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## Exploring Songwriting with Bereaved Adolescents: A Literature Review

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**Exploring Songwriting with Bereaved Adolescents: A Literature Review**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

April 25, 2022

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Music Therapy

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## Abstract

This literature review explores and identifies essential aspects of songwriting with bereaved adolescents. First, it provides a description of grief and its processes with primary theoretical models. This is followed by a deeper look into adolescent grief, how it has been viewed in Western culture, along with and corresponding mental health needs. Expressive arts and music therapy approaches to grief and loss are explored, including a detailed of songwriting with bereaved adolescents. Improvisation and therapeutic relationship were found to be two crucial aspects to effective songwriting interventions with bereaved adolescents; person-centered approaches were used to develop authentic relationships with adolescent clients. There is a need for continued research on a Person-Centered Expressive Arts (PCEA) (Rogers, 1993) informed framework for songwriting with bereaved adolescents. Three established treatment protocols warrant further exploration with this population: Resilience Songwriting Program (RSP) (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019a; 2019b; 2020), Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP) (Dalton & Krout, 2005; 2006), and Automated Lyrical Songwriting Application (ALYSIA) (Cheatley et al., 2020; 2022). Each of these treatment protocols should be further researched with bereaved adolescents to determine efficacy, with particular attention to adolescents with developmental disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) as they are underrepresented in the literature. Lastly, the Grief Process Scale (GPS) (Dalton & Krout, 2005) was found to be a potentially effective measurement tool for client grief processes in music therapy. GPS should continue to be researched and reviewed with bereaved adolescents to further research in this area.

*Keywords:* bereavement, adolescence, music therapy, song writing, grief

*Author Identity Statement:* The author identifies as a straight, cis-gender, Caucasian, Jewish male from California of mixed European ancestry.

## Exploring Songwriting with Bereaved Adolescents: A Literature Review

### Introduction

Human beings are wired for connection and attachment with other people, which derives from an individual's biological need to feel safe and secure (Worden, 2018). Worden (2018) stated that such attachments develop early in life. Close bonds may only exist with a select few individuals, such as our primary caregivers; when an individual experiences a loss of attachment by death or abandonment of their caregiver, the individual may be filled with anxiety and emotional protest (Worden, 2018). Neimeyer and Thompson (2014) iterated that there can be an "existential void" an individual experiences with a loss, followed by an attempt to find meaning of why (p. 3). Psychotherapy may support the bereaved individual, which can include a variety of interventions tailored to the unique needs of each person (Zech & Arnold, 2011).

However, it has been presumed that adolescents particularly lack concern towards death, and, by this assumption, adults tend to neglect this population from grief counseling when it is clinically indicated (Creed et al., 2001; Fiore, 2016). The grieving process is further complicated without appropriate intervention, leaving adolescents to feel alone and unsupported. Many scholars and practitioners of expressive arts therapies have proposed that the arts can be used effectively to support adolescents in the grieving process (Baker, 2005; Myers-Coffman 2019a; Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). Music therapy has been widely used with individuals to cope with grief (Baker, 2015; Myers-Coffman, 2019a). Music and musical experiences can deeply impact adolescents and can serve as a core foundation in their development. Music therapy can utilize adolescents' current interests with music to further engage them and create meaning within the therapeutic space (Baker, 2015).

Working through grief and loss is understandably a complicated process (Heath & Lings, 2012); this paper will primarily discuss the unique qualities of music therapy and demonstrate the effects of this modality with grieving adolescents. However, it has been found that songwriting can particularly serve as a therapeutic guide for youth in their healing process (Fiore, 2016). Baker et al. (2005) described songwriting as the formation and cultivation of lyrics and music. In modern Western society, there are an eclectic variety of themes within songs; these themes could include relationships, loss, rejection, and oppression (Baker, 2015, p. 14). While Western society often holds songs and songwriters to ambitious standards, songwriting, however, can be utilized by anyone means of self-expression. Songwriting can guide individuals through their grief process when other modalities are too challenging to confront. (Baker et al., 2015). Moreover, this review will formulate how therapeutic songwriting is a beneficial intervention for adolescents, with particular attention to those experiencing grief.

### **Literature Review**

To set the stage for this exploration, the author will discuss the fundamentals of grief and bereavement work, touching on how society views grief during adolescence in today's world. This will be done by giving background on how grief is currently handled. It is the author's hopes to share an understanding of why songwriting is beneficial for working with bereaved adolescents. There will be a discussion about how music therapy is utilized for grief and bereavement work. This will set the landscape on how songwriting fits into music therapy and glean understanding of how songwriting has become a beneficial intervention for bereavement work with adolescents. Lastly, the author will share how songwriting with adolescents processing the bereavement process can be enhanced and improved by looking at gaps in the literature and finding any flaws or ways to better understand the therapeutic songwriting process

with bereaved adolescents. Therefore, based on an exhaustive review of the literature, the author will conceptualize their own theoretical understanding of what makes songwriting such a powerful tool for adolescents experiencing grief and loss.

### **Grief and Its Processes**

It is essential to understand how songwriting with bereaved adolescents may be understood within the current literature on grief and bereavement. This section will identify several processes that occur during bereavement, the impact of grieving, and the necessity to create meaning after loss. Additionally, it will review key frameworks and therapeutic approaches to grief. The primary relevant models in the context of this paper include the Dual-Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) and the Meaning Reconstruction Model (Neimeyer, 2001).

### ***Understanding Grief***

Grief can often be mistaken for mourning. Grief is an experience individuals will have internally within themselves, whereas mourning is an outward expression showing internal grief (Schuurman & Lindholm, 2002). Dunne (2004) stated that "grief" was formed from the Latin meaning to "burden or to cause distress" (p. 45). Grief is something that multiple species experience, such as geese, dolphins, and humans (Worden, 2018). Worden (2018) described the behavior of dolphins after losing their partners; the surviving dolphin would refuse to eat, which was identified as a manifestation of grief and depression that can also be seen in humans (Worden, 2018). There has been evidence that all humans will grieve in some capacity or another during their lifetime (Worden, 2018). Worden (2018) goes on to say that in a multitude of cultures, people have remarkably similar reactions to their experiences of loss. Anthropologists have discovered that people attempt to regain connection with their loved ones that are now

absent from the physical world; longing to find their loved ones leads to a belief in an afterlife where the bereaved can rejoin the deceased (Worden, 2018).

