

Hospice Wellington's Art Therapy Program
The Search for Meaning

The Meaning Reconstruction approach (Niemeyer, 1998) supports the primary focus of bereavement to be a search for meaning, arguing the experience challenges the bereaved self-concept and self esteem. The meaning-reconstruction model focuses specifically on the importance of meaning making, stressing the central process of grief through loss is connected to relationship realignment. This approach, Niemeyer continues, also holds opportunity for new growth. Meaning reconstruction can be a prolonged process, depending on the circumstance surrounding the subsequent death, encouraging us to “re-learn the self” and to “re-learn the world” (Attig, 2001), as both may be challenged in relation to loss. The perceived relationship with the deceased is the key component to be explored on the journey through meaning reconstruction, reviewing the deceased in connection to our personal identity, connected to the past, present and future (Niemeyer & Thompson, 2014). The act of “re-membering” (Hedtke, 2012) the deceased in a present state through acts of storytelling and legacy may support meaning reconstruction, thereby supporting the continues bond to the deceased in the bereavement process.

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The Lived Experience of Loss

Phenomenology focuses on the lived experience in relationship to the world. Art Therapy provides the therapeutic context where emotional and physical experiences can be explored and meaning can be derived from the lived experience. Creative art-making process, environment and group dynamics are essential components while exploring meaning in group Art Therapy. This format uses dialogue and creative art-making, along with a therapeutic series of focused topics, to create a twelve-week healing process of ritualized creative encounters. Hospice Wellington's Art Therapy Program focuses on fostering community, providing a space

that validates death and the experiences of grief, all while empowering participants to find a sense of wellbeing in their current lived experiences.

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Benefits of Art Therapy-based Bereavement Groups

Kohut (2011) identifies art therapy-based bereavement groups as a place to provide the safety required to express and externalize difficult emotions, potentially normalizing the grieving experience all while decreasing personal isolation. Creating art provides a means for healing from loss and the opportunity to re-connect to past stories, thereby creating legacy work that acknowledges and honours memories. Group art therapy also allows bereaved individuals to re-organize and re-integrate thoughts and experiences in a supportive environment, continuing the process of loss acceptance and the development of new meanings. After a significant loss, the ability to take risks is often hindered (Raymer, 1987). The art therapy group process supports and teaches group members to safely take risks that can be slowly incorporated into other daily activities.

Creedon (2011) encourages the integration of art-based programming in community-accessible locations, declaring it as "critical content" supporting the emotional and physical needs of vulnerable populations, insulating the healing mind from stressful environments, in addition to offering positive cognitive, social, medical and emotional benefits from consistent exposure. Upon encountering loss, there is a realization that one's life has become irrevocably altered by the grief experience, accompanied by feelings of depression, anxiety and anger (Gillen, 2010; Leibmann, 2008). Group art therapy provides an outlet for these emotions, supporting the process toward understanding, acceptance, resolve and adjustment to their experiences. Using the art as a platform for verbal communication also helps build confidence and supports the individual's understanding and acceptance of the experience (Horovitz, 2005). Weisbrot (2013) identifies a degree of resistance to psychosocial issues may be present during the initial stages of intervention, supporting that art therapy provides an alternative approach to accessing mental health and emotional issues.