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Grief & Bereavement exercises



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Welcome

The pain of losing someone can be all-consuming.

It can feel like a physical ache or a wave of completely unexpected emotions like anger, guilt, or even relief. For others, it's a spiritual challenge, casting doubt on our firmest beliefs. The last time we confronted the heartbreak of losing a loved one, none of it was textbook.

You may relate to these experiences, and you probably have your own to add to the list. Death is a universal certainty, and it touches us all in unique ways.

But you know what?

Many of us who live through loss still believe that there is a 'right' way to experience it and that a linear path lies ahead of us. To resolve our suffering and restore a sense of normalcy, we assume we must take certain steps – mourning, anger, bargaining – whatever we've heard is 'best.'

If you've ever felt this way or worked with a client who has, we don't blame you in the slightest.

It's drummed in by the media: "Stay active; stick to a routine."

You may get advice from others: "You'll feel better soon. Try not to worry about it so much."

Even psychological frameworks for grief and bereavement are pretty prescriptive and scheduled, if we're being honest.

We believe the only thing worth knowing about grief is that it's complex. As you walk beside bereaved clients or through your own personal struggle, we are convinced that you are not doing it wrong.

Don't worry too much about when you'll get through it, and don't judge yourself for not being able to take the pain away.

As distressing, agonizing, or confusing as it is, your pathway to adjustment is uniquely personal. And you, like we did, will get there in your own time. The exercises in the package were designed to assist you and your clients on the personal journey through grief. We hope you will find them valuable.

If you like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with a wide variety of practical positive psychology tools:

<https://positivepsychology.com/toolkit/>

All the best,

Seph Fontane Pennock
Hugo Alberts, Ph.D.



Drawing Grief Tool

Grief

Exercise

45 min

Client

Yes

Expressive therapies are psychotherapies that incorporate creative activities, such as art, dance, movement, music, drama, and play, to facilitate treatment. They aim to provide clients with a highly individualized and experiential way of expressing and exploring their presenting issues [1,2]. In the context of grief, incorporating drawing into treatment can be an effective way for clients to explore their thoughts and feelings about their loss. According to Irwin [3], client drawings in therapy provide an avenue through which clients may “tell the story” of their loss and grief as well as facilitate emotional processing, promote introspection and self-knowledge, and provide a way to “express the inexpressible” [1,3].

In this tool, grieving clients are invited to draw a picture of their grief. The idea is for clients to complete this drawing and reflect on it afterward to begin to unpack their thoughts and feelings about their loss and ultimately understand where they are at in their grieving process.



Author

This tool was created by Dr. Lucinda Poole.



Goal

This tool aims to help grieving clients explore their thoughts and feelings about their loss through drawing.



Advice

- Practitioners should emphasize that this exercise does not require any special gifts or talents in creativity or artistry. The idea is not to create a perfect work of art but an avenue through which they can explore their grief. In this way, the artwork may be messy and imperfect - and that is OK/the point.
- Clients should be provided with an array of drawing materials to find a medium with which they are comfortable. For instance, include lined and unlined paper, pencils and erasers, colored markers, watercolor paints, etc. The more options the clients have, the more likely they will find a suitable medium.

- The practitioner must not adopt an expert stance when it comes to analyzing their clients' drawings. The idea is to extract from the clients how they interpret the drawing. To facilitate an interpretive discussion, therapists can use prompts and questions like, *This part of your drawing is interesting. Can you tell me about it? I'm interested in the colors you used; tell me about these. What do you make of this part of your drawing? You mentioned anger/sadness/loneliness/etc. several times as we have been chatting about your drawing, help me understand more about this.*
- Avoid overexplaining the exercise, and instead, keep your instructions and directions brief.
- Strong emotions will likely show up for your clients during this exercise. If you notice your clients becoming overwhelmed by emotions, stop the exercise for a moment and take some deep breaths together until they have calmed down. Give your clients the option to continue drawing their drawings or stop, regardless of whether they are finished.
- Practitioners can recommend that clients continue to draw to explore and express their grief outside of the session by starting a personal 'art journal.'



