

5-2022

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Understanding Grief and Loss

Loss is an inevitable experience for all living creatures. Grief is the intense sadness that comes as a result of a loss. Many people only associate grief with death, but grief can appear following many different types of losses: the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, a change in lifestyle, etc. There are also different types of grief which each individual person experiences to different extents depending on the type of loss they experience and/or their way of processing their loss. There can be short-term and long-term effects of grief on one's life, health, belief system, and more. While grief and loss can be an incredibly difficult experience, there are many resources for coping with its effects, and, for some people, songwriting can be a key method for dealing with grief.

Causes of Grief

Grief can affect people for different reasons. Certain situations may cause more grief for one person than it would for another. Grief is unpredictable, and its severity varies on a case-by-case basis. According to Dr. Alejandra Vasquez, the four most common causes of grief are death, estrangement, financial loss, and illness or injury. More specifically, some causes that are less often directly regarded involve loss of career, pets, institutions, limbs, living situations, or love. Certain times of the year such as holidays or important dates can also trigger grief. Many people can experience more than one of these tragedies during a short period of time which can intensify the feelings of sorrow that arise with grief.

Types of Grief

There are also many different types of grief. Eleanor Haley, program director and co-founder of the blog *What's Your Grief?*, defines the broadest form of grief as “normal grief,” which is the umbrella term for the physical and emotional turmoil that occurs after a loss. Within that umbrella, there is anticipatory grief in which someone is able to prepare for a loss by having the knowledge that the loss will occur soon. Anticipating a loss may or may not make the grieving process easier by providing the opportunity to say goodbye or express other sentiments while the person is still alive. Those who experience anticipatory grief may also experience abbreviated grief. This is when grief lasts a short amount of time either due to being prepared for the loss, not being attached to what was lost, or by filling the void of the loss with another person or circumstance.

Complicated grief, when a person's routine is thrown off by the impact of the loss, can include chronic grief, delayed grief, and distorted grief. Chronic grief is severe and long-lasting. It is a constant state of hopelessness with seemingly no end in sight. Similarly, there is prolonged grief, which is another long-term grieving process but also includes the inability to adapt after the loss. Some people experience delayed grief in which the intense sadness does not occur until a long period of time passes after a loss. This can be a result of denial or other causes of having to suppress grief. Denial of a loss can also be seen in absent grief. This can be seen in someone who does not exhibit physical or verbal signs of grieving as a result of denial or shock. Distorted grief takes anger, negative self-fulfilling prophecies, and uncommon reactions to a loss to an extreme. This type of grief also shares many characteristics with exaggerated grief or inhibited grief. Exaggerated grief, though, may drive people to turn to thoughts or vices that lead to physical harm. Inhibited grief causes people to turn inward with their pain which may cause negative manifestations to come to life (Haley).

There are several types of grief that can be extremely overwhelming to experience. Cumulative grief is when one loss is followed by a secondary loss. The aftermath that is created by the first loss may create its own separate grieving process. When someone's loss is

disregarded by a community they are a part of, this is known as disenfranchised grief. While the community may have their reasons for invalidating the loss, which are usually due to a stigma of the cause of loss or of the person who or situation that was lost, this can cause extreme loneliness in the person who is grieving. Within disenfranchised grief, there is also ambiguous loss. This is when people who experience loss may not even be clear on the fact that they have experienced a loss or if they have the right to grieve the loss. Traumatic grief can be triggered by a horrific and/or violent loss. Post-traumatic stress disorder may be coupled with this type of grief as well. It is possible that this type of grief may also be seen alongside collective grief: when a group of people witness and grieve the same loss. This ranges anywhere from people who have witnessed a violent event where multiple people were targeted, injured, or killed to grieving the death of a well-known personality (Haley).

Effects of Grief

While types of grief may vary, two things they all have in common is that they are a result of a loss and that they will have either short or long term effects on a person's brain and body. While grief itself is not considered a mental disorder, it can create a change in one's mental health. Sadness, shock, denial, numbness, a sense of unreality, anger, guilt, blame, and relief are common emotional effects of grief. These effects can also look like symptoms of depression and may even develop into clinical depression. Severe cases of grief may result in addiction, self harm, and/or thoughts of suicide ("Grief and Loss").

Grief can take a toll on one's physical health. Due to the high emotional demand on the body, grieving can lead to exhaustion which can create a weakened immune system. Other issues such as disordered eating, fatigue, and different types of physical pains may develop as well ("Grief and Loss"). This goes to show how distress on one's mental health can also have a profound effect on their physical wellbeing.

