



Portland Institute For Loss and Transition

In partnership with:



Course Pack

Grief Therapy as Meaning Reconstruction [Part IV]

Robert A. Neimeyer, PhD

Director, Portland Institute for Loss and Transition

Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychology, The University of Memphis

NOTE:

This online course is equivalent to a half-day Core Course leading to all Certification Programs offered by the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition. For further details about the various Certification Programs, simply click: <https://www.portlandinstitute.org/certification>.

Grief Therapy as Meaning Reconstruction [Part IV]

A. Analogical Listening

At a deep level, we know more than we can say, so that grief therapists often must assist a client with the delicate process of meaning symbolization. Ironically, this is sometimes true even when we think we know what our client is saying, as when they are using public language to refer to private feelings associated with the loss. At such moments, it can be helpful to attend to preverbal and often somatic sensed meanings that are unique to that person, much as Eugene Gendlin did in his classic work on *Focusing*. Analogical listening does just this, as we listen in an analogical, metaphoric way to the language of loss.

Clinician's Toolbox

Entry Point 1: Conversational Extension

With two or more partners, take turns inquiring about a “shared” feeling term associated with loss—perhaps sadness, fear, disorientation, guilt—and inquire about it using “analogical” or metaphoric questions. Forget for the moment about objective situations that trigger it, the history of the feeling, etc., and instead listen for what it feels like, now, for the person. Your goal is not to “solve” the feeling or get the person beyond it, but simply to sense its meaning as fully as possible.

Entry Point 2: Focusing on An Internal Felt Sense

Establishing greater self-contact through the process of mindful breathing, allow your attention to turn down and in, to that place in your body that you hold your grief. When you discern that, just place your attention near it but not in it, just off to one side, slightly. Then consider innovating on some of the following questions.

Some possible questions to guide you in this process include:

- Can you think of a recent time when you felt _____ keenly? Without describing the situation, can you close your eyes for a moment and go back there, now?
- What are you aware of when you feel _____? If you focus your attention in your body, what do you notice?
- If you can identify a bodily feeling associated with _____, where is it located? If it had a shape, form or color, what might it be?
- Is there a movement, or a clear blocking of movement, associated with _____? Can you let it move forward in this direction a bit? What happens?

- What do you find yourself doing or wanting to do when in touch with this feeling? Are other people aware of how you are responding to it? If so, what do they see?
- If you had a question for this image, what would it be? Speak this question aloud, now.
- If the image had something it needed to tell you or teach you, what would it be? Speak this message aloud, now.
- Directing your attention to other areas in your abdomen or body, is there any part that wants to “answer” the image in some way? Speak this answer aloud.

After spending 10-15 minutes exploring the felt image in this analogical way, thank it for visiting you, and slowly return your attention to the sounds and sensations of the room in which you sit. Across the bridge of a few mindful breaths, open your eyes to your partner(s) and process the experience, giving attention first to the experience of the client, then therapist, then observer.

- How was it for you to invite access to the felt sense of your grief in this way? Did anything surprise you in this, or provoke significant emotion?
- What do you need to do to integrate or understand this feeling more fully? What would “help” with it in some way? What would you need from others in this process?

**As a follow-up to this analogical work and an aid to consolidation, the client can be encouraged to give form to the felt sense in an expressive arts medium, such as a drawing or painting, in or between sessions.*

B. Dialogue with Loss: Conversing with the Canvas

1. Jung on *Active Imagination*: Contemplating an image will animate it. Converse with the figure, whether it is in writing or visual image as it expresses a viewpoint that is different from one’s normal conscious view. Engage the figure in an iterative dialogue in order to become more aware of different viewpoints so that they can be more fully integrated.
2. *Talking with Images*: Relate to images as having an autonomous life in order to experience other perspectives. The process is close to free-association. Allow the painting to reveal itself and relate to it as if it had a unique voice and perspective.
3. Thompson (2014) on *Conversing with the Canvas*: Look at the painting carefully, respectfully, non-analytically, and with curiosity. Describe out loud what you are noticing. Stay on the surface with our description. Begin a dialogue.

Clinician's Toolbox: Drawing forth the Image

After contacting a felt sense associated with your grief, orient to it in a visual way. In silence, contemplate the following questions:

- If it had a shape, what might it be?
- If it had color, what hue, shade, tint or tone might it have?
- Is there movement or change associated with the image, and if so how might this appear?

