project.

Client C

When client C got started, he worked slowly and deliberately. He painted a red heart surrounded by stripes of colors that he chose with care. He asked that no one look at his painting until he was finished. When he was asked about what he created, he hesitated and said "happy." Client C sometimes has difficulty verbalizing his feelings about his mother who died but the painting showed the care he put into expression even though he couldn't verbally communicate his thoughts.

Client C had the strongest reaction to layer two and insisted that he had finished his painting. This reaction was likely because he put a great deal of effort into his first layer. Considering this reaction, the third layer was skipped with this group and their response is elaborated on in the discussion.

11-13-Year-Old Boys Group

Client D

For his first layer, Client D asked for bright orange paint and described that the shock he felt when his father died would look like a pointy orange starburst. He then asked for more colors to describe other feelings including blue for sadness, red for anger, purple for nothingness, and

green for happiness. He had only a few specks of green among many strokes of the other colors. His starburst was covered up as he worked with the other colors he used. Client D included a blue border around the edge of his canvas to indicate the sadness that he felt.

Client D jumped back into his painting for his second layer. He started by deliberately choosing colors again—blue for sadness and orange for feeling okay. He created a frowning face and smiling face on top of each other to show that he had begun to oscillate between these feelings as time had passed. The eyes of the face were composed of both colors, which mixed together to form brown. The double application of colors made the paint drip down from the eyes, which he pointed out to the group. Client D's original color for happiness was green, which he included more of in this painting.

Client D completed his final layer quickly. He knew the prompt and was able to execute it with ease. Client D chose to use only green, which had been his color for happiness in earlier layers, and he painted a circle around the face he had added in layer two. Client D told the group that this face represented his father. When talking about his art, he shared that similar to his painting, he can contain all of the emotions at once sometimes and that can leave him feeling panicked. He made up the word "sangraneutral" to describe this feeling of having all the emotions at once. The group shared some ways that help them when they feel panicked or overwhelmed with emotion.

Client E

Client E also started with colors to represent prominent emotions. He asked for blue for sadness, red for anger, and brown for fear. Client E painted different colored brush strokes all blending together in a chaotic formation. He painted a brown box with blue in the center and

described it as “fear coming from sadness.” Client E also painted a blue border around his canvas and explained that sadness was the primary emotion that all others were contained in.

In his second layer, Client E asked for blue paint for sadness, red for anger, yellow for happiness, and orange for the unknown. He used a semi dry brush to scumble the blue, red and yellow in various places over his canvas. Client E remarked that he enjoyed the fact that he could still see the first layer through his new marks. He shared that he has experienced some happiness since his mother died but he still has feelings of sadness and anger. Finally, he added three orange asterisk shapes and said he would figure out what they meant eventually.

Client E chose only yellow paint for his final layer and painted it across most of the surface. The paint was transparent enough to see the marks underneath. Client E's explanation of his final layer was that when people look at him they would probably see someone who looks happy on the outside. He then continued to explain that below the surface he is still sad and angry about his mother's death. This led to a conversation about what we choose to show to the world and what is kept inside.

Client F

Client F had difficulty getting started with his first layer. He shared that his father's death was 4 years ago and it was hard to think back to that time. He described feeling “all the emotions” and asked for every color paint. Once he had his palette set up, he still took a while to start his painting. He finally started with some blue paint but noticed that when he went to change colors there was still some blue on the brush and it was “infecting the other colors.” Client F decided to play with the color mixing and he blended the colors together on his palette before adding them to the canvas. He shared that he liked how his palette looked even though it was an “accident” and then he decided to print it onto the canvas directly. A connection was

made with his use of the word accident and the way his father died. He then painted lines coming outward from the multicolored form in the middle. When it was time to share the paintings, Client F included his palette as a painting next to the other canvases.

Client F chose four colors for his second layer—light pink, dark pink, purple, and blue. He painted a strip of light pink on the left edge, a strip of dark pink on the right edge, and a strip of blue across the bottom. The remainder of the painting was covered with purple. The paint application was light enough to see his first layer through it. Client F described these colors as being not too sad, but also not too happy. He explained that this layer over the entire surface represented the healing that had begun to happen a couple years after his father died. He said that he felt “okay” during this time but his dad’s death was still a part of him.

Client F used red, blue, and purple paint to make a face on his canvas as his final layer. He painted two straight vertical lines for the eyes and one straight horizontal line for the mouth. He finished the face with a dark purple circle enclosing the eyes and mouth. Client F spoke about how this face further illustrates his current emotional state. He reported that he doesn’t feel the extreme emotions that he used to, rather he is somewhere between happy and sad at this point in his grief journey.

