

Acceptance & Meaning Making for Adults with Prolonged Grief Disorder

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This paper will outline group curriculum designed to work with adults aged 25-45 who have received a diagnosis of prolonged grief disorder (PGD). This will be a short-term (ten session), closed group comprised of eight total outpatient members who have been referred by their individual mental health clinicians. These individuals should ultimately join voluntarily and be selected with discretion following a screening interview. The group will be largely psychoeducational by nature as we will be moving through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's (1969) original five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) plus David Kessler's (2019) addition of the sixth stage, finding meaning. Acceptance and meaning making will become secondary goals to guide the participants towards following several weeks of informative as well as mindfulness and expressive arts-based experientials related to grief, prolonged grief and how each person's experience of these stages and beyond inevitably vary (more on the overall goals and week by week set-up later). I have chosen this population upon the basis that despite PGD's addition to the most recent 2022 revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition Text Revision, grief continues to remain a largely taboo topic within Western culture. I believe that the collective avoidance and even denial of topics related to grief, loss and death in the West further isolates those who might grieve "abnormally" in terms of duration and intensity such as those who receive a PGD diagnosis. Further, the functional consequences associated with PGD which increase the risk for physical disease are compelling bases for preventative measurements and treatment (DSM-V-TR, 2022, p.326).

Each of the ten, two-hour sessions will take place in a local community arts space. Following an informational introduction regarding the stage of grief that will be explored, clients will be

guided through a somatically-oriented, bereavement and trauma-informed meditation expanding upon my mindful grieving facilitator training with the Center for Somatic Grieving (CSG) to assist the group to arrive within the space. Group members will then participate in an expressive arts-based warmup informed by my own training at Lesley University, inspired both indirectly and directly by a handful of expressive arts pioneers such as Daria Halprin as well as grief-specific expressive arts literature as presented by Barbara E. Thompson and Robert A. Niemeyer in *The Expressive Arts in Grief Therapy: An Empirical Perspective* ranging from: music therapy which utilizes song/rhythmic instrumental playing, humming and vocalization/singing; writing therapy including poetry, journaling and narrative writing; a mild degree of psychodramatic enactment; and intuitive movement. The core “activity” of the group will be the creation of a transitional book object inspired by Dr. Elis Syuhaila binti Mokhtar’s 2019 autoethnobiographical doctoral thesis which will serve as a visual journal to artistically document and track each individual’s relationship to their grief overtime. The space will then open up for an intentional period of group and art-share with facilitator reflection and will be followed by a closing meditation.

The space aforementioned above is an open setting with plenty of natural light, tables, chairs as well as room to move about during experientials and art-making. Provided will also be meditation cushions and back jacks to optionally use instead of chairs for the opening, group-share portion and closing of the circle. Participants are encouraged to wear comfortable clothing and to bring socks if they would like to remove their shoes, a shawl or sweater for protection or to coverup if chilly, a small sensory object to use for grounding, a journal and pen, as well as a water bottle, a flask for tea and high protein snacks to support themselves throughout session as needed. Musical instruments for experientials (a variety of drums, tambourines, xylophones,

bells, guitar and piano) will be made available by the arts center. Other materials that will be provided for participants, covered in part by their attendance fee, include book making materials (scissors, paper, glue and cardboard) as well as basic multi-media art supplies such as: oil and chalk pastel, graphite and colored pencils, pens/markers, collage materials, watercolor and acrylic paints, brushes, sponges and glitter. Participants will also be encouraged to collect found items from nature such as seashells, sand, feathers, stones, sticks, leaves, flowers, etc., and to optionally bring any other material that feels important to use including photographs as well as some type of fabric they can bind their book in if they would like to.

