

Spring 5-18-2019

# Towards Healing Ambiguous Grief with Nature-Based Expressive Arts Therapy, Embodiment, and Mindfulness: A Literature Review

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## Recommended Citation

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Towards Healing Ambiguous Grief with Nature-Based Expressive Arts Therapy, Embodiment,  
and Mindfulness: A Literature Review

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

April 15th 2019

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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### **Abstract**

There is an emerging trend of nature-based expressive arts therapy with a developing body of research. The current literature indicates that there are numerous nature-based approaches and that they can be effectively applied to many populations. Some of the benefits of nature-based therapy are shifts in physiology such as lowered blood pressure, heart rate, and decrease in stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms. The approaches of nature-based therapeutic work include mindfulness and meditation, animal-assisted therapies, farm and work-based therapies, horticulture therapy, and nature-based expressive arts therapy. There are many effective applications of these frameworks that have been studied and some that have not been explored yet. There is a small but growing body of research in nature-based expressive arts therapy approaches for dealing with grief and loss. This literature review suggests that nature-based therapies might be effective for healing ambiguous loss. This thesis will explore some of the current research on nature-based expressive arts therapy, research on ambiguous grief and some suggested areas for exploration of nature-based interventions for grief and loss.

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### **Introduction**

In life, there are very few things that are certain, but change, death, loss and grief are a few things that can be expected. These natural experiences of life take many forms during a lifetime. Often loss and grief are only considered from the perspective of death of a loved one, but there are many other forms of loss and grief that are impactful.

While much of the research and theory on loss, grief and bereavement are focused on tangible and permanent losses, there is less research on how to work with other forms of loss. Due to multiple stigmas surrounding grief, many kinds of loss have not been acknowledged by the literature or theory. Therefore, these topics could be overlooked by doctors, therapists, families and others. Thus, people dealing with feelings of loss may not be getting the necessary support.

From a nature-based perspective, all forms of loss and grief are natural and normal. The ways loss and grief present themselves are natural. In nature, there are constant changes and transitions and subsequently constant losses. Grief and loss take a multitude of forms: the death of a loved one, the loss of a sense of home, a change in personal identity, or even the transitions of the seasons. There can be no one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with grief.

The original intent for this project was to complete a community-based study through an organization. This writer reached out to many local organizations that work with people dealing with grief and loss, as well as artist organizations, and meditation centers to offer this workshop. Due to time constraints, concerns around accessibility, seasonal weather and trail conditions, and

difficulty finding the right organizational fit for the study, the writer is instead completing the project as a literature review with a series of proposed workshops. These proposals are based on her own experiences of mindful walking in the woods, and on pilot experiences this writer conducted as part of the research for this project.

It is the opinion of this writer that there is little existing research on this topic. Therefore, it is important to build on the knowledge base, practice these skills, and educate the community in hope to spark more interest moving forward. The use of nature-based therapies for ambiguous grief will be explored through a review of the current literature on ambiguous grief, loss, nature-based therapy, expressive-arts therapy and mindfulness. Also, included in the discussion section are proposed nature-based expressive therapy interventions for grief and loss. These are presented in the form of group workshops designed for adults. Ambiguous grief is experienced on mental, emotional and physical levels. Considering the constant, but often subtle changes and losses in nature, using nature-based mindfulness practices and expressive arts therapy may be particularly helpful for people dealing with ambiguous grief.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Loss, grief and the challenges of ambiguity**

The definition of loss per Oxford Dictionaries is: “The fact or process of losing something or someone” or “the feeling of grief after losing someone or something of value” (Loss, 2019). Grief is defined as: “Intense sorrow, especially caused by someone’s death”, or “an instance or cause of intense sorrow” (Grief, 2019). This writer distinguishes between these concepts as two distinct experiences. There are many psychological theories on death, dying, loss and grief. According to Carolyn Ambler, Walter McCoyd, and Judith McCoyd (2016), Freud’s task-based theory was the first, and others built upon that theory. The most common current

theory of loss and grief is the stage-based theory introduced by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969. This theory states that grief is worked through in stages. These stages are: *Denial and Isolation*, *Anger*, *Bargaining*, *Depression*, and finally, *Acceptance*. This theory was developed specifically for people dealing with terminal illness and death and the extended applications of this theory have led to misinterpretation (Ambler, McCoyd & McCoyd, 2016).

A fluid model of understanding grief may be more applicable to other kinds of grief. “The bereaved individual may fluctuate among the various stages and ‘acceptance’ comes gradually (most often), not in one delineated event” (Ambler, McCoyd & McCoyd, 2016, p. 13). The theory and practice of grief and bereavement work are moving away from the linear model and making room for cyclical processing.