It has also been noted that grief was less debilitating in societies prior to written language, and far more debilitating for individuals in modern society (Parkes et al., 2015; Rosenblatt et al., 1976; Rosenblatt, 2008; Worden, 2018). Our modern world complicates our healing process. Grief is affected by "personality, culture, religion, the nature of the relationship with the deceased person", and how they died (Buglass, 2010, p. 44). In today's world, the loss of a loved one can be as psychologically traumatic as it would be if an individual were wounded physically (Engel, 1961; Worden, 2018). Grief takes the individual away from the state of well-being and it can take a significant amount of time to heal back to a state of psychological equilibrium, such as when an individual needs to heal in the physical realm to bring the body back to a balance (Worden, 2018).

However, there tends to be many individuals who are resilient in their bereavement after the passing of someone they loved dearly (Bananno, 2009). Still, about 10% of people will experience something much more painful after the loss and lead to more complex, long-term health and mental health risks (Neimeyer, 2016). An individual having a severe response to the death of a loved one, such as preoccupation with the loss leading to impairments in their daily life, is known as complicated grief (Maercker et al., 2016; Neimeyer, 2019). Neimeyer (2019) found how complicated grief symptoms are linked to one's struggle to find meaning after loss and "successful meaning-making with more positive adaptation over time" (p. 80).

### ***Theories of Grief***

There have been countless theories on grief work, with some suggesting there are multiple stages to the process of grieving (Bowlby, 1980; Buglass, 2010; Kubler-Ross, 1969;

Worden, 1991). Kubler-Ross (1969) proposed that the grief process had five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance of the loss (Kubler-Ross, 1969). While this was a foundational model for several years, it has been demonstrated that not all individuals will experience these stages or even in that order. Eventually, longitudinal research showed that most individuals do not experience a predictable linear stage of grief (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010). Grief is far more complex than this, and an individual will react to the loss in various ways which may be as complicated as the individual (Currier, Neimeyer & Berman, 2008).

**Dual-Process Model.** There are two contemporary theories of bereavement: Dual-Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) and the Meaning Reconstruction Model (Neimeyer, 2001). Dual-Process Model (DPM) consists of multiple frameworks and can be an extraordinarily complex form of bereavement treatment (Fiore, 2021). One such framework is Cognitive Stress Theory (CST) which proposes that when an individual experiences high stress, it can result in health problems (Fiore, 2021, p. 415; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive Stress Theory may help the individual cope with a stressor and its corresponding emotions (Fiore, 2021). Stroebe and Schut (1999) developed DPM after identifying a major limitation to CST; CST does not consider the myriad of other stressors that a bereaved person could be experiencing, including taking on tasks that once belonged to the deceased. Stroebe and Schut (1999) proposed that DPM would address multiple stressors simultaneously. Buglass (2010) added that DPM may also describe how an individual deals with the experience of the loss in their life and how their life changes from such a loss.

Dual-Process Model helps an individual cope with grief through the development of loss-oriented factors and restoration-oriented factors; loss-oriented factors include breaking the bond with the deceased and restoration-oriented factors involve creating a new identity without the



deceased (Buglass, 2010). Stroebe and Schut (1999) stated that loss-oriented factors help individuals express their emotions about the loss; this can be done through dialogue, pictures, and other creative interventions which will be discussed throughout this paper. Restoration-oriented factors are more concerned with practical needs after the loss has arisen, such as re-engaging other relationships or helping the bereaved to develop new life goals (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Ultimately, bereaved individuals' titer between confrontation and avoidance of the loss which is highly representative of both the loss and restoration-oriented factors of DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

**Meaning Reconstruction Model.** Meaning Reconstruction Model looks at grief through a cognitive constructivist perspective by adapting one's belief system to cope with their environment (Neimeyer, 2001). Neimeyer and Sands (2011) spoke about how our belief systems will be challenged by specific events and meaning "must be either assimilated into the existing belief system, or the system must be accommodating to make congruent meaning of the event" (as cited in Weiskittle, 2019, p. 17). Humans not only live in the present moment yet live in a world with memories reflecting on goals, hopes, beliefs, regrets, and interpretations which overall refers to meaning (Neimeyer et al., 2011). At times, the passing of a person whom an individual loved or cared about, such as dying prematurely, will interrupt the life story, leaving the person to look for meaning in their loss with few to no answers (Neimeyer, 2019).

Worden (2018) discussed the outcomes of a study with two different groups of individuals experiencing grief (as cited in Davis et al., 2000). Worden (2018) asserted that individuals who sought meaning in death and found such meaning were "better adjusted than those who searched and didn't find it" (p. 6). However, finding meaning is much easier to say than to accomplish. Gradually integrating the experience of loss for an individual over time has

been found to have a reduction in the individual experiencing complicated grief; this may, in turn, help the individual recover from intense psychological distress from the transition and the traumatic event of death (Holland et al., 2010; Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). Worden (2018) added that Neimeyer (2000) encouraged counselors working with people who are dealing with bereavement to understand that making meaning out of death “is a process, not an outcome” as the meaning individuals make with death are constantly being modified (p. 6). This approach might be particularly well suited for adolescents. Adolescents will find ways to escape and even deny, as an adult would dealing with grief (Rogers, 2016). Rogers (2016) found that the way an adolescent’s caregiver makes meaning from death and how they cope with grief has a significant impact on the adolescent(s) in their grieving process and their ability to assimilate the loss into their belief system. Neimeyer and Thompson (2014) explained that expression in multiple art forms from “chants, music and dances across cultures” has been a means to process death (p. 3). More and more people are finding resilience in the weeks to months after experiencing a loss (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). The ability to find meaning from the lost may have two processes: the ability to process why the death happened and the ability to understand the story behind the relationship of the deceased in some healing fashion (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011; Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). To find the meaning of why the lost occur may bring an individual to re learn who they are and how they fit into the world (Attig, 2001; Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). Finding a meaning may be difficult however, the latter part of this review will look at how music, specifically songwriting can help adolescents process their grief and find such meaning (Baker, 2015; Heath & Lings, 2012; McFerran, 2014). Neimeyer and Thompson (2014) reported that there are many methods to healing through grief and that using a creative outlet can help individual find meaning from the loss of the deceased.

