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Creative Writing after Traumatic Loss: Towards a Generative Writing Approach

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Abstract

Meaning-reconstruction theory explains bereavement in terms of an ongoing striving to find meaning. The expressive writing paradigm claims that writing, through disclosure, can facilitate meaning-reconstruction. In this article, we explore how writing, and specifically the writing of poetry, facilitates meaning-reconstruction for bereaved parents who are coping with a sudden traumatic loss of a child. Ten Israelis who lost a child in a terror attack or during the child's military service and subsequently wrote poems about their experience were interviewed. Based on meaning-reconstruction theory, and keeping in mind the expressive writing paradigm, our findings indicate that there are three writing exercises that are particularly helpful in enabling bereaved parents to find meaning in their traumatic loss: writing a dialogue with the deceased; writing an alternative reality; and editing poems and reshaping meanings. Our conclusions suggest that these exercises, which assist bereaved parents in making and finding meaning in their loss, could be used successfully by social workers as an intervention technique. The concept of 'generative writing', as we have termed it, supplements the existing views of both the expressive writing paradigm and meaning-reconstruction theory. Generative writing aligns well with the core values of social work and of the strengths perspective.

Keywords: Bereavement, expressive writing paradigm, grief therapy, meaning-reconstruction, traumatic loss

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Introduction

Social workers are often called upon to help clients cope with the loss of a loved one and assist them throughout their bereavement process (Potocky, 1993; Stein and Fineberg, 2013; Worden, 1982). Accordingly, they provide individual therapy, spiritual care (Lloyd, 1997), family therapy (Kissane and Bloch, 2002) or group work (Tonkins and Lambert, 1996) along with other interventions. One of the challenges for social workers in bereavement care is to assist the bereaved in the process of meaning-reconstruction—that is, finding and making meaning of their loss (Dransart, 2013). This task can be extremely difficult in the case of bereaved parents (Bailey *et al.*, 2013) as parental bereavement creates a radical contradiction between parents' former and present lives and poses a great challenge to finding meanings that bridge the two (Barak and Leichtentritt, 2014; Davis *et al.*, 2000). A long-term professional intervention is thus often needed (Videka-Sherman, 1987).

Even though grief therapy skills are acknowledged as important in social work, social workers often feel unprepared to engage in such work with clients (Christ and Sormanti, 2000) and organisational support for social workers who deal with bereaved clients may also be insufficient (Davidson and Foster, 1995). Moreover, bereavement care, as noted in a recent editorial essay in the *British Journal of Social Work*, has somehow 'slipped from the social work gaze and therapeutic interventions with dying and bereaved people are seen as a luxury which mainstream social work cannot afford' (Holloway and Taplin, 2013, p. 203). But, if we wish to address the challenges posed by bereaved clients, where else should our gaze, as social workers, be pointed?

My professional orientation as a social worker and theatre director (first author) who develops expressive arts and creative arts intervention methods (Barak, 2013, 2016) has guided the exploration described in this article. Specifically, I was interested in learning about the artistic-creative agency that bereaved parents use to make and find meaning in their loss. Understanding this process could help in the development of potential intervention techniques that are based on bereaved parents' creative capabilities and could enrich social workers' toolboxes.

Amongst the different possibilities of creativity within bereavement, we focused in this research paper on bereaved parents' writing, and specifically the writing of poetry. Bereaved parents often write as part of their bereavement process (Barak and Leichtentritt, 2015). A general consensus exists about the therapeutic merits of writing in the bereavement process (Young, 2008). However, the majority of writing on the subject of writing draws from the expressive writing paradigm and puts the spotlight on the positive effects—such as improvement of physical and mental health (Frisina *et al.*, 2004)—of the disclosure of thoughts

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and emotions regarding a traumatic event (Esterling *et al.*, 1999; Lepore and Smyth, 2002). Very little is known, however, about the power of writing not only to reflect an existing reality, but also to generate new meanings. Moreover, to our knowledge, no research exists regarding the therapeutic effects of unguided writing (i.e. writing that is not part of therapy). To understand how writing is interwoven with the bereavement process, and what its therapeutic components are, we would like to briefly introduce meaning-reconstruction theory, which will lay the theoretical groundwork for our exploration.