Sibling Loss Group

Client G

Client G has a particular response each time paint is offered to the group. He covers his hands and arms with the paint and prints them down, smearing the paint around. His interaction with this directive was the same. He said that the colors didn’t matter to him, and he quickly chose red, orange, and lime green paint to mix together with his hands. Once he printed them

onto the canvas, he reported that he was finished. Client G had a difficult time talking about his process but he did share that it was difficult for him to go back to the day that his sister died.

For his second layer, Client G chose to use a small paint brush and paint the entire surface blue. He started with a medium blue and painted about half the canvas and then switched to a lighter blue. He used vertical strokes for the entire layer and was actively sharing about his sister during this process. When asked about his painting, Client G could not explain any rationale for his painting choices but the amount of sharing he participated in during the process showed his engagement with the topic.

Client G started his final layer by painting a dark purple border around the edge of his canvas. He then switched to neon yellow paint and added six large stars across the open space in the middle. At this point, Client G reported that he was finished but the other groups members were still working so he decided to experiment with using a plastic cup to pour water down the wet painted surface. Client G then used the bottom of the cup to print two purple circles onto his image. He finished by using his paint brush to turn the circles into a face with a straight horizontal mouth. When sharing about his art, Client G described that the yellow stars represented his general happy feeling this year but the water that washed over them represented school weighing him down. All three layers were still visible in his image and he shared which grade level he was at during his sister's death, the middle of his journey, and right now.

Client H

Client H started with black paint and created a border along the edges of her canvas. She continued the brush marks down at some areas to create black vertical lines throughout her piece. She also made some lines with light blue paint. All of her marks were done with a dry brush which left brushy marks rather than crisp lines. Client H explained that the colors represented the

darkness and sadness she felt and the brushy marks were indicative of a blurry or hazy feeling she had moving through her life after her brother died. She explained that there were moments where it was as though she couldn't feel anything anymore and she made some risky choices as an attempt to feel again.

Client H chose to change the media she was using for her second layer from paint to collage. She looked through some art magazines and tore out images with different colors and textures on them. Client H used scissors to cut organic circular shapes, which she glued onto her canvas. She left some of the painting showing on the top edge and bottom left corner but covered the rest of the surface. Client H shared more about the risky ways in which she tried to feel something when the numbness set in a year after her brother's death. She reported that if she were to title this layer she would call it "Suppression."

For her final layer, Client H used paint again and covered over some of her collage from layer two. She used light blue paint in the middle of the canvas and extended it outward. She then switched to using yellow paint around the edges. She also added star shapes, first with red paint, then covered by white paint. These stars were small and were dispersed across the surface. Client H shared that the blue represented the constant reminder of her brother's absence in her life but the yellow was used to represent the fact that she generally tries to maintain a positive outlook and hasn't had an entirely bad day in a while. The stars represent the positive or negative emotions that may happen throughout the day but she shared that she tries not to let them dictate her day overall.

Client I

Client I used yellow and black paint to make some abstract shapes spaced out on his canvas. He worked slowly, making careful, crisp, shapes. Client I left a great deal of white space

in between each of his marks. He described feeling as though nothing made sense any more after his sister died and he represented this by the miss matched shapes that didn't seem to fit together in any logical way.

Client I started his second layer by making some precise pink shapes on his canvas similar to the yellow and black shapes from layer one. He then changed his style and used more painterly and chaotic marks with light blue, black, gray, and white. He finished his image with a dark gray skull in the middle of his painting. Similar to Client I, he shared about how lost he felt and the risky decisions he made during this time. Client I said that he felt as though nothing mattered any more. He titled this layer "Lost."

While working on his final layer, Client I shared that he is generally doing okay now but he still feels lost sometimes when he thinks about where he is going. He reported that some of his memories of his sister are fading and that makes him feel like he is losing her again. For his artwork, Client I used oil pastels to make a circular pattern over the surface of his image. He finished it with light blue and white paint, making winding organic lines in the middle of his composition.

Client J

Client J chose blue and black paint and mixed them together on his palette. He used a small paint brush and slowly moved it back and forth on his canvas. The marks made a small rectangle shape that eventually grew into a larger mound on his canvas. Client J used about one third of the space, leaving the remaining canvas empty. He shared about his feeling of "helplessness" that he had when he found out his brother had died.