References

1. Humphrey, K. M. (2009). *Counseling strategies for loss and grief*. American Counseling Association.
2. Gladding, S. T. (2005). *Counseling as an art: The creative arts in counseling* (3rd ed.). American Counseling Association.
3. Irwin, H. J. (1991). The depiction of loss: Uses of clients' drawings in bereavement counseling. *Death Studies*, 15, 481-497.

Drawing Grief Tool

Step 1: Introduction

In this exercise, you are going to try drawing a picture of your grief. You can draw whatever you like, whatever feels right for you today. Your drawing may take the form of a self-portrait, a place at which you think you are right now, a picture of yourself in relation to your loss, how your relationships have changed since the loss, or your thoughts and feelings about your loss. Alternatively, your drawing may take the form of something entirely different. You may use any of the materials here to do this.


Step 2: Start drawing

Take a moment to think about what you might like to draw. When you are ready, you can start. You have half an hour to work on your drawing, but if you finish before then, that is perfectly fine.

Step 3: Reflect on your drawing

When you finish, take a moment to reflect on the following:

- How was it for you to do this exercise?
- What elements make up your drawing? What do these different elements mean to you?
- What feelings and emotions showed up for you as you were drawing?
- How are you feeling now?
- What do you think your drawing says about you and where you are in your grieving process?

 **Coping** Exercise n/a Client No

Objects of Connection

Objects of connection provide grieving people with a powerful continual bond with someone (or something) they have lost [1]. Objects of connection are highly unique to the griever and the circumstances of the loss. Objects of connection include clothing items, photographs, personal items of the deceased person (e.g., child's drawing, lock of hair), forms of communication (e.g., letters, texts, voicemails), gifts from the deceased person to the griever, and other memorabilia. The griever often carries objects of connection (i.e., in a pocket or wallet) or places them in a specific place at home (e.g., on the mantelpiece, fridge, in a drawer, or a home shrine/alter).

The literature distinguishes between two types of connection objects: symbolic objects and linking objects [1]. Symbolic objects represent something about the lost person or situation, for example, a honeymoon photo symbolizing a time when a newlywed couple was blissfully happy. Linking objects are items that evoke a sense of the lost person (or situation) in the griever, such as a daughter taking a whiff of her deceased dad's old pipe, parents holding on to their deceased child's stuffed animal, and a family keeping their dead dog's collar.

Objects of connection generally serve a positive, adaptive function in the grieving process; however, they can be maladaptive in some cases, hindering a grieving person from moving through their grief [1]. This exercise aims to identify grieving clients' objects of connection and understand their meaning and function (adaptive/maladaptive) in the grieving process.



Author

This tool was created by Dr. Lucinda Poole.



Goal

This tool aims to explore grieving clients' objects of connection and help clients discern their meaning and functionality in the grieving process.



Advice

- Objects of connection are often most valuable at the beginning of the mourning process, as these concrete objects satisfy the client's need to maintain continuing bonds. Typically, as clients put more energy into getting their lives back to "normal" following a loss, objects of connection become less important in their grieving process. Maintaining continued bonds through physical items typically transitions to more abstract means, such as comforting memories or daydreams [2].
- Objects of connection usually serve a positive function in the grieving process; however, in some cases, difficulties can arise, especially if objects lead to avoidance of the reality of the loss. In the last step of this exercise, practitioners should focus on helping clients discern the functionality of their objects of connection in their grieving process to identify and reduce their maladaptive use and enhance their adaptive use.
- Be aware that clients may be hesitant to reveal an object of connection for fear that it will be viewed as a sign of maladjustment to their loss. Objects of connection can hold such power and meaning to a grieving person that they may interpret this as evidence of being "crazy." Therefore, allow clients time and space to disclose any objects of connection they have. If no objects of connections come to the fore in step 1 when this exercise is first introduced, practitioners can think about doing this exercise later, when the client-therapist relationship develops further and strengthens.
- Practitioners should normalize the existence of objects of connection by ensuring they remain normal and pragmatic when enquiring about these in therapy or coaching.
- Practitioners should validate the clients' objects of connection by sharing the importance of the items, showing genuine understanding of their value, and even inviting the client to bring the object into session to show it to the therapist in person. Practitioners can say something like: *Your object of connection says something important to you about your loss. How would you feel about bringing this item with you to the next session?*



References

1. Humphrey, K. M. (2009). *Counseling strategies for loss and grief*. American Counseling Association.
2. Field, N. P., Nichols, C., Holen, A., & Horowitz, M. J. (1999). The relation of continuing attachment to adjustment in conjugal bereavement. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 67, 212-218.