Healing and Mental Health Treatment

Healing from grief can be a long process. However, as time goes on and the grieving process becomes more openly talked about, there are some common coping mechanisms and practices that can be followed to ensure a healthy healing process. Independent coping skills include welcoming all of the emotions that come with grief, living in the present, implementing a healthy regimen of exercise and diet into daily routines, practicing self care, and staying connected with people and activities that bring comfort (“Grief and Loss”).

In more severe cases where mental illness becomes a factor in battling grief, there are options for treatment via medication or therapy. In order to be treated with medication, one must see a psychiatrist. Before or during that process, the first step in any mental health journey may be to seek different types of therapy. Cognitive behavior therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, traumatic grief therapy, complicated grief therapy, group therapy, art therapy, and play therapy are types of counseling that are commonly used to support grief (Kelly). The goals of these therapies vary based on how the client chooses to address and correct certain behaviors or patterns that will help them cope better with their grief. Some therapies, like cognitive behavior therapy, rely mostly on processing by talking through issues, and some, like music and art therapy, rely on creative expressions of feelings.

Songwriting as Music Therapy in a Professional Setting

A common aspect of music therapy is creating original works of music. The songwriting process, be it lyrical or musical, can serve as a tremendous resource for healing from grief. Having a specialized therapy session for this songwriting process may provide support for executing the process as efficiently and meaningfully as possible.

Accessibility

Music is commonly referred to as a universal language, which makes it a diverse tool for people of all ages and backgrounds to utilize in the grieving process. Music therapists often work with children and adolescents to treat the trauma of experiencing grief at a young age as well as other types of behavioral issues and developmental disorders. In terms of geographical accessibility, music therapy may be offered in the form of inpatient or outpatient treatment at private practices, hospitals, schools, correctional facilities, or mental health treatment centers ("Music Therapy: What Is It, Types & Treatment"). As far as financial accessibility is concerned, the American Music Therapy Association found that the average rates vary between \$50-\$110 per session (Klemm).

Types of Sessions

Formal music therapy can be experienced in a group setting or an individual setting. Having this option opens the door for patients to have more opportunities for comfortability based on their needs and goals. Some patients may feel that sharing both their grief and music therapy progress and experience with other people who are going through similar circumstances and treatment may bring more support while some patients may feel more supported by a music therapist on a one-on-one basis ("Individual Vs. Group Music Therapy").

Some different activities that may take place during a music therapy session include composing, writing, singing, playing, listening, and discussing music in relation to working through grief. When someone's music therapy journey begins, they are first assessed on what exactly they are experiencing and what they hope to access, gain, or change during their time with a music therapist. It is important that the therapist understands a client's reasons and goals for seeking music therapy, music preferences, and music experience. This may include discussing what kind of music a client enjoys or resonates with as well as the extent to which they have interacted with instruments, performance, or writing (Klemm).

Role of Music Therapist

After a client's initial intake session, a music therapist will facilitate treatment in either an individual or group setting. Music therapy sessions will vary based on a music therapist's specialties. For example, one music therapist may have more experience with one instrument than another one might. If a client wants to utilize a guitar in their sessions, they will probably want to work with a music therapist who has knowledge of that instrument. Moreover, one music therapist may have more experience with guiding a client to create an original piece where another therapist may prefer to use existing music to help a client relate to. With all of this diversity in the field of music therapists, it is important that the client advocates for finding the right fit in order for their goals to be met (Klemm).

The role of a music therapist is to mediate the creative healing a client is seeking through music. The therapist evaluates a client's concerns of their personal life, such as struggles with grief, and works with the client to determine what kind of music exercises would benefit them. The music therapist will then continue to monitor their client's progress in the personal struggles as they work through the music therapy sessions ("FAQ's").

Pros and Cons

Music therapy, with a focus on songwriting specifically, can provide a different experience for every person that tries it. One advantage of songwriting in music therapy is that anyone can participate in it regardless of their background in music. A common method used is referred to as the cloze procedure in which a client substitutes alternative lyrics in existing songs with original lyrics relating to their perspectives. This may be executed by writing lyrics to existing melodies or substituting individual words in existing lyrics. Even if a full line is not written by the client, just changing one word that applies to their situation can open up a sense of vulnerability to say more about their situation (Lowe).

