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## How Art Can Be Used to Grieve and Heal: Making Altered Books with Parentally Bereaved Adolescents

Samantha Adams  
sadams5@lesley.edu

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How Art Can Be Used to Grieve and Heal:  
Making Altered Books with Parentally Bereaved Adolescents:  
A Method  
Capstone Thesis  
Lesley University

April 3, 2020

Samantha Adams

Art Therapy

Elizabeth Kellogg, PhD

### Abstract

Death is a natural and inevitable part of life. The grief response to death is also natural, yet children's grief is often overlooked. Many believe that children are not capable of grief because their brains are still developing or that they do not understand what death is and therefore cannot grieve. It is true that a child will grieve differently than an adult, but they still experience grief. This paper focused on children and adolescents who have experienced the death of a parent and how they use art to grieve in a healthy way. Existing research supports the benefits of using art therapy with children who are grieving, and a literature review was done documenting and reviewing the research. The method that was used in this paper was the making of altered books in an open art studio grief group of 6 adolescents. The results of the method were that the altered books served as a way for the participants to tell their story with the use of expressive arts.

Key words: death, grief, bereavement, adolescent, adolescence, art therapy

How Art Can Be Used to Grieve and Heal:  
Making Altered Books with Parentally Bereaved Adolescents

**Introduction**

“In the United States, approximately 11% of individuals have experienced the death of a parent... before the age of 20” (Hill & Lineweaver, 2016, p. 91). This statistic is jarring and is something that many do not even realize. Everyone experiences grief and loss and yet it is still so difficult to talk about. Bereavement centers and grief groups provide a safe and supportive place for children and families to come and talk about their grief and to learn how to cope with the death of someone that they love. Adolescents are at an already difficult time in their development, and adding grief and loss into their lives creates an even more confusing and isolating experience. Grief support groups can be helpful for adolescents experiencing the death of a parent, in order for them to feel more peer connection to work through the array of emotions that come with grieving. When adolescents participate in grief groups, their feelings of being different reduce and their experiences can be validated and understood (Glazer, 1998).

In this thesis, I explored the use of altered books with parentally bereaved adolescents. In the literature review, I discussed different grief terms relevant to this thesis, different models of grief, grief and parental bereavement among adolescents, coping skills and resiliency of parentally bereaved adolescents, and how art therapy can be used in grief work. I pursued a method of creating altered books with six adolescents, between the ages of 10 and 13, who have had a parent die. The method took place in a bereavement center support group twice a month for several weeks. The groups were one hour long. The hope for the altered book method was to allow the adolescents to use the altered books as a way to express themselves through art.

In the discussion and results portion of this thesis, I discussed the altered books that were created by the adolescents in the group as well as my own altered book response. This self-expression through creating altered books allowed the adolescents to begin identity-formation, express their emotions, and help them to connect to each other and help build peer support. I discussed some of the limitations and the successes that I experienced while implementing this method.

### **Literature Review**

In this literature review, I began by reviewing the different terms that I used throughout this thesis. I discussed and compared the different models of grief, their importance when they were first created and the impact they have had on more modern grief theories, and how these grief theories have evolved over time. I discussed the differences in the expression of grief among adolescents. Because expressions of grief and grief feelings are intertwined with one's development, it is important to understand where the adolescent is at developmentally to really understand how they are grieving and what that grief may look like. Parental bereavement is an especially challenging form of grief, and so I discussed what parental bereavement is, how parentally bereaved adolescents express their grief, and what they use to cope. I discussed grief groups, art therapy, and the use of both with grieving adolescents.

### **Grief Terms**

There are many terms used in the world of grief and bereavement, and so defining some of these terms in the context of this thesis is helpful. Some terms that are often used are grief, secondary losses, bereavement, mourning, and grief work. *Grief* is the reaction to a loss, and in this context, a death loss in particular. "Emotionally, grief is a mixture of raw feelings, such as sorrow, anguish, anger, regret, longing, fear, and deprivation. Grief may be experienced

physically as exhaustion, emptiness, tension, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite (Le Count, 2000, p. 17). Grief is a process that affects every part of a griever's life (Eppler, 2008). Along with the loss of the person, there are also *secondary losses*, which come about as a result of the death loss (Lister, Pushkar, & Connolly, 2008). These secondary losses can be physical, such as the loss of income and housing, or they can be more internal, such as the loss of a sense of self and purpose. *Bereavement* is defined as “a lifetime of reworking the death, the relationship, one’s identity, and future relationships” (Lister et al., 2008, p. 249). Dr. J. William Worden, who created Worden’s tasks of mourning, defined *mourning* as “the adaptation to loss” (2008, p. 39). *Grief work*, as defined by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut who created the Dual-Process Model, is “the cognitive process of confronting the reality of a loss through death, of going over events that occurred before and at the time of death, and of focusing on memories and working toward detachment from (or relocating) the deceased” (2010, p. 275). Both Worden’s Four Tasks of Mourning and the Dual-Process Model of grieving are discussed in the next section. These terms are used in the world of grief all the time, and though many seem interchangeable, there are some differences.

## **Models of Grief**

**Early models of grief and evolution of theories.** Freud’s theory of grief work was the foundation for other models of grief, but has since been challenged and expanded upon. In his theory, he believed that the bereaved follow an expected and calculable course of grief (Lister, et al., 2008). Important features of Freud’s grief model were: “(a) grief is intra-psychic,” meaning it occurs solely within one’s own mind; “(b) one must confront the loss; (c) the purpose of grief is to relinquish all attachment to the deceased; and (d) one returns to normal” (Lister, et al., 2008, p. 246). It has now been said that grieving is not just intra-psychic, but is also relates to one’s

relationships with others; grieving includes a range of emotions and emotional expression' one does not necessarily return to "normal," but instead adjusts to the loss; and that the grief process includes denial (Lister et al., 2008).