Meaning-reconstruction and expressive writing

Meaning-reconstruction theory explains bereavement in terms of an ongoing striving to find meaning and, as a result, a redefining of continuing relationships with the deceased (Neimeyer, 2000). The theory argues that loss of meaning is the main challenge for a bereaved person (or a trauma victim in general). Thus, it is the attempt to reorganise and reconstruct the internal world of meaning that informs the bereavement process (Neimeyer and Sands, 2011). At the core of meaning-reconstruction is the process of meaning-making, which can be defined as the adaptation to bereavement through sense-making and benefit-finding in the loss (Holland, *et al.*, 2006)—a struggle that is extremely prominent after the death of a child (Lichtenthal *et al.*, 2010). Meaning-reconstruction theory expands on the goals and means of using creative methods such as writing in therapy (Lister *et al.*, 2008) since writing, and expressive art in general, is considered to be a hands-on way to process meanings.

The expressive writing paradigm (Pennebaker, 1993; 1997), which in some cases is referred to as the 'disclosure paradigm' (Stroebe *et al.*, 2006), forms a theoretical basis for the claim that writing, through disclosure, can facilitate meaning-reconstruction after a sudden traumatic loss. Specifically, expressive writing can reorganise the internal world of meanings (Range *et al.*, 2000) via the exploration of emotions (Neimeyer *et al.*, 2009) and by giving voice to those emotions that have now been identified (Lichtenthal and Cruess, 2010; Ryan *et al.*, 2013; Sloan and Marx, 2004). The paradigm's suggested treatment typically involves a short daily writing exercise about existing emotions and thoughts (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005) or about past traumatic and stressful events (Pennebaker and Beall, 1986).

The disclosure of meaning through the writing of poetry, specifically, is considered to have unique advantages in meaning-reconstruction for an individual coping with trauma. Poetry writing brings out into the open hidden meanings that cannot be revealed through common verbal expression (e.g. Bolton, 1999; Mazza, 1999; Robinson, 2004): it organises

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and re-stabilises the existential chaos within traumatic bereavement (Orr, 2002); it presents complicated, contradicting, multifaceted meanings all of which taken together adequately represent the experience of trauma and loss (Bell, 2006); it establishes a dialogue with society about one's traumatic loss by communicating important stories and messages; and/or it serves as a venue for outlining meanings in regard to, and within, broad social spheres (Barak and Leichtentritt, 2015; Flower, 1994; Furman, 2004; Neimeyer, 1999, p. 81).

These views concerning the role of writing in the meaning-reconstruction process of bereavement are valid and important, yet they present only a partial picture. Specifically, there is still much that needs to be learned about *how* writing *creates* new meanings rather than *conveys* or *organises* existing ones and how this process of writing facilitate meaning-reconstruction. This research is aimed at addressing these questions.

Methodology

To gain insight into how writing facilitates meaning-reconstruction for bereaved parents who have lost a child in a sudden traumatic loss, we used a hermeneutic design based on Gadamer's (1976) philosophy of understanding. Gadamer posited that understanding occurs when the horizon of the researcher intersects or fuses with the horizon, context or viewpoint of the object under inquiry. This fusion is achieved when both horizons are expanded, thus creating new knowledge (Pascoe, 1996). Accordingly, and in order to achieve a 'fusion of horizons', we explored—during the different stages of analysis—our own pre-understandings (Plamer, 1969) and entered into a dialogue with research texts and research participants regarding the interpretations we had arrived at, as will be further explained.

Participants

We recruited ten bereaved parents who wrote poetry related to their loss. All participants had lost their child in a sudden traumatic event (see Table 1). We chose to put the emphasis on traumatic loss, since it creates a radical contradiction between parents' former and present lives, and poses a difficult challenge in constructing meaning of the loss (Davis *et al.*, 2000). Thus, an 'extreme case' sampling rationale was applied (Patton, 1990). We recruited participants in several ways: two names were found in poetry collections via a library search; one was found via a memorial booklet; and three via internet memorial sites. The remaining four participants were recruited via the snowball technique (Patton, 1990).