## **Grief with Adolescents**

The following section will provide an overview of how grief is experienced by youth, particularly in Westernized cultures, to give a context for how media can impact bereaved adolescents. In a discussion of songwriting with this population, it is essential to consider how youth have traditionally experienced grief and loss through popular culture. This section will also review what grief means to adolescents and how it might impact their development, with particular attention to mental health needs. Following a loss, significant mental health concerns can arise for adolescents and careful intervention is necessary for effective support.

### ***Adolescent Grief in Western Culture***

Historically in Western cultures, grieving adolescents were overlooked in terms of clinical need, and it was not until the field of bereavement gained merit that child and adolescent grief processes would be explored (McFerran et al., 2010; Rogers, 2016). Noppe and Noppe (1991) discussed how adolescents presented with distinct challenges when it came to grief, and Harris (1991) added that this was due to the assumption that acknowledging grief led to increased vulnerability, and ultimately, an increase in mental health problems (as cited in McFerran et al., 2010). However, this notion was rejected by many scholars who found that there were ways to successfully cope with grief; effective coping led the adolescents to have a better understanding of the world, such as how relationships play an essential part in it (Davies, 1991; Oltjenbruns, 1991; McFerran et al., 2010). Furthermore, a review of 60 plus controlled studies attested to the benefit of grief interventions offered to bereaved adolescents (Currier et al., 2008).

Traditionally, Western cultures have denied the impact of grief and loss; it was not until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it became normalized to discuss death and dying with children (Goldman, 2015, p. 279). At this time, books and stories for young people started to address life

and death issues, with titles such as *Charlotte's Web* by Elwyn Brooks White, circa 1952 and *The Dead Bird* by Margaret Wise Brown, circa 1958 (Goldman, 2015). In *Charlotte's Web*, the farm animals discussed death and their fears around their own mortality (Goldman, 2015; White, 1952). In *The Dead Bird*, children prepared a funeral for an animal which had passed away (Goldman, 2015; Brown et al., 1958). These two literary works were some of the first to address grief and loss with adolescents in western culture (Goldman, 2015).

Furthermore, one of the first books geared towards adolescents to even mention death was *About Dying* (Stein, et al., 1974); this literary work informed readers, especially parents, about what grief may feel like, how to manage it, and how to address death with their children (as cited in Goldman, 2015). Fred Rogers, a children's television star, was another pioneer in this area; he spoke to youth about death and dying in one of his episodes circa 1970 (Goldman, 2015). Today there are now several examples of various types of media that normalize grief and provide a validating perspective for youth; these works encourage individuals to express themselves and acknowledges that it is okay to feel a wide realm of emotions after a loss (Goldman, 2015). Goldman (2015) stated that creating a positive experience in learning and helping youth process life issues, such as bereavement, can guide them to have a significant increase in their learning capacity. Therefore, early intervention is a crucial way to educate and empower youth about such topics. If children and adolescents possess an age-appropriate understanding of grief, loss, and bereavement, they will be much more likely to integrate these experiences in a meaningful and adaptive way in their future.

### ***Grief and Development***

Goldman (2015) noted that children as young as 7 to 12 years old will start to understand the concept of death, understanding that it is not reversible. There has been research to

demonstrate that by the age of 13, adolescents begin to deal with death by relying on their friends as their main support system (Goldman, 2015). By the time adolescents graduate from high school, one in twenty of them will have experienced the loss of one of their parents (Fiore, 2016). Fiore (2016) continued that this parental loss may lead adolescents to have poorer academic performance, decreased interaction with peers, and significantly less engagement in activities; their experience of grief may interrupt their sleep patterns and contribute to aggressive or injurious behaviors. Moreover, adolescents' grief will surely impact their school performance and "influence their ability to learn and grow" (Goldman, 2015, p. 275).

**Adolescent Grief and Mental Health.** It is evident that adolescents respond with behaviors to communicate their pain and needs (Rogers, 2016). Pitman et al. (2016) stated that teens are at an elevated risk for suicide after they have experienced the loss of a significant relationship, particularly the loss of a family member. Feelings of shame, depression, guilt, and self-blame can manifest as clinical concerns (Andriessen et al., 2017; Andriessen et al., 2018).

However, Andriessen et al. (2018) studied how adolescents' (ages 12 to 18 at time of death,  $N = 39$ ) mental health was affected from the experience on death of a family member. The qualitative study interviewed participants over the telephone who had experience the death 6 months to 10 years before the initial telephone interview (Andriessen et al., 2018). By the time of the interviews the participants were of the ages 13 to 27 and found how loss may contribute to greater resilience, with reporting "the death signified a catalytic life event, and they developed a more thoughtful, and in their experience, a more mature view on life and relationships (Andriessen et al., 2018, p. 613).

Balk (2014) stated that adolescents who have experienced bereavement are less fearful in the presence of other individuals who are experiencing "emotional pain" such as grief, whereas

adolescents who have yet to experience bereavement will avoid encounters with others who are grieving (p. 6). Behavioral manifestations can vary. Some adolescents may display greater involvement in school and stricter adherence to expectations, as it is something they have control over; others might experience a loss of control and decline academically or refuse to follow social expectations (Balk, 2014). It is also important to consider that the term “loss” encompasses more than just death; unexpected concerns such as migration, illness, divorce, unemployment, and poverty can lead to considerable grief (Rezenbrink, 2021, p. 117). In light of this, it is crucial not to minimize the impact of death bereavement or presume that the impact of one type of loss is more significant than another; an individual may even be experiencing multiple losses simultaneously which can compile and complicate one’s ability to navigate the bereavement process (Rezenbrink, 2021).