Statement of Intention

My goal is to offer a mindfulness and expressive arts-based educational and therapeutic experience to those struggling with prolonged grief in order to ultimately empower them to accept their losses so that they may find meaning and perhaps a changed relationship to their grief on the other side as they arrive in their own timing, likely following the termination of the group. This group is not meant to rush anyone through their grieving process nor to “instruct” how it is to properly be done; Rather, the short-term nature of its course is intended to help participants explore and potentially find language for, and most importantly a means of expression, of their various emotions and experiences within their own unique experience of grief. My hope is that this group will open the hearts, bodies and minds of its participants to accept that grief holds a seat at their table so that it may ebb and flow in natural relationship to their course of life following whatever loss they may be struggling to adjust to. The group setting becomes another container through which participants can rediscover connection by being in the caring presence of others who can relate or otherwise understand. A byproduct of participating in this experience might also result in improved interpersonal relationships outside of the group vis

a vis a more holistic relationship to self. Group members will also be encouraged to examine the story offered by the images and experiences that arise throughout the visual journal making during group share as a means of tracking the shift that will inevitably occur overtime. The transitional book will purposefully have extra blank pages with the intention that it can become a practice that participants will continue throughout their own grief explorations following the closing of the group; it will likewise be constructed to have the capacity to both flip through in a classic book-style as well as to expand out long for a more unified and comprehensive journaling and reflecting experience throughout the group, towards the end and beyond.

Week by Week Curriculum

Session 1: Introductions & Getting to Know Each Other

I will begin the first session by welcoming participants into the space, encouraging everyone to find a comfortable seat in circle, beginning on time with a collective breath. I will follow with an introduction about myself in terms of education, training as well as a bit of personal self-disclosure about what led me to pursue grief work both personally and professionally. I will offer a brief grief education offering everyone a moment to reflect upon the diagnosis which brought them there followed by a brief outline about what to expect from the group. This will segway into group norms which will include: taking care of one's needs, challenging oneself to engage in the material in a way that serves their goals, stepping up/back when necessary, remembering the breath, being mindful of others' boundaries and practicing compassion. I will then invite the circle to name or alter any norms that feel important for their sense of safety and ability to engage followed by an expressive means of introducing themselves by name. I will then lead the four-part (body, emotion, mind and spirit) meditation as expanded upon from Colorado-based yoga therapist and grief expert, Wendy Black-Stern's (2021),

curriculum at the Center for Somatic Grieving (CSG); this will be the anchoring meditation each session and will prompt everyone to identify where they feel grief inside their bodies, begin a dialogue with that part and to potentially make contact with an intention informed by an inner knowing, wisdom or spirit that they would like to carry into the rest of their participation in the group. After the meditation, the group will go into about 10-15 minutes of independent journaling where I will towards the end prompt everyone to notice any recurring words, phrases or themes that have been coming up. Following this, I will invite participants to stand up and begin walking in circle. One by one, each participant will stop and face the circle, reading aloud any word or phrase that stood out to them or that feels comfortable to share; the bones of this warm-up was inspired by my personal participation in a group experiential led by Dr. Mitchell Kossak at Lesley University in the spring of 2023. We will repeat this as few or as many times as necessary until I lead into the art-making portion which will be the making of the visual journal that will be filled in the sessions to follow. I will demonstrate how to get started and will be floating around to help anyone that needs it. Materials will be provided and participants will be encouraged to recall the intention that they may have set during the opening meditation. This is the only period of creating that will be “controlled” in the sense that everyone will be employing the same function of the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) as the repetition of page making will engage kinesthetic functioning. This can have a soothing effect on mind and body as a sort of primer for the weeks that will follow and might even inspire the feeling of beginning again or anew which employs symbolic functioning of the ETC (Hinz, 2019). If participants do not finish assembling their blank book, they will be invited to gather materials to take home to complete independently. We will close with a closing meditation likewise informed by Wendy Black-Stern’s (2021) CSG grief curriculum. Before releasing everyone, I will ask the group to

reintroduce themselves with an optional expressive gesture, movement or sound before officially ending the session.