Client J was absent during the group designated for layer two so he skipped this prompt and continued with the final layer in the following group. For his final layer, Client J chose

bright colors including, pink, green, blue, and purple. He played with different textures and patterns. He shared that he chose bright colors to indicate that he is doing better now that he has found ways of coping that are helpful. The thing that he finds most helpful is talking to his friends.

15-17-Year Old Girls Group

Client K

Client K asked if she could use tissue paper for her artwork. Although it was not originally provided with the other materials, it was easy to accommodate. Client K chose white and silver tissue paper and began tearing it into small pieces. She explained that she was going to cover the surface of her canvas with the crumpled-up pieces of tissue paper. For her first "layer" she started with white paper in the corner to represent the shock she felt when she found out that her father had died. The white paper started to blend into the silver paper and she explained that it represented the haziness that set in after shock. Client K shared that her plan was to add black tissue paper next, followed by other colors until the surface was covered.

Client K was absent during the time designated for creating the second layer. Due to time constraints, she skipped this step and continued with the prompt for layer three during the following group. For her final layer, Client K decided to alter her idea slightly from what she previously explained. She began by tearing black tissue paper and added some to the corner of white and silver paper she had applied before. As she was tearing the tissue paper, she reflected that some of the pieces looked like birds. She decided that she wanted them to be birds but she didn't know how to make them look the way she wanted. Another member of the group chimed in and offered to help her cut bird shapes for her image.

When describing the significance, Client K shared that the birds were hawks and crows, which both symbolize death to her. The “flock of crows” were at the bottom and made up a dense black area, which she described as representing some of her lowest moments. As they moved up the canvas, the birds got bigger and more spaced apart. These were her hawks and she said that they represented the fact that she has overcome some of her challenges. She shared that she would be somewhere in the middle of this flock of birds, still very close to the area she made to represent the shock of her father's death.

Client L

Client L started her canvas by painting each corner a different color. She used black and red on opposite corners diagonally across from one another and then used light blue and light purple on the other two. Client L filled in the center with light green. Finally, she extended the black and red corners towards the center and had them meet with an interlocking spiral. Client L explained that the black and red represented sadness and anger, which were her primary emotions surrounding her father's death. The other lighter, more subdued colors represented the peace and beauty her father brought into his final moments battling cancer.

Client L embellished her painting by adding a network of lines in her second layer. She used yellow and orange lines to represent the surprising feelings of relief and happiness she felt in the four months following her father's death. She then included black lines that curved around and radiated from the spiral in the middle of her painting from layer one. She explained that those represent the sadness that followed and became a constant in her daily life.

For her third layer, Client L covered her whole painting in a layer of transparent blue. She shared that she really like blue because it signifies “calmness” and “Zen” for her. She also created three horizontal stripes that dripped down the image. One was green to symbolize the

love of nature that she got from her father and it also represented the growth she has experienced in the year since her father died. The other stripes were light blue and purple and they represented the "peace and serenity" she is beginning to find.

Client M

Client M started by painting red waves at the bottom of her canvas that she later described to be "a sea of anger." While working on her painting, she mentioned that she "had no idea what she was doing." She was then asked if this connected with how she felt when her father first died. She agreed that she was very lost during that time. After thinking for a moment, Client M continued to paint the remainder of her canvas a mixture of dark blue and black. She then added a yellow crescent moon and white stars and explained that she now feels connected with her father when she looks up at the night sky.

For layer two, Client M added a second row of red waves above her first. She included other colors and shared that her anger had turned into a variety of emotions. She added a green border to symbolize growth. Client M also highlighted one of the stars in her night sky by painting a heart around it. She shared that this was her continued connection to her father and the night sky.

Client M explained that she "destroyed everything" and created a tree for her final layer. Client M went back to explain her thought process of the evolution of her red waves into the tree. She shared that the sea represented all the "negativity" she felt after her dad died. Slowly other emotions crept in and started to transform those feelings into personal growth. She shared that the tree's roots grew out of these emotions, just like she has grown as a person. Client M said that she is now more aware of negativity in her life and finds ways not to let it affect her as much.

Client N

Client N started with an orange circle in the middle of her canvas, which she later shared represented the shock she felt when hearing the news that her father died. She then added a dark blue line that covered part of the orange circle, and she painted four vertical lines that looked as though they were dripping down from it. Client N shared that this was a symbol of the relief she felt and the guilt she had for feeling relieved. Finally, she painted a light blue "X" on the canvas, which she referred to as the scar she will always carry with her from this loss. However, she indicated that she chose to paint it in a "calm" color.