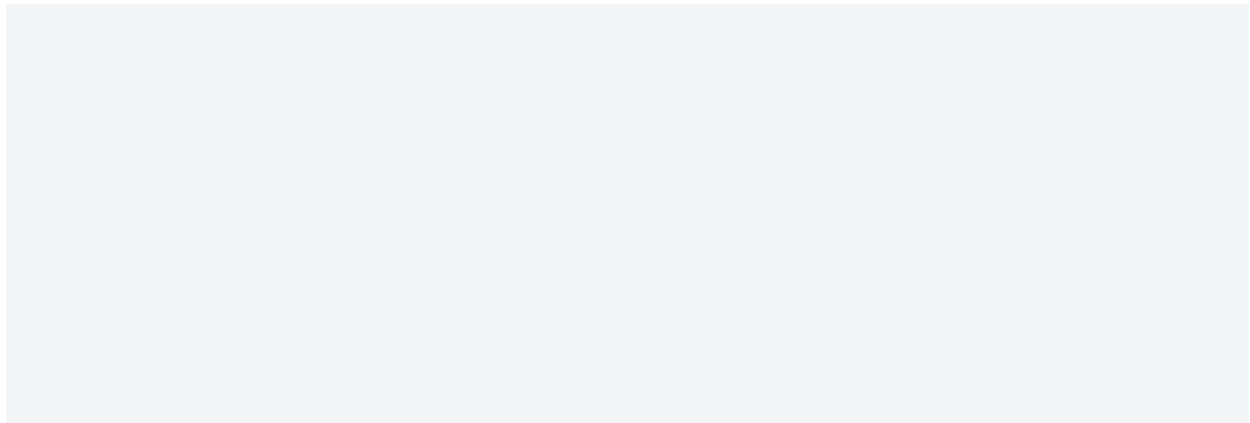
Objects of Connection

Step 1: Identify your object(s) of connection

People grieving the loss of a loved one (or relationship or situation) often keep special items they associate with this loss. They might like to keep these items close to them because they help them feel 'connected' to who or what they have lost. These items are known as *objects of connection*.

An object of connection can be anything that links people to their loss. Common examples of objects of connection include photographs, items of clothing, an airline ticket stub, personal items of the deceased person/pet (e.g., toothbrush, lock of hair, dog collar), emails/texts, letters, voicemails, home video recordings, obituary, marriage/birth certificate, death notice, and many others.

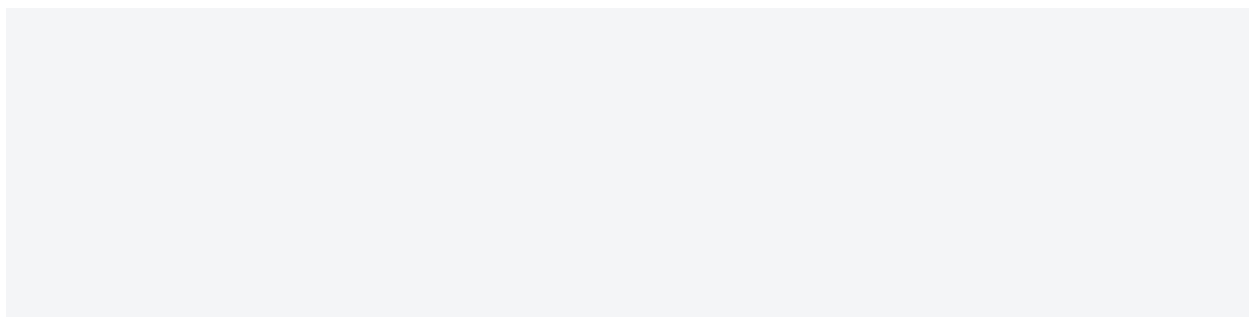
Do you have anything that connects you with who or what you have lost? If so, please describe this object of connection below. If you have multiple objects of connection, list them all here.