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Table 1 Summarizes our sample demographics

	Mothers (n = 6)	Fathers (n = 4)	Total sample (n = 10)
Age, *M* (SD)	64.3 (7.1)	65.3 (14.1)	64.7 (9.7)
Retired, *n* (%)	6 (100%)	3 (75%)	9 (90%)
Number of children[1], *M* (SD)	3.50 (1.1)	3.75 (0.5)	3.60 (0.8)
Family status			
Married, *n* (%)	2 (33)	4 (100)	6 (60)
Divorced, *n* (%)	2 (33)	0 (0)	2 (20)
Widowed, *n* (%)	2 (33)	0 (0)	2 (20)
Cause of death			
Terror, *n* (%)	2 (33)	2 (50)	4 (40)
Military, *n* (%)	4 (67)	2 (50)	6 (60)
Child's gender (male, *n* (%))	4 (67)	4 (100)	8 (80)
Child's age, *M* (SD)	24.2 (8.3)	21.0 (3.5)	19.8 (2.5)
Child's family status (single, *n* (%))	5 (83)	4 (100)	9 (90)
Number of poems[2] *M* (SD)	44.3 (34.9)	57.5 (49.0)	49.6 (39.0)

[1]Including the deceased.
[2]Poems submitted to authors.

Research process

We roughly structured our process of data collection and hermeneutic analysis into five steps (see Table 2) based on what has been outlined by scholars working within the framework of Gadamer's hermeneutics (e.g. Austgard, 2012):

Step 1: Preliminary readings. Upon their agreement to participate in the study, participants granted us permission to analyse their published poems. Additionally, parents who had not published their poetry, or, alternatively, who had additional unpublished work, shared with us poems that they perceived of as being meaningful. The poems were analysed prior to the interview and the researchers' perceptions were noted. Our conclusions about each participant's poetry, along with our understandings and theoretical conceptualisations, were summarised into an individually tailored set of questions for each participant.

Step 2: Interviews. Interviews were conducted by the first author in the form of an open conversation about poetry writing (based on the conclusions we had come to from our poetry analysis) and meaning-reconstruction along the bereavement process. Each interview consisted of a single session. In the first part of the interview, participants were asked: 'Would you please describe the role that writing in general has played in your bereavement process?' and 'Would you please describe the role that writing poetry has played in your bereavement process?' Subsequently, follow-up and clarification questions were 'put into dialogue' in the continuation of the participant interviews (Costantino, 2003, p. 76).

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Table 2 Summarizes the phases of research and their main tasks

Analysis phase	Main tasks
Preliminary readings	Analyse the poems and come up with questions and assumptions for dialogue with participants
Interview phase	Understand participants' analysis of their poems Get a comprehensive overview of the bereavement process Contextualise and interpret poems chronologically in accordance with parents' history of bereavement
The post-interview analysis process	Write an integrative summary that synthesises the interview findings and the poetry analysis
Follow-up interview	Validate and improve interpretation through a second interview with informant based on personal analysis chapter
Integrative thematic analysis	Integrate personal chapters around evolving shared themes in the writing of the final report

Step 3: Post-interview analysis. Based upon our pre-interview analysis plus new insights gained from the interviews, we wrote an integrative chapter about each participant (on average, fifteen pages in length each). These personal chapters were examined and discussed with the participants during the follow-up interview.

Step 4: Follow-up interview. At this meeting, each individual's chapter was read aloud to him/her by the first author; each participant was also provided with a hard copy of his/her chapter. During and after the reading, comments, suggestions and thoughts were encouraged. Participants were further given the choice to delete any parts of their chapter that they considered to be insensitive, inaccurate or parts that they preferred not to reveal to the public. At the end of the follow-up interview, we summarised the new information and insights into a new updated version of each personal chapter. All updated personal chapters received participants' approval before the next step was carried out.

Step 5: Integrative analysis. During this step, the revised and validated chapters were categorised using a constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; for a discussion about the use of grounded theory content analysis methods without attempting to develop grounded theory, see Ramey and Rose-Krasnor (2015)). The integrative phase resulted in the recognition of four mechanisms, as will be further described.

