WRITING YOUR WAY OUT OF DARKNESS AND INTO THE LIGHT:
USING CREATIVE WRITING AS A WAY TO NAVIGATE THROUGH THE
GRIEVING PROCESS FROM A NARRATIVE THERAPY PERSPECTIVE

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Marriage and Family Therapy

By

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This project is dedicated to two very important and influential people in my life. This project is dedicated to my grandmother and to my pottery teacher and dear friend Linda.

My grandma played a huge role in my life. She was my mother and father, my grandmother and grandfather, my inspiration, my teacher, and my rock. My grandma loved me so much. I was her everything. I guess she was my everything, too. Grandma, you will always be missed and you will always be found. So much of who I am today is because of you, and therefore I can never ever lose you. If I can give the world just a fraction of the love you gave to me, the world will be a much better place.

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The purpose of this project was to create a guidebook to aid individuals struggling with grief, bereavement, and loss through use of creative writing. A detailed literature review covers various models for the stages/process of grief, bereavement, and loss. Additional aspects of the literature review provide an overview of narrative therapy and creative writing in therapy. An integration of the narrative and creative writing is suggested. The project, a guidebook for navigating the grief process through writing and recommended for use by individuals and/or in conjunction with therapy, is included in the appendix.
CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Background and Significance

Emotional attachment is an innate characteristic of humans (Freud, 1917; 1957). We are immediately physically and emotionally reliant on others to survive at birth. Philosophically, physical and emotional attachment with other people can provide fulfillment and enhance the level of contentment over our life span. The complement of such attachment is the inevitable loss of this attachment at some point in life (Freud, 1917; 1957).

Loss has many forms, such as death of loved ones or pets, loss of a physical inanimate object, or the loss of a relationship. Of these losses, the most difficult type of loss to overcome results from death due to its permanent nature. On average, over six thousand people die each day and 4% of children experience the death of a parent before the age of 18 in the United States (U.S. Census and Social Security Administration, 2000). The inevitability of grief as the result from a loss should prompt society to teach coping strategies in schools, churches, or public service announcements. Especially considering how the stressful event of loss can increase the risk for a wide range of mental health problems in childhood and adulthood (Sandler, Ma, Tein, Ayers, Wolchik, Kennedy & Millsap, 2010).

Popular culture in America would have you believe it is understandable to be sad after experiencing the loss of a loved one; however, one should be back to normal in a few months (McBride & Simms, 2001). Popular culture also advocates for vacations; trips to night clubs and bars; shopping sprees; or other distractions as suitable resolutions to get one over the grief "hump" (McBride & Simms, 2001). However, 10 to 20% of bereaved individuals suffer for years (Bonanno, 2008; Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa, & Folkman, 2005).

Research confirms that people’s ability, duration, and methods to cope with grief vary
widely (Bonanno, 2008). Succinct interventions that can be employed by clinicians or grief stricken individuals to reduce the duration and the mental health ramifications are needed. An approach or intervention for coping with grief need not be complex or laborious to enhance digestibility. The more effort any approach requires will likely significantly reduce the number of people willing to employ its techniques.

The ideas in this project shall converge on using the creative ability of the human mind to transfer raw emotional thoughts into literary expression. The literary expressions effectively connect the right and the left brain in telling a personal story (Dietrich & Kanso, 2010), providing the power to heal with every pen stroke.

**Statement of the Problem**

Bereavement, loss, and grief are experiences that occur for all individuals. Unfortunately our society rarely makes room for the disclosure or discussion of the emotions inevitably connected to these complicated experiences on an individual level (McBride & Simms, 2001; Kubler-Ross, 1969). Individuals try to find ways to deal with the grief, but usually the grief reemerges in the form of anxiety, depression, or a variety of other emotional or physical ailments (Supiano & Vaughn-Cole, 2011). Creative writing has been shown to have many benefits for individuals and especially for individuals in the process of bereavement, loss, and grief (Mazza, 2001; Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, 2001; White & Epston, 1990; Wong & Rochlen, 2009). One of the difficulties with tapping into the creativity is that creative writing is not usually taught as a way of dealing with emotions in our society. Furthermore, creative writing is a process that can be useful, but one that requires practice. The combination of these two facts creates a situation where an individual is left to follow the socially acceptable “normal” way of grieving (Kubler-Ross, 1969). This “normal” way of grieving is in the form of religious or cultural ceremonies that
may only account for the grief experienced during the first few weeks to a month after the death. The problem is the individual is likely still carrying immense levels of complex emotions, but the individuals that are less affected by or further removed from the grief are ready to move on with their lives and go back to their lives as they were before the loss (Kubler-Ross, 1969; McBride & Simms, 2001). The internal world of the grieving individual is still in chaos and turmoil. One way to allow some of the chaos out is through creative written expression (Mazza, 2001).