Life and development can be conceptualized as a series of changes and losses that lead to personal growth. According to Judith Viorst (1986), throughout development humans experience losses that are necessary for personal development. Her definition of loss encompasses a wide range of experiences. She states in her introduction: “... [W]e lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on” (p.15). Viorst’s perspective widens the scope of what a loss is, and creates room for inclusion of life events that might otherwise not be considered loss.

The term ‘ambiguous loss’ has emerged in both literature and theory in the field of bereavement. Ambiguous loss most often refers to the unresolved loss of a person who is either physically or emotionally not present (Boss, 1999). It has also been described as experiences where there is a feeling of loss that is not tangible and/or remains unresolved. Ambiguous grief and loss can be experienced as a result of a sex-change, a separation or divorce, injury, a diagnosis, a birth, infertility, miscarriage, and many other kinds of change and loss (Afifi, &

Keith, 2004; Golish, & Powell, 2003; Krosch & Shakespeare-Finch, 2017; Markin, & Zilcha-Mano, 2018; Norwood, 2013; O'Brien, 2007; Steftel, 2006). Loss and grief can be experienced due to wanted and unwanted experiences. Any of these occurrences can come with a shift or a loss of identity, which can lead to feelings of ambiguous loss.

There are some challenges that are specific to ambiguous loss. Boss (1999) discusses four challenges. One is the uncertainty as to whether the loss is permanent or temporary. This uncertainty prevents people from adjusting their lives accordingly. A second is that there is often no culturally established ritual or ceremony to create closure surrounding the loss. The third is that ambiguous loss brings awareness that the world can be chaotic and cruel. This can come as a threat to some who want to believe that some things in life are certain. Boss's fourth point is that ambiguous loss doesn't have a clear beginning or end. The relentless and continuous uncertainty becomes emotionally and physically exhausting. Boss states "Our hunger for absolute certainty is rarely satisfied even in the relationships we believe are permanent and predictable" (1999, p.7). Due to these factors of ambiguous loss, it requires a very different healing approach than other forms of loss.

### **Nature-based therapy**

Howard Clinebell is one of the pioneers of Nature-based therapy and defines it as: "...healing and growth nurtured by healthy interaction with the earth" (Clinebell, 1996, as cited in Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009, p.18). Nature-based therapy is a broad net that can encompass many different practices due to and depending on the definition of nature. This can be a very personal definition depending on one's relationship to nature. Per the Oxford dictionary nature is defined as "The phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human

creations” (Nature, 2019). Another definition of nature, and the one that is used as a fundamental assumption of this research is:

Nature in the broadest sense, is equivalent to the natural world, physical world, or material world. “Nature” refers to the phenomena of the physical world, and also to life in general. It ranges in scale from the subatomic to the cosmic. (Environment and Ecology, 2019).

The idea that all parts of the human experience are natural and normal is also consistent with the teachings of mindfulness practices.

Much of the literature on Nature-based therapy discusses that part of what ails us as humans is our disconnection from nature. Linda Buzzell discusses this, and distinguishes between the many layers in which humans are part of the greater systems of nature. She discusses how the health of the planet affects human health. She states: “Most therapy clients don’t realize that much of the grief, shame, emptiness, and fear they struggle with may be a natural response to the unnatural way we live” (Buzzell, 2009, p.47). If a disconnection with nature is making us sick, then nature based therapies may be effective on numerous levels.

There is a body of research that indicates positive effects of being mindful in forested areas. The physiological research points to many benefits of nature based therapy of many kinds. Per Hensen, Jones and Tocchini, in their extensive 2017 review of the Forest-bathing and Nature Therapy research state: “...significant empirical research findings point to a reduction in human heart rate and blood pressure and an increase in relaxation for participants exposed to [natural green space]” (p.43). From the psychological view, research from Denmark indicates that “safety, calm and overall general wellbeing” followed exposure to nature. And the research from



South Korea indicates that there are benefits of nature-based therapy for those with alcohol abuse disorder and depression (Hensen, Jones & Tocchini, 2017).

