

Techniques of Grief Therapy

Creative Practices for
Counseling the Bereaved

Edited by Robert A. Neimeyer

2012, ROUTLEDGE, NY

The Grief Spiral

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CLIENTS FOR WHOM THE TECHNIQUE IS APPROPRIATE

Groups of bereaved children, teens, adults, or mixed ages. Individual support is likely to be more beneficial in cases when a person is facing acute grief, has difficulty self-regulating or is behaviorally disruptive. The intensity of a community ritual and exposure to others' stories and emotions may be too much and cause flooding for individuals in these circumstances.

DESCRIPTION

The death of a loved one forces us on a journey through an internal wilderness. This journey within takes us through previously unexplored terrain of being and meaning—revealing new parts of ourselves as we continue to navigate life. This journey can feel ominous, isolating, and unguided. Grief camps and retreats provide opportunities for bereaved children, adults, and families to gather with understanding peers for support, camaraderie, and healing. In outdoor settings, the Grief Spiral ritual can become an embodied life metaphor illuminating the theoretical Dual Process Model of Grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This model underscores the simultaneous processes of honoring significant loss while re-engaging and investing in life.

A spiral can be created in a multitude of group settings—stomped in the snow, outlined in the grass, or brushed in the sand. As individuals walk the spiral at night toward the center with an unlit dripless tapered candle, the spiral represents the journey within that we find ourselves launched upon following a significant loss. The path winds and is walked alone as a symbol of the uniqueness of the journey. A single lit candle in the center symbolizes parts of ourselves that are illuminated having walked this path—parts that are brighter, stronger or more pronounced since the loss. Participants light their tapers from the center candle and as they move along the outward spiral have the opportunity to share their experience of who they are becoming on the journey and new parts of themselves that are more present. The path is lined with tea candles. As participants move along the spiral outward, they may light one candle or more in honor of their loved one who has died. This begins to add light to the darkness—a symbol that while we cannot walk the path for another, we can add comfort, warmth, and hope along the way.

The group holds the space with their candles around the periphery of the spiral, bearing witness to one another's journey—a symbol of universality and solidarity. After each group

member has walked the spiral, they stand together with candles ablaze. At this time, a facilitator may make a comment about how the space holds the energy of the words and memories that have been shared, the candlelight holds the courage and camaraderie of the individuals who have come together for this event, and the silence holds the many stories and feelings unspoken, yet present and real. After a moment of silence the group together recites, "We will remember, we will remember, we will remember," and each individual blows out his or her tapered candle. The strumming of an acoustic guitar, a poetry reading or a song can help bring the group together as the ceremony comes to a close. Participants have the opportunity to stay in the space for a time before transitioning to campfire for music and s'mores, helping to re-focus and re-center each individual before transitioning away from the event.

Logistical considerations

Prior to the ceremony, the group can choose a location of significance or beauty for the spiral ritual. Clearly delineating the spiral facilitates walking it during the ceremony, marking the path in the pine needles, trail, snow or sand. The path can be lined with yarn, hemp, pine cones, rocks, branches, or wild flowers for clarity (see Figure 89.1). The process of creating a unique spiral together provides an opportunity for reflection while establishing ownership in the ritual. With large groups and camps, a double spiral with a path circling inward and continuing outward can be created, allowing multiple people to walk simultaneously. When created as a double spiral, the Grief Spiral is often walked in silence.

Gathering as a group just prior to walking the Grief Spiral to read a poem or story and to discuss the plan and significance of the ritual can serve to focus the collective energy and help to create a calm, safe space for the walk. A facilitator can pass out tapered candles or have a basket of candles at the entrance to the spiral. The center candle is lit prior to the ritual.

