



# Exploring The Potential of Expressive Art Therapy for Grief: An Empirical Study

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how art therapy can alleviate grief and bereavement. The article examines the theoretical foundations of mourning, such as Kübler-Ross's Five Stages and the Dual Process Model, before evaluating the impact of art therapy therapies. The study emphasises the significance of art therapy in enabling emotional expression, aiding in healing, and enhancing resilience in those experiencing grief, based on scientific studies and art therapists' experiences. Further study is needed to strengthen the integration of promising findings into mainstream grief treatment regimens due to methodological limits and accessibility concerns.

**Keywords:** sorrow, loss, art therapy, therapeutic potential, theoretical frameworks, Kübler-Ross, Dual Process Model, emotional expression, healing, resilience, empirical studies, art therapists, limits, research gaps, mainstream treatment.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Grief

Grief is the intense emotional suffering that follows a significant loss, typically the passing of a cherished someone. Grief commonly involves physical discomfort, feelings of loss, mental perplexity, longing, excessive focus on past events, and worry about what is to come. Severe sorrow can pose a risk to life by affecting the immune system, leading to self-neglect and triggering suicide ideation. Grief can manifest as regret for a loss, guilt for an action taken, or grief for a personal misfortune. Grief is a common human emotion typically brought on by the death of a loved one, a significant life event, or a shift in one's sense of self. Humans have struggled with sadness throughout history and tried to comprehend and elucidate its

intricacies. Various theories on mourning have been developed, each providing a unique viewpoint on how people handle and deal with loss.

This study will examine many theories of mourning, including their origins and contemporary significance. Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced a significant theory of mourning in her 1969 book "On Death and Dying." Kübler-Ross's theory, the Five Processes of Grief, describes individuals' emotional processes when confronted with their approaching mortality or losing a loved one. The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Kübler-Ross posited that individuals do not progress through these stages in a straight line and may move back and forth between them before ultimately reaching the stage of acceptance. This theory was revolutionary and aided physicians and healthcare workers gain a deeper insight into the grieving process. Another significant grief theory is the Dual Process Model, created by George A. Bonanno.

The idea questions the conventional perception of sorrow as a straightforward progression and instead considers it a fluctuating process alternating between actions focused on loss and activities focused on healing. Loss-oriented activities entail addressing and dealing with the emotions connected to loss. Restoration-oriented actions involve reconstructing one's life and adjusting to the loss of the person or object. According to this view, individuals do not progress through separate stages but alternate between these processes during grieving. The Continuing Bonds Model, introduced in 1996 by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, is a modern explanation of grieving. This theory questions the concept of "letting go" and advocates for the belief that persons can sustain a positive connection with the deceased.

The model proposes that individuals should maintain activities that assist them in maintaining a bond with their loved ones, such as discussing them, holding onto images, or commemorating significant occasions in their honour. This theory underscores the significance of deriving meaning from loss and underlines that the connection with the deceased persists beyond their physical passing. Recently, Complicated Grief has been acknowledged as a distinct type of grief marked by severe, enduring, and incapacitating symptoms.

This viewpoint questions the notion that mourning conforms to a set and widespread pattern and recognises that specific individuals could find it difficult to adjust to the loss and may need professional assistance. People with complicated sorrow struggle to do everyday tasks, interact socially, and feel good emotions. Treating complicated grief requires psychotherapy, support groups, and other therapies designed to assist individuals in managing the loss and its related symptoms. Although mourning theories have changed over time, their importance in the present day is still vital.

The grieving process has become more public and visible due to the growing awareness of mental health and the popularity of social media platforms. This has resulted in an enhanced comprehension of the intricacies of grief and the necessity for a broader range of inclusive theories encompassing the variety of human experiences. Grief is a complex and individualised phenomenon that has been the focus of various theories. Each theory provides a unique viewpoint on mourning, collectively enhancing our comprehension of this ubiquitous human phenomenon.

These theories have assisted clinicians, researchers, and individuals in understanding and managing the mourning process and developing strategies to deal with loss. It is essential to investigate further and enhance our comprehension of grief to assist those grieving and encourage the development of effective coping strategies as society progresses.