There is also a large and developing body of research indicating that animal-assisted therapy is effective in mental health treatment. Kamioka et al. did a review of literature including studies that utilized many kinds of animals. This article reviewed studies looking at a variety of severe mental and physical illnesses, mood disorders as well as animal assisted therapy with older adults. As stated in Kamioka et al. (2014):

The most commonly reported target diseases were ‘Mental and behavioral disorders’ ... and the effect of [animal assisted therapy] on these diseases was improved mental health (e.g., anxiety and mood), [quality of life], and social behavior. The main reason given in these articles for improved mental health was that the feeling and memory of an animal allowed the patient to be comfortable, pleasant, and happy. (Kamioka, 2014, p. 385)

Animal assisted therapy has been researched to be helpful for treatment due to its mood elevating effects, positive physiological effects and increases in prosocial behaviors.

Horticulture therapy is another form of nature-based therapy that has increasing interest and research. Liden et al. (2016) conducted a study for women on long-term medical leave that combined horticulture therapy and supported employment to increase the women’s social competence, self-worth and mental health. The study found significant increases in quality of life, general health, vitality, social functioning and mental health. Through the practice of maintaining a garden, body awareness, mindfulness activities, social engagement, and presence in a natural place, these women experienced many positive changes in their mental and emotional wellbeing.

### **Nature-Based Therapy for Grief**

Lin, Lin, & Li (2014), investigated the value of horticulture therapy for grief caregivers who assist others in their experience of grief. This study offered a self-care workshop utilizing horticulture therapy. This article describes the value of flowers and plants for mental health, and in the bereavement process: “The unique quality of the grieving ritual featuring plants is the juxtaposition of life and death. The plant life cycle provides a metaphorical framework for contextualizing death that is illustrative and meaningful” (Sneh & Tristan, 1991; Cinq Mars, Tristian, & Eucker, 1999, as cited in Lin, Lin, & Li, 2014, p. 604). This is an example of how nature-based therapy overlaps with arts-based therapy, using metaphors from nature.

There is some research on animal-based therapy and its usefulness for healing grief. The 2012 article by Ashley Symington discusses the use of horses in therapeutic work specifically for loss and grief. The author gives numerous examples of how horses are incorporated in the therapeutic process and specifically with grief work (Symington, 2012). Projective techniques are often used in nature-based therapy as well as expressive-arts therapies.

Symington uses a form of equine-assisted therapy called EAGALA which stands for Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association. Different from other forms of Equine Therapy, there is no riding of the horses. It utilizes observational skills and interactions with the animals to draw therapeutic material. Due to the purely observational and interactional nature of EAGALA, these projective techniques have also been utilized with other animals such as goats, chickens, sheep, cats and dogs to gain more information about an individual’s internal experience (Symington, 2012).

Similar observational techniques can be used in the mindful experience of noticing one’s surroundings, being embodied, and moving in, around and with nature. Many nature-based

therapeutic techniques use the same principles as the expressive therapies, but utilize animals, natural places, metaphors from nature, or experiences in nature instead of art (Atkins & Snyder, 2018). The use of larger conceptual metaphors from nature can be a helpful way to talk about feelings or events in an accessible and effective way. Symington (2012) also discusses the value of using metaphor for clients. Symington states:

“Metaphors are an empowering tool that can be incorporated into counseling to allow clients the opportunity to think for themselves and to determine what something means to them...When clients find their own meaning within a metaphor, that metaphor becomes more powerful and important to them as individuals, and they will be more inclined to accept and take responsibility for it. (Symington, 2012, p. 168-169)

Nature-based therapy lends itself to art making, writing and movement, making nature-based therapy compatible with the expressive therapies.

### **Nature-Based Expressive Arts Therapy**

Nature-based expressive arts therapy uses nature and expressive art modalities to help people find wellness mentally, emotionally and physically. Nature-based therapy and expressive-arts therapy techniques overlap and complement each other in many ways (Atkins & Snyder, 2018). Together these tools and techniques can be very effective for many clients. This interconnectivity makes for the potential of robust communities working together towards mental, emotional, physical, spiritual and environmental health and wellness.

One valuable technique of nature based expressive arts therapy is the use of metaphors drawn from nature. Some examples of valuable nature-based metaphors are the cycles of the seasons, day and night, the moon cycle, plants, the elements and compost. There is some research on the use of nature-based expressive arts therapy, using nature metaphor (Hirschson,

Fritz, & Kilian, 2018; Kurter, Bicer, Aysoy, & Serlin, 2016). Some of the metaphor based work uses specific images from nature such as in the Hirschon, Fritz and Killian article (2018). Other research uses more ambiguous metaphors like life cycles, as in the Kurter, Bicer, Aysoy and Serlin article (2016). Using metaphor as it connects with the natural world is both a nature-based practice as well as an expressive arts practice.