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) came up with the stage theory of grief, in which she explains that every person grieving goes through five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This theory was inspired by Kubler-Ross's work with terminally ill patients and has since been found to not be helpful in the grieving process of those who have lost a loved one to death, as there is not a linear path one must embark upon while grieving (Worden, 2008, and Lister et al., 2008). Phase theories, such as the theories created by John Bowlby (1962) and Colin Murray Parkes (1972), are similar to the stage theory, but "imply a certain passivity, something the mourner must pass through" as opposed to action taken by the griever through their process (Worden, 2008, p. 38).

**Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning.** Worden (2008) created his task theory in opposition to previous theories. He believed that this approach to grieving could "give the mourner some sense of leverage and hope that there is something he or she can actively do to adapt to the death of a loved one (2008, p. 38). These tasks are: to accept the reality of the loss; to process the pain of grief; to adjust to a world without the deceased; and to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life (Worden, 2008).

Accepting the reality of the loss harkens back to Freud's belief in confronting the loss, however this is the only similarity between Worden's theory and Freud's. It is implied in the theory that one cannot begin to process the pain of their grief until they have accepted that the loss is real. Once the pain is processed, the next task is to adjust to the world without the deceased.

According to Worden (2008), there are three different areas of adjustment: external adjustments, internal adjustments, and spiritual adjustments.

External adjustments are adjustments that the griever makes to their physical environment without their deceased loved one. These adjustments will be different for every person depending on the role that the deceased loved one played in their life; external adjustments may be easier or more difficult (Worden, 2008). Internal adjustments refer to the griever's adjustment to their own sense of self, as "death affects self-definition, self-esteem, and sense of self-efficacy" (Worden, 2008, p. 47). Spiritual adjustments are also made when someone dies because one's values about life and philosophical beliefs are often challenged (Worden, 2008). Worden's last task was to find an enduring connection with the deceased, which is very different from Freud's theory of completely detaching from the deceased. Worden (2008) believed that one must create a new life for themselves after the death, but that keeping a lasting connection with their deceased loved one is an important part of the process. This task theory implies, similarly to the stage and phase theories, that one must go through one task before moving onto the next.

**The Dual-Process Model (DPM) of grieving.** The DPM, created by Stroebe and Schut (2010) looks at bereavement as a process made up of an "oscillation" between two orientations: loss-orientation and restoration-orientation. Loss-orientation refers to "concentration on, appraising, and processing of some aspect of the loss experience itself... It involves painful dwelling on, even searching for the lost person, a phenomenon that lies at the heart of grieving" (Stroebe & Schut, 2010, p. 277). This loss-orientation is where the grief work is done, and includes intrusive grief, letting go and continuing and relocating bonds with the deceased, and denial or avoidance of the restorative changes (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Restoration-orientation



refers to “the focus on secondary stressors that are also consequences of bereavement, reflecting a struggle to reorient oneself in a changed world without the deceased person” (Stroebe & Schut, 2010, p. 277). Restoration-orientation includes: attending to the changes of life; involving oneself in new activities; denial, avoidance, or distraction from grief; and finding new roles and identities within oneself and one’s relationships (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

According to the DPM, the process of bereavement is a back and forth between these two orientations. One who is grieving must do the grief work, but a need for “dosing” of grief is also understood. At times the grieving person will confront the aspects of their loss and at other times will choose to avoid them in favor of working on the adjustment to their life without their deceased loved one (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). This theory is much different than previous theories of grief in that it does not include a set linear view. It poses that one freely moves between two aspects of their grief in order to adjust to a new world.

**The Meaning-Reconstruction Model.** Robert A. Neimeyer (2014) came up with the Meaning-Reconstruction Model as a new model of the process of grief. As mentioned in previous theories of grief, death loss changes a person’s view of the world and challenges their own identity. The Meaning-Reconstruction Model views grieving as “a process of reaffirming or reconstructing a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss” (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014, p. 4). Reconstruction and meaning-making are viewed as positive coping resources and have been found to create more positive outcomes in the grieving process (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). In this theory, one must create sense of the loss in some way, what that sense means for them, and how the meaning of the death fits into their life story and views of the world (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014).

The Meaning- Reconstruction Model also focuses on *continuing bonds* with the deceased loved one. Continuing bonds reflects the “ongoing attachment to the deceased” and can be experienced “emotionally, through missing, yearning, and feeling strongly connected to the loved one, and cognitively, by thinking of and remembering the deceased person” (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p. 12). Especially if the loved one was a “trusted witness” to the griever’s life, the death can shake the foundation of bonds and meanings created with the person as well as our fundamental views of the world and relationships (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014, p. 5). Continuing bonds also includes bringing memories of the deceased loved one into one’s social world, “reclaiming their membership in the club of significant figures in [one’s] life” (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014, p. 6).

These models of grief were all created in reference to the grief of adults, and much of the literature on grief is based on adult’s grief. It is important to realize that the way an adult grieves looks very different than the way a child or adolescent grieves. These models of grief, however, can be adapted to the grief of children and adolescents if done with the development of children kept in mind. The next section is about the way an adolescent may experience grief and how that contrasts with grief expression in adulthood.

### **Adolescents and Grief**

Adolescence is a time in a person’s life where they are growing out of the child stage and beginning to form their own sense of identity in the context of others and their world. Because the method used in this thesis discussed adolescents who are ages 10- to 13-years old, I discussed adolescents and their grief from this perspective. Children and adolescents grieve very differently than adults do, and so it is important to understand that distinction. In this section I discussed the different ways that grief can be expressed by adolescents.