Step 2: The meaning of your object(s) of connection

The object(s) you have listed in the previous step says something important about your loss. What does this item mean to you? Explore your answer to this question using the following prompts.

How does this object connect you to who or what you lost?



What does this object represent for you?

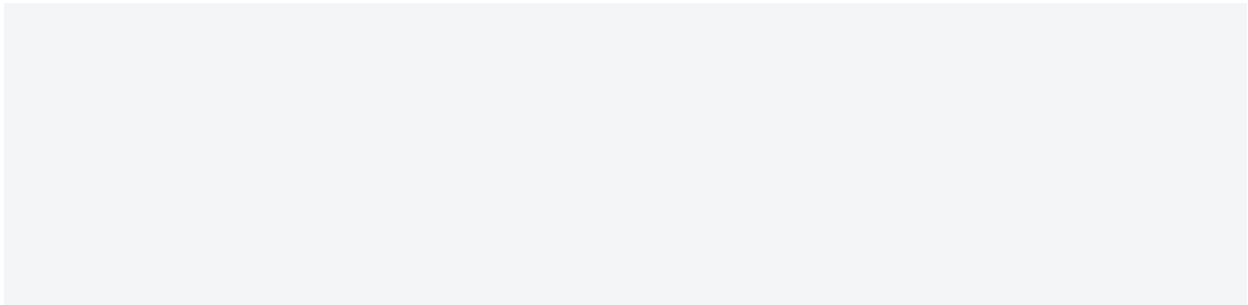
What kind of feelings does the object bring up for you?

When you use or see this object, how do you feel?

Step 3: Using the object of connection

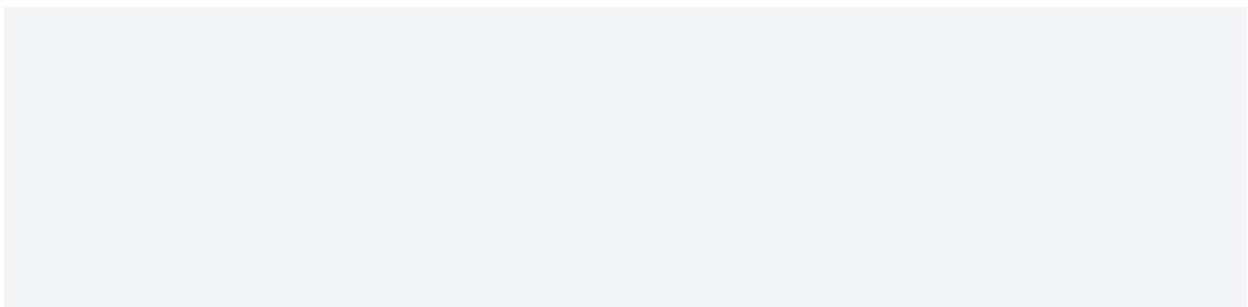
Expanding on the previous step where you explored what your object of connection means to you, please answer these next questions only if you think that using this object is helping you move through your grief. If you feel your object might be holding you back or triggering strong negative feelings, please stop this exercise here.

How do you think this object is helping (or will help) you move through your grief?



What would be a good way for you to use it?

For example, you could carry it with you in your pocket or handbag, place it somewhere in your home for you to see each day (e.g., a mantelpiece, the fridge, a home shrine/alter), or pack it away in a drawer or bedside table. You may share it with others or keep it to yourself.



Final note

It is important to note that the attachment we feel to our objects of connection can change over time. As we begin to put our energy into restoring our lives after losing a loved one, the need for using concrete reminders may start to fade. Often, we become less reliant on physical items to feel connected to the person or situation we lost and instead find this comfort and connection in more abstract or spiritual ways, such as memories and daydreaming.

Prescription to Grieve Tool

Grief

Intervention

45 min/day

Client

No

While losing a loved one is a natural, universally experienced life event, it is also one of the most challenging experiences a person will ever go through [4]. For many people, losing a loved one is followed by an intensely emotional and disruptive period. Experiencing the death of a loved one is highly stressful, both because of the loss and because of confrontation with mortality. Numerous stressors also emerge as the bereaved person attends various events and services that are not usually on the agenda. Coping with these is necessary for the restoration of a satisfying and meaningful life [4].