There is an emerging field of work in which Nature-based therapy and expressive-arts therapy are fused. As stated by Atkins & Snyder (2018), nature is present in all art and creative expression:

All materials of artistic making, whether clay, skin, stone, paint, instrument of music or the body itself, come from the Earth. All creative expression begins with our presence with the sensory experience of the body. We see nature as the inspiration and the model for our understanding of creative process, and we view creative expression and responding as participatory processes embedded in the ongoing creative process of the world. (Atkins & Snyder, 2018, p. 55-56)

Whether it is in the physical art materials used, the metaphors woven into the art, or the creative process through which the artist/client works, nature is ever present in the creation of art.

### **Mindfulness and Dance/movement therapy**

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as the practice of “intentionally focusing one’s attention on experiences occurring in the present moment in a non-judgmental or accepting way” (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1990, as cited by Baer, 2010, p. 26). The practice of mindfulness, brings attention to the senses, to bodily experience and to emotional experiences in the moment. Through becoming aware of the present experience in therapy, clients learn how to access that awareness in the rest of their lives. Germer, Siegel and Fulton, discuss this:

Mindfulness...focuses our attention on the task at hand. When we're mindful, our attention is not entangled in the past or future, and we are not rejecting or clinging to what is occurring at the moment. We are present in an openhearted way. This kind of attention generates energy, clearheadedness, and joy. Fortunately, it is a skill that can be cultivated by anyone. (Germer, Siegel, Fulton, 2013, p. 5)

The therapist may practice mindfulness for themselves to be present for others, in a mental, physical and emotional way. Mindfulness practices are often taught and practiced with clients to calm and ground them. It can help clients access what might be under the surface of their experience or dysregulated in their lives (Germer, Siegel, Fulton, 2013). In therapy, mindfulness offers the opportunity for awareness and reflection.

Mindfulness is also fundamental to how the expressive arts therapist interacts with clients and how client and therapist interact with the art materials and the creative process. As stated by Rappaport, Trantham, Surrey, Chang, & Mullin (2013):

There is a sense of being immersed in the process, a quieting of the mind, an experience of oneness with the artistic experience engaged in the present moment, and an absence of linear time. At some point, the artist steps away from the painting, sculpture, or other art form to observe it. Stepping back engages an inner witness who looks at the work of art to sense its aesthetic balance—to decide what is needed—colors, shapes, and so forth.

(Rappaport, Trantham, Surrey, Chang, & Mullin, 2013, p.25)

Mindfulness facilitates the creative process. It allows both client and therapist to fully experience what it is like to create, and to pinpoint what thoughts or emotions might be coming up for either party during the therapeutic/creative interaction. Mindfulness is important in transforming art making into a therapeutic experience.

Mindfulness and arts-based interventions have been used for the treatment of grief. Neimeyer, and Young-Eisendrath (2015), utilized meditation, storytelling, poetry, writing, a Dharma lesson on unwelcome change and other interventions for people dealing with grief. As the authors stated: "... deep awareness of the universal... nature of the impermanence of life and its imperfections will open a new perspective on what human life is about in its challenge to create meaning in the midst of change" (Neimeyer, & Young-Eisendrath 2015, p.264). The use of mindfulness, Buddhist teachings, and art were used to facilitate understanding, acceptance and new perspective on experiences of loss.

Mindfulness can be used to transform a walk in the woods into an introspective experience. The practice of shinrin-yoku translated from Japanese meaning forest-bath, is a meditation practice developed in Japan in the 1980s to combat the effects of extreme stress (Li, 2018). In the 2018 book entitled *The Japanese Art and Science of Shinrin-Yoku, Forest Bathing: How Trees can Help you Find Health and Happiness*, Dr. Qing Li defines forest bathing as "...simply being in nature, connecting with it through our sense of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch" (Li, 2018, p.12). Li goes on to state: "Shinrin-yoku is like a bridge. By opening our senses, it bridges the gap between us and the natural world" (p.15). Shinrin-yoku is a practice of grounding and connecting to the natural world through the use of the senses. Like other body-based grounding techniques, it is a way to sense connection and to become aware of what is happening internally and externally.

In the field of dance/movement therapy, there is an emphasis on embodied mindfulness or developing the internal witness. This concept has been developed and researched through the practice of Authentic Movement developed by Janet Adler (1999). In the practice of authentic movement there is a mover and a witness. As is implied by the titles, the mover moves from a

place of authenticity, mindfully paying attention to what they want and need physically, mentally and emotionally. The witness watches the mover in a very attentive, present and mindful way. Mindfulness is a fundamental aspect of both roles. With practice, the mover develops their own sense of a witness (Adler,1999). Becoming one's own witness allows the individual to be connected with the body through the senses, and the mind. Through this connection to the body, the individual connects with the self and to the world around them.