Developmentally, children around the ages of 9- to 11-years old are in the concrete operational stage, meaning they can “use logical thinking, understand cause and effect, and retrace memories to aid in correcting erroneous opinions, thoughts, and conclusions” (Christ, 2010, p. 172). Those around the ages of 12- to 14-years old have a higher concept of abstract thinking than their younger peers (Christ, 2010). There has been much debate about whether or not a child can actually grieve, and therefore many studies on grief are based upon the grief process of adults, contributing to the lack of services children and adolescents who have experienced a death loss (Auman, 2007). Newer theories show that children can grieve, and that because of previous beliefs about their capacity to grieve, they have often been “the forgotten mourner” (Auman, 2007, p. 39).

Because the grief process and the understanding of grief is dependent on the developmental stage of a person, an adolescent’s experience of death and grief is very different from adults. Children and adolescents “mourn according to their current developmental level, and then may postpone further grief work until they reach a new stage when developmentally appropriate mourning will resume” (Eppler, 2008, p. 190). Children and adolescents will also mourn and confront their intermittently, what Stroebe and Schut (2010) described as “dosing” in their DPM of grieving. They go back and forth between allowing themselves to feel the emotions of grief and to try to cope with the loss and immersing themselves into their routine and activities that they enjoy in order to give themselves a break from their own grief for a time (Corr, 2010). This compartmentalization of their grief often makes them seem less emotional or that they are not grieving, when in fact they are just grieving in a way that is developmentally appropriate (Christ, 2010).

### **Parental bereavement**

Though an adolescent can experience a range of death experiences during their development, such as the death of a grandparent or other family member, teachers or classmates, and even friends or siblings, I solely discuss the impact and experience of the death of a parent. Parental bereavement, or the death of a guardian who is not a parent, is experienced in an entirely different way than any other form of bereavement because of the relationship between child and parent. No matter the quality or circumstances of the relationship, the death of a parent is always a difficult event for an adolescent who is forming their own identity and going through many internal changes already.

In the United States it was reported in 2016 that approximately 11% had experienced the death of a parent before the age of 20 (Hill & Lineweaver, 2016). Parental death is a major stressful event that is often traumatic and has been found to increase the risk for many mental and physical health problems from youth and into adulthood (Sandler, Ma, Tein, Ayers, Wolchik, Kennedy, & Millsap, 2010). Parentally bereaved children and adolescents can experience a wide range of emotions, including “numbness, sadness, anger, confusion, fear, worry, regret, loneliness, guilt, and self-blame. Sometimes, children’s grief involves fatigue and turning within themselves, whereas at other times it can lead to agitation, irritability, lashing out or getting into trouble” (Corr, 2010, p. 14).

When a parent dies, the adolescent is not only grieving the death loss, they are also grieving all of the secondary losses that come with it; routines and schedules change, as well as family dynamics, family finances, and a possible move from their home (Corr, 2010). These secondary losses can alter the self-concept of the adolescents, because their family members,’ and at times their own, roles have been altered (Auman, 2007). Their identity, which is still starting to form, is completely changed by the death of a parent. They may feel that “fatherless”

or “motherless” becomes a major part of their identity, which can be isolating (LaFreniere & Cain, 2015). Often, adolescents will self-isolate after the death of a parent, however, because of the stigma, their peers may isolate them as well. Because many bereaved children and adolescents do not have any peers that have also lost a parent by death, those peers often do not know how to support them and can make things feel harder for the bereaved adolescent. Many parentally bereaved adolescents do not like to talk about the death for this reason and because they do not want to become too vulnerable with their peers, especially those that are not very close to them (LaFreniere & Cain, 2015). Grief groups can be helpful for adolescents in allowing them to be with peers who have also experienced the death of a parent in a place that is safe to talk about their experiences with the death.

### **Grief Groups**

In this section I discussed what a grief group looks like and how it impacts the life of a grieving adolescent as well as their family members. I discuss the importance of peer support, the processing of the death and different grief expressions, and the facilitation of memory sharing and relationship building.

While the adolescent is grieving the death of their parent, the surviving parent is grieving the death of their partner. The surviving parent may become so consumed by their own grief and working on logistics of secondary losses that they may not be able to support their grieving child or parent them in the same way they were able to before the death (LaFreniere & Cain, 2015). Grief groups provide a supportive environment for the adolescent to talk about the death of their parent, share memories with others, work through hard emotions, and “begin the process of healing” (Glazer, 1998, p. 52). Unlike peers in their everyday life who may not understand or may isolate out of the fear of stigma, grief groups are filled with peers who have also had a

parent die. These peers can offer more effective support than peers outside of the grief group; they may be able to give more helpful advice, or at least be able to share their own experiences with other grieving adolescents (LaFreniere & Cain, 2015). Grief groups often follow a model of peer support in order to make the grieving children and adolescents feel less alone and to normalize parental death and the feelings associated with grieving (Glazer, 1998 and Finn, 2003).

Symbolic acts and rituals are a major component of grief groups, allowing those participating in the groups to express their own beliefs and continually process the death of their parent and the emotions it evokes (Finn, 2003). Grief groups for children and adolescents are often designed with activities that process the different emotions of grief and build upon the strengths of the children and adolescents (Eppler, 2008). Grief groups for children and adolescents often run in tandem with grief groups for their parents, which often facilitates the necessary connection between child and parent. Those running grief groups work with the parents to make sure their child has the necessary information related to the death of their other parent and that their fears and anxieties about the death are being addressed (Corr, 2010). Much of the child's coping depends on how the surviving parent is functioning and what their relationship is like with that parent or caregiver (Corr, 2010). Grief groups can aid in the building of different coping skills and can be an additional protective factor for a grieving adolescent.

### **Protective Factors, Resiliency, and Coping**

There are different terms that can be used when discussing therapeutic change and effectiveness when working with adolescents. The terms discussed in this section are: protective factors, resiliency, and coping. *Protective factors* are “traits that enhance well-being and provide the tools to avoid adverse emotions and behaviors” (O’Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009, p. xv).