Creative writing has many forms. The important part of creative writing for a grieving individual is not in the form, but in the transfer of emotions. The inherent difficulty is that creativity by nature is a process that can be unique and therefore not repeatable (Snyder, 1996). The unique experience of the creativity makes it difficult to propose a universal set of steps that will fit every individual and help them tap into or express their emotions creatively.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project is to create a guide that will allow individuals to start the process of tapping into their creativity in the form of written expression and teach them how to practice and build upon their creative abilities as a way of coping with loss, bereavement, and grief. The guide is comprised of a step by step approach to help the individual through a process of creative written expression. The guide offers individuals with little (or extensive) creative writing experience the benefit of accessing untapped emotions by separating the process into easy to follow steps.

Definitions of Key Terms and Concepts

In order to understand the loss, bereavement, and grief process fully, it is necessary to define the terms: loss, bereavement, and grief for the purpose of this project. The definitions of the terms "bereavement," "loss," and "grief" used in this project are based on research (Servaty-
Loss is defined as a moment in time when a person has a tangible and or intangible amount less than the amount they had at an earlier time. An example of a tangible loss is when an individual loses an object such as a toy, picture, or wallet. Another example is when a person dies or moves away. The individual that is close to that person is the one experiencing the tangible loss. An example of an intangible loss could be an individual losing their internal connection to the person or object they lost. When a person dies, an individual who had a connection to that person may suffer from both a tangible and intangible loss. The tangible loss comes from the inability to touch or hug them. The intangible loss comes from the internal connection that evokes pleasurable feelings when they were around them. According to Servaty-Seib, bereavement can be defined as "the state of having experienced loss" and grief can be defined as "the generally passive and involuntary reaction to the state of bereavement" (2004, p. 126). This definition of grief directly ties to unpredictability. The words passive and involuntary in “generally passive and involuntary reaction” imply the reaction is happening to an individual and the individual is not involved or engaged in the reaction. The moment when a person is reacting to the bereavement is the exact moment they realize the loss had already occurred. Their reaction becomes tainted by this new found information of the loss. When an individual experiences the instantaneous change resulting from the death of a loved one, the realization that they can never go back to the way things were before the person died can be shocking. Grief, a deep and profound shock to the entire person, is described in many ways including emotional instability, unique, personal, powerful, emotionally draining, stressful, anxiety provoking, permanent, consuming, and painful (Kubler-Ross, 1969).

The next sections of the project will discuss experiences and emotions, psychological theories, and current treatments associated with bereavement, loss, and grief. The description,
uses, and benefits of narrative therapy and creative writing will be explored. Lastly, creative
writing, narrative therapy, and grief work will be reviewed and integrated to describe the process
of coping with grief by use of creative writing from a narrative perspective.
CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

Loss, bereavement, and grief can create a lonely, painful, and overwhelming experience for an individual. This experience can be so overwhelming the individual may not know where or how to start navigating through their feelings. Over the years therapists have developed many theories to help individuals resolve their grief and find ways to minimize their symptoms. In this review of the literature different loss, bereavement, and grief psychological theories and treatments are compared. Then a review of the narrative therapy approach and tying the narrative process to the grieving process. Lastly, a review of the connection between creative writing as it applies to grief and as it applies to narrative therapy for grieving individuals.

Loss, Bereavement, and Grief

Loss, bereavement, and grief are complicated and emotional experiences that every human will encounter, some indirectly and for all, ultimately in a very direct, personal, and individual way. The field of loss, bereavement, and grief has been addressed by many counseling theorists from Freud to Kubler-Ross to White and Epston and many others (Granados, De Witt, Hedtke, & Winslade, 2009; White & Epston 1990). Although these theorists all deal with loss, bereavement, and grief, their approaches vary vastly. The two main categories of theories discussed are the stage/phase theories and style, process, and concept driven theories.