Then, without discussion, planning or pre-thinking, sit before a generous blank sheet of paper with a good selection of oil pastels within reach. Let your hand choose the color or colors that feel right to depict this inner image or landscape of feeling. Let it take shape, and perhaps even surprise you with what comes forth.

Clinician's Toolbox: Conversing with the Canvas (Thompson, 2014)

Now look at the painting carefully, respectfully, non-analytically, and with curiosity. Describe out loud what you are noticing. Stay on the surface with your description. Begin a dialogue with the image, as if it were a being distinct from Creative You.

Alternatively, work with a partner, as you “channel” the image, giving it voice as your partner interviews you. Some useful questions your partner might ask include:

- What are you feeling?
- Is there a feeling beneath the feeling?
- What do you want the artist to know?
- What more do you want to say?
- Is there something else that the artist needs to see?
- What do you need or want?

Allow the answers to come unbidden, without pre-thinking. If you are doing this with a partner, each of you might serve as a scribe to note down the gist of the answers each gives aloud; if doing this alone, you might wish to record your spontaneous responses for later harvesting or journaling.

Then switch roles and repeat the conversation. Conclude by exploring similarities and differences in your experience.

Clinician's Toolbox: Harvesting Meaning

Journaling alone, or in interview with a partner, take further perspective on the experience by engaging questions like the following:

- What did you notice during this exercise?
- What surprised you? What stood out?
- Where was there movement or stuckness?
- What happened?
- What do you need to integrate or understand?
- What would be helpful in this process?
- As you look at the image now, is there anything you would add or change?
- What title would you give the image?

C. Directed Journaling***Clinician's Toolbox: Guidelines for Therapeutic Journals*** (Pennebaker)

- Find a private place where you will not be interrupted
- Focus on one of the more traumatic experiences of your life
- Write about those aspects that are most difficult to acknowledge
- Shift between external event and your deepest thoughts and feelings
- Abandon a concern with grammar and syntax: Write only for yourself
- Write 20 minutes a day, for at least four days
- Schedule a "transitional activity" to return to life as usual
- Have a support person or professional available in case of need

Clinician's Toolbox: Directed Journaling (Lichtenthal & Neimeyer)

Consider tailoring questions addressed to client's need:

Emotional exploration:

- What do you recall about how you responded to the event at the time? Put yourself back there, now.
- How did your feelings about it change over time?
- What was the most emotionally significant part of the experience to you?

Sense making:

- How did you make sense of the death or loss at the time? How do you interpret the loss now?
- What philosophical or spiritual beliefs contributed to your coping? How were they affected by it, in turn?
- Are there ways in which this loss has affected your direction in life? How, across time, have you dealt with this?

- How, in the long run, do you imagine that you will give this loss meaning in your life?

Benefit finding:

- In your view, have you found any unsought gifts in grief? If so, what?
- How has this experience affected your sense of priorities?
- What qualities in yourself have you drawn on that have contributed to your resilience? What qualities of a supportive kind have you discovered in others?
- What lessons about loving has this person or this loss taught you?
- Has this difficult transition deepened your gratitude for anything you've been given? If so, to whom might you express it?

Variations:

- Dream journals
- Dialogues with self
- Letters to a "friend" with a similar loss
- Gratitude letters

Notes:

If used as an adjunct to therapy, integrate into session through reading selected passages aloud, rather than as material for therapist to read between sessions. The client's perspective on the journaling may shift depending on whether client or therapist does the reading.

Recommended Readings

- Lichtenthal, W. G., & Cruess, D. G. (2010). Effects of directed written disclosure on grief and distress symptoms among bereaved individuals. *Death Studies*, 34(6), 475-499.
- Neimeyer, R. A. (Ed.) (2016). *Techniques in grief therapy: Assessment and intervention*. New York: Routledge. [Compendium of numerous methods for assessing grief and meaning, as well as methods of grief therapy, with instructions for each and a case study illustrating its application. NB: this volume provides entirely different content than the original 2012 volume]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (Ed.) (2012). *Techniques in grief therapy: Creative practices for counseling the bereaved*. New York: Routledge. [Compendium of 96 methods of grief therapy, with instructions for each and a case study illustrating its application]
- Thompson, B. E. & Neimeyer, R. A. (Eds.) (2014). *Grief and the expressive arts: Practices for creating meaning*. New York: Routledge. [Comprehensive handbook detailing dozens of grief therapy techniques using visual arts, music therapy, dance and movement, creative writing and theatre and performance, giving explicit instructions and case examples to illustrate each.]



Portland Institute

For Loss and Transition

For more information about training and certification,
navigate to:

www.portlandinstitute.org