*Resiliency* is “the ability to recover from or adapt to adverse events, life changes, and life stressors” (O’Connell, et al., 2009, p. xxviii). *Coping* refers to “processes, strategies, or styles of managing (reducing, mastering, tolerating)” (Stroebe & Schut, 2010, p. 274). Because bereaved children and adolescents are at an increased risk for different mental illnesses and negative social experiences, it is important to discuss the different protective factors that enable them to become more resilient and to cope more effectively with their death loss, specifically the death of their parent.

Much of an adolescent’s coping and resiliency depends on the functioning and role that the surviving parent or guardian plays in their life (Corr, 2010). Bereaved adolescents need “adequate information, fears and anxieties addressed, reassurance that they are not to blame, careful listening, validation of their feelings, help with overwhelming feelings, involvement and inclusion, continued routine activities, modeled grief behaviors, and opportunities to remember” (Corr, 2010, p. 17). Because the surviving parent is also grieving, these needs can be very difficult to attend to. Grief groups and grief therapists help the adolescents’ needs to be met and help the surviving parents to meet these needs by providing them with the resources and help that they need. Continuing bonds, as discussed in the Meaning-Reconstruction Model of grieving, is an important way that adolescents cope with the death of a parent. The coping processes of the adolescent are aided by efforts to “maintain an ongoing connection” to the deceased parent (Corr, 2010, p. 16). These continuing bonds can be encouraged by the surviving parent and grief groups through discussion and sharing of memories, traditions, and feelings surrounding the parent who has died.

### **Art Therapy**

In this section, I define what art therapy is and discuss why it is used in addition to or instead of more traditional forms of therapy.

Art therapy is an integrative therapy that includes the benefits of art-making and creative processes, as well as psychological theory and the psychotherapeutic relationship (American Art Therapy Association (AATA), 2017). According to AATA, “art therapy engages the mind, body, and spirit in ways that are distinct from verbal articulation alone” (2017). Creating art can be a powerful experience that allows for a mastery of control for someone who may not feel that they have much control in their lives (Finn, 2003). Art can be used as an alternate form of communication, when language alone is not enough or when verbal expression is too difficult. Creating art accesses the right and left hemispheres of the brain, “encouraging an integration of feeling, cognition, and sensation that can lead to new understanding” (Wood & Near, 2010, p. 375). Art promotes the use and creation of images and metaphors. The art created can “act as a bridge between conscious and unconscious” and can encourage the identification of these symbols and the discovery of possible meanings (Wood & Near, 2010, p. 376). Just the act of creating art can be relaxing and gratifying, and the “aesthetic experience can engage [one] in transformational healing processes” (Chilton, 2013, p. 464).

### **Grief Work and Art Therapy**

In this section I discuss how art therapy can be used in grief work within grief groups. I focus on using art therapy with grieving adolescents.

The use of the arts in grief work is becoming increasingly more common, with “80% of trained art therapists [reporting] working with bereaved individuals” (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p. 11). Art therapy connects naturally with the more modern theories of grief work. Both the “leading theories of grief,” the Dual-Process Model and the Meaning Reconstruction Model,



and the theories of art therapy “argue that creating meaning is the leading mechanism of change” (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p. 11). The main objectives of art therapy are “awareness, expression of energy and emotion, working through a problem, and creativity and joy” (Finn, 2003, p. 157). These objectives correspond with the current grief theories that focus on working through grief by “helping the client develop an awareness of loss, express feelings of grief, and learn new ways of coping” (Finn, 2003, p. 157). Because of these correlations, it is not uncommon for those who are grieving to seek the care of an art therapist or for grief groups to be run by trained art therapists (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018).

Using art therapy in grief groups can be a safe way for adolescents to express their emotions and their struggles surrounding the death of their parent. Art and other creative expression is often a natural way for adolescents to communicate and participate in life (Wood & Near, 2010). Because of this more innate nature of adolescents, creating art allows the clinician to meet the adolescent where they are at in their own individual grief process (Wood & Near, 2010). Art can make tangible what is difficult to express verbally, aiding in the grief work that the adolescent is doing (Glazer, 1998). Along with an encouragement of the expression of emotions relating to grief, art therapy can also allow grieving adolescents to assert some control in their lives. Because of the ups and downs of intense emotions, grief can make adolescents feel completely out of control. Creating art allows adolescents to express their grief at their own pace in a way that can be less-threatening than traditional talk therapy (Wood & Near, 2010). The creation of art with an art therapist facilitates a safe space to express these intense emotions and to help “organize” their thoughts and feelings to better regulate their emotions (Wood & Near, 2010, p. 376).

Although the process of creating art is extremely important, and is often thought to be more important than the art product by many art therapists, creating an art product can serve as a way to document what the adolescent has learned in the therapeutic process and what their own grief process and progress looks like concretely (Wood & Near, 2010). It can help throughout the grief work to look back at the art created earlier when the grief was still so raw and to look at the difference between old art and new. This can help the art therapist and the adolescent when it comes to goal setting and reviewing therapeutic work that has been done.

### **Method**

In this method, I discuss the therapeutic intervention of altered books and how they can be used with parentally bereaved adolescents. I worked with adolescents between the ages of 10 and 13, who have had a parent die. The method took place in a bereavement center support group twice a month for several weeks. The groups were one hour long each. I chose this method because of its found uses of aiding in self expression, identity formation, and the telling of one's unique story. I thought this would be an effective intervention for adolescents who are currently figuring out their own identity and story after the death of one of their parents.