Moreover, bereaved adolescents require adequate support, guidance, and psychoeducation to effectively process their grief and maintain their mental health. The use of books, television and popular media has been used to help facilitate this process, therefore it is sensible to consider music therapy as a viable intervention with this population. Krout (2017) described how songs can create a safe space with metaphors to describe complex life experiences, such as death; this provides some indication that songwriting would be beneficial with bereaved adolescents. However, before any further mention of songwriting, the broad umbrella of music therapy must first be discussed.

### **Creative Expressions of Grief**

This section will describe music therapy and its roots and how it might apply to bereaved adolescents. Music therapy focuses on the therapeutic process of music as opposed to musical products (O’Callaghan & Michael, 2016), and it is part of a broader spectrum of expressive arts

that can be used for healing and therapeutic purposes (Renzenbrink, 2021). The field of expressive arts therapy will be defined and reviewed as a basis of understanding for the modality of music therapy. Music therapy in grief work will be explored in addition to how songwriting fits into music therapy.

### ***Expressive Arts Therapy***

The use of creativity as a means of healing is a very old concept that can be seen across a variety of cultures (McNiff, 2004; Renzenbrink, 2021). This notion provides the foundation for the use of creative and expressive therapies in our modern world. The field of expressive arts involves the process of using an arts-based approach to improve quality of life in conjunction with counseling and other mental health practices; visual art, music, movement, drama, and writing are used collaboratively to facilitate personal growth and transformation (Goslin-Jones, 2020). Goslin-Jones (2020) asserted that these creative arts modalities may be used separately and together in combination with one another.

Additionally, Person-Centered Expressive Arts (PCEA) is based upon principles of unconditional positive regard, radical empathy, and supporting individuals towards a greater state of congruence with themselves by maintaining the belief that each individual has the capacity for growth and self-direction (Rogers, 1993). Renzenbrink (2021) spoke on Natalie Rogers' (1993) view of the expressive arts therapy and how movement, drawing, painting, music, improvisation may all be used in a supportive setting to allow for healing. The latter part of this review will further discuss how a person-centered approach can be effective in therapeutic songwriting.

**Grief and Expressive Arts Therapy.** Expressive arts therapy may be effective for grief work because it utilizes a nonverbal approach and “new pathways to healing the wounds of loss”

(Renzenbrink, 2021, p. 24). Rogers (1993) has also argued that creative and expressive processes can be very helpful when there are no words to properly describe grief. McNiff (2004) spoke about how accepting pain and creating from such pain can be particularly therapeutic (as cited in Renzenbrink, 2021). Imagination provides an opportunity to see things in a new and novel way, as van der Kolk (2014) added. Imagination is what drives creative people, soothes pain, and enriches intimate relationships (Renzenbrink, 2021; van der Kolk, 2014). Moreover, healing involves a change in an attitude by learning to live with an issue or approaching a problem in a “creative way” (Renzenbrink, 2021, p. 94). As stated previously, an adaptive and flexible approach to shifting one’s sense of meaning is a very important aspect to grief work.

Niemeyer & Thompson (2014) discussed specific case examples of clients utilizing expressive arts to process grief through the lens of meaning reconstruction. Neimeyer and Thompson (2014) presented the case of a particular client who was struggling to process the loss of their mother’s passing; the client felt stuck and blocked off from the ability to be creative. The client reported how writing in a journal and drawing guided them to process their relationship with their mother (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). Neimeyer and Thompson (2014) added the client’s relationship with their mother was complex and the client did not always feel supported by their mother while she was alive; through art making and writing, the client was able to find peace and reassurance that their mother did support them. Additionally, Atkins (2014) believed that metaphors are a crucial part of the creative writing process that supports grief work.

Metaphors are also an effective part of the musical songwriting process (Baker & Wigram, 2005; Baker et al., 2008; Baker, 2015; Baker & MacDonald, 2017 Heath & Lings, 2012). Moreover, music may be a particularly helpful modality for grief work.



## ***Music Therapy***

Music has been traditionally used to guide community members to find values, beliefs, and aspirations, express their identities, have social interactions, and discover healing (Bartleet & Higgins, 2021). The purpose of music therapy is to ultimately support an individual's psychological and emotional well-being and using the healing aspects of music as a therapeutic tool. (Chong & Yun, 2020). Ansdell and Stige (2016) stated that community music therapy views health from a social, cultural, and political standpoint, as these factors often can have a negative influence on health. An individual's well-being is not solely to rely on the individual themselves yet, relies on the human social need to feel connected and respected, to experience a sense of cooperation and collaboration with other humans, and ultimately to share an experience (Ansdell & Stige, 2016). Ansdell and Stige (2016) continued that a loss of any of these for one person may affect the people around them, such as the community.

Music therapy is both an art and a science (Bruscia, 1998). The art and science of music therapy go together to create an interpersonal process (Bruscia, 1998). Bruscia (1998) stated that musical experiences and relationships are a massive part of the interdependent nature of music as a therapeutic tool. Bruscia (1998) spoke about the multitude of relationships that can exist within music therapy: intrapersonal relationships (which are within an individual and any part of themselves i.e. client's body and client's emotions), intramusical relationships (existing in the individual's music i.e. client's rhythm and client's melody), interpersonal relationships (exist between two or more people i.e. the client's behavior and there therapist's feelings), intermusical relationships (exist within one individual's music and the music of another individual i.e. one client's rhythm and another client's timbre), sociocultural relationships (exist between the individual and community to where the individual lives i.e. workgroups or social clubs), and

environmental relationships (exist between the individual and the “physical environments in which the individual lives” (p. 128). All of these types of relationships are important to the music therapy process and can contribute to a person-centered approach. The latter part of this review will discuss how a person-centered approach may be best in the context of therapeutic songwriting for bereaved adolescents.

