



Healing Through Art: A School Based Grief Intervention

Supporting Emotional Well-Being for Grieving Students

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The Sixth Stage: Finding Meaning

Emphasized by David Kessler, meaning transforms the relationship to grief without eliminating it. This can involve honoring legacy, personal growth, renewed purpose, or helping others. Meaning is unique and deeply personal.

Workshop Overview:

This workshop introduces a trauma-informed, developmentally responsive grief intervention using art therapy to support students experiencing loss. It focuses on strengthening emotional regulation, social support, and school engagement, highlighting the therapeutic role of rituals and memorial altars for remembrance and resilience.



Workshop Learning Objectives

- ➔ Describe the impact of grief on students' emotional regulation, behavior, and academic engagement.
- ➔ Explain the importance of school-based grief interventions in supporting mental health and learning continuity.
- ➔ Understand the therapeutic role of visual arts and ritual practices (e.g., memorial altars) in grief processing.
- ➔ Implement a practical art-based strategy and remembrance art activity to support grieving students.
- ➔ Integrate trauma-informed, culturally responsive approaches into school practices.

Understanding Grief

Grief is a natural, individual, and complex response to loss. It's a non-linear process, and while we explore stages as a framework, it's not a rigid checklist.



Types of Grief

Grief isn't one single experience. It shows up in different forms depending on the situation, relationship, and even personality.

➔ Anticipatory Grief

➔ Acute Grief

➔ Complicated Grief
(Prolonged Grief)

➔ Disenfranchised Grief

➔ Collective Grief

Types of Grief

- ➔ Cumulative Grief
- ➔ Masked Grief
- ➔ Secondary Loss Grief
- ➔ Traumatic Grief
- ➔ Integrative Grief

Impact of Grief on Students

- ➔ Significantly impairs concentration, emotional regulation, and classroom participation.
- ➔ Associated with lower academic performance and cascading psychological/developmental effects.
- ➔ Can manifest as withdrawal, anxiety, behavioral challenges, or declining grades without adequate support.

Origins of The Five Stages

On Grief & Grieving
Finding Meaning of
Grief Through the Five
Stages of Loss

➔ Developed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

➔ Expanded with insights by David Kessler

➔ Initially for terminal illness, now for all types of loss

The Five Stages of Grief

➔ Denial

➔ Anger

➔ Bargaining

➔ Depression

➔ Acceptance

Stage 1: Denial

➔ Initial shock and disbelief, a protective mechanism.

➔ Example thoughts: 'This can't be happening.'

➔ Role: Helps pace emotional processing.

Stage 2: Anger

➔ Frustration, helplessness, or injustice expressed outwardly.

➔ Example thoughts: 'Why is this happening?'

➔ Role: Gives voice to pain and restores a sense of control.

Stage 3: Bargaining

➔ Attempt to regain control or reverse loss with 'If only...' thoughts.

➔ Often tied to guilt or regret.

➔ Role: Reflects desire to make meaning or change outcome.

Stage 4: Depression

→ Deep sadness, withdrawal, and reflection.

→ Acknowledging the reality of the loss.

→ Role: Allows full experience of grief.

Stage 5: Acceptance

- ➔ Recognizing the reality of the loss, not being 'okay' but living with it.
- ➔ Adjusting to a new normal.
- ➔ Role: Creates space for healing and forward movement.



The Sixth Stage: Finding Meaning

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Key Principles of Grief

- ➔ Stages are not linear or predictable.
- ➔ People may revisit stages multiple times.
- ➔ Not everyone experiences all stages.
- ➔ There is no 'right' way to grieve.

Supporting Others in Grief



Listen without trying to fix.



Validate emotions without judgment.



Avoid clichés (e.g., 'everything happens for a reason').



Be present and patient.



Grief in School and Community Settings

- ➔ Recognize grief in students and staff.
- ➔ Understand its impact on behavior, learning, and relationships.
- ➔ Emphasize trauma-informed and compassionate responses.
- ➔ Integrate mental health support with safety systems.

The Role of School Based Interventions

- ➔ Schools offer a unique and accessible environment for providing essential support to grieving students.
- ➔ Systematic reviews indicate these programs reduce grief symptoms and enhance emotional support.
- ➔ Interventions are most effective when evidence-informed, developmentally tailored, and coordinated by school professionals.

Visual Arts in Emotional Processing

Creative expression through visual arts provides a nonverbal outlet for complex feelings, especially after loss. Artmaking externalizes internal emotional experiences, fosters meaning-making, and supports identity and resilience. Art projects like memory boxes and collages help students connect with loved ones while processing grief, promoting adaptive coping.



Memorial Altars: Cultural Practices & Significance

A memorial altar is a designated space created to honor, remember, and maintain connection with someone who has died. It often includes photos, meaningful objects, candles, flowers, or symbolic items.

Altars can be temporary or permanent, private or communal, and are found across many cultures and traditions.

➔ Dia de los Muertos (Mexico)

➔ Buddhist & East Asian Traditions

➔ Indigenous & Native Traditions
(varies by tribe/community)

➔ Christian Traditions

➔ Diwali & Hindu Traditions

Portable Altar



➔ Common Alternative Names

➔ Grief & Memorial Focused Terms

➔ Student/School Friendly Language

➔ Clinical/Therapeutic Language

Portable Altar Making facilitation guide

➔ How to introduce the activity

➔ Emotional safety

➔ Choice & autonomy

➔ Symbolism & meaning making

➔ Group dynamics

➔ Timing & pacing

➔ Cultural & family context

Materials

➔ Felt fabric & fabric (pre-cut or from bolt)

➔ Felt shapes (hearts, flowers...)

➔ Scissors

➔ String (embroidery thread, sewing thread, yarn) & needles

➔ Altar pattern

➔ Glue (hot glue, fabric glue)

➔ Fabric markers

➔ Crafts (beads, sequins, charms, buttons, natural elements such as shells)

Instructions

➔ 1. Choose a color of felt fabric

➔ 2. Cut or trace your altar pattern

➔ 3. Decorate your altar
Using choice of materials

➔ 4. Add closure
Using ribbon to wrap, button

➔ 5. Fold it up

How to Use It



Inside your portable altar, you can place:

A small photo

A written intention or prayer

Tiny natural items (leaf, stone)

Tokens connected to memory or healing

Portable Altar Making Considerations

➔ Developmental considerations

➔ Art making considerations

➔ Trauma informed practices
(all ages)



“With younger children, we scaffold the experience—more structure, more concrete, more guided. With adolescents, we shift toward autonomy—more choice, more meaning-making, and more respect for privacy.”

Conclusion: A Lifelong Journey

Grief is a lifelong process, not a problem to solve. Healing involves moving forward while staying connected to what was lost. Finding meaning offers a pathway to resilience, connection, and hope.





Thank you!

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