### **Altered Books**

An altered book is "any pre-existing book that has been changed into a new work of art" (Chilton, 2007, p. 59). Any number of art materials can be used to create an altered book, making them an accessible way to create art. Materials that were used in this method included: acrylic paint, magazines, paper scraps and cutouts, tissue paper, sharpies and markers, Mod Podge glue, glue sticks, tape, and scissors. The altered book is an alternative canvas in which an artist can create, and because it already has words and images, it can also be a nonthreatening way to start the creative process as opposed to a blank piece of paper (Cobb & Negash, 2010). The words and

images that are found in the book can serve as an inspiration for self-expression, allowing the artist to focus on certain words and images and to cover up others that might not be relevant (Cobb & Negash, 2010). This can be done in a variety of ways: painting, collaging, and using markers to cover up the pages of the book are just a few.

Altered books can be a great way to express oneself in times of crisis. According to Gioia Chilton, MA, ATR-BC, “Altering books allows a symbolically rich canvas on which to express one’s inner life. The process of making art in an intentional manner through creatively altering a book becomes healing, life affirming, and helpful in producing growth and change” (2007, p. 59). There is no set way to create an altered book, but it is often helpful to come up with a theme to guide the expressive process (Cobb & Negash, 2010). Because the altered books in this method are created in a grief therapy group, the common themes are the adolescents’ individual stories about the death of their parent and the relationship they had with them, as well as the continuing bonds that they are creating with their deceased loved one. The altered book in this context is used to aid in the creation of the adolescents’ own unique narratives.

Adolescents are at a time in their life where they are trying to figure out their own personal identity. When they are grieving, this makes that self-discovery even more difficult. Altered books can serve as a way to help adolescents tell their own story of life and grief and can help them to explore their identity as it relates to their experiences of grieving the death of a parent. The altered book is used to “work with the renegotiation of identity” through the use of collage, painting, assemblage, and poetry (Lister et al., 2008, p. 249). This creation fosters meaning making and the ability to “access the back story of the relationship with the deceased in a healing fashion” (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014, p. 5).

Altered books are most helpful when created over a period of time, as it allows for the artist to create a fuller story of their experiences and provides a tangible image of the progress that they have made throughout the therapeutic process (Cobb & Negash, 2010). This tangible object of the book itself serves as a reminder to the artist, but can also be shared and witnessed by others. In the grief group, the books are often shown to the group, which allows for discussion, but also allows for the visual images to speak for themselves in a way that language may not be able to convey.

### **Participants**

The participants for this method were 6 parentally bereaved adolescents in the same grief group: Client A is a 13-year-old whose father died 11 years ago from a car accident when Client A was only 2-years-old. Client B is a 12-year-old whose father died over one year ago from a drug overdose. Client C is a 12-year-old whose mother died of breast cancer a little over one year ago. Client D is an 11-year-old whose mother died less than a year ago of cancer. Client E is a 10-year-old whose father died less than a year ago of cancer. Client F is a 10-year-old whose father died over one year ago from a heart attack.

### **Implementation**

Each participant had the ability to choose the book which they worked with from a pile of pre-selected books. These books were given as choices because of the availability from donations. The books were worked on in the allotted grief group time of one hour. The materials given to work with in the books were: acrylic paint, magazines, paper scraps and cutouts, tissue paper, sharpies and markers, Mod Podge glue, glue sticks, tape, and scissors. In the beginning of each group before the books were worked on, the facilitators of the group would begin a check in consisting of the name of the participant, who died, how they died, and any good or bad things

that had happened in the previous two weeks between groups. This acted as a guide while they worked in their books. They all worked in their books for the entire allotted group time of one hour during the six weeks. At the end of each group, the adolescents would share with each other as little or as much of their altered books as they wanted. When the six weeks were over, none of the adolescents felt that their books were complete, but wanted to work on them less frequently at their own pace. Once they felt that the important parts of their story had been told, or they needed distance from the book, the method felt complete.

### **Results**

For this section I discussed and described the altered books that were created by the adolescents in the 6 weeks that they worked on them. For this method, I also created my own altered book in response to the altered books created in group. Images of my own art are included at the end of this section.

#### **Client A and Client D**

Both Client A and Client D had multiple absences during the 6 group weeks that we worked on the altered books. Because of this, their books are not as complete as their peers' books and thus will be discussed in the same section. Client A painted a blue color gradient on the front and back cover of his book. This process took him two weeks of group time so that he could layer the paint to make it more opaque. On the inside cover of his book, he used sharpie to fill in large areas with blocks of black. He also used the black sharpie to draw an eye. During the creation of his book, Client A came out to the group as transgender and asked that he be referred to by an altered version of his current name and with he/him/his pronouns. Client D painted a large yellow flower on the front cover of her book. On the inside, a few pages a painted over with a diluted mixture of acrylic paint and water so that the original text could still be seen. In

large black letters, she had written “Love is All You Need” over one of these painted pages, revealing the words to be lyrics from one of her mother’s favorite songs.

### **Client B**

Client B painted a blue color gradient on the back cover of her book after seeing what Client A was painting. On the front cover she did a color gradient as well, but with different shades of pink and purple. As with Client A, Client B worked on the covers over a few weeks to add layers of paint to make it more opaque. On the inside, she painted some of the pages with a mixture of acrylic paint and water in the same way that Client D had done. During one week, she concentrated on painting different fruits on the back cover of her book, over the blue color gradient. When asked about the fruit, she explained that it was the easiest thing she could think to paint. The next group week, she went back and painted over the fruit and color gradient with blue acrylic paint. The last thing she added to her book was on the inside cover, a flower drawn in sharpie.

Client B had been in the program for a year without having disclosed much about the death of her father, her complicated family system, or her own personal struggles with grief. During the third week of creating the altered books, Client B opened up to the group about her mother’s and father’s struggles with drug addiction and how she lives with her aunt. This disclosure opened the door for her to talk more in depth about her feelings towards her mother and to provide more stories about her father, which she had not been able to do before.