Evaluation criteria

To ensure rigour of qualitative studies, Rice and Ezzy (1999) suggested five main areas of consideration: theoretical, procedural, interpretive,

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evaluative and reflexive. In this study, we focused on interpretive rigour, the main domain within the hermeneutic tradition (Tan *et al.*, 2009). Interpretive rigour is achieved when a researcher has reached a sensible meaning that is free of inner contradictions (Kvale, 1996). To ensure this rigour, our interpretations were examined and approved of by research participants, whose approval we received after encouraging them to raise critical questions and express any doubts that they had.

Ethical considerations

Prior to its implementation, the University Institutional Ethics Review Board granted approval for this research. Detailed information was provided to research participants concerning the research and publication process. This information was provided orally as well as in a written informed consent form. Careful attention was given to issues of confidentiality, especially since most of the participants had already published at least some of their poems. Thus, anonymity could not be guaranteed. All participants asked to be identified in this research by their names, although alternatives that could have provided a certain amount of anonymity were offered. Only after participants approved of our analyses and reaffirmed their willingness to participate in the study did we include their data in our report.

Prior to the study, we located available mental health services in participants' areas, in case of need. A mental health professional was also available to participants (and to researchers needing supervision) after each interview. Participants were informed of these options both verbally and in the consent form. All participants declined, however, explaining that they found comfort in talking about the deceased and sharing their poems. The researchers, both of whom are certified social workers, met together before each interview to discuss ways of minimising participants' distress and to identify cultural differences that needed to be respected.

Findings

Our interpretation of the participants' poems resulted in the emergence of three themes addressing the ways in which bereaved Israeli parents used the writing of poetry in their bereavement process.

Theme 1: Writing a dialogue with the deceased

The content of the bereaved parents' poems often focused on a dialogue with the deceased. When poems served as dialogues, the aim seemed to be a discussion between parent and child of behavioural changes or a

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change of meanings. For example, parents viewed their suffering, in the aftermath of their loss, as an expression of their love for their deceased child. Consequently, at some point, they also felt the need for permission from their child to move forward: in essence, they needed their child's approval to change. This permission was requested, and sometimes granted, via the writing of poems.

Eyal, Yaakov Zur's son, died during a military mission that took place in the days preceding the First Lebanon War (in 1982). Yaakov Zur (1998) 'talks' with his son Eyal in his poem 'In the eighth year':

> In the eighth year he told me:/ Father,/ You cannot go on this way,/ Like this we cannot./ Always with you/ Standing behind you on crowded roads/ Leaning over the desk with you/ At midnight,/ Sitting near you invisible/ At work meetings,/ At the theatre, at the movies .../ Accompanying you in big airplanes/ Across the sea,/ Watching the wonderful landscapes with you ...
>
> Leave me father,/ Leave me to rest/ In my peaceful, distant world .../ I won't forget you father/ And from time to time/ I'll come to see you/ You'll be better off this way/ and so shall I ...
>
> And I was awfully upset/ By the words of my killed son/ Those were as painful as the pain of his death/ And I held his hand/ And I whispered—No.
>
> And I cried,/ How could I stand such a separation/ Don't go away from me/ I told him/ But I knew I was doomed.

The writing of the poem legitimises Yaakov's choice to move on in life; having his son instruct him to do so, in the poem itself, validates his choice, as Yaakov explains in the interview:

> Throughout the years things change, it's not the same. At the beginning ... I was feeling he's by my side all of the time, seeing what I'm writing. It was a strange feeling .... This poem articulates my will to let go of it, and I'm making him responsible for that. When he says, 'Let go of me,' it's me saying that. And I cried, How could I stand such a separation ... as if now is the real separation. Not when he died.

Similarly, Nazzi Kadur, an Israeli Druze who lost his son, Anan, in a suicide attack at a bus stop full of soldiers returning to their units, writes a poem in which his son speaks, pleading with his family to stop mourning:

> Just don't cry, don't cry/ what use is there for tears when you all weep together?/ It's only me who should be crying/ so please, please no tears/ and don't cry when you remember/ a witty youngster/ heart of gold, covered up with homeland soil/ I'll always—always be with you/ with love Anan.