Stage/Phase Loss, Bereavement, and Grief Theories

Sigmund Freud, considered the father of psychology by many, was one of the first theorists to introduce his theory on grief (Granados et al., 2009). He introduced the phrase "grief work", and posited that grief work meant the individual had to experience and express the emotions related to the loss (Freud, 1917; 1957).

Kubler-Ross (1969) and Worden (2004) are two other theorists that shared the belief that
the individual has to experience and express emotions, but each has different approaches to how
the individual navigates through the experiences and expression of feelings (Granados et al.,
2009). According to Kubler-Ross (1969), a grieving individual goes through a 5-stage process of
denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance in dealing with death and the dying.
Kubler-Ross (1969) believed an individual does not have to move through the stages in a linear
fashion, but rather the individual may skip or spill over from one stage to another. Kubler-Ross
(1969) used near death hospital patients as her subjects for her research and therefore, her
understanding was initially more about the process of death and dying, rather than the process of
grieving. After gathering, processing, and organizing all of the information from her patients
Kubler-Ross (1969) began to understand that her theory is also applicable to the grieving
process. Kubler-Ross (1969) proposed that the process of grieving is the process her patients
were in when they were confronting their own death (Kubler-Ross 1969). Kubler-Ross (1969)
then developed the following five stages of the grieving process; denial, anger, bargaining,
depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross 1969). Worden suggested four sequential phases of
grieving: accepting the reality of the loss, working through the pain, adjusting to the new
environment, and emotionally relocating the deceased in order to move on (Worden, 2004).
According to Worden (2004) emotionally relocating the deceased is the process of forming an
ongoing relationship with the memories associated with the loss, rather than holding on to the
attachments of the deceased. Worden (2004) believes this process allows the individual to
continue on with their lives by building a new relationship with those memories. Other theorists
(Bowlby, 1980; Gilliland & James, 1988) suggest a theory where shock, disorganization, and
reorganization are three distinct but overlapping phases that have less rigid boundaries. Bowlby
(1980) and Gilliland and James' (1988) theory allows for varying levels of overlapping of stages
with minimal containment.

Each of the aforementioned theorists have the following in common: they believed all individuals go through stages/phases in the grieving process, they believe that an individual must complete all of the stages/phases in order to complete the grieving process, and they believe that the final step is to disconnect from the person or thing that was lost. In order to make the aforementioned claims, these same theorists made the assumptions that grief is universal and that the purpose of the grieving process was to disconnect from the person or thing that was lost. Over time, other theorists developed different ways of thinking about the grieving process that do not include the assumptions of universality and the necessity to disconnect, but rather consider that the grieving process may depend on the individual. Each individual may need or desire different things in their own individual grieving process (Doughty, Wissel, & Glorfield, 2011; Servaty-Seib, 2004). These newer theories look at the individual's style of grieving, way of processing the grief, and how the individual may conceptualize the grief.

**Style, Process, and Concept Driven Loss, Bereavement and Grief Theories**

Some of the newer theories in the 21st century, such as Adaptive Grieving Styles, the Dual Process Model, and social constructionist theory, suggest that the grieving process is not universal by way of the feelings the individual experiences, but rather individuals share similar styles, processes, or concepts about their own grief. (Doughty, Wissel, & Glorfield, 2011; Servaty-Seib, 2004). The grieving process is complex and often intense. The reaction and way of coping will vary from person to person making the grieving process a very personal and unpredictable, nonlinear experience (Servaty-Seib, 2004).

**Adaptive Grieving Styles**

Adaptive grieving styles is a grief model presented by Martin and Doka (2000) that looks
at the individual's unique and distinctive way of dealing with a loss. The model reflects the individual's current use of cognitive, behavioral, and affective strategies for dealing with a loss and allows the individual the freedom to further develop these strategies. The adaptive grieving style model separates the grieving into three distinct patterns for adults. The patterns of the grief are determined by both the individual's internal experience and their external expression of the grief. The three pattern styles of grieving are A) intuitive grieving, B) instrumental grieving, and C) blended grieving. In the first style of grieving, intuitive grieving, the individual's expression and experience of emotions is heightened. In the second style of grieving, instrumental grieving, the individual's cognitive expression and experience and a desire to control emotions is heightened. Instrumental grieveros usually attempt to problem solve and perform tasks as an attempt to fix the problem. Lastly, in the third style of grieving, blended grieving, the individual uses a combination of both the intuitive and instrumental styles of grieving. The blended grieving style is the most common approach for individuals. Martin and Doka (2000) postulate; every individual has some level of intuitive and instrumental grieving and helping the individual connect to these grieving styles at their different levels of intuition, cognitive expression, and experiencing is important.