### **Client C**

Client C began by painting the front cover of her book with blue acrylic paint. On top of that, she layered a pre-cut heart in the middle of the cover with a cancer ribbon in the middle that

she had cut out of construction paper herself. Under this heart and cancer ribbon, she painted her first initial and the first initial of her mother. On the inside cover, she glued a pre-cut clock image. Client C experimented with the material to create different collages and 3-dimensional images within her book. Some of her pages include: a heart that “pops out” of the book when opened to that page; an envelope filled with different pictures of animals she had cut out from magazines; a tissue paper collage of a sky and sun; a tissue paper collage of a fire; and a collage of a sky with a sun and clouds made of construction paper.

Client C came up on the one-year anniversary of her mother’s death when she began creating her altered book, which she disclosed emotionally as being extremely difficult for her. She and her mother were very close and throughout the process of making her altered book, Client C was able to share happy memories of her mother with the rest of the group and the grief she felt from her death.

### **Client E**

Client E’s process of creating her altered book was very sensory. She worked on the cover over a few weeks, layering on large sums of Mod Podge glue and acrylic paint. She used many different colors of paint which, when all mixed together, became different shades of brown. She used scissors to cut out squares into the pages of her book, and then glued these cut-outs of the pages to the front cover of her book, before peeling them all off the next week and adding more paint. The result of the cover was very thick and textured. During the 6 weeks she worked on the book, she ripped and cut out the inside pages little by little. During the fifth week, she ripped out every single page from the inside of the book until it was completely empty. She then wrote “I love you to the moon and back” twice on the inside covers, explaining that she and her father used to say that to each other all the time before he died. The last thing she added to

her book was “[Client E’s] book. Do Not Touch” on the front cover with a drawing of a smiley-face underneath.

Throughout the process of creating her altered book, Client E disclosed a lot about the death of her father and the resulting struggles and secondary losses of her family members on his side of the family. She discussed her worries about her mother and her father’s side of the family, and bullies at school that have become more cruel since the death of her father. She also described taking comfort in being around some of his possessions or gifts that he had given to her.

### **Client F**

Client F painted on layers of acrylic paint, tissue paper, and glue to the front cover of her book, with the intention of making it look like a mountain range. She folded down the first few pages on her book, and when one turned the page, the words “Myself,” “My Town,” and “The Universe” could be seen written on the pages. She added a lot of intricate features to her book and experimented with materials and the pages of the book. When the book was closed, one could see a scrap of paper that said “Pull Me.” When pulled down, a comic book-like shape emerged with the words “I love you” on it. She also created a drawing of her father’s truck that, when put into a slit that she created in one of the pages of the book with a drawing of a road, could be moved as if it was driving across the road to a stop sign. She also glued many pages together and then cut into them to create a “fireplace” using paint.

Throughout the process of creating her book, Client F also came upon the one-year anniversary of her father’s death, which fell on Christmas day. She was able to voice her worries and struggles with the holiday, even with the excitement that the others in the group felt. She was



also able to disclose to the group that her parents had been divorced when he died and that she had to split her time between her mother and father on a weekly basis.

### **Altered Book Response**

Throughout the six weeks that the adolescents worked on their altered books, I also worked on one of my own. I worked on the book on my own time after group weeks with the intention of processing both what had been discussed in group and how the altered book intervention was working with the adolescents in group. I used the same materials that the adolescents used when making their altered books, with the exception of embroidery floss which I used to sew sections of pages together as an alternative to using glue.



Figure 1

For the first spread in my book (Fig. 1), I used images and words cut out from magazines and textured decorative paper. I wanted to convey the way that I felt when the altered books were first introduced. Working in grief groups often feels as if one is looking through a window into

the life of the person who is grieving. Sometimes there are curtains in that window, or there are objects covering that window to make it harder to see into. This is how it feels when facilitating a group in which one or more members do not want to discuss their grief. The window is shut tight and the curtain is pulled closed. Watching the adolescents begin to create their altered books felt like the curtain slowly opening up, as in the picture in this spread. The curtain can still be seen and is able to be drawn closed at any moment, but right now it is open. There are some objects on the windowsill, creating more privacy, but it is easier to see into than if the curtain were closed. I added the words “The Backstory” and “something so intimate” because the backstory of their grief really is something so personal and private. The relationship that they had with their deceased parent, especially if complicated, can be so difficult to open up about.