Many bereaved people meet the coping demands with the help of supports and find a pathway that leads to restoration of ongoing life [4]. Some people, however, do not cope effectively with bereavement. They become entangled in grief and caught up in denial, trying to avoid reminders and focusing helplessly on intrusive waves of painful emotion [4].

The *prescription to grieve* exercise is designed to guide and contain a bereaved person's grief experience while facilitating emotional catharsis [1, 2]. Just as one receives a prescription for a medication, grieving clients are given a prescription to grieve their loss. This prescription includes details of the recommended length of time to grieve regularly or weekly, the place where their grief work will take place, and approaches to carry out this grief work. In this way, the prescription provides bereaved clients with a structured, time-limited framework to express their grief, supporting, and in a way, granting them permission to express and release their thoughts and feelings of loss.



Author

This tool was created by Dr. Lucinda Poole.



Goal

The mock medical “prescription” to grieve tool aims to provide grieving clients with a structured, time-limited framework to express their grief. Rather than being held hostage by intrusive emotionality, this exercise allows clients to grieve on their terms.



Advice

- Clients should use a timer to signal when their grieving time is up (e.g., kitchen timer, phone alarm). Doing so not only frees the client to focus completely on the task at hand, but it also enforces the time limit, which is important, as the previous research has found that 30 minutes is typically insufficient while devoting more than an hour to grief unnecessarily prolongs the experience [1].
- If your clients want to express their grief through drawing, you might like to direct them to the Drawing Grief tool to provide additional guidance with this grieving activity.
- When selecting a setting (Step 2), clients must choose a place that provides them with a sense of connection to their loss and enhances their experience of thoughts and feelings while not diverting attention. Therefore, public places or places unfamiliar to the client are not ideal, as these types of places could be quite distracting.
- Encourage your clients to “note” any thoughts and feelings about their loss outside of their prescribed time slot. “Noting” is a mindfulness technique where one acknowledges the thought or feeling (by simply noting “thought” or “feeling”) without following or engaging with it. The clients may say to themselves “grief thought” or “grief feeling” and then refocus on whatever they are doing at that moment.
- This tool would be particularly helpful for those grieving clients who find their grief is overwhelming, unpredictable, and interferes with their daily activities.



References

1. Janson, M. A. H. (1985). The prescription to grieve. *The Hospice Journal*, 1(1), 103-109.
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3. Manning, D. (1979). *Don't take my grief away from me*. In-Sight Books, Inc.
4. Shear, M. K. (2012). Grief and mourning gone awry: Pathway and course of complicated grief. *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience*, 14(2), 119.

Prescription to Grieve Tool

Grieving is as natural as crying when you are hurt, sleeping when you are tired, eating when you are hungry, or sneezing when your nose itches. It is nature's way of healing a broken heart."

- Doug Manning (1979)

Grief is the natural emotional response to losing someone (or something) we love. Grief often involves intense sadness and sometimes feelings of shock, numbness, or even anger. Grief affects everyone differently. It can be exhausting, emotionally draining, and intrusive, making it hard to do simple things or even leave the house.

In this exercise, you will complete a "prescription to grieve." Just as you would receive a prescription for a medication, the idea here is to prescribe yourself a time and place to grieve your loss. Your script will detail when, where, and how you will experience your grief to provide some structure around your grief journey. An example of a completed prescription is shown in Appendix A.

Step 1: Choose an activity

Choose **how** you will carry out your grief work. You can express your grief in several ways, such as journaling, drawing, or memory-making. The idea is to become *absorbed* in your grief experience, allowing yourself to fully experience any thoughts and feelings connected to the person (or situation) you have lost. See Appendix C for information on a few different grieving activities. Once you have chosen an activity, write this down in your script (Appendix B).

Note, you might like to do different grief activities on different days. You are not "locked-in" to the grief activity that you write down in your script. Please choose whatever feels right and good to you on the day.