The Dual Process Model

The Dual Process Model looks at two types of stressors when coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). These two stressors are loss-oriented stressors and restoration-oriented stressors. Loss-oriented stressors come up when an individual is dealing directly with a loss and the emotions associated with that loss. Restoration-oriented stressors deal with life after a loss and the stress that this different experience brings. Some examples of loss-oriented stressors include, remembering the times that the individual spent with the deceased before they died,
asking questions such as: "Why did they have to die?" "Why me?" or "What did I do to deserve this?" thinking of what the individual could have done to prevent the loss, and dealing with the emotions these subjects bring up. Some examples of restoration-oriented stressors include, asking such questions as: "What am I going to do now?" "How will I go on?" or "What if I can't do this on my own?" thinking about what life will be like in the future and all of the changes that they will cause, and looking at new roles that the bereaved may have to assume to make up for the loss of the loved one. According to Stroebe and Schut (1999), individuals dealing with a loss will spend some of their time dealing with loss-oriented stressors, some time dealing with restoration-oriented stressors, and some of their time not dealing with the grief at all. This "oscillation" between these three states is considered a healthy and normal response to dealing with grief and adapting to life after the loss. Stroebe and Schut (1999) also postulate that when these oscillations are not occurring that the individual's grieving is not progressing.

The Dual Process Model is somewhat unique in that it is a compilation of some earlier theories, but one that provides a fuller, more comprehensive view of the grieving process. When the individual is dealing with loss-oriented stressors, they are doing what Freud (1915; 1957) called "grief work" when they are dealing with restoration-oriented stressors, they are looking at their lives in the present and future. Post-modern psychological theories emphasize the use of present and future perspectives. Lastly, when the individual is "taking a break" or not dealing with the grief, they allow themselves to do some self care. "Taking a break" is acknowledged as a normal part of the grieving process (Parkes, 2002; Servaty-Seib, 2004; Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Social Constructionist Theory

Social constructionist theory is a postmodern philosophy that posits an individual's reality is socially constructed through language and relationships (Gehart, 2010). What an individual
believes to be the truth is based on dialogue interactions with others about truth discourses. Social constructionist theory postulates that there is no absolute truth, but rather, there are multiple truths that are dictated by an individual’s connection to their world (Gehart 2010; Neimeyer, 1993; Servaty-Seib, 2004). Neimeyer (2001) argues that social constructionist theory and narrative therapy concepts explain grief and loss as the process of reconstructing meaning for the present and future of the individual's life experiences after the loss. The concept of "meaning reconstruction" is a way of looking to the present and future rather than trying to bring the individual's world back to the way it used to be (Neimeyer, 2001). Meaning reconstruction assumes the world cannot be taken back to a previous state before the loss, but the loss has now changed the individual's perspective of his/her world (Neimeyer, 2001). The only way to "move on" is to create a new meaning - to reconstruct the individual's world into something new (Neimeyer, 2001). Meaning reconstruction after a loss "involves a complicated balance between redefining the self and an implicit reweaving of how one engages with the world" (Servaty-Seib, 2004, p.133). One way of engaging in the process of redefining the self and re-engaging with the world is by using the narrative therapy way of re-storying, re-authoring, or re-membering (White & Epston, 1999). The style, process, and concept driven theories place emphasis on the individual's strengths and look for ways of incorporating those strengths in the present as well as the future. In order to have individuals look into their future, the clinician must facilitate and allow for changes in the individual's current meaning of the loss. As Neimeyer (2001) explains, meaning reconstruction is crucial to helping individuals continue on their path in the grieving process. The grieving and the feelings an individual internalizes after a loss, is a never ending process that molds and shapes with time. Narrative, solution-focused, and collaborative are some of the post-modern psychological theories under the broad social constructionist theory (Gehart,
According to Neimeyer (1999) narrative theory helps individuals with meaning reconstruction.

**Narrative Therapy**

Narrative therapy was developed by Michael White and David Epston in Australia and New Zealand (Gehart, 2010). The main premise of narrative therapy is that we create the meaning of our lives based on the available information from our surrounding environment. We use information such as broad societal stories, sociocultural practices, assumptions, and expectations about how we should live our lives to create the stories that make up who we are (Gehart, 2010).