## 1.2 Art Therapy

Conventional therapeutic methods, including talk therapy, medication, and support groups, are commonly employed to assist individuals in managing grief. Art therapy is increasingly becoming acknowledged for its effectiveness in treating grief. Art therapy is a type of psychotherapy that uses different art techniques and materials such as drawing, painting, sculpting, and collage to assist individuals in expressing and investigating their feelings. Creative expression has been used for healing and self-expression since ancient civilisations.

During the 1940s, psychiatrists and psychologists acknowledged the therapeutic advantages of art and its ability to address mental and emotional pain. Art therapy is a recognised and evidence-supported treatment method utilised to assist individuals in managing different mental health challenges, such as grieving. Art therapy is beneficial for treating grief because it offers a secure and non-verbal channel for feelings. Grief can be overpowering, causing individuals to have difficulty expressing their ideas and emotions.

Through engaging in a creative process, individuals can externalise their feelings and express themselves in a manner that may feel less intimidating and more comfortable than conventional talk therapy. Moreover, art therapy enables individuals to examine and deal with their sadness at their speed. This primarily aids individuals who resist traditional treatment or struggle to articulate their emotions. Utilising art for communication eliminates the need to search for precise words and enables a more profound examination of intricate emotions.

Art therapy can help individuals access and process suppressed or unconscious emotions, another benefit in treating grief. Grief can evoke various feelings, some of which may be unfamiliar to the individual. Engaging in art can assist folks in accessing their inner emotions and expressing repressed feelings that may be linked to their grief. This can enhance self-awareness and facilitate the healing process. Art therapy gives patients a feeling of control and empowerment, especially when experiencing loss and feeling helpless or overwhelmed. Engaging in the creative process allows individuals to exercise agency and autonomy over their artwork, leading to a sense of mastery over their emotions and existence.

This can be especially beneficial for those going through complex grief, where they feel powerless and find it challenging to adapt to a new situation. Art therapy can offer a feeling of camaraderie and assistance to persons experiencing grief. Engaging in group art therapy sessions with fellow individuals coping with sorrow can foster a sense of connection and empathy. This feature can be potent in the healing process, as grieving frequently causes an individual to feel alienated and solitary in their sorrow.

## 2. Literature Review

Nelson et al. (2022) conducted a study on the effects of an art and story therapy programme on participants' grief and bereavement experiences. This study investigates the impact of a closed group art and narrative therapy programme in Ontario on individuals going through a grieving or mourning process after losing a loved one. The study examines the mourning experiences of art therapy participants, the nature and degree of social and community relationships, the program's influence on sorrow over time, and its overall success. This study proposes that art and narrative therapy have significant therapeutic promise in assisting those dealing with grief or bereavement.

Green et al. (2020) researched the impact of Art Therapy on the emotions of grieving children within the Dual-Process model. The study assessed alterations in the positive and negative effects on 13 grieving children following six individual art therapy sessions. The results indicated a rise in positive affect and a notable reduction in negative affect. This study suggests that art therapy can help those grieving by facilitating the exploration and expression of emotions experienced throughout the mourning period.

Garti and colleagues (2019) examined the subjective experience of art therapists when working with bereaved clients. Eight art therapists participated in an art-based exercise and underwent a semi-structured interview. Qualitative analysis identified three main themes: (a) promoting emotional expression and control, (b) shifting between the client's art being present or absent, and (c) navigating between intuitive and theory-based therapies. The last axis included the injured healer element. The findings detail how art therapists utilise the creative process, respect imagery, and skillfully decide on their solutions when working with clients dealing with grief.

Or and Garti (2018) conducted a study to explore how art therapists view the importance of the art medium in treating bereaved clients in art therapy. Eight Israeli art therapists explored this subject through paintings and conversations. Qualitative indicated three primary functions of art: a space for the client to work with grief, a communication channel affecting the art therapist's experience and therapeutic connection, and a shared space for the client and therapist to develop a new narrative. The discussion focuses on the findings and clinical implications, pinpointing the fundamental therapeutic processes in art therapy for grieving clients.