Session 2: Grief Education

The structure of this week and each week which follows will closely resemble that outlined in session one. This week before the meditation, I will offer a more in depth education about the diagnosis of PDG and grief in general, focusing on an overview of Kübler-Ross's (1969) five stages of grief as well as Kessler's recent (2019) sixth addition. My intention here will be to normalize the group's experience and offer information meant to empower further understanding of themselves. Throughout, I will encourage participants to notice their reaction to the information I offer and to stay with the sensations that may arise, assuring them that there will be time for group-share towards the end of session. From here I will lead the same four-part meditation as before and will continue to draw upon the somatic element of dialoguing with the body in terms of stored grief by means of the warm-up. This will be a movement-based warm-up inspired by Daria Halprin's (2003) offering in her book, *The Expressive Body in Life, Art and Therapy: Working with Movement, Metaphor and Meaning*, which invites participants to stand up and move about the space as if informed and led by the part of their body which arose most prominently from the meditation (p.145-175). I will cue to allow the body's wisdom to lead the way and shift from part to part as feels natural. From here we will transition into the art-making portion of session, spending about 20 minutes beginning the visual journal based on whatever colors, gestures, forms or images arose in their experience thus far. After art-making, we will meet back in circle where each participant will have about 4-5 minutes to share freely, including their art, with the option to pass where I will then offer a brief reflection of their share and invite them to name an intention they'd like to carry with them into the next eight sessions. We will

close with the same closing meditation as session one, of course informed by what happened in this session.

Session 3: Noticing Denial

As mentioned earlier, each regular session through session eight will begin with an informational introductory period outlining the Kübler-Ross/Kessler stage of grief that is to be explored prior to the rest of the regular format of meditation, warmup, art-making, group/art-share with reflection and closing meditation. This week I will invite participants to notice how denial may or may not play a role in their experience of prolonged grief after defining denial according to Kübler-Ross (1969) and offering some examples about how it might manifest in the grieving process, is normal to experience, can be a useful survival mechanism shortly following loss especially that which is shocking or violent, as well as its potentially adverse effects on wellbeing should this survival mode become a habitual or illusorily “safe” way of being. Following meditation, this week’s warm-up will begin with some musical experimentation as outlined by Torres et. al (2014) in their chapter titled “Grief and the Expressive Arts: Practices for Creating Meaning” in Thompson and Niemeyer’s (2014) work and as inspired by the several musically-oriented group experientials I’ve been led in by Dr. Mitchell Kossak throughout my first year of training at Lesley in 2022-2023. As an accelerated group, we will be moving at rapid pace through the stages of group development. At this point, we are continuing to build trust following the introductory period thus playing to attune rhythmically as a group can be useful. Using the instruments provided by the arts center, I will begin a steady drum beat and invite each participant to join in as they feel ready while attempting to attune to the energy and shift tempo according to what is happening as a collective. To offer more structure, I might invite the group to start by playing the sound, intensity and rhythm of grief as they experience it in their bodies,

followed by their rhythmic imagination of denial, followed by the sound that represents they are actually feeling in that moment—being sure to emphasize that it doesn't have to be grief or denial and that it's ok to welcome other emotional states, such as silliness, humor or even joy, despite the guiding grief-context of the group. Once we wind down, the group will break out into art-making for about 40 minutes. I will circle around to check in with each person about content and process and how grief or specifically denial is coming up, or not. We will then transition into group/art-share and reflection with about 4-5 minutes for each person and close with our closing meditation.