According to Morgan (2000), humans search for meaning in their experiences. The linking of these experiences come together to form a “story.” This story, or narrative of one’s life, carries a meaning for the individual that is influenced by personal experience, shared experience, and our surroundings. “The way we have developed these stories is determined by how we have linked certain events together in a sequence and by the meaning we have attributed to them” (Morgan, 2000, p.4-5). White and Epston (1990, p.10) define “story” or “self-narrative” in the following way:

In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. Specific experiences of events of the past and the present, and those that are predicted to occur in the future must be connected in a lineal sequence to develop this account.

Narrative therapists believe an individual’s "story" to be filled with dominant and local discourses. Dominant discourses or stories are socioculturally biased generalizations accepted as
a way of being or doing. Dominant discourses show up in our everyday life in the form of being a parent, spouse or child, or what makes a good versus bad driver, cook, or plumber. In contrast, “local discourses” are personal judgments or beliefs stemming from personal experiences, perceptions and language. Local discourses generally have different values than dominant discourses (Gehart, 2010).

White and Epston (1990) also compare “lived experience and alternative stories.” Lived experience is the part of our linked experiences that get storied in our minds and our understanding. These lived experiences carry our version of the truth as we currently believe and understand it. Lived experiences can never include our total here and now experience, because they are limited by language in nature. This leaves room for the possibility of an alternative story to unfold. These alternative stories are one way healing can occur according to narrative therapists.

**Treatment Phases of Narrative Therapy**

Various authors use different language and terms to describe the phases of narrative therapy, but most share similar ideas about these phases of treatment (Morgan, 2000; Nichols, 2008; White & Epston, 1990). The basic phases of treatment for narrative therapy are: Meeting the person, listening to the problem saturated stories, externalizing the problem by separating the problems from the people, mapping the influence of the problems, "deconstruction," finding unique outcomes, and creating and reinforcing an alternative story (Morgan, 2000). Narrative therapists try not to make assumptions about individuals and ask the person if their assumptions are indeed true.

In the first phase of treatment, narrative therapists are meeting the person for the first time and are learning about the individual. The therapist is deconstructing their assumptions of
the individual by asking the individual questions in this meeting phase. The questions allow the therapist to learn about whom the client is through the individual's narrative and stories the individual shares (Morgan, 2000). The therapist is "listening for the effects of dominant discourses and identifying times without the problems" as the individual is talking (Gehart, 2010, p.421). According to White and Epston (1990) "Externalizing" occurs when the therapist helps the individual see the problem that they present in therapy as a problem that is outside of the individual. This process helps the individual see the problem as an outside separate entity from the individual, rather than the problem defining the individual. Mapping the influence of the problem is the process of tracing the history of the problem and exploring its effects (Morgan, 2000). This process allows both the therapist and the individual to better understand the problem as a standalone entity and to find "unique outcomes" by use of deconstruction.

Deconstruction is the process of questioning assumptions. The therapist can help the individual see other possibilities or "unique outcomes" by questioning the assumptions or local discourses of the individual (Nichols, 2008). These "unique outcomes" are "times when the client resisted the problem or behaved in ways that contradicted the problem story" (Nichols, 2008, p.382). These "unique outcomes" provide an opportunity for creating and then reinforcing an alternative story. The reinforcement stage of narrative therapy is very powerful. Narrative therapy is one of the few therapies that strengthen and reinforce the new preferred narrative. Reinforcement can be accomplished by what others have called "re-storying" or "re-authoring" (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). The reinforcement aspect of narrative therapy can take on many forms such as letter writing, poetry or creative writing, making a movie, making a song, or doing something creative that celebrates and solidifies the accomplishments completed in therapy (Morgan, 2000). The two benefits to this type of creative celebration are the act of
creation, and sharing the creation with individuals that can appreciate the accomplishments (Morgan, 2000). Although there are many ways to help individuals create and reinforce their unique alternative stories, such as lists, art, poetry, celebrations, letter writing and certificates (White & Epston, 1990), the remainder of this discussion will explore the use of creative writing as it pertains to poetry therapy.

Creative Writing

According to Wong and Rochlen, (2009, p.150) creative writing has many therapeutic benefits such as:

Shorter stays in the hospital after surgical operations (Solano, Donati, Pecci, Persichetti, & Colaci, 2003), increase in job offers after being laid off (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994), a decline in depressive symptoms (Lepore, 1997), improved psychological well-being (King, 2001), and positive effects on romantic relationships (Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006). Significantly, expressive writing has been found to bring about benefits comparable to short term therapy (Esterling, L’Abate, Murray, & Pennebaker, 1999).