Schouten et al. (2014) researched the efficacy of art therapy in treating traumatised adults. This systematic review seeks to discover and assess empirical evidence about the effectiveness of art therapy in treating trauma. A systematic review identified six controlled, comparative studies on art therapy for trauma in adult patients. Half of the trials showed a notable decrease in psychological trauma symptoms in the therapy groups, with one study indicating a significant drop in depression. The study has limitations regarding the number of included studies, participants, heterogeneity, and methodological quality. However, the results

provide valuable information on the effectiveness of art therapy in trauma treatment, highlighting the necessity for more research in this area.

### 3. DISCUSSION

The discourse thoroughly explores how grief and art therapy intersect, using a range of empirical investigations to clarify how artistic expression can be therapeutically effective in dealing with loss and sadness. The exposition begins by thoroughly examining grief as a complex human experience, outlining many theoretical frameworks essential for understanding and dealing with the numerous aspects of the grieving process. The text explores the development of grieving theory from Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grieving to modern models like the Dual Process Model and Continuing Bonds Model and discusses its impact on clinical practice.

The text explores the development of art therapy as a practical treatment for dealing with sorrow, examining its historical origins and theoretical foundations. Art therapy combines many artistic techniques and mediums, such as painting and sculpture, to provide clients with a safe and non-verbal space to express and explore their emotions. This aspect becomes essential because of the intense nature of mourning, which sometimes hinders persons from expressing their emotional states just through traditional talk therapy methods.

The conversation highlights the benefits of art therapy in dealing with grief, emphasising its ability to promote emotional release, encourage healing, and enhance psychological and social well-being. The narrative explores how art therapy interventions positively benefit mourning individuals by increasing positive emotions and reducing psychological trauma symptoms through empirical research. The results highlight the beneficial effects of art therapy and its ability to meet the unique requirements of grieving populations across different demographic groups and cultural backgrounds.

The discussion explores how art therapists navigate treating bereaved clients, highlighting the unique function of art as a therapeutic tool. Art therapists guide clients through the complex stages of grief by encouraging emotional expression, developing a solid therapeutic connection, improving intervention techniques, and promoting self-reflection, self-realisation, and emotional strength. This aspect is essential due to sorrow's complex and subtle character, which typically requires a customised and comprehensive therapy strategy.

The discussion provides a detailed and thorough examination of the healing possibilities of art therapy about grief and bereavement.

The discussion emphasises the importance of incorporating art therapy into comprehensive therapeutic approaches for managing grief. This integration aims to enhance the mental well-being and adaptive coping strategies of individuals dealing with loss and existential challenges, drawing on both research-based

evidence and theoretical foundations. Further empirical research is needed to enhance the clinical effectiveness of art therapy and ensure fair access for those who require it.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the literature synthesis highlights the significant therapeutic benefits of art therapy for dealing with sorrow and grief. This review highlights the importance of art therapy as a comprehensive therapeutic approach by examining grief as an ordinary human experience and discussing several theoretical frameworks that explain its complexities. Empirical research has highlighted the effectiveness of art therapy in helping mourning individuals express emotions, facilitate healing, and build resilience. Art therapists and bereaved clients emphasise art's unique ability to help navigate sorrow and facilitate transformative therapy processes.

Despite the abundance of research supporting the effectiveness of art therapy in treating grief, several limits need to be recognised. The examined papers primarily use qualitative approaches, indicating a need for additional quantitative research to support results and improve applicability. The diverse nature of grieving requires customised interventions, highlighting the importance of individualised treatment strategies that consider individual variations in coping mechanisms and cultural contexts. Art therapy has potential as a therapeutic method, but its accessibility could be restricted by cost, availability of skilled practitioners, and institutional backing.

Future research should address these limitations by using robust research methods, broadening the diversity of study participants, and exploring the cost-effectiveness of art therapy therapies. Overcoming these obstacles can enhance the incorporation of art therapy into conventional grief treatment methods, improving the delivery of thorough and fair mental health care for those dealing with grief and loss.

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