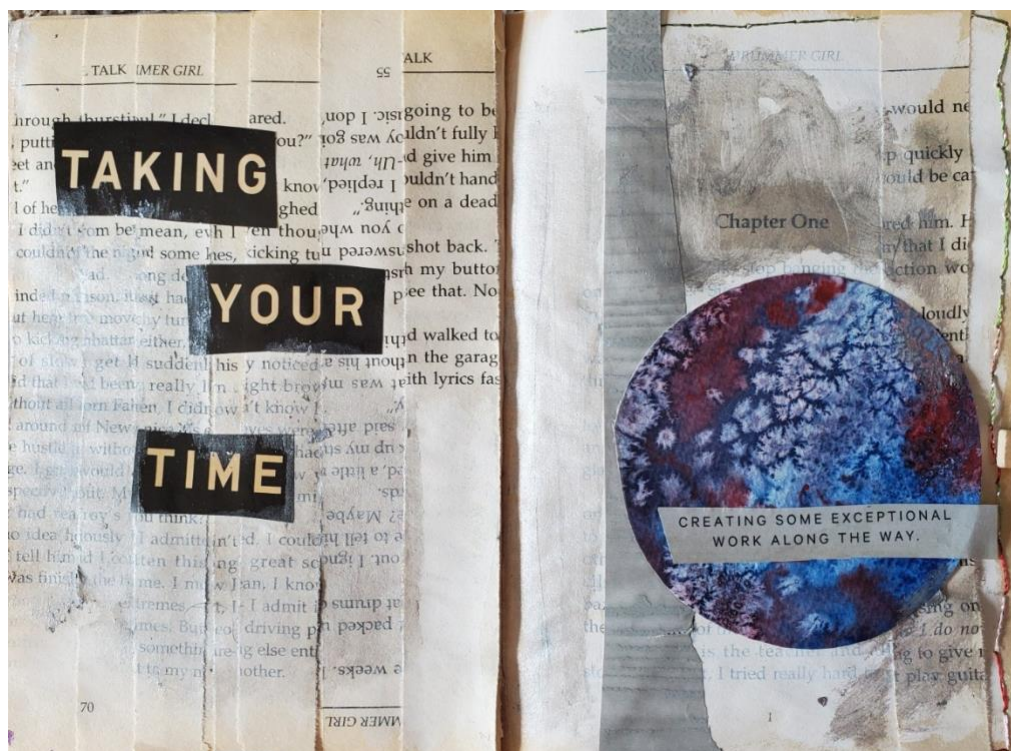


Figure 2

In the second spread (Fig. 2), I used cut outs from magazines and part of a watercolor painting that I had done using salt, which I cut into a circle and glued into the book. In contrast to the first spread, in this spread many of the original words in the book are still visible. I gently tore one of the pages into strips, arranged them back into the book out of order and upside down, and glued them in this way. Grief can be so confusing and adolescents can have a hard time making sense of their parent's death. The way I rearranged the pages was meant to convey this feeling of disarray and disorientation that comes with the grieving process. I often found that my role when working with these adolescents was to hold their confusion and to put it together as neatly as I could without fixing it. There is no fixing grief, but I was there to help any way I could, even if that meant just holding it for them. I added magazine cutouts that read "Taking Your Time" and "Creating some exceptional work along the way." Many of the adolescents took their time working on their books. They explored the media and thought of creative ways to work with their books. Throughout all of the time they worked on their altered books, they created amazing pieces of art that spoke to who they were and what their relationship was like with the parent who died.

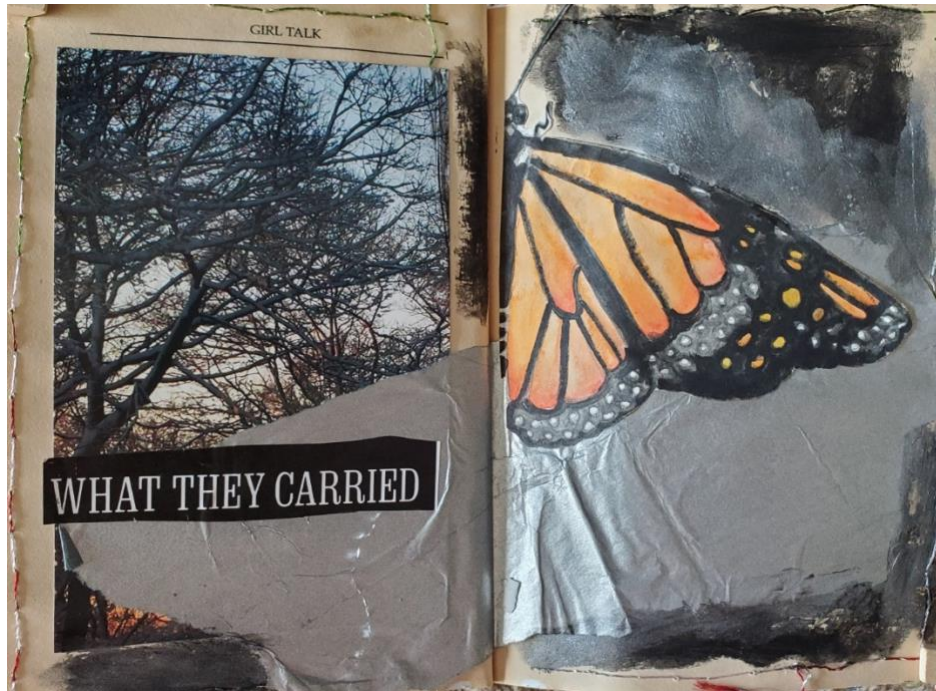


Figure 3

In the third spread (Fig. 3), I used magazine cutouts, acrylic paint, watercolor paint, and tissue paper. Using watercolor paints, I painted the butterfly to symbolize the growth that I was seeing in each of the adolescents, their stories, and in the books that they were creating. Each book was becoming more and more intricate and detailed, and I wanted to convey that through the butterfly and the image of the tree with its many entangled branches. Their stories also became more detailed. They shared memories and stories about their lives that they had never shared before in group. They shared the complexity of their relationships with their parents before and after they died and the complexity of their relationships with their remaining family members. I added “What they carried” on top of the tree image. The adolescents hold so much inside of them: grief, sadness, anger, and loneliness; but also hope.





Figure 4

In the fourth spread (Fig. 4), I used acrylic paint, magazine cutouts, and a page from another book, covering all of the original text from the book. I began by painting over the page from another, leaving some words visible to create a poem that reads:

Concerns.

Contemplating move.

Wrenching, cherished, empty.

Locked family's belongings.

Saying, "goodbye, goodbye, goodbye."

Taken apart.

Memories rather than emptiness.

### Withdrawing relationship.

There were so many words on the page of this book that I felt reflected what the adolescents expressed in group. So much of what they discussed was around the concerns they had, both for themselves and their families. Their grief was wrenching at times, with emotions spilling out onto the pages of their books and in the tears that were shed. They locked and stored these memories, their “family’s belongings,” inside of them and the group was privileged for these memories that were shared with them. Through this “withdrawing relationship,” they were able to keep with them “memories, rather than emptiness.” I used this poem to guide the rest of the spread. I used a magazine cutout of clouds and glued an image of a feather in the middle. I wanted to juxtapose the lightness of the images with the heaviness of the poem. While the adolescents did have a lot of emotional and sad moments, there was also a lot of happiness and laughter among them. Being with them often made my heart feel light.