According to Dennison (1999) poetry and writing have been used in the last three decades to help clients with a variety of issues. According to White and Epston (1990) "therapeutic documents" such as written letters, poems, and journal entries, can quadruple the impact of just "talking" therapy alone from a "narrative" therapy perspective. Stepakoff (2009) states that the act of writing poetry can often leave the client with a sense of relief, because the client is able to let out their feelings and raw emotions by way of organized language. White and Epston (1990) discovered that the client can use creative writing to remind themselves of the way they may have felt over time and how those feelings change. According to McAllister and
Wolff (2002) letter writing and free writing are also techniques helping individuals deal with their problems. This form of writing can oftentimes surprise the individual with the content and information that surfaces. Writing the material down is one aspect of the benefits. According to Stepenkoff (2009) another aspect of recovery comes when one can regain the capacity for "meaningful participation in civic life" by sharing their written work with others.

**Creative Writing and Grief**

There are many ways to deal with grief, bereavement, and loss as the vast gamut of emotions that come up can be as unique as the individual. There is usually a sense of blame or guilt when one is dealing with grief (Denisson, 1999). An individual’s guilt may relate to being alive while the loved one is dead. The guilt may also relate to feelings of not doing enough, saying enough, or being enough for the loved one while they were still alive. The process of creative expression can help the individual express and externalize these feelings by literally allowing the emotions to leave the body. Whether the expression of feelings is in the form of writing, painting, drawing, clay making, or any other creative form, the final product is one that is physically outside of the individual. The final product represents the transfer of the internal emotion to an external physical form. This creative form of externalizing is very powerful for two reasons: first, the person will feel some of the weight of these emotions lifted or gone; as though that part of them is now no longer weighing them down; second, the final product is one that can be shared with others. When an individual writes a poem, they can read it to themselves or others (Denisson, 1999). Both experiences can have a continuous healing effect (Denisson, 1999).

Denison (1999), a clinician that used creative writing many times as an intervention with her clients wrote a poem to her mother after months of dealing with her mother’s upcoming
death. According to Denisson (1999), the healing effect the poem had on her and her mother was immensely disproportionate to anything else she had done to that point.

Then one day the author sat down and began to write a poem to her mother. After her months of anguish, the words just flowed and the emotional pain, for the first time in two years, began to diminish. It was that sense of externalizing of such emotionally charged material that no other mode of communication had been able not only to bring to the surface, but to articulate in a way that produced a satisfying message of 'this is what you meant to me, mom.' (Denisson, 1999, p. 220)

An additional aspect of healing occurred for Denisson, because although the poem was about the loss of her mother, it was written while her mother was still alive which allowed the grieving process to begin before the physical loss had occurred. This brings up three different notable observations. One is that the process of grief, bereavement, and loss does not begin only after the physical loss occurs (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Second, the person who is dying is also very involved in their own loss of themselves - in their death (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Third, there is healing power in sharing this creative expression with the person who is dying. Healing occurs for the writer/reader as well as the listener (Dennison, 1999; Antzoulis, 2003).

The act of writing itself is not the only way creative writing benefits an individual in the grieving process. Reading or sharing creative writing that has been written by others is also helpful. For example, when children in New York City were exposed to the tragedy of 9/11, they were immediately exposed to too much loss, bereavement, and grief. According to Antzoulis (2003), reading poetry to the children who had witnessed the tragedy of 9/11 from their classroom window, allowed them to tap into their feelings about the horrific visuals they observed. The children found ways to directly externalize their feelings about the difficult
experience by talking about the poetry of others that had dealt with loss. The reading and discussions of poetry about death allowed the children to tangibly describe their own experience Vis a Vis the experiences of the writers of the poems. The children from this classroom progressed from reading poems to eventually writing their own poetry to deal with and process their grief (Antzoulis, 2003).

Although the healing power of creative expression is well documented (Wong & Rochlen, 2009), the methods by which an individual expresses themselves are as unique as the individual themselves. There are many ways to be creative. Creativity by definition according to dictionary.com (n.d.) is "the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc. the state of having originality, progressiveness, or imagination." According to this definition, meaningful new ideas and forms are created by transcending traditional ways of doing. In finding ways to help individuals "transcend" the traditional approaches, they can find new meanings for themselves. The healing from the pain of dealing with grief, loss, and bereavement is in these new meanings, because as Morgan (2000) explains, narrative therapy looks for new meanings of the problem saturated story and it uses these new meanings to create the new story.