A scientifically proven advantage of this form of music therapy is that songwriting does have an impact on the brain's neural structure and functions. This is because the part of the brain that is stimulated when a person's creativity is in play is activated at the same time as the parts of the brain responsible for psychological and memory functions (Lowe). Furthermore, music used in therapy can encourage motivation and self-esteem in clients as it may improve attention span and mood ("Outcomes, Benefits, and Drawbacks of Music Therapy").

Although the brain's memory functions are exercised in songwriting for music therapy, this can be difficult for someone processing a traumatic memory or experience such as grief. Memories of a loss resurfacing can be scary and overstimulating for a client and may result in them quitting music therapy altogether. Overstimulation can also come from the music itself. This could be a result of unsettling volumes or instrument timbres. Anxiety may come as a result of the overstimulation or of other aspects of a music therapy session. Sharing original pieces in a group or with others can cause anxiety. Existing lyrics with differing outlooks on life may also cause a client to become uncomfortable and anxious ("Outcomes, Benefits, and Drawbacks of Music Therapy").

Overall, songwriting in music therapy may work better for treating one client's grief than it will for another client. Ultimately, the client has the right to advocate for the treatment and the therapist that will benefit them the most.

Case Study: Songwriting-based Music Therapy with Bereaved Adolescents

When a death of a child is experienced in a family, it is common for surviving family members to engage in group therapy. Dr. Robert E. Krout was able to observe a group of adolescents undergo a group music therapy retreat following the loss of their sibling. A group setting was chosen for its benefits of normalizing feelings of grief after a shared loss. The goal of the group songwriting therapy sessions was to write lyrics that targeted five key areas of grief processing: understanding, feeling, remembering, integrating, and growing. This case study

involved traditional therapy methods that are used in brief, cognitive, and insight therapy along with the project of rewriting a song that was written specifically for this group of clients (Krout 32-34).

The group of adolescents in this study had varied backgrounds in age, gender, and type of death they experienced. Some of the clients were prepared for their loss whereas some experienced a sudden loss. Background information about both the surviving and deceased family members were also given to Dr. Krout. Goals for participating in the music therapy retreat were also assessed. A major shared goal was to give the grieving adolescents an outlet to express their emotions (Krout 34-35).

The clients collectively engaged in the rewriting of the lyrics of a song written with the purpose and theme of being rewritten by grieving adolescents. This was done during one confidential 90-minute group session. The original song was performed for the group with the intention first being to just listen to the lyrics, and then to later on change the lyrics to relate to their situation if they chose to do so. The group engaged in a discussion about the song and how it related to their loss. Next, the group rewrote lyrics, which was one of the key activities in processing their grief with songwriting. Dr. Krout mediated this process by writing down the rewritten lyrics, helping the group brainstorm, and singing the song with the new lyrics. The new song was recorded with the group of adolescents singing and being accompanied by Dr. Krout. CDs were made with this recording and given to the families of the participants (Krout 36-39).

As a result of this experience, the bereaved adolescents were able to engage in a creative activity that provided a sense of healing and validation in their grief. The group setting and working with professionals aided in this process (Krout 39-40).

Songwriting as Music Therapy in an Informal Setting

Although music therapy is typically done under the direction of a professional music therapist, some may choose to find their own versions of music therapy informally. Using self-motivated songwriting to cope with grief, for example, is a common outlet that many people turn to. Self-motivated songwriting may alleviate the pressure that may come with formal music therapy sessions as there might not be the stressor of having someone analyze an original song about deeply personal life experiences. Nonetheless, songwriting on one's own can still allow one to execute their grief into a healing work of art. Many commercially successful music artists can attest to this.

Methods

While writing in general can be a helpful way to express emotions, doing so through musical or lyrical writing without the pressure of being obligated to share works with others may give the creator the freedom to express more freely and honestly. When songwriting is done with the purpose of coping with or processing grief outside of a formal setting, the creator may also choose to utilize it at any time the inspiration or the need to write strikes.

Case Study: Motionless in White

Many professional artists who write music use their own experiences to inspire their writing. They may be consciously or unconsciously using their livelihood as a therapeutic mechanism as well. In an interview with Wisconsin-based radio station Razor, Chris "Motionless" Cerulli of Motionless in White described how writing music during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic helped him cope with the drastic changes that occurred in his professional and personal life. As a result of the pandemic, Cerulli and his band, like the majority of other performing artists, were forced to cancel or indefinitely postpone their scheduled tour dates with no certain return to live entertainment in sight. At first, the break from touring seemed like a

much needed vacation for Cerulli, but it quickly turned into a mental health battle due to the fear and chaos in the state of the world at the time.