**Music Therapy in Grief Work.** O’Callaghan and Michael (2016) stated that music to alleviate human loss had been a thread for many societies, and grief reactions may vary from culture to culture. Mourning music guides individuals to take on loss in alternate forms that can help release emotions, create an environment for self-soothing, cultivate awareness, and provide a sense of strength to move forward from the loss (O’Callaghan & Michael, 2016). Even passive methods of musical engagement can be extremely beneficial and therapeutic. Duffey (2014) described how “musical chronology” was utilized to guide a bereaved client to find a connection to process either their own life story or feelings of the deceased (p. 41). Musical chronology is an intervention targeted to help an individual “organize their thoughts, give voice to their feelings, explore their beliefs associated with the loss” and even process how the loss contributes to their own life (Duffey, 2014, p. 41). Duffey (2014) stated that the first part of this intervention involves the client compiling songs that represent their past; this allows the client to reflect and revisit certain experiences which could have been painful or challenging. This is followed by the client curating a collection of songs to describe their thoughts and beliefs about the present, along with songs that reflect the client’s future and metaphors for their own goals and hopes (Duffey, 2014).

Iliya (2014) stated that the use of singing and dialoguing with the deceased was shown to be an effective intervention with their participants ( $N = 9$ ). Iliya (2014) created a bereavement-

specific music therapy intervention and used thematic analysis techniques to analyze qualitative data generated by interviews with participants. The study was conducted with a group of adult female participants from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and findings were consistent with prior research in this area. This study is a promising example of the impact of voice work in music therapy to support the grieving process.

*Music Therapy in Grief Work with Adolescents.* There is empirical evidence in the literature supporting the use of music therapy, particularly with children and adolescents. Rosner et al. (2010) conducted 2 meta-analyses of 27 treatment studies exploring various interventions for grief work with children and adolescents ( $N = 1,073$ ), citing that music therapy was one of the most effective and promising treatment modalities. Other therapies that were reviewed included: play therapy, psychoeducation, traditional talk therapy, and brief school-based interventions for trauma and grief focused work (Rosner et al., 2010). Rosner et al. (2010) asserted that “promising treatment models were music therapy and trauma/grief-focused school based brief psychotherapy” (p. 99).

McFerran et al. (2010) conducted a mixed methods study utilizing grounded theory analysis of focus groups to understand the impact of music therapy on bereaved adolescents. Adolescents ( $N = 16$ ) ages 13 to 16 years old participated in either a 12 or 14-week music therapy group for grief processing and reported on their experiences. McFerran et al. (2010) discussed several studies that demonstrated how a variety of music therapy interventions, such as “lyric analysis, free musical play, rhythmic improvisation, and songwriting,” helped improve adolescents’ ability to cope with grief (as cited in Myers-Coffman et al., 2019, p. 133), however acknowledged that more research is needed to properly understand the impact of music therapy with this population.

### ***Therapeutic Songwriting***

It is evident that health and well-being may be enhanced by the writing process (Petrie et al., 2004; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). In a quantitative study utilizing survey data ( $N = 477$ ) of professional music therapists in 29 countries. Baker et al. (2008) found that songwriting was a widely used and effective intervention amongst music therapists. Common goal areas were developing confidence and self-esteem, externalizing thoughts and emotions, creating narratives, gaining insight, and developing a sense of self; Chi-square and comparable Exact tests were applied to data gathered from a 21-question survey (Baker et al., 2008). Baker et al. (2008) also stated that although a significant number of music therapists reported that songwriting interventions were used with individuals with developmental disabilities and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), there is very little literature or published studies with songwriting for these populations. This could point towards a gap in the research.

However, songwriting is a relatively new intervention in the music therapy field compared to improvisational music therapy or music therapists' use of pre-created songs (Aasgaard & Blichfeldt, 2016). Aasgaard and Blichfeldt (2016) added that it was not until 2002, the first doctoral thesis on songwriting with children with cancer was completed. This thesis elaborated on the children's processes and meaning created by looking at their life stories through their songs. In 2005, Baker and Wigram (2005) created their first textbook providing in-depth length information on the process of songwriting with clients in a clinical setting. Since the creation of this text, song writing has been more widely written about to give a voice to individuals who have experienced trauma, hospice patients, traumatic brain injury patients, and bereaved individuals. It has been found effective for groups of older adults: in a study by Allsion (2008), a group of elderly adults ( $N = 30$ ) living in a residential community were able to develop

new skills through songwriting which created a more positive environment in their residential community culture (as cited in Bartleet & Higgins, 2021).

Across populations, there are a variety of other benefits to songwriting as well. Songs can be a way to hold complex and scary emotions, and when songs are used therapeutically, they can communicate intricate feelings experienced by the songwriter (Bion, 1962; Camilleri, 2007; Short, 2013). Songwriting can improve self-esteem and decrease anxiety and anger (Short, 2013; Turry, 1999). Creative freedom in musical and lyrical composition writing can guide the individual to feel empowered in choice-making (Myers-Coffman, 2019b). Songwriting may increase an individual's emotional awareness, in both individual and group community settings (Baker, 2015). Baker (2015) added that songwriting could bring about collaboration between various individuals as it is a social activity and paves the way for emotional expression. Stuckey and Nobel (2010) added that songwriting that integrates sensory, cognitive, social, and emotional realms may even assist with greater processing of emotions.

Baker (2015) noted that songwriting can be a powerful way to keep the songwriter engaged by holding them in the present moment to address poignant emotional matters. There is much evidence to suggest that writing out feelings can alleviate distress and despair, and guide individuals on a new path in their life (Finlayson, 2006). When the music therapist is that of a singer-songwriter, they are sensitive to curating experiences that will be “musically motivating and interesting to clients... which are clinically sound and appropriate to their needs” (Baker & Wigram, 2005, p. 206). Additionally, Richards et al. (2019) stated that songwriting, especially rap, led the participants to have freedom of self-expression by exploring their experiences and feelings in a free and safe environment.

Baker (2015) reflected how songwriting can provide an opportunity for individuals to put words to music as means to help the individual express what they are trying to say. Adolescents often may have difficulty expressing themselves due to fear of rejection, concerns about being too weak, or feelings of shame and depression that are too unbearable to handle (Andriessen et al., 2017; Andriessen et al., 2018). Songwriting is a means of narrative communication and a method of telling our life stories; the resulting songs can be highly vulnerable, intimate, and meaningful, and particularly helpful for end-of-life processing and bereavement (Heath & Lings, 2012). Using several case vignettes, Heath and Lings (2012) demonstrated that individuals who find themselves close to death often have a particular connection to songwriting. The song writing process can support them in creating new meaning and finding peace within themselves (Heath & Lings, 2012).