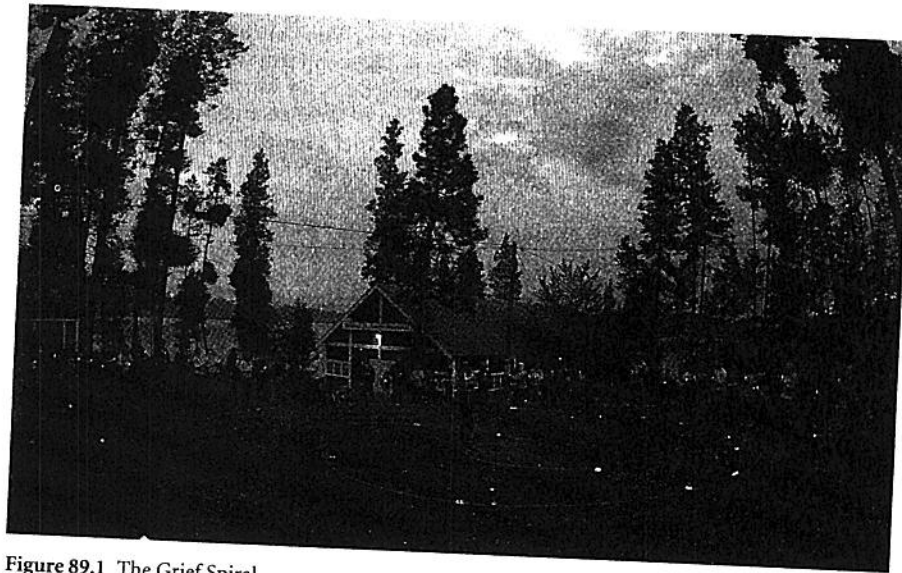


Figure 89.1 The Grief Spiral

Source: Joe Danzer, Mad Hatter Photography.

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CASE EXAMPLE

Molly, age 16, experienced the death of her father who committed suicide when she was 12 years old. She participated in a snow spiral on a Teen Grief Retreat. Seven adolescents and three facilitators snow-shoed to a historic homestead in the Sapphire Mountain range in Montana over a January weekend. During the afternoon the group stamped a spiral in the snow and placed tea candles along the path. That evening we gathered around the spiral as brownies baked in a Dutch oven on the campfire warming our backs. The following is a recreation of Molly's words as she walked into the spiral.

I'm walking this spiral in honor of my dad. When I was 12, I was babysitting and this lady came to the house frantically stating, "You have to come home right now!" Dad had been missing for a few days—but I had convinced myself that he is my hero and heroes don't die. We ran home and I remember it pouring rain and lightning everywhere. A police officer was in the living room and all of my siblings were sitting in a row on the couch sobbing. My mom came in and said, "Your dad committed suicide." He was in our bus in the backyard. I really wanted to go out and see him. I remember screaming then my knees buckled. I just wanted to hold his hand even if I couldn't see him.

It turned out that it wasn't raining or lightning. It was cameras in the backyard. I never saw the ambulance or fire trucks. I just walked past without seeing them.

I am one of quadruplets and we all responded completely differently. I wanted to talk about it and feel it. My brother got angry. My sister disappeared to connect with horses and disconnected from people. My other brother stayed close to my mom who could no longer parent. I took my little sister under my wing. So basically that bullet shattered our lives.

Molly knelt in the snow to light her taper from the candle in the center of the spiral:

I light this candle in honor of my dad. My dad was incredibly compassionate and passionate about what he did. I hope and strive to be a bit like him in those ways.

As Molly walked out of the spiral, she stopped to light a tea candle along the path:

I light this candle in honor of me. Deep inside of me there is a flicker of deep existence and hope. Let's be honest, it's been a long road. I really see myself as having perseverance and the ability to fight for who I want to be. I don't want to be a quitter. I want to believe no matter the circumstances, a piece of you exists that just keeps going.

Eight years later, now age 24, Molly reflects on her experience with the Grief Spiral:

Walking the spiral was pretty divine because it was pretty cold. We were walking this path that is just ice with a candle in the center. I realized that my dad presented me with the idea that you can just opt out, but somewhere along my journey, I saw that there is one flicker of light or one bit of hope somewhere. I want to move toward the light instead of away from it.

The deep spiral of grief is pretty isolating. You can't walk it for anyone else. You find yourself ultimately alone on the bumpy, cold, dark path. However, the circle of all these people standing around the spiral is a blatant symbol of solidarity and shared experience. We know that we will come out the other side and that there will be people waiting for us. At different times the candles actually go out, but we help to relight them for each other. That seems significant.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Whether it be a mountain, lake, or desert landscape, the great outdoors can be an ideal setting for contemplation, reflection, and natural metaphor. The Grief Spiral allows participants to enact or embody meanings as they walk the spiral inward and out. As an embodied life metaphor, the Grief Spiral integrates a person's narrative with his or her footsteps, illuminating past experiences, self-awareness, and movement forward amidst a group of understanding others.

Metaphors can facilitate the reconstruction of experiences (Santostefano, 2004). Weaving together interaction, experiential participation, and opportunities to honor self and others, the Grief Spiral as a metaphor enactment has the potential to foster hope, insight, and strength as the grief journey continues.

References and further reading

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