Session 4: Feeling Our Anger

This week we will explore anger as a stage of grief. As before, the psychoeducational material will focus on anger as presented by Kübler-Ross. I will also touch upon the possibility that unexpressed or unacknowledged anger can sometimes manifest as depression and will offer some constructive practices to experiment with which allow anger to properly move through and out of the body in order to climb Stephen Porges' (2011) polyvagal ladder from the dorsal vagal (shut-down) towards ventral vagal tone (safe and social). Following meditation which will be cued towards allowing anger to exist in the body and doing our best to breathe with it, we will again join in circle to explore rhythmically the felt experience of anger with our musical instruments. As we continue to build trust, I will cue more the breath, vocalization of anger that is considerate of the nervous systems of others and encourage anyone who needs it to scream or yell into their sweater or meditation cushion. I will intentionally attempt to wind the group down to a more stable state vis a vis my own drumming and voice while inviting participants to put their instruments down and sit with what they notice now. There will be an option to spend some time writing a letter to one's anger or to a person they are angry with (whether it is their lost

person or not) prior to art-making. As always, we will follow with group-share/art-share, my reflections and closing meditation.

Session 5: Getting Curious About Bargaining

This week we will explore Kübler-Ross's (1969) bargaining stage at the beginning of session and note what the difference between bargaining and denial might be or how they can be related to and inform each other. We will be working with the resistance that may naturally arise in this kind of phase as cued throughout the meditation. For the warm-up this week, I will invite participants to create an imaginary bonfire in the center of the circle by writing down any words or phrases they have thought, said or otherwise used to bargain their way out of reckoning with the loss that has ultimately rendered them with a diagnosis of PGD and tossing or ripping them while speaking or otherwise expressing them aloud into the center of the circle. When the group is complete with this, I will as always invite them to sit with what just happened and to notice any shift taking place, even imagining that what they released into the circle is being burned away by the imaginary fire. Participants will then document what is happening visually in their art journal and will return after about 35-40 minutes for group/art-share, reflections and meditation. I will close the group by inviting everyone to find some photos of their lost person that they have extra copies of at home and are comfortable to bring and potentially share/use in their art in the next session.

Session 6: Being with the Sadness

This week the group will be learning about Kübler-Ross's (1969) sadness stage. Imagining that most participants will be more aware of and familiar with this phase, I won't spend too much time "lecturing" about it; As always, I will be sure to give information that is affirming and empowering; emphasizing the normalcy of this experience and highlighting what

might be signs of abnormalcy while inviting everyone to get curious about their own bodies and experiences in order to become experts enough to know when they might need extra support either with increased self-care, contact with a loved one or the support of a professional. I will also gently broach the topic of suicidal ideation and the intense desire and longing to be with the lost person in any capacity that is so common among PGD diagnoses (DSM-V-TR, 2022, p.326). I think the sadness stage is a great opportunity to invite the group's lost people into the circle by means of memory which is why I asked everyone to bring photos this week. By this stage, the group will likely have gone through or at least have initiated Bruce Tuckman's (1965) storming phase, especially throughout explorations of anger and bargaining, and might now be "norming" together, allowing for some deeply vulnerable memory to arise in the relative safety of each other's presence. Following the meditation which will, as usual, be led with extra cuing specific to the week's topic, I will roll out a big sheet of paper that the group will make a collective collage with, encouraging them to include at least one photo or other symbolic representation of their lost person using their personal photos and/or other provided collage materials. I imagine this as an opportunity to energetically invite the lost people into the group and think it can be powerful for everyone to see their lost person in the presence of another's: When the group is complete, I will hang the collage on the long wall of the arts center and invite everyone to take a look at what they contributed as well as the contributions of their peers. From here, I think it would feel more natural to open into group-share if anyone would like to speak or story-tell about their lost person, their struggles with missing them, longing to be with them, their experience of profound sadness. I'd like to allow a good amount of time for this, offering about 8 minutes for each person's share if they would like and to finish with some explorations in their visual journal. We will wrap up as always with a closing meditation. This week especially I will

encourage participants to continue with their visual journals outside of the group, to be extra gentle with themselves and to pay attention to their dreams.