The late son's words, which are of course his father's words, open up a space for new forms of mourning to take place, and validate the

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option of 'not crying'. Giving a voice to the deceased, via a poem, legitimises a change of behaviour for the survivors of the loss and, consequently, a change of meaning.

Theme 2: Writing an alternative reality

The death of a child, among other things, brings to an end any choices the child might have made in the future. This stark and sudden closing-off of options was perceived by the parents as a major cause of their ongoing suffering. The loss of the child, whose death automatically cuts off his/her future, can therefore become even harder over time. For example, the marriage that will never happen, and that could have eventually made the parents grandparents, becomes more painful when the potential time for such a marriage to occur arrives.

Writing poetry was therefore sometimes used by participants as a way of developing an alternative life for their child. This alternative enabled the parents to explore new meanings: meanings that could not have been explored against the unbearable background of the reality of their child's absence. The alternative reality, in our sample, was created through a rewriting of the past and a granting of continuity.

Rewriting the past

Haya Egbar (n.d.) created an alternative personal history for her and her son, Rotem, who died in a military training accident, by writing about events that never took place. This rewriting of history allowed her to explore and adopt some of the meanings that could have been generated by these imaginary events. Her poems, which do not announce themselves as fictions, convince the reader of the existence of the alternative reality that she has created, and thus make a space in which her reality can exist as 'truth':

> In a field of buttercups we are/ only us two,/ wearing a variety of colors/ decorated in a scarf of beauty.
>
> The wind delivers in its wings/ to us who stand astonished,/ the colors of beauty/ for which we long.
>
> Always together/ looking for beauty/ and thanking beauty/ for all its variations.
>
> This is how I'll remember/ us two,/between color and sky/ in a field of blooming buttercups.

This poem, entitled 'Buttercups for my son', contains a secret, and the reader who does not know the writer would be mistaken to think that

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the poem is about a moment Haya has had with her son—a moment that she will 'always remember'. In fact, it is a poem about an experience that *could* have happened if Rotem had been alive but was not. In the interview, Haya explains:

> One day he came back home with two plastic bags full of bulbs, and he said: 'This is for you and for Grandma,' and we immediately planted the buttercups together. When they blossomed, however, Rotem was already gone—in February. And it was awfully sad that he didn't live to see them. It's like, a thing that he will never be able to experience .... We will never be there together.

Granting continuity

Some of the poems were written to provide the dead with continuity. This continuity was often sought through a description of the deceased in the afterlife. Tirtsa Barri, for example, who lost her nine-year-old daughter Dina in a terror attack, writes about her daughter's afterlife:

> I'm thinking of the other side/ Of my sweetheart who awaits me impatiently/ Like a 10-year-old when her mother is delayed .../ I imagine that my other kids are big enough and do not need me every day/ but she is still 10-years-old and has been waiting for such a long time/ it is many years already that I owe her/ and I have so much to give/ I await my dying day.

Imagining a continuity to her daughter gives new meaning to this mother's future death, as her death could potentially be a time when she can make up to her daughter for the long years for which they have been separated. Thus, inventing and exploring alternative realities results in exploring alternative meanings of one's day-to-day reality.

Theme 3: Editing poems and reshaping meanings

The participants often referred to the question of whether or not to edit their poems. When engaged in a process of editing, parents were also engaged in a process of reshaping meanings—a process which was facilitated through the writing and rewriting of the poems for the purpose of making them more intelligible and comprehensible to the readers. Another aspect of editing involved searching for the 'correct', or most accurate, wording: the words that would make the meaning 'right'. This search helped parents not only define for themselves the meanings they held, but also helped create new meanings that were now perceived as more accurate.

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Rewriting for readers

The process of editing the poems was fuelled by social and aesthetic considerations. Yossi Zur, for example, who lost his seventeen-year-old son in a suicide attack on a bus, explained:

> In most cases I edited my poems. I mean, I didn't publish them as they were in my notebook. I tried to make them a bit more like poems .... Look, editing is a lot of things; it is sometimes used to explain the poem better, sometimes to make it more beautiful, sometimes to wrap it up with more content ... I did what I could to make them seem more like poems ... so that if I wanted to publish them, they would seem worthy, and worthwhile.