During the band's pandemic-induced downtime, the band released a few projects such as rearranged versions of previously released songs, covers, and new original music. While working on music for their first full-length album to be released in a post-COVID world, Cerulli used his grief about the pandemic and his mental health struggles as inspiration for the theme of the album. Having an audience who had also experienced pandemic-related grief further inspired the message of the music he worked on. "Cyberhex," the first single off of the band's 2022 LP *Scoring the End of the World*, was dedicated to this audience of fans who kept their faith in Cerulli and his music throughout the pandemic. In an Instagram post, he stated, "At times where I felt like my world was ending, as well as the world around us, it was always in my mind that I was able to turn to the special relationship we have created together for help, and I cannot thank you enough for that."

The tone of the lyrics of this song is that of hopefulness in a time of uncertainty, fear, and doom. In the second verse, Cerulli writes, "We broke it down, to build it up / 'Cause analogue life's digital enough / Initiate the cyberhex / The only way to win is to reconnect / Stay alive, stay alive." He is saying that while the world may be changing in a seemingly negative way, staying connected with the people or the things one loves can provide the hope to get through any obstacle. Many people who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic or any loss in general have likely also had similar stages of emotion during their grieving process, therefore making this song a therapeutic anthem not only for the songwriter but also the audience.

Case Study: Personal Narrative

Some songwriters write music inspired by their pain without the intention of anyone ever hearing it. This was the case for all of the songs on my EP, *Aftermath*. The six songs on this project were written at different periods of my life about the grief I had been processing

stemming from the deaths of loved ones, failed romantic endeavors, estrangement, and the loss of self-identity. The process of writing the lyrics for these songs was much like writing a diary entry. The lyrics came from a place of pain that could not be suppressed and had to be written out. The act of turning my thoughts into words that flowed together like poetry and eventually turned into lyrics with melodies turned my pain into something I viewed as art. This was a positive act for me to turn to art rather than behaviors that could worsen the emotional distress that grief causes.

One of the most powerful parts of using songwriting to cope with my struggles of loss is how healing it is to talk about traumatic life events in a poetic way with varying time frames in relation to how soon or how long after the events occurred. For example, the title track of the EP was written about the loss of my father eight years after his death and took several months to complete, while songs like “Finally Free” and “Heart’s Revenge” were written during or immediately after the events in which the songs were about took place and were each completed in less than a day. To be able to turn painful losses that happened ten years ago or ten minutes ago into music is an incredibly healing and empowering skill.

My experience with using songwriting as a form of music therapy was self-motivated in that no one was requiring me to use songwriting as a method to heal my grief. My songs were never intended to be shared with a wider audience than my close friends. There was no pressure to say anything in the most perfect way possible or to create a catchy song that would appeal to thousands of listeners. I was in control of what I was saying and how I was saying it. As a result, the songs I wrote were very honest and vulnerable. I did not feel that I had to suppress the ugly parts of grief that are less commonly spoken about and that is a form of power that should be encouraged in all those who need a creative way to express their grief.

Pros and Cons of Songwriting as Informal Music Therapy

Is taking honest songwriting about grief into one's own hands just as beneficial and healing as a professional music therapy setting can be? There are some advantages and disadvantages to self-motivated music therapy. It is accessible to more people financially since little to no materials and services are required to write music alone. It does not require transportation or a specific location. It can be done wherever and whenever for as much or as little time the writer feels they need. It also does not need to be shared with anyone the writer does not feel comfortable sharing with.

However, some people may feel lost without the guidance that a professional music therapist offers by navigating different exercises to encourage a steady flow of songwriting. Some people may even feel discouraged by their songwriting skills and give up on the process altogether. Both formal and informal music therapy settings offer their own crucial attributes that may be more or less fitting for different people which is why it is important for people in search of such creative outlets to be aware of what each setting has to offer.

Outcomes From Songwriting as Music Therapy

Effects on the Grieving Process

Whether songwriting for processing grief and loss occurs in a formal setting or an informal setting, it is bound to have healing effects on the person experiencing grief. All songwriting exercises parts of the brain that are crucial in memory, psychological, and creative processing. Taking part in and completing songwriting-based music therapy may feel a sense of motivation and accomplishment, which is a positive experience for someone going through a period of mourning. Ultimately, these positive attributes of songwriting may make it easier for a person to achieve acceptance and growth.

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