Step 2: Choose a time

Choose a time of the day for **when** you will carry out your grief work. It is important to choose a time to focus entirely on grieving your loss for 45 minutes. This time slot should be a time where you will not be disturbed by others. When choosing a time, think about a time in the day when you typically notice your grief is quite strong, as this would be a suitable time slot to choose (so long as you are generally undisturbed at this time). Write down the time you have selected in your script (Appendix B).


Step 3: Choose a setting

Now, set the scene for your grief work. Take a moment to think about **where** you would ideally like to carry out this exercise. Your chosen location should be somewhere you feel very comfortable, safe, and undisturbed, like at home. It could be a place that connects you with your loved one, such as his/her bedroom, a place that offers you a sense of calm and contemplation (e.g., garden, porch), or a place that is familiar and comfortable to you (e.g., your bedroom). You may also choose to bring any items that help you feel connected to your loss, like clothing, photographs, or music you loved together. Write down the location you have chosen in your script (Appendix B).

Step 4: Sign your prescription

The final step now is to sign your prescription. Think of your signature as your commitment to carrying out this exercise. The idea of spending 45 minutes each day feeling and experiencing the difficult thoughts and feelings tied to your grief might be slightly overwhelming, which is normal. However, take comfort in the fact that for the other 23 hours and 15 minutes of your day, your grieving is, in a way, turned “off.” You can go about your everyday life, noting any thoughts or feelings related to your loss. You may also stop the exercise at any time, take a break, and try again the next day.

Appendix A: My Prescription to Grieve Example

Positive Psychology Counseling Service	
For:	Jim Keller
Date:	23/11/2021
Activity:	Journaling, once daily x 30 mins
Time (when?)	At 6 PM after dinner
Setting (where?):	In my home office
Signature:  <hr/> Katie Beaulieu	

Appendix B: My Prescription to Grieve Template

For:	
Date:	
Activity:	
Time (when?)	
Setting (where?):	
Signature:	

Appendix C: Suggested Activities for Grief Work

Journaling

Writing is a way for you to vent and release any internal tensions to a fully accepting “friend.” Your journal does not talk back to you, interrupt you, or jump in with “solutions”; rather, it listens quietly and allows you to express your innermost thoughts and feelings. If you choose to journal as part of your grief work, find a blank notebook and begin writing freely about anything related to your grief. You might like to start by writing about the person (or situation) you lost, what you miss about them, what life is like for you without them, how you are coping (or not coping), and whether you feel angry or lonely or lost. Alternatively, you might like to write to the person you have lost (e.g., “What I miss the most about you and our relationship is...”). Write about whatever feels right or important to you at the time. What you journal about today could be completely different from what you write tomorrow. Allow your writing to take whatever tone is true for you at the time. Remember, this journal is for you only. No one else will read it, so allow yourself to write freely and honestly.

The Life Review

Create a scrapbook to encapsulate the life you shared with the person (or situation) you lost. This scrapbook is a way for you to consolidate and remember this important chapter of your life. Start by sorting through old photo albums, news clippings, or travel souvenirs. Your scrapbook could include stories told by old friends or family members, drawings of your loved one, and photos of him/her or of the two of you happy together.

Dialoguing with the Deceased

This activity involves sitting down facing an empty chair and imagining your loved one sitting there in his/her usual posture, typical clothing, and so on. (If you are having trouble creating a clear vision of your loved one, place a photo of him/her on the chair). Then, share out loud whatever comes to mind--whatever you would like to say to your loved one. If you have a tough time getting started, try any of the following prompts:

- *What I miss most about you is...*
- *I have never been able to say goodbye to you...*
- *I still feel angry at you because...*
- *I miss the way you...*
- *I wish...*
- *I appreciated the way you...*
- *Since you've been gone, I have felt...*



Drawing

Draw a picture of your grief. You can draw whatever you like, whatever feels right for you today. Your drawing may take the form of a self-portrait that shows where you think you are at right now or of a portrait of the person you lost, of a picture showing how you see yourself in relation to your loss, or of how your relationships have changed since the loss. Your drawing may also take the form of something entirely different. You may use any materials that you like to complete your drawing. For more information about how to draw your grief, please check out the Drawing Grief tool.