The experience of the physical, mental, emotional and energetic bodies are innately part of nature and are the human experience of the greater natural world. As stated in her chapter "Embodying Sentience", published in the book *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*, Amanda Leigh Morrison (2009) explores the connection between embodied exploration and nature. She states, "The field of somatics...sees the body as a source of knowledge and wisdom as well as a powerful ground for healing and transformation" (p. 107). Embodied mindfulness is an aspect of nature-based therapy.

Nature-based expressive arts therapy practices utilize changes, losses and transitions in the natural world, to explore the human experience through expressive modalities and mindful awareness. Transitions, losses and transformations of the natural world can be used to reflect upon the changes and losses in our own experiences to allow for processing, greater understanding, acceptance and healing from grief. Due to the constant changes, transitions and losses in nature, Nature-based expressive arts therapy and mindfulness may be helpful for those dealing with grief and loss.

## **Discussion**

Like many animal species, humans mourn losses and must adapt to changes in their lives. Most often, loss and grief are conceptualized specifically as the loss of a loved one due to death, but people experience grief in many ways in response to various kinds of change and loss. The most widely known theories of grief conceptualize it as a stage-by-stage process. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's theory of grief, developed for dealing with terminal illness and with loss of a loved one due to death, is widely known and is often applied to many other forms of grief. Although it is generally understood that many forms of loss are experienced similarly, this theory was not intended for application to other forms of grief. The misinterpretation and misapplication of this theory is likely to have detrimental effects (Ambler, McCoyd & McCoyd, 2016, p. 11-12). While it may be applicable to people dealing with terminal illness and grief related to a person's death, it isn't ideal for application to other forms of grief, and it may be very limiting and silencing for people experiencing other forms of grief.

For example, aspects of the anger, depression and denial phases may be seen multiple times or concurrent with other aspects of loss and grief. If a person's grief isn't following the stages as they are laid out in this theory, they may feel that there is something wrong with them, or that they should be further along in their process. This could lead to increased distress and grief. A more fluid or cyclical model may therefore be more suitable for other forms of grief.

Despite how universal these experiences are, they are often not discussed or dealt with openly. Many people dealing with grief seek support from mental health professionals because they do not have enough natural supports or because a loss brings up unexpected and complex challenges, emotions or trauma. But even professionals may not have the whole picture of what issues may be contributing to the loss and causing grief (Markin, 2016). Many layers of loss can come in the process of a single life transition, but these unanticipated feelings of loss may go



unnoticed, or be overshadowed by the expected outcomes of the change, despite being an important part of the person's experience.

When a person experiences wanted or unwanted change, they may feel as though they have gained something or left something behind. With any kind of change, something is lost (Viorst, 1986). At the very least, the former state before the change no longer exists. Sometimes these subtle losses can cause significant grief for a person, but may go unnoticed and unaddressed.

To address the many forms of loss that exist within the human experience, this writer looks towards nature to offer insight, inspiration, perspective and acceptance. Like processes in nature, dealing with loss and grief takes time and patience. Like the cycles of day and night, the moon, and the seasons, grief is often processed in a non-linear, cyclical way. For some, dealing with one loss may bring up bigger systemic challenges or others losses that have not been fully processed. Particularly, when working with ambiguous grief, which may not have a clear beginning or ending, nature-based expressive therapy interventions may be helpful.

Another aspect of nature-based therapy that aligns well with grief work is its use of acceptance of all that is human. When humans and human activities are accepted as natural and part of nature, anything that a person experiences becomes natural and "okay." This writer believes that a fundamental part of what causes illness is a human disconnect from nature and the idea that humans are often not considered to be part of the natural world. If there is a fundamental understanding that everything within the human experience is a natural reaction to the person's situation, the environment, or the people or events around them, they can begin to develop a greater acceptance of their own experience (Buzzell, 2009). Anything within the human experience is natural, including anything that happens within the human body, as well as

mental illness and dysfunction. This encompassing perspective can help people develop more acceptance of themselves and their experiences.

We, as humans, live in a way that separates us from the natural world. This separation may be a causing or contributing factor to increases in mental illness. It is the belief of this writer that the mental illnesses that people experience are a natural, normal response to challenging events, separations, and imbalances. With the increased speed and intensity of modern life, and the extreme changes to the environment, the human system (mind, body, spirit, community, culture, society) must adapt to these external changes. Nature-based and art-based therapeutic techniques can help individuals feel more connected to themselves and to the greater world.