Poems, thus, were reconsidered through a prism of aesthetic and social expectations. By way of the editing process, bereaved parents negotiated with themselves the degree to which they were willing to give up the original poem in order to make it 'accessible', 'worthy' and 'beautiful'. As a result, they were allowing the possibility for the poem to take on a slightly different meaning.

Finding the right wording

Among editing considerations, finding the 'right' wording was a major challenge—namely, parents perceived some words as more accurate than others in describing what they were going through. However, these words were not necessarily available to them, or they were unable to make clear the message they had hoped to reveal. Consequently, the process of seeking the right words for the meaning they wished to convey, and finding meaning and coherence in one's own story, were bound together, as evident in the following quote:

> Sometimes I changed the wording ... [because] on second thought I realized that what I felt didn't need to be written as an outburst, but rather as something with a beginning, a middle and an end ... I had a need to rearrange, and make it look more right (Tirtsa).

The process of finding just the right words, as per Tirtsa's quote, is also addressed by Yossi, who gives examples of editing considerations that are focused on the careful selection of words. It is clear from this example how the consideration of different words to describe his son's death is also an active consideration of different meanings:

> [In order to write about my son's death] I invented a noun ... I wanted to write, and I asked myself what shall I write, how do I write about my son's death? Was he murdered? Was he killed? ... and I needed a word that I would feel good about ... and 'enangeled' [became an angel] seemed like a good fit ... It allowed me to not use other nouns that I didn't want to use.

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The consideration of precise wording promotes a re-examination of different meanings. This re-examination led to potential alterations of personal and social meanings.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that writing in general, and poetry writing in specific, not only enables one to explore existing meanings (Stepakoff, 2009; Lattanzi and Hale, 1984; Frisina *et al.*, 2004), or explore and give voice to existing emotions (e.g. Neimeyer *et al.*, 2009; Sloan and Marx, 2004; Lichtenthal and Cruess, 2010), but also generates new meanings and new emotions that are created through the writing itself. We suggest the term 'generative writing' as a handy definition for all writing that creates new meanings and emotions. A generative writing approach could provide new understandings about the use of writing in bereavement therapy, and about writing therapy in general (see e.g. Nicholls, 2009; Wright and Chung, 2001).

One way to understand how the use of generative writing mechanisms might create new meanings is through highlighting the relationship between enactment and change. Kelly's fixed role therapy (Kelly, 1973), for example, suggests that inventing an imaginary character in therapy and enacting this character in the real world might result in a genuine positive change. Similarly, drama-based therapies (Moreno, 1961; Landy, 2000) and other forms of therapy such as Gestalt (Coven, 1977) or verbal constructivist therapies (Neimeyer, 1993) use enactments to facilitate change. In that regard, our results demonstrate that writing can also serve as a 'safe' enactment mechanism and thus create new experiences for the bereaved.

This angle could be strengthened by looking at the performative aspects of language that are widely acknowledged by social science researchers (Carr, 2009, 2010). Mainly, language is perceived as a way not only to 'describe' something, but also to 'do' or 'perform' something (Austin, 1975). The emphasis on language in writing within bereavement might serve as a way to enact new possible meanings and identities of the bereaved or the deceased, with the audience being the addressees of the poem (Barak and Leichtentritt, 2015; Furman, 2004), regardless of whether the poem has been publicly or privately disseminated (an imaginary audience, by the way, might also serve as an audience for enactment). Conversely, emphasising the disclosure potential of writing only disregards the performative and generative aspects of language and therefore misses the important role this aspect of writing can play in the bereavement process.

Another way to look at our results is through the strengths perspective. Through this prism, one can see from our results how, in the face

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of trauma and grief, bereaved parents find a way to generate creative writing that is both artistic and therapeutic. Social workers should consider these kinds of personal resources as valid strengths when planning interventions with bereaved clients, along with other client resources that are usually taken into consideration, such as the ability to define and set therapeutic goals (Early and GlenMaye, 2000), personal knowledge and capabilities (Saleebey, 1996), unique individual characteristics and internal psychological resources (Cowger, 1994). The strengths perspective in general could benefit by looking at the ability to create art as a resource to be assessed along with other resources. Although we have found no reference that specifically relates to creative talents of clients as a 'strength' or 'knowledge', we believe that such a view is well rooted in the strengths perspective.