Session 7: Radical Acceptance

This week we arrive at what was the “last” stage of grief according to Kübler-Ross (1969): acceptance. If the group is comfortable, I will hang up the communal art piece from last week as a way to continue including participants’ lost people throughout the rest of our process. In addition to literature from Kübler-Ross, I will reference the work of Tara Brach (2004), *Radical Acceptance*, as a suggestion about what can become possible when we acknowledge things as they are—including, if not especially, the existence and intensity of grief in PGD in addition to the obvious reality of life without the deceased person’s physical presence. I will follow as always with meditation while cuing for participants to notice their reaction (somatically, emotionally, mentally, even spiritually) to the idea of acceptance. For the warm-up I thought we could return to the attunement we had begun to build using our instruments, and similarly to weeks’ prior, play what acceptance sounds or feels like while cuing the group to stay with the resistance or any other experience that may be arising in response. I’d like to expand this week by inviting participants to play with incorporating their literal voices by humming, making general vocalizations or even recalling a lyric, melody or tune that they once shared with or that otherwise reminds them of their lost person. When the group winds down and feels complete, I will open up the art-making portion of our time by inviting everyone this week to instead write a letter to their lost person directly as a sort term of acceptance of their death, a means of asking for or receiving closure, a goodbye. Group-share will offer the invitation to read a portion of or entire letter to the group. I will plan to skip reflections this week and instead hold space for

silence. After ending with a gentle closing meditation, I will ask the group to carve time throughout the next week to visually journal about their experience this week.

Session 8: Finding Meaning

This week we will explore Kessler's (2019) addition to Kübler-Ross's five grief stages, finding meaning. I will present some information about meaning making including a bit of Kessler's personal experience with grief which led him to create this stage. Further, I will reference logotherapeutic thought as fathered and outlined stunningly by Viktor Frankl (1959) in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* which embodies well existentialist philosopher, Fredrick Nietzsche's, quote which states that "S[H]e who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How" (as cited in Frankl, 1959, p.ix). I will invite participants to ponder the possibility of finding meaning in their grief throughout the opening meditation while emphasizing increased importance upon community by means of my cuing which will be reflected by the moving group sculpture warm-up: When the meditation ends, I will invite everyone to consider something or someone in their life that gives them a sense of meaning; it can be imagined or real, it can include the lost person or not, it can be another person, place, object, animal or plant. One by one, participants will step into the center of the circle embodying that person, place or thing that gives their life meaning—offering the strength of that experience to others. I will cue to allow the embodiment to change over time, especially in relationship to those around; this warm-up is inspired by my personal participation I in a peer-led experiential by Molly Sousa in the spring of 2023. After letting this evolve a bit, I will transition the group into art-making, keeping with them the felt sense of purpose or meaning. I will also remind the group that this will be the last week together to actually fill the pages as next week we will be making the covers while I float around for our usual one-on-one time. As always, we will have group share and close with a

meditation. Before participants head home I will remind them all to consider bringing some sort of fabric, even a piece of clothing or bedding of the lost person if they feel comfortable to bind their visual journal in.

Session 9: The Other Side of Grief

This week I thought I would touch a bit on what I feel is missing from a lot of grief literature which my teacher Wendy Black-Stern frequently refers to as the other side of the grief coin: *love* (Wendy-Black Stern, group communication, 2021-2022). Love can obviously become part of the making meaning we explored last week, especially in the context of interpersonal connectedness. However, Black-Stern offers an expanded perspective which suggests that the experience of one's grief is equivalent to the depth of love that they had and still have for the lost person. In this way, participants will be encouraged to acknowledge a strength within, or despite of, their PGD diagnosis—their superpower to love! For the warm-up, I thought we could do some more enactment where each person offers something or some way that they remember offering or receiving love in relationship with their lost person to each other. Participants will one by one approach another member of the group offering by gesture and words the love they either gave or received from their lost person. The receiver is to welcome the offering by means of their own gesturing and will become the next to make their own love offering to another group member. We will then break-out into the cover making of our visual journals either with the fabric brought in by participants or decorated in some otherwise expressively artistic way. I want to encourage the group to think about this process as they would while obtaining, wrapping and preparing a gift for someone very dear to them, perhaps for their lost person, someone else or also for themselves—perhaps none of the above. As always, we will open for group-share, reflection and closing meditation.