**Songwriting with Bereaved Adolescents.** While there is not exhaustive literature on the topic, songwriting is the most documented music therapy intervention used with adolescents who are experiencing grief (McFerran et al., 2010; Myers-Coffman et al., 2019a). Myers-Coffman et al. (2019b) stated that coping with death may be difficult at any age; however, bereaved adolescents have unique struggles as a result of trying to balance their development along with their understanding of the social and cultural context of the world. Songwriting is a way for adolescents to speak about life events and many have found it easier to create a song rather than engage in a conversation (Moula, 2021). Parker (2020) discussed their work with adolescents and their overall findings of how music brought “peace, catharsis, enjoyment, and feelings of wholeness” to their everyday lives (p. 3). Parker (2020) spoke with 30 adolescents from age 12 to 18 with multiple backgrounds to find what music meant to them, asserting that understanding what it means to be music means to them can be helpful in the grieving process. Additionally,

music making can facilitate adolescents' need to express themselves and assist in the process of self-discovery (Parker, 2020).

***Improvisational Approach.*** Improvisation is often the first step in any music therapy process that involves songwriting; the client does not necessarily need any musical experience or skill to participate (Heath & Lings, 2012). Heath & Lings (2012) asserted that improvisation may help bond the therapeutic relationship and plant a seed for therapeutic songwriting. This is because music-making goes beyond “words” as communicating with music often may hold a foundation for connection between people in a “meaningful way that can authentically convey the experience of grieving” (McFerran, 2014, p. 44). Often an experience around loss may leave an individual “wordless,” and even if they can say they feel “sad,” there is still a multitude of feelings that surround the grieving process (McFerran, 2014, p 44). McFerran (2014) stated that this is especially true for adolescents due to having challenges in narrating their feelings with just words. Moreover, the therapeutic relationship can support the client’s engagement in an improvisational process which sets the stage for grief work.

Baker and Macdonald (2017) stated that improvisatory songwriting, creating new songs from familiar ones, and integrating aspects of familiar and new songs may repair damaged identities. While spontaneous expression can present a hurdle for some, analysis of one’s expressions may halt the creative process (McNiff, 2004). McNiff (2004) spoke about his work with a shamanic group, where he learned the power of how to communicate through drumming, use his voice feely, and engage in authentic movement which made way for the process of spontaneous self-expression. As stated previously, adolescents experience roadblocks to their creativity as well as their ability to process grief. Heath (2014) stated that a reflective discussion

could take place after a musical improvisation and be a catalyst for igniting the songwriting process. The improvisational process warrants further exploration for bereaved adolescents.

***Person-Centered Approach.*** Rogers (2007) mentioned how a person-centered approach in psychotherapy is experiential; the improvisational songwriting process is also experiential in nature (Baker, 2015). Therefore, the focus of growth within the individual is a prime focus for person-centered therapy (Rogers, 2007). If the therapist is authentic, they will show genuine care for the individual and exhibit true empathy for the individual, and the client will be more likely to find self-acceptance and a better understanding of who they are (Rogers, 2007). Yalom (2020) also voiced that the relationship with the therapist and the client is founded on trust and empathic understanding as well as acceptance.

Rogers (1993) discussed how a Person-Centered Expressive Arts (PCEA) approach involving the synthesis of many expressive arts practices, such as movement, could be applied prior to a music therapy intervention. Improvisational and playful approaches to songwriting are effective ways to process grief in the PCEA approach which is suitable for all populations (Rogers, 1993). This is an area of the literature that has not been fully explored and would benefit from future research consideration.

***The Use of Voice.*** Songwriting is often employed along with voice work in music therapy and has been demonstrated as an effective intervention in grief work (Iliya, 2014). Singing is a powerful tool for self-expression as it involves the integration between one's thoughts, emotions, and the body, and connects the self with other people (Austin, 2014). Due to methodological weaknesses, the benefits of singing are not widely understood (Iliya, 2014). Austin (2014) proposed that singing gives voice to emotions and helps the singer to express



emotions that may seem inexpressible. The use of the bereaved individual's voice may create a powerful experience for them (Heath & Lings, 2012).

Free-associative singing may be particularly helpful in adolescent grief work, as it encourages the client to sing freely no matter what comes to their mind and may bring up repressed memories and feelings (Austin 2014). To guide the individual, the therapist may play a simple two-chord pattern on piano or another instrument to support the client in verbally engaging in song (Austin, 2014). Austin (2014) discussed the case of a client who reported feeling a sense of relief through the free-associative singing as the client reported the grief was weighing her down (p. 37). Additionally, singing as improvisation is highly therapeutic and can be a warmup to the songwriting process (Austin, 2014). Moreover, the use of voicework with bereaved adolescents is a topic that warrants further research.

**Group Work.** Group songwriting can also be a means to use with bereaved adolescents. The clinical aims for group songwriting may be writing down words and lyrics, gathering and creating the music together, learning to sing the song, or even recording the song together (Lings, 2014). Lings (2014) continued that recording the music after the song is written may be used to not only help the individual who wrote the song but support another individual going through a similar process. Additionally, creating an original verse from the expressions or words co-created within the group may deepen the group's ability to recognize the level of connectedness between participants (Lings, 2014). At times, a familiar song may be utilized as a template which can help with lyrical writing because the song structure is already in place (Lings, 2014; Ryan, 1995). Burgess (2016) suggested that choosing a song that the members of the group are familiar with could be particularly helpful, and if none seem appropriate, the therapist may choose to bring a recorded song in.

While constructing groups for adolescents, clients should be grouped together based on similarities in age; this creates comfortability to express a variety of emotions due to having less fear of being judged by parents or adults (Rogers, 2016). Rogers (2016) stated that adolescents respond to adult figures more when the adult behaves in a supportive companion role rather than directing them. After all, listening is the most crucial part of supporting adolescents who are grieving (Rogers, 2016). It is also wise for the music therapist to collaborate with the youth to create the group rules such as the musical content to be explored, boundaries, and language used within the group to allow an equalized power dynamic (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019a). This equalization of the power dynamic is healthy for the adolescent to build trust with the music therapist (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019a). Specific protocols for group songwriting with bereaved adolescents have been explored and will be discussed in depth, however this is a topic that deserves continued exploration.