While these practices help build connection, they may also paradoxically help separate the person from painful feelings so that, without minimizing how they feel, they can better understand the universality of their experience. People can have experiences in nature or understand processes of nature and draw connections to their personal, internal experience. When this happens, they can better understand what is happening within them, how nature deals with it, how animals deal with it, and how they can learn to cope and adapt themselves. In this way, nature becomes the art that acts as metaphor. Nature-based therapy and expressive-arts therapy overlap significantly in techniques and application.

Nature-based movement practices such as shinrin-yoku are valuable tools to help people connect with nature and with their own bodies in a mindful and introspective way. Mindful movement in nature is at once a nature-based practice, a mindful practice, a movement-based practice and an expressive-arts therapy practice. Through embodied awareness, the individual attunes to their own experience, as well as to the rest of the world through the senses. Mindful time spent in nature can bring about feelings of calm, wonder and curiosity. It may also bring

about feelings of anxiety, fear, loneliness and despair. All experiences are natural and normal, and all experiences in the present moment are material for therapeutic work.

Humans are part of the natural world and are connected to nature. Like many natural processes, human experiences of loss and grief are often very complex. Through fostering, nurturing and deepening the human connection to nature with nature-based expressive arts therapy, people may find deep healing. Whether it is through mindful movement, gardening, art making, caring for another living thing, cooking, or simply observing what is present in nature, connections are being made between mind, body, spirit and the greater world. These tools together form a field of budding work connecting the fields of psychology, counseling, mindfulness, expressive arts therapy, environmental stewardship and food-systems. This combination of approaches has the power to help many people learn new skills and develop tools for dealing with whatever challenges, changes and losses may come their way.

The following section outlines a proposed series of nature-based expressive arts therapy groups for adults dealing with loss. It is offered as a way of developing a treatment option, and to encourage further research and understanding about nature-based expressive arts therapy approaches to grief and loss. This writer designed these groups based on personal experiences practicing shinrin-yoku and arts-based explorations alone and with groups. Many group activity ideas, songs, pieces of art and connections between personal experience and nature were created in these explorations.

Based on this literature review, this writer believes it may be useful to consider offering a workshop on using nature-based expressive therapy for dealing with loss and grief. This workshop is described in detail and considerations for execution are included.

### **Description**

Prior to setting up the workshop, this writer screens individuals for appropriateness for the workshop based on referrals, phone interviews, and in-person interviews. Individuals are assessed based on self-reported experiences of loss and grief, physical ability to maintain a slow walking pace in the woods for about two hours, willingness to participate, and gain insight into their personal experience.

Upon arrival at the established natural area, each participant is given a liability form, a demographic sheet, a grief assessment and a mood assessment, to complete before the group begins. Participants are given the option to use an alias on the demographic sheet and assessment to maintain confidentiality. There is then an opportunity for introductions and a brief opening breathing activity, outlined below.

### **Opening Breathing Activity**

*Bring your attention to your breath. Notice the sensation of the breath without judgment and without trying to change it. Become curious to the sensations of the breath. Notice the thoughts of the mind. If the thoughts wander away from the breath, with compassion gently bring the attention back to the breath. Now begin counting your inhales and exhales. Breathe in on a count of two hold for two and exhale for four. Repeat for three rounds.*

The group is given the rules and expectations of the workshop, including the use of a bell as a transitional tool for the group, rules regarding safety and communication, and a timeline and overview of what will happen during the workshop. The group will then be instructed to take a short two-to-three minute walk as a group to a second location, which is the predetermined beginning and ending spot for all subsequent groups. Along the walk, the group leader instructs participants to begin to notice their experience of walking and to notice their breath, heart rate and any sensations in their body.

**Opening Ritual** (practiced at the beginning of every session)

The group leader welcomes each person to the group and leads introductions and the opening breathing activity. The group leader reads a short poem or sings a short song selected to bring the participants into a curious self-reflective space. Participants are given paper and writing materials to reflect in words or images the loss they are dealing with; what they are leaving behind or choosing to not think about when they enter the natural space; what emotions, ideas or thoughts they intentionally bring in with them, if any; and what they are looking for from this experience. Group members are given the opportunity to share with the group if they would like to. The group leader leads a brief mindfulness exercise and introduction to walking meditation.