Practical implications

Based on our findings, we would suggest considering three therapeutic exercises, but with the caveat that they be used with caution; specifically, social workers should first assess the willingness and agency of clients to engage in this kind of exploration. For example, it would be important for them to determine whether a particular client experiences a heightened sense of guilt or ambivalence around the loss he/she has suffered. If so, this client might not be the best candidate for trying to generate new meanings through writing, at least not at this time during the therapeutic process. Furthermore, these exercises should be facilitated with awareness that they might engender feelings of severe distress, even in clients most predisposed to doing this kind of work. It should be emphasised, then, that adequate mental support and emotional containment are crucial and should be provided by the social worker during and after this process.

The imaginary dialogue exercise entails the writing of a dialogue with the deceased. The social worker would invite the bereaved to write freely about what the deceased would have advised him/her to do in regard to a specific dilemma that he/she has, or in regard to how the deceased sees the bereaved. This process of writing would be different from regular enactment exercises, as it would invite clients to consider their writing thoroughly, and engage in a prolonged process of writing, different from brief, on-the-spot therapy session enactments. Such an exercise would also enable a continuous dialogue between the deceased and the bereaved. Questions that could be asked in this exercise include: 'What would you like to ask the deceased?', 'Could you imagine what the deceased would have told you if he/she had written a letter to you?' and 'What do you feel about the words that are written in the deceased's name?'.

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The *editing and reshaping meaning* exercise involves the writing of a text that tells the story of the deceased to others. The social worker's role, in this exercise, would be to encourage the client to edit and re-edit the text until satisfied with the chosen words and meanings that are embedded in the text. Questions that could be asked include: 'Is this the correct way for you to describe the story and your experience?', 'Would this be the correct word here?', 'How do you think your respondents would understand your words here?' and 'What would you want your respondents to understand?'. Such a writing exercise would encourage clients to edit and re-edit, while also considering the different available meanings for their experience, with the goal of eventually generating the most accurate meaning possible.

The *writing alternative reality* exercise could be used in order to assist clients in exploring different possibilities and meanings that cannot be explored easily in the absence of the deceased. Clients in this case would be encouraged to conjure up different imaginary scenarios that bear importance for them and then write them up. These alternative scenarios would be used in order to facilitate a dialogue between the social worker and his/her client, regarding the significance of those alternative imaginative scenarios in the client's life, and about the meaning of life in the absence of those scenarios. Social workers, for example, could invite clients to think about something they had planned to do with the deceased and did not have a chance to do. Having written about it would enable clients to reflect upon the meaning of this imaginary event, and the meaning of its not actually having occurred. Questions that could be asked by the social worker during this exercise could be: 'What significance would this event have had for you?', 'What does this event say about your relationship with the deceased?', 'What would you have wished to tell the deceased during such an occasion?' and 'Could you tell me about similar activities you enjoyed doing with the deceased?'.

Memorial booklet exercise

Social workers could offer to usher clients through the process of writing a memorial booklet about the deceased, incorporating in it all of the above-mentioned exercises. For example, when writing about the life story of the deceased, the social worker could suggest a technique of editing texts and reshaping meanings, considering the importance and significance of a shared history, or entering into an imaginary dialogue with the deceased.

In conclusion, based on our findings we believe that applying a generative approach to writing in therapy, after trauma, might

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supplement the views of both the expressive writing paradigm and meaning-reconstruction theory. By doing so, there is a good chance that the suffering and pain of those who are in need can be eased. We call for other researchers and social workers to provide their own accounts of generative writing in therapy, as we believe that such accounts will enrich the professional knowledge of all practitioners in the field of mental health and psychological trauma.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be considered. First, our results are based primarily on poetry writing. However, we believe that the mechanisms that were revealed in this article could be facilitated by any form of writing. Second, in this article, we suggested a few generative writing exercises that could be used in bereavement therapy. It is important to note that these exercises have not been systematically evaluated.

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