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Vision: To foster an environment of collaboration and networking while providing universal access to support for individuals in distress and crisis.

Distress and Crisis Ontario

Spirit of Volunteerism Committee Art Therapy and Grief After Suicide Webinar Notes

Held VIA Zoom
July 21, 2021

Hosted by: Neta Gear, Executive Director of DCO, and Marilyn Clarke, DTATI, (Cand.), RP (Qualifying)

Marilyn Clarke presented her research findings exploring the role that creative engagement can play in fostering healing and meaning making for individuals within the suicide loss community. Marilyn's goal is to raise awareness about the potential benefits of using art therapy as a mental health modality to promote healing. The webinar included slides that shared rich and evocative artwork and artist statements stemming from participation in her major project. Unfortunately, we are unable to share these slides since the research presented is still in the thesis advisory process.

As a suicide loss survivor, Marilyn is committed to contributing to ways in which she can support, inform, and improve future support approaches for survivors of suicide loss. Following the webinar, she invited attendees to answer the question, "How do you see art therapy within your community as a potential tool of support in your client population?" If you would like to support Marilyn in her research by answering this question after reading through the summary, the link to do so is at the end of the notes.

Introduction and background:

- In 1990 Marilyn's mother died by suicide at the age of 52. She was 23 years old. Left behind were six children, a husband, and many friends. The foundation of their existence collapsed as they struggled in uniquely different ways to heal and to construct meaning from their loss.
- While impressed by their collective resilience, Marilyn acknowledges that they did not have the adequate supports in place to cope with this death. The experience has led to an ongoing query into the way those affected by suicide loss are supported.

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PO Box 40115 RPO Waterloo Square Waterloo, ON N2J 4V1

Phone: 416-486-2242 / email: info@dcontario.org / www.dcontario.org

- This major project reflects Marilyn's emerging attentiveness to how suicide loss survivors are able to heal and make meaning of their loss through arts-based modalities.
- "The one single event of a pebble falling in the water affects all that is around it with multiple, vast, extending ripples. Death has that ripple effect as well, setting off a disturbance that moves across time and space" (Dr. Jill LaMorie, 2013).
- An average of around 4,000 Canadians dies each year by suicide – over 11 deaths by suicide each day.
- Suicide is one of the leading causes of premature death in Canada, and is the 2nd leading cause of death among youth.
- More than 1000 people in Ontario die by suicide each year. (Source for the last three statistics: Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Council: <https://wrspsc.ca/understanding-suicide/facts-figures-2/>.)
- At risk populations include survivors of suicide loss and survivors of an attempt, youth aged 15 to 24 years, persons serving federal sentences, some First Nation and Métis communities, all Inuit regions in Canada, and members of the LGBTQ2+ community, once again, especially in youth.

The unique aspects of suicide loss:

- In suicide there is an enormous stigma. Consider the language used to discuss suicide, "committed", as though someone has committed a crime. Historically, suicide was considered a crime and families may not receive the same amount of support (financial or otherwise) following a death by suicide.
- "Suicide loss represents a particularly difficult form of bereavement due to the challenges that volitional death poses to survivors. Understanding these challenges requires recognition of the idiosyncratic processes of meaning reconstruction for this specific group of grievors" (Bottomley et al., 2019, p. 92).
- Some of the challenging emotions surrounding suicide include shame, despair, shock, anger, denial, and, in some cases, a sense of relief. For example, a feeling of relief may occur if an individual has been living with someone who has been attempting suicide for many years and has been caring for them continuously. This can be very challenging to address.

- Anyone can be impacted by the loss of someone in their life who has died by suicide be it their parent, sibling, spouse, other family member, friend, co-worker, teacher, etc.

Why use Art Therapy?