Client N was another member who was absent during the group designated for creating the second layer. She skipped this step and continued with the prompt for layer three during the following group. For her final layer, Client N used red paint to create a brushy layer on half of her canvas. She said that in the year after her father died she had convinced herself that she hated him and that made her feel like she didn't have to deal with the fact that he died. The red represented this feeling for her. Client N used her thumb to print light blue marks on the bottom of her image. She shared that this was symbolic of her personality and how she tried to make jokes and be happy all the time. Finally, she painted a purple circle that was combination of these two colors to represent the mixed emotions she feels now. She said that she does not know if she still hates her father or not.

Client O

Client O started her painting with thin black lines that made a geometric pattern on her canvas resembling shattered glass. She proceeded to fill them in with different shades of red or red and black mixed together. She used broad brush strokes to paint a brushy texture over the whole surface and finished it off with some orange dots to represent the happiness she could still

find. Client O spoke about the shattered feeling she had when her father died and how this was depicted using the two colors that were most intense to her.

Client O was absent during the time designated for creating the second layer as well. She continued with her final layer by painting some purple, pink, and green geometric designs over her previous layer. She explained that, similarly to some of the other group members, these brighter colors indicate that she is doing much better now but the layer underneath is still visible and present. She said that the grief, anger, and sadness are still there for her but they are less powerful now. She also shared about memories that were created after her father died and how she is always aware of his absence.

Artistic Response

For my own art reflection, I painted response art in reaction to what my clients created. My intention was to create a layered painting at the same time as my clients but it took three iterations for my first layer. In Figure 1a, I chose to divide my painting into four quadrants to represent each group that completed the method. The top left was for the 4-6-year olds group, the top right was for the boys group, bottom right was the sibling loss group, and the bottom left was the teen girls group. In this image, I included many of the symbols and types of brush marks from the imagery created in each group. This was a valuable process to see the similarities and differences but I wanted to create a painting that felt more unified.

Figure 1b was an attempt to create a more unified painting that looked at what grief looked like for the whole organization rather than each group separately. This used more of my own artistic freedom to create. With this completed, I still felt the urge to internalize the imagery even more and show more of my own voice in my response art. I finally created Figure 1c in response to this desire. This made me consider what it was like to be the exquisite witness for all

of my clients and share my own part in that. I felt the most free and authentic while painting this piece and I decided to continue with this iteration for my layered painting process.

Layer 1



Figure 1a



Figure 1b



Figure 1c

Layer 2

For my second layer, I continued with Figure 1c to build up the background layers and expand on the spiral in the middle. I envisioned my depiction of grief to be a storm at sea, an emotional vortex on the right, followed by a dissipating haze as the aftermath. My expansion of the spiral in the middle of Figure 2 was influenced by one of my clients' use of that symbol because of the connection I had with that as a representation for grief. I also wanted the background of my image to be messy so this layer involved a lot of scumbling with different colors to build up the surface. After this layer, I thought my image could be finished so I was curious how it would expand in the final layer.



Figure 2

Layer 3

In my third layer, I focused on balancing my image and refining my lines. This layer created a more built up surface that felt emotionally charged. The red brush marks and blue drips on the left of Figure 3 evoked deeper feelings of anger and sadness for me. Many of my clients showed some signs of growth in their final image. In my response, I don't have a specific element that represents growth but my focus on the composition and edges of each feature represents the ability I see in my clients to hold their grief, as well as the group's grief, and further define and elaborate on the complexities they face. I have seen how each group changes over the course of the year and the insight and nuances that come from holding the space to reflect and facilitate expression.

When reflecting on this process overall, I noticed that my clients' artwork was much more colorful than I expected, and this was reflected in my art representation as well. I was surprised at the vibrancy of the colors I used, when my own artwork is usually not as saturated. I believe this has to do with the emotional symbolism my clients created in naming different colors for different emotions. When these emotions are strong and there are many of them, the

result is an image that contains a broad spectrum. I was impressed with my clients' ability to describe the many emotions they face and to create art that represents the emotional vibrancy inside them.



Figure 3

Discussion

This method was generally well received by my clients, most of whom were excited by using mini easels and canvases, which some described as making them feel like “real artists.” One aspect that I realized about this process was the language that I was using to describe the prompt likely affected the artwork being produced. After the first layer, all but one client chose to use paint as their medium, which made me reflect on the using the language of layered “paintings” vs. layered “art.” While the canvases could also be linked to painting, I tried to use the language of layered “art” in the consecutive layers to avoid unintentionally dissuading the use of the other materials.