Figure 5

For my final spread (Fig. 5), I used metallic acrylic paint, magazine cutouts, fabric, and embroidery thread. Inspired by the adolescents cutting into their books, I cut a rectangular shape into the book, carving through several pages at once. I sewed a mesh fabric with gold circles on it into the pages, layering it over an image of a carnation flower. I then glued a blue floral image onto the other pages and added the words “Compelling Art” on top of it. The books that the adolescents created were thought-provoking and impressive. I felt amazed at the different ways in which they utilized the materials and created meaningful stories within the pages of their books. The last step I took in finishing the last spread of my book was to paint the pages using metallic gold paint. I chose gold to convey the way that I felt in group, getting to hear their stories and see them create art. Creating my own altered book was a great way for me to connect with what I had learned through my review of the literature and what I had learned from my experiences with the adolescents in group.

### **Discussion**

In this discussion section, I went over what implementing this method was like, what the limitations were of this method, as well as what was successful about this method.

Introducing the altered book method to the adolescents in the group was initially met with confusion and discussion about drawing in books being “not allowed.” This was short-lived, however, once the idea was explained in more detail. I did not give them any physical examples of what altered books look like because I did not want them to fixate on what the book “should” look like, though I did give them some examples of what they could do in the book: painting, drawing, collaging, and writing. I made it as clear as I could that they were allowed to do whatever they wanted in their books. Once they became comfortable with the idea of creating altered books, they became engaged quite quickly. They did not need much guidance or

encouragement from me during the six weeks that they worked on the books and often asked at the beginning of group if they were going to be able to continue working on them. I was fortunate enough to have many different materials that could be used in the altered books, and so the adolescents had a lot of freedom of choice, which was exciting to them.

My goals for this thesis were to allow the adolescents to connect to each other, share memories, express their emotions, and begin forming their identities through the use of altered books. There were a lot of successes during the six week intervention, with all of these hopes being met in some way. As they worked, they leaned on each other for support with problem-solving and different techniques that they could use. They asked each other for feedback and were willing to ask for help and to give help. They laughed together and cried together and were there for each other during hard times and good times. The altered books gave them opportunities to share artistic ideas with each other, allowing them to build connections with each other in a way that seemed more accessible than traditional talk therapy.

While they worked on their altered books, I was witness to the oscillation that Stroebe and Schut (2010) discussed in their Dual-Process Model of grieving. They created different memories of their parent who had died and expressed their love for that parent, and in this way were very loss-oriented in their artistic expression. They also created fun images in their books that were not directly related to their parent who had died, such as the painting of fruits or different images of animals cut out from magazines. These creations seemed to be more restoration-oriented because they allowed the adolescent the freedom to be creative and have fun without the underlying intention of creating everything based upon their experience of the death of their parent. Some of them oscillated between these two orientations a few times each session,



some of them oscillated every few sessions, and some were in one orientation much more than they were in the other orientation.

The altered books gave the adolescents a way to share memories visually with each other. Client F created a cutout of her father's truck and allowed every group member to move the truck across the page, making it seem as if it was driving down a road. She also painted a fireplace in her book, linking it back to family traditions during the wintertime and the holidays. Client C filled her book with images of cancer ribbons to signify her mother's long battle with cancer. Client D wrote "Love is all you need," referencing one of her mother's favorite songs. Client E wrote "I love you to the moon and back," telling the group it is what she and her father used to say to each other all the time. These memories were first created in their books and then spoken out loud to the group. The altered books became a creative way of continuing bonds with their parent who died. Their memories of their parent and their feelings about their parent were all turned into art work within their altered books. They were able to go back to different pages that they had created, allowing them to view their relationship and keep that connection in a unique way. This could be connected back to Neimeyer and Thompson's (2014) Meaning-Reconstruction Model, which focuses on the continuing bonds with the deceased loved one and the making of meaning after the death.

The altered books gave them a tangible way to express their feelings. Client E was very sensory with her book, adding layer after layer of glue and paint to create an extremely textured book cover, as well as ripping out every page in her book. Though she did not give a reason for her process, it is possible that she was conveying a feeling of lack of control or an emptiness that she feels without her father with her. She often spoke of keeping his belongings near to her and her fears that someone would take these belongings away from her. Client C expressed her

concerns about time using an image of a clock in her book. Client F expressed more existential feelings and identity concerns by creating different sections in her book labeled “Myself,” “My Town,” and “The Universe.” She began by thinking more inwardly about herself, and then began to picture herself in the larger themes of life. They all expressed themselves in very different ways and all had very different feelings, but one theme that was seen in almost all of the books was the feeling of love. They used or created images of hearts and wrote words about love to express their affection and love towards their parent who died.

Though there were many successes during this intervention, there were a few limitations. Most of the adolescents were not there for every session of the six weeks that they worked on their books, with the exception of two individuals out of the six. Even more limiting was the fact that Client A and Client D missed multiple groups and therefore were at very different stages in their altered books than the rest of the group. Both of them were still working on their covers on during weeks three and four and did not have much on the insides of their books. This left four adolescents with more completed altered books. Regardless, Client A shared things that he had never shared before, but most likely not as a result of creating the altered book. It would be helpful to do this intervention with groups with more consistent attendance and multiple groups instead of just one. It would also be interesting to see a comparison between parentally bereaved adolescent groups who created altered books and those who did not in terms of building connections, expressing feelings, and memory sharing. Because the group was much more open-ended than directive-based, it would also be interesting to see what kind of work would be created if there were different directives involved each week, rather than allowing the adolescents to come up with their own directives for their altered books.

It was a privilege to be a witness to the creation of these altered books. I felt as though I was able to get a glimpse of the different stories and experiences than I would have with more traditional forms of therapy. Using altered books to process their emotions and their own story was a powerful tool that allowed them to create emotional, creative, and compelling works of art.

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

**Thesis Advisor:** E Kellogg, PhD