- “‘Art Therapy’ combines the creative process and psychotherapy, facilitating self-exploration and understanding. Using imagery, colour and shape as part of this creative process, thoughts and feelings can be expressed that would otherwise be difficult to articulate” (Canadian Art Therapy Association, n.d., para. 2).
- Marilyn’s major project proposal seeks to address problems stemming from the conundrum that, “most suicide survivors are plagued by the need to make sense of the death and to understand why the suicide completers made the decision to end their life” (Young et al., 2012, p. 177).
- As grief associated with suicide is complex, deriving meaning is an ongoing and challenging prospect. Motivating Marilyn’s research is the question: “What role can creative engagement play in fostering healing and meaning making for individuals within the suicide loss community?”
- Bereavement and grief are not linear and art making mimics the process of exploring the oscillations of emotional expression natural to the grieving process. It is also a way to support and alleviate feelings of loneliness, and a way to normalize a myriad of difficult feelings.
- The benefits of individual art therapy when grieving a loss by suicide lie in the prospect of strengthening continued bonds with the deceased. A relationship always changes over time, but when there is a loss due to suicide it is normal to have feelings of anger and betrayal far beyond the norm. It is important to work through these feelings and return to a place where a relationship can be remembered fondly and with comfort.
- “Meaning making” born out of loss is succinctly described as “reaffirming or reformulation his or her (the survivor’s) prior system of meanings” (Gillies, Neimeyer, & Milman, 2015, p. 64).
- Art therapy is able to offer activities that strengthen the rejection of destructive messaging and is an antidote to a hopeless narrative that often surrounds suicidality and suicide loss.

Research considerations:

- “Suicide survivors face unique challenges that can impede the normal grieving process, putting survivors at risk for developing complicated grief, concurrent depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation. If left untreated, these conditions can lead to prolonged suffering, impaired functioning, negative health outcomes, and can even be fatal..” (Young et al, 2012, p. 184).
- Caring for and being alerted to the signs of severe functioning impairment stemming from suicide loss is of critical importance.

The project:

- Marilyn had six participants complete six online sessions each with a new form of art being explored each week. She mailed each participant the supplies they would need before beginning the sessions.
- The six art forms explored, in order, were collage, body mapping, painting, clay sculpting, memory flowers, and strength stones. Unfortunately, we are not able to share any images, but the explanations of what the artform is meant to achieve and the success of the activity may provide some insight into possibly suggesting these activities to callers who are struggling with grief.
- Collage Purpose: Facilitate insight into feelings in the context of suicide loss and promote the externalization of difficult feelings.
 - Some of the words accompanying the collages include confusion, cloudy sky, clutching, despair, expectations, into the unknown, remembering, aloneness, love, tenderness, and beauty.
 - The artist statements that Marilyn shared spoke to how effective this exercise was for connecting with the emotions accompanying grief, and how helpful using a range of imagery and words was to see those feelings on a page and be able to process them more effectively.
- Body Mapping Purpose: Gaining self-awareness of the somatic effects of grief. Acknowledging the pain is important to achieving a restoration-oriented stance.
 - Some of the words accompanying the body mapping images were unsupported, fluttering, collecting and moving through, heaviness, tightness, pressure, calm, unyielding, and stuck.

- This exercise was helpful for participants to understand how their grief impacts them physically and how to recognize where their grief sits.
- Painting Purpose: Communicate feelings by making them visible and tangible. Tap into hard to access emotions through surprising outcomes.
 - The words accompanying the painting images included stigma, perspective, freeing, intuitive, shift, upheaval, balance, resiliency, spirit, and invitation to sit.
 - One of the artist statements said this: "Dragging the string with ink along my page creates tress intertwined together and in the holes I see a beautiful sky, deep and bright and kind. Forests have made my stomach turn for four years now, but somehow I created one out of the lines on a page and found new feelings of peace within that forest." This exercise was a favourite of the participants as they enjoyed the fluidity of the paint and ability to create new images from a base activity.
- Clay Sculpting Purpose: To access and release grief in the body. Enact the process through pulling, molding, hollowing out to create a sculpture that represents how the body holds/feels grief.
 - Some of the words shared with the clay sculpting images were grief, anger, dissociation, intrusive thoughts, tactile, tenderness, fitting puzzle pieces, and soft.
 - One participant shared how their mind had one expectation for using the clay to create something hard and angry to reflect their emotions, but once their hands started working, the feeling of molding the soft material helped them relax and softened the edges of their anger, creating something calming instead.
- Memory Flowers Purpose: Think of meaning in the context of grief. Explore aspects of the person we have lost and concepts of gratitude, hope, and continuing bonds with that person.
 - The memory flower images were shared alongside words like repair, celebrate, honour, gratitude, hope, and continuing bonds.
 - After completing this activity one of the artist statements read: "I am beginning to remember differently. I feel hopeful in the work that I still do. I feel there is a lot more room now for a different story."