***Resilience Songwriting Program.*** Furthermore, Myers-Coffman et al. (2019a) developed a protocol called Resilience Songwriting Program (RSP), which was built primarily from the Meaning Reconstruction Model (Myers-Coffman et al., 2020). The intention of RSP is to connect songwriting processes to protective factors and is particularly built for grieving adolescents; the authors recommended a series of 90-minute RSP groups over a period of eight weeks (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019a). The sessions guide participants to create and record two original songs and utilize a variety of cognitive-behavioral therapy strategies that build self-esteem and restructure thinking (Myers-Coffman et al. (2019a). Over the sessions, the group members will build rapport, get a sense of their songwriting personality and identity, and then create two songs with the opportunity to share (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019a). The RSP model is essential because it looks at the development of change in an individual and takes their cultural

perspective into consideration after they have experienced a significant loss due to death (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019a; Sandler et al., 2007).

Myers-Coffman et al. (2019b) implemented the RSP intervention with a group of adolescents ages 11-17 ( $N = 10$ ); the authors used a pre and post-test mixed methods design to study the impact of RSP on “grief, coping, emotional expression, self-esteem, and meaning making” (p. 348). Significant findings were that the participants experienced an increase in emotional expression and found that they were able to safely express grief-related emotions within the group context (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019b). Overall, engaging in collaborative therapeutic songwriting may decrease grief related distress, but more research is needed to further identify how RSP supports adolescents in their bereavement process in a group setting (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019b).

Myers-Coffman et al. (2020) explored the feasibility and acceptability of the RSP design based on the group implemented by Myers-Coffman et al. (2019b). Similarly, Myers-Coffman et al. (2020) utilized a pre and post-test mixed methods study design with music therapists and adolescent participants ( $N = 10$ ) and found that the groups were overall very relevant and meaningful. It was also found that 90-minute sessions in community-based settings were preferred by participants and music therapists to 60-minute sessions; 60-minute sessions, however, were more feasible in the school setting which was more feasible for recruitment than community-based settings (Myers-Coffman et al., 2020). Questions posed by music therapists were around: “group composition, participants’ readiness to share song recordings with non-group members, and the clinical appropriateness of taking home song recordings (Myers-Coffman et al., 2020, p. 1). While RSP appears to be an effective modality for grieving

adolescents, these are considerations that are still not widely studied or understood by music therapists and need further investigation.

***Grief Song-Writing Process.*** Dalton and Krout (2005) created an original assessment instrument to measure changes in the grieving process “of bereaved adolescents due to treatments such as music therapy” (p. 131). The focus of this project was to design and use a “music therapy-driven grief processing assessment instrument with bereaved adolescents receiving group songwriting interventions” known as the Grief Process Scale (GPS) (Dalton & Krout, 2005, p. 132). This instrument was created by and used with The Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP), which looked at 123 songs containing a multitude of lyrical themes that were written by adolescents dealing with grief in weekly individual music therapy sessions over a 36 month period; this process was shown to be extremely engaging as it “offered a safe, creative method of addressing the difficult subject matter of a loved one’s death” (Dalton & Krout, 2005, p.132; Dalton & Krout, 2006, p. 101).

The songwriting process consisted of creating lyrics and music melodies as a means to express the adolescents’ core concerns and coping mechanisms around the death that they experienced (Dalton & Krout, 2005). The GPS was created to address lyrical themes from the songs created and divided into five grief- process areas: “understanding, feeling, remembering, integrating, and growing” (Dalton & Krout, 2005, p. 132; Dalton & Krout,2006, p. 98). Many lyrics within the songs created by the adolescents showed their insight into identifying personal issues which related to the five grief-process areas (Dalton & Krout, 2006). The GSWP was implemented with four groups of adolescents experiencing bereavement, each group consisting of approximately 4 to 6 members ( $N = 20$ ) ages 12 to 18 who experienced the death of a loved one within the past 3 years (Dalton & Krout, 2006). This design was considered a quasi-

experimental, nonequivalent group design with pre and post-test measures for treatment and control groups.

The GPS had a small sample size and therefore, was analyzed with descriptive statistics (Dalton & Krout, 2005). Dalton and Krout (2005) looked at any differences between the treatment group and control group between pre and post-test changes of the GPS score. It was found that songwriting did help “adolescents improve in their grief processing scores across all grief domains as compared to control participants” (Dalton & Krout, 2005, p. 137). Furthermore, Dalton and Krout (2005) found that the GPS was very feasible and did not have any negative feedback from the participants. Dalton & Krout (2005) suggested that the GPS go through further studies to truly find its validity and reliability as a measurement tool; an example is wording the scale to be more universally understood as some words such as “hard” could be too abstract and confusing to members (p. 138).

***Automated Lyrical Songwriting Application.*** Cheatley et al. (2020) focused on how it is essential for processing our thoughts through the use of self-expression through creative means. However, to express yourself creatively is easier said than done, as there may be a level of artistic experience that some individuals have yet to access; this is where “creative machines” come in to help those who have limited “creative experience” (Cheatley et al., 2020, p. 33). Cheatley et al. (2020) continued that the use of the Automated Lyrical Songwriting Application (ALYSIA), a co-creative songwriting system was utilized to aid bereaved people through their loss (p. 3). Ackerman and Loker (2017) discussed how the ALYSIA is a songwriting system to help individuals create songs through technology. Cheatley et al. (2020) desired to use ALYSIA to help anybody express themselves with songwriting no matter their experience in a musical means.

The use of ALYSIA was conducted with participants 18 years and older ( $N = 3$ ) (Cheatley et al., 2020). Cheatley et al. (2020) found that even when the participants had doubts about their own creative ability, they still found therapeutic value in the process. Further, ALYSIA helped clients connect with emotions surrounding the loss of which “they were not previously aware” (Cheatley et al., 2020, p. 39). Utilizing ALYSIA with bereaved adolescents would be wise to research and would likely be an effective tool with this population. Due to adolescents’ high level of engagement with technology it is a familiar platform for them and could be more comfortable for them.