**Becoming Present**

*Begin by noticing your breath. Take a moment to just notice. No need to change it, slow it down or speed it up in anyway. Notice now the sensation of your heart beating like the baseline of an internal piece of music. Allow for your attention to hold these two rhythms together for a moment and notice if these change or develop at all. Begin now to notice other physical sensations in the body. Try to refrain from placing judgement or meaning to the sensations. I know that may be hard to do, but try to maintain instead a state of curiosity for your internal experience. Notice now sensations or emotions that are present in or around your body. How do you perceive these to be present? Is there a physical sensation, an energetic sensation or perhaps visual shapes or colors, or an auditory element to the internal experience? Just notice. And bring your attention to the thoughts of the mind. Notice what the mind has to say. Try once again to maintain a distance and withhold judgement of the thoughts of the mind. And expand out to notice all the layers of your experience all at once. Notice if one layer is stronger than*

*another, or if there is a fluid dance between these experiences coming in and out of your consciousness. Continue to notice and to breathe.*

### **Introduction to Walking Meditation**

*Begin by walking at a comfortable speed, whatever that means to you. Notice the movement of your body in space and now the movement within your body. What parts seem to be moving the most and what are moving the least? Bring your attention to the upper body. Notice how the arms move, the hands, shoulders, chest, neck, head and upper back. Notice now the lower body. The core, the lower back, hips, thighs, knees, shins, calves, ankles and feet. Notice how the soles of your feet move, and the toes. Now begin to slow the pace of your walk. Notice if there is more or less movement in the different body parts. What changes as you slow the pace even further? Notice the breath: what is the breath doing? How is it changing? Now, try to tap into the heartbeat. How slowly do you need to go to feel your heartbeat, to know in the felt sense of your body that it is there? Continue now to slow down your walking pace. Steadily slowing it down like you are imperceptibly turning the knob down on the stereo while you continue to walk. Bring your awareness to the soles of your feet once again. Try to break down each step into parts. First, the heel touches the ground, then the outside of the foot, the outside of the toe mound, the toes, the big toe mound, and the big toe. Notice how the weight shifts in your body from one foot to the other. Notice the pattern begin again on the other side and again. Slow the pace of your walk. Pay attention to how every bone in the leg, ankle and foot moves together to create this important motion. Notice if it feels easy to continue walking at this pace, or if it is challenging. Notice how balance feels in your body. Gently bring your walking to stillness. Both feet flat on the ground, under your body. Notice the sensation of stillness. Notice the movement still present in the body. The movement of your heartbeat. The movement of your lungs, ribs,*

*belly and chest. Notice and gently bring your attention to the space around your body, to the ground, to the surroundings, to the other people here with you. Together we take three breaths in and out.*

### **Session 1: Introduction, being present through the senses**

The group leader begins the formal meditation practice by ringing a bell that will be used to inform the group of transitional moments throughout the experience. Speaking is kept to a minimum during meditative periods. The first part of the activity is 10 minutes of silent walking at a slow pace. After 10 minutes, the group leader rings the bell and instructs the participants to reflect on what the walking was like including what they saw, heard, felt and thought about, and discuss with one group member. Participants are given 10 minutes for discussion.

After 10 minutes the bell rings and the group leader invites the participants to explore deeply one place or thing in the location. They are invited to use the sensory exercises offered at the beginning of the group to connect with sights, sounds, smells, and the felt sense (textures, temperatures, etc.). They are invited to wander a little bit, but to keep within eye and earshot to know when the next transition will happen. This deep exploration lasts 20 minutes, and ends with a bell. The group is given 10 minutes to write, draw, or move to express or process the experience. The group leader then asks whether who/what has come up in the experience. The group leader then facilitates a group discussion (about 20 minutes) during which any group member can share what they experienced if they would like to. The group leader informs the group that they will be walking out the way they came in and the group can discuss the significance of retracing one's steps. The group walks out with a 10-minute slow walking meditation out of the wooded area.

### **Closing ritual**

The group concludes with a brief discussion if anything else that came up and wants to be shared. The group leader then shares a poem or song, and the group concludes by taking three deep breaths together, and completing a mood assessment.

### **Session 2: Stages of grief/path as journey**



**Figure 1- Photograph of South Reservoir in the Middlesex Fells Reservation. Photo Taken by Emily C. Piper on February 1st 2019. This is an image taken at the proposed location for session 2 in the workshop series.**

The group begins with the opening ritual. Discussion then moves into the experience of grief and how natural processes (e.g. the seasons, the water cycle, composting, the food chain) relate to grief and healing from loss. The group leader leads the group on a mindful walk to a body of water (about 30 minutes). Participants are instructed to sit, stand or move in mindful



contemplation with the body of water for 10 minutes, taking in the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of the moment in that place. The bell rings and participants are given 10 minutes to write, draw, photograph, move or vocalize what they experienced. An example of an art piece created in nature is included as figure 1. The bell rings and the group comes back for five minutes of discussion.