- Strength Stones Purpose: Create inspirational stones that remind you to access your strengths, inspire comfort, and support you through your grieving process. Focussing on a narrative that recognizes resiliency and strength.
 - Some of the words written on the strength stones include compassion, hope, gentle, support, courage, serenity, ease, and trust.
 - One of the artists titled their strength stones “toolbox” and all participants shared about the lessons they had learned and skills they had developed to continue on their journey with grief in a more accepting way.

Following Marilyn’s presentation there was time for some questions and discussion. The following questions, with answers provided by Marilyn, stem from what was asked in the time we had.

Question 1: Based on this question from the webinar, “In the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS) the word ‘attention’ is used a lot, what other word would you use?”, what would you suggest in terms of language choices when discussing suicidality and suicide loss?

Response: I agree that there is a problematic use of language around suicide. Language use is very important & this concern speaks to the issue of using a “blame” or “labelling” orientation in response to people expressing suicidal thoughts. Talking about the desire to die by suicide is not a “typical” response to stress. Therefor, minimizing and blaming language may very well impede action that may be critically needed to help the individual.

The centre for suicide prevention, has some excellent resources around safe and respectful talk, language use and prevention strategies with specific information about working with youth.

<https://www.suicideinfo.ca/>

Question 2: Do you have any advice for persons who are still “stuck” in their grief related to suicide loss even decades after the death?

Response: Grief related to suicide loss is profound and complicated. Determining if what you are experiencing is complicated grief might be a good start. In doing this, I would encourage seeking support with a therapist who really understands features of grief as an ongoing and non-linear process. A good therapy experience/alliance may also provide a space in which one can more fully come to understand the relationship with the deceased.

Above all, resist self-blame and invest in the notion and practice of self-compassion! There is no one way to grieve & the process looks different for everyone.

Below is an excellent podcast with Barbara Rubel who lost her father by suicide and has recently written a book called "But I didn't say Good Bye".

<https://www.sallyspencerthomas.com/hope-illuminated-podcast/52>

Question 3: Do you have any suggestions for how to frame art therapy for those who consider themselves "unartistic" or see themselves as "too cool" to engage in artmaking (seems to be an issue of experiencing vulnerability)?

Response: One of the cornerstones of art therapy is the concept that it is not about the "product". Art therapy focuses on the "process". That being said, if a person has had negative art making experiences, or labels themselves as "unartistic" it may be challenging to convince them of the merits of artistic engagement. Creative activities that are less threatening, such as collage making, are a great way to begin in easing art making fears.

Creating a safe non-threatening and engaging environment is the key to fostering meaningful art making engagement. The art therapist's role is to help facilitate insight as a supportive, non-judgmental & non assessment orientated ally. This stance helps foster an environment of safety and therapeutic alliance. Within the emotionally safe and non-threatening space the therapist can then provide guidance to help individuals understand the message, symbols/metaphors found in the client's art forms to promote self-understanding and insight.

Outside the scope of therapy, art making facilitators can offer encouragement, guidance, motivation, positive affirmations, and an opportunity to bring people together. And yes, art making is cool! Think Public Art! Community art installations/projects are well situated for younger populations as the process is an excellent way to work together, build community, build something "cool", bring awareness to important issues and have fun! Envision an installation that is simple, visually effective, and invites students/youth to explore meaningful and relevant themes.

Below is the link to answer Marilyn's question on the use of art therapy in your role as responders. She also invites any responses that reflect on how art therapy may be helpful in other areas of your life if you do not have a "client population".

https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6P5OkfdIogw4nVc