The group with four-to-six-year-olds was the one group that this method did not work for. I expected that this process might be challenging for this group and it was valuable to see that the concept of layering did not make sense to them. Developmentally, this group is still

coming to terms with what death means and they have little to no awareness about the passing of time. Children first begin to understand the human body as a "biological entity" between the ages of four and six (Slaughter, 2005, p.182). This is also the age when they begin to understand concepts such as all living things die and do not come back to life. Thinking about their response to their parent's death over time proved to be a concept too challenging for this age group.

I was expecting more resistance to this prompt from the boys group because they had shared that they do not generally enjoy art-making and they dislike their art classes at school. They were the group that helped with putting the pieces of the easels together, which may have been a buy-in for them to participate in a fun construction process first. The results showed that that they were able to then dive into an abstract painting in expressive ways.

As the researcher, it was the most difficult for me to ask the sibling loss group to revisit the day that their sibling died. It was important for me to process this and to examine how asking the group to explore what may be the hardest day of their life was important for integrating the experience into their narrative. Expressing their feelings in art also allowed a new way for the participants to make sense of their story in a visual and symbolic way.

Some of the participants, particularly in the teen girls group, had difficulty separating where they are now with what they felt when their person first died. In the first layer, some group members included aspects to indicate the scars left, or the way they continue to connect with their loved one even though the prompt asked them to think back to their very first response with the first layer. This observation indicated that it may be challenging to separate the healing or meaning-making has already taken place and revisit a time before that reconstruction happened.

This method allowed for aspects of the Dual Process Model to be considered by clients in their artistic representation and the discussion that followed each layer. Many clients interpreted

the prompt by showing a loss-orientation for the first layer and adding more elements of restoration-orientation by the third layer as they explored the changes they faced over time. Some of the group members had aspects of both in each layer, which showed their ability to hold both mindsets as they sit with their grief and also reconstruct their new schemas of themselves, their families, and the world around them.

The Meaning Reconstruction model notes that “many of our construction of reality are verbally inexpressible and thus, are not amenable to logical articulation. These may reflect emotions, intuitions, or other abstract experiences” (Lister, 2008. p. 247). In this sense, using art allowed for parts of their narrative to be expressed in alternative ways of communicating. Creating symbols for emotions also lead to new ways to talk about the feelings and many members shared more in this method than they had previously. There was also sensory and kinesthetic exploration by a few of the participants. The layered process allowed for an ongoing reflection on how the bonds with the person who died may have evolved over time. Participants were encouraged to continue layering on their own if they would find that to be a helpful way to explore their continued bond or their grief journey.

When considering future implications of this capstone thesis project, I think this could be a starting point for illustrating the power that art therapy has on bereaved youth. The National Alliance for Grieving Children hosts annual symposia and could be a future platform for continuing to share this work. This method can also be adapted for other populations. One of the 18-year-old participants in the sibling loss group has already incorporated this method into a peer support group she runs at her high school. She provided a similar prompt, substituting a grief timeline with one that reflects the beginning, middle, and end of the group's high school experience.

My recommendations for continued research of this method would be to expand on the age range of the participants involved. I found that the four to six-year-olds that I worked with were too young to grasp the concept of layered paintings. The next youngest participant involved in this project was 11-years-old. I would be curious to see what a successful lower age bracket would be for this method, which may be somewhere between the six to 11 age gap. This method was also very successful for teens and I predict that it could be beneficial for adults as well.

Through the use of layered paintings with bereavement groups for children and adolescents, participants explored existential themes of confronting death, connection to their loved one, impermanence and change over time, and meaning-making in the form of post-traumatic growth. Participants were able to create a tangible representation of what their grief looked like, which deepened the way in which many group members were able to talk about their grief. The discussion of the artwork was tailored for each group to include parts of the existential framework that might make sense for their developmental level.

Bereavement programs are inherently linked to existentialism by focusing on the effect of death, fostering connection between isolated individuals, and providing the space for meaning reconstruction. Incorporating existential art therapy into this format was a predominantly seamless inclusion that enriched the discussion about grief and the people who have died. The artwork showed the vibrancy of emotions and the energy in which they are felt. They were full of metaphors and symbols that highlighted the narrative truth in each individual's unique grief journey. It allowed for each member to reintegrate their story from day one to the present and reflect on what has changed over that period of time.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA**

Student's Name: Catherine Johnson

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Existential Art Therapy in Children's Bereavement Groups: Development of a Method

Date of Graduation: May 18th, 2019

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Vivien Marcow Speiser