***Additional Interventions.*** One successful format for songwriting is a fill-in-the-blank approach. This process involves an individual completing a phrase that has already been started to generate a complete lyric (Heath & Lings, 2012). An example could be that the music therapist presents the words “I feel...” with the individual or group finishing the phrase. This fill-in phrase format has been used if there are time constraints for the session, or to provide more structure if needed (Heath & Lings, 2012). It is also vital to use the musical style in which the adolescent enjoys along with utilizing words that they suggest, as this helps create a song that is genuinely validating to their personal feelings and can further their grief processing (Heath & Lings, 2012).

An acrostic may be used when a client has trouble writing words to music. An acrostic is a poem or a type of writing that has been used for centuries to help the songwriting process (Heath, 2014). It takes the letters of a word to start each line. For example, an acrostic of the word “music” could be:

**M**usic is the sound

**U**rging me to find

Something deep in my mind.

I can hear it now

Coming closer and closer than ever before.

Heath (2014) stated that using the name of the person who died for an acrostic may be a way to help the adolescent client in their songwriting process.

### **Discussion**

Songwriting has been one of the most documented music therapy interventions that has been utilized with bereaved adolescents (McFerran et al., 2010; Myers-Coffman et al., 2019), however, there are still many questions that remain unanswered. This literature review has explored and identified many important aspects of songwriting with bereaved adolescents, several that warrant further attention and exploration. It began with a description of grief and its processes, followed by a deeper look into adolescent grief and corresponding mental health needs. Expressive arts and music therapy approaches to grief and loss were explored. This led into a discussion of songwriting with bereaved adolescents and findings that were gleaned from a survey of the current literature. Several conclusions can be drawn from this review.

This writer believes that improvisation, relationships, and songwriting are all interconnected. To reiterate from above, it has been suggested that improvisation in music may help form a strong foundational therapeutic relationship between client and the therapist (Heath & Lings, 2012). Within a strong foundational relationship, songwriting can occur more fluidly and naturally (Heath & Lings, 2012; McFerran, 2014). These connection between improvisation, relationships, and songwriting may be vital for the grief process. Furthermore, Rogers (2016) discussed how adolescents may be more likely express their emotions when they do not have to

worry about being judged. If the therapist maintains a supportive role and can behave as a companion to the adolescent client, outcomes are much more successful (Rogers, 2016).

This is an area where a Person-Centered Expressive Arts (PCEA) approach may be beneficial, as PCEA weaves improvisation with person-centered principles (Rogers, 1993). Rogers (1993) suggested that the use of other art modalities, such as movement, may be an effective tool to use prior to a songwriting process. Austin (2014) stated that singing or voicework may also be a helpful warm up for therapeutic songwriting. PCEA involves the utilization of multiple art modalities in synthesis with one another as a means of therapeutic processing (Rogers, 1993). Moreover, a strong case can be made for further research on a PCEA-informed framework for songwriting with bereaved adolescents, as it involves improvisation, a client-centered approach, and an intermodal expressive arts approach to songwriting.

Additionally, two established protocols for songwriting and bereavement have been studied with the adolescent population: Resilience Songwriting Program (RSP) (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019a; 2019b; 2020) and Grief Song Writing Process (GSWP) (Dalton & Krout, 2005; 2006). Findings for each of these protocols varied, but they all warrant further exploration and study. Particularly, GSWP was developed alongside of the Grief Process Scale (GPS) (Dalton & Krout, 2005), which was shown to be a promising assessment tool for linking the grief process with music therapy. No further studies of GSWP or GPS have been conducted since 2006. GPS could be applied to other treatment protocols, such as RSP, or tested with non-music therapy protocols to increase its validity and reliability. A helpful next step in the research would be the development of a mixed-methods study that administers RSP and GSWP groups to similar populations and compares findings, perhaps involving the GPS as a measurement tool.



Furthermore, engaging in collaborative therapeutic songwriting may decrease grief related distress, however, more research is needed to further identify how RSP supports adolescents in their bereavement process in a group setting (Myers-Coffman et al., 2019b). This study should be replicated and applied cross-culturally to determine its overall effectiveness. A concern about songwriting literature in music therapy that was pointed out by Baker et al. (2008) was that although a significant number of music therapists reported that they used songwriting interventions with individuals with developmental disabilities and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), there is very little literature or published studies on songwriting for this population. This is a significant gap, and perhaps RSP can be replicated with grieving adolescents who also have developmental disabilities or an ASD diagnosis; due to the prevalence of music therapists working with this population, there is a crucial need for information in this area.

Myers-Coffman et al. (2020) also discussed that 90-minute sessions in community-based settings were overall more effective than 60-minute sessions; however, 60-minute sessions were more feasible in the school setting. This deserves further study, as well as other questions about the RSP framework that were brought up by music therapists on: “group composition, participants’ readiness to share song recordings with non-group members, and the clinical appropriateness of taking home song recordings (Myers-Coffman et al., 2020, p. 1). Formal recommendations for these concerns have not yet been established, and Myers-Coffman et al. (2020) have suggested that music therapists must use clinical judgment to determine answers to these questions as each scenario presents itself. Moreover, the RSP framework needs further evaluation and definition to enhance the current protocol and increase its efficacy with grieving adolescents.

While not specifically tested with adolescents, Automated Lyrical Songwriting Application (ALYSIA) is a widely accessible songwriting tool used with grief (Cheatley et al., 2020; 2022). This process would be excellent to replicate with adolescents. Due to its feasibility and use of technology, ALYSIA may be a very natural fit for grieving adolescents. In conclusion, the present writer hopes that this review can serve as a basis for further investigation on gaps in the literature discussed above and that research on songwriting with bereaved adolescents will continue to be explored. Ultimately, by way of the therapeutic relationship and improvisational process, songwriting has been proven to be a promising tool for adolescent grief treatment.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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

**Thesis Advisor: Jacelyn Biondo, Ph.D., BC-DMT, LPC**