To begin the journey out of the natural area the group leader teaches the group a song she wrote to facilitate the transition and to introduce the idea of transition and termination of the session:

The sun is falling  
My home is calling  
Our time in the woods is ending  
I never go out the way I came in

The song introduces the metaphor of the physical path representing the internal journey. The group walks out a different way they came in, circling back to the starting point. The group discusses any thoughts on walking in one way and leaving another way, as well as thoughts about the significance of the path and the internal journey. The group concludes with the closing ritual.



**Figure 2– “A Place Remembered”- Collage and Watercolor- 12.23.18. This image was created by Emily C. Piper after the first informal group she led in the Middlesex Fells. It is an image created out of a memory of South Reservoir as pictured in figure 2. It is an example of reflective art work on the image and concepts explored with trees.**

### **Session 3: A Tree**

The group leader leads the group to an area with many trees. The group discusses the significance of trees in their lives as well as metaphors that trees can offer and connections to life and death. Each group member chooses one tree and spends 10 minutes seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling and/or moving with the tree. There are then 10 minutes for writing, drawing, or moving. Figures 2 and 3 are examples of art that came out of a forest-bathing group this writer lead. Each member is asked to embody their felt experience in the form of some movement. After the 10 minutes, the bell rings and participants come back to the group for discussion. Group members are paired up and asked to share what they are comfortable sharing with their partner, after which the partner mirrors the movement back. Each pair co-creates a movement that takes elements of each person’s movement. The larger group comes back together and the

new movements are shared. Group members are offered an opportunity to respond to each pair. The group members then come together for discussion of that process. The group walks back to starting location and concludes with the closing ritual. Group members complete a grief assessment and exit survey.



**Figure 3- “Internal Map”- Watercolor- This image was created by Emily C. Piper and resulted in the experience of considering the metaphor of the wooded path and the internal journey.**

### **Limitations to the proposed nature-based expressive arts therapy group**

There are several limitations to the proposed groups discussed above. One limitation is that a certain level of physical health, and mobility is required, since the group takes place on walking paths in the woods. There are numerous environmental hazards that would make this group inappropriate for individuals who have a physical disability or medical condition that would prevent them from safely walking in the woods for about two hours at a time. The trails go up and down small hills with rocks, pebbles and possibly around snow and ice. People who

would have significant difficulty walking this terrain would not be appropriate for these groups. Another limitation to this group proposal is accessibility to the natural green space. In the development of this proposal, this writer considered that accessing wooded areas is more challenging for people without access to a car or ability to drive. This writer chose a location that is accessible by bus, with the understanding that arriving by bus creates other concerns and barriers for some people. With these limitations in mind, this writer believes that the content of these workshops can be modified and integrated into other interventions for populations that would not be appropriate for these workshops.

This writer is aware that she and workshop participants may come from a variety of cultures and have intersecting identities that impact how they view the world and the work they do in these workshops. This writer is aware that her view of how the fields of expressive arts therapy, dance/movement therapy, nature-based therapy, and mindfulness are related impacts how she would lead these groups and how she would introduce the activities. This writer hopes to offer activities that are accessible to people who have little to no experience with nature-based therapy, expressive arts therapy, hiking, wilderness training, mindfulness or meditation. This writer believes that the interventions described above can be adjusted to work with many populations and in many more accessible settings.

In gathering the literature on nature-based expressive arts therapy, mindfulness, and grief and loss, this writer has learned a great deal about these fields individually and how they interact and impact each other. This writer feels passionately that nature-based therapy has potential for helping people deal with loss and grief of many kinds. Nature-based approaches may be helpful in offering new insights and perspectives in coping, accepting and living with grief and loss. This writer has offered an example of a pilot workshop series on this subject to contribute to a

growing body of knowledge and to spark interest and inspiration. The hope is to offer this project so that others find freedom to move in mutual relationship with the natural world, both giving to and receiving from the ground that holds the human experience.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Dance/Movement Therapy, MA**

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**Type of Project:** Literature Review

**Thesis Title:** Towards Healing Ambiguous Grief with Nature-Based Expressive Arts Therapy,  
Embodiment, and Mindfulness: A Literature Review

**Date of Graduation:** May 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