Session 10: Integration & Another Goodbye

Week ten being our last session, I wanted to offer some solid process-oriented psychoeducation on the act of group termination as a way to gain more experience with “saying goodbye”. Thinking about this as a sort of death of the group relationship, we can make it a parallel experience for group members to experiment with how they would like to say their future goodbyes by empowering them to find what they need to obtain closure. We will go through our final four-part meditation together tracking the somatic sensations in relation to the impending separation. I will be sure to emphasize the fourth aspect of the meditation, the spiritual/wisdom body, for the group to locate some sort of information or intention about how they want to exit and feel at the end of this relationship. For the warm-up I thought we could make an improvised group poem where each participant will offer a word or phrase inspired by the meditative exploration of their empowered goodbyes. Below the tapestry of the group collage, I will roll out and hang a large sheet of paper that everyone will add their contributions to. When everyone has had a turn and feels complete, I read to them aloud the poem they had created together. For our last group-share, I wanted to offer a gallery-style portion of our time where participants offer specific pages or roll out their entire visual journal thus far in its process for the rest of the group to observe as they feel comfortable. We will do this one by one where the “presenter” will have an opportunity to share and reflect aloud to the group about their visual journal, their experience in the group and their current relationship to their grief. I will offer a brief final reflection to each person and invite them to state an intention as they did at the opening of the group about how they would like to step into this next chapter of relationship to their grief. Towards the end of our very last closing meditation, I will read again the group poem and end by inviting the group to offer an expressive gesture, movement or sound into the circle

as we did at the beginning. Participants are also encouraged to retrieve their personal photos by taking a piece of the group collage home with them. Following the close of the group I will email to all members a typed out version of their group poem as another transitional object they can print out or otherwise look at as needed.

Reflection

The process of developing this curriculum was a culmination of my own grief education and training with the Center for Somatic Grieving as well as my current expressive arts-based education at Lesley thus far. I enjoyed writing it and found that the language I needed to describe the curriculum as I felt it in my own body and imagination came quite naturally. Further, it became an opportunity for me to put into “practice” what I have learned thus far as an expressive arts therapist in-training and found that it was really useful to meet myself where I am at in my own process by building off of the personal passions which led me to this program. I am walking away with a renewed perspective about internship possibilities as well as a bit of a confidence boost in my ability as well as desire to continue with this work. The prospect of actually implementing this curriculum and, further that it can actually help someone, is part of what is feeding the enthusiasm I have been describing. I think for this curriculum specifically I would pretty fiercely step into the role of holding a firm container as I think the dual-process of the psychoeducational component with the grief experiencing and processing requires. I think the easiest aspect might be the planning of a group in general, but that the difficult part can become the actual implementation of it in relationship to the needs and personality of the group upon a collective and individual basis which requires immense flexibility and an ability to improvise and embody the phrase “yes, and”. I would need to develop further the psychoeducational component by expanding upon my research and literature references while planning out the

didactic portions a bit more intentionally. I would also consider preparing psychoeducational materials to send participants home with at the end of each week as a means of maintaining contact and deepening the possibility of a lived-relationship to the material. The biggest issue I could foresee myself running into is the reality of working with this population in the flesh; The truth is, I have no idea what it is like to work with adults diagnosed with PGD and have no basis upon which I can anticipate how debilitating this condition is in terms of client ability to engage in the material. Is this format too intense? Too much at once? Traumatic? Realistically, what is possible to accomplish in twenty hours over the span of ten weeks? I also wondered about potential limitations or challenges related to the broad age range but ultimately followed the ever-evolving science of brain development to arrive at the stated 25-45 years of age requirement given that both the male and female brain is said to be fully developed around mid-20s and that as early as mid-40s the risk or potential for cognitive and structural decline may begin to arise.

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