Creative writing is a powerful approach to dealing with loss, bereavement, and grief (Servaty-Seib, 2004). The use of creative writing has the potential of allowing the individual to connect to their subconscious in a direct way that is unrestricted, uninhibited, and raw (Wong & Rochlen, 2009). The creative writing comes directly from the subconscious without being distracted or influenced by conscious thoughts (Dennison, 1999; Wong & Rochlen, 2009). Creative writing allows the individual the opportunity to connect to their grieving process in their own way, rather than a predetermined universal way (Antzoulis, 2003). Creative writing helps
individuals feel less alone because the individual can share their innermost pain, suffering, thoughts, and feelings with themselves and others (Dennison, 1999; Servaty-Seib, 2004). Sharing with the outside world gives others a glimpse of what the individual is feeling inside. This outward expression, the writings on the page, can oftentimes transform an individuals’ experience into a universally understood experience. This transformation comes about because of the rawness that is portrayed on the page which allows others to connect to that same pain, suffering, feeling, or thoughts in a way that feels as if it was their own. This universal connection is what makes creative writing so powerful.

**Treatments / Therapies for Loss, Bereavement, and Grief**

Many different treatments have been used in the last few centuries for loss, bereavement, and grief, such as rituals, prayers, therapies, and medications (Parkes, 2002). The stage/phase grief theorists discussed in this project, Freud, Kubler-Ross, and Worden, as well as the style, process, and concept driven theories of Adaptive Grieving Styles, the Dual Process Model, and social constructionist theory each indicate varying treatment styles to help individuals work through loss, bereavement, and grief. Other treatments such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), attachment theory, supportive theories, art therapy, poetry therapy, group therapy, and narrative therapy also have their corresponding treatments (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008). Despite the breadth of research on the treatments for loss, bereavement, and grief, no single treatment has been identified as superior. Most of the research points to finding the treatment best fitting the individual (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008). For the purposes of this project, I will concentrate on poetry therapy integrated with narrative therapy to formulate a unique treatment approach for loss, bereavement, and grief.

**Poetry Therapy**
The use of poetry in the counseling world dates as far back as the "Moral Therapy" movement in England in the 1800s which used poetry as well as other forms of bibliotherapy to enhance the therapeutic experience (Gladding & Mazza, 1983). Today poetry therapy has become a well recognized form of treatment in the mental health field. The most powerful movement for poetry therapy came about in the 1960's and 1970's and was pioneered by Jack Leedy and Art Lerner (Gladding & Mazza, 1983). Jack Leedy and Art Lerner had different ideas about the use of poetry in therapy. Although they both understood the many benefits of poetry in a similar way, they chose very different approaches in the room with their patients (Gladding & Mazza, 1983). Leedy had a structured approach to poetry therapy. He would choose the poem to be read by the individual and select his poem based on the issue the individual was dealing with.

In contrast to Leedy, Lerner took a less structured approach using poetry in therapy, one that was more free and collaborative. Lerner believed that the individual as well as the therapist were responsible for giving input in selecting which poem to read in session and who was to read (Gladding & Mazza, 1983). Because Lerner's approach was less structured and defined, Lerner used guidelines to help keep some structure and frame. One of the guidelines Lerner used, for example, is that there should be no object between any of the individuals and the therapists. Lerner believed that having an object such as a desk or lamp created unwanted distancing between individuals (Furman, Downey, Jackson, & Bender, 2002). Lerner's collaborative approach allowed the therapist and individual's to work together towards their goals in a setting where all the individuals in the room had the same level of authority.

Other poetry therapists such as Houlding and Holland (1988) looked at other aspects of poetry therapy. They looked for ways the therapeudic experience could be improved for clients by making sure individuals had a table nearby to use for writing. Houlding and Holland (1988)
also found ways to reduce the individual's or group's level of anxiety by starting with a poem with word blanks in which the individual or a group member suggests a word and shares it with the therapist or the group. Other poetry therapists (Mazza, 1985) suggested the use of collaborative poem writing in a group setting where all of the group members actively participate in writing an impromptu poem. Mazza (1985) would ask group members to identify and express the feelings most relevant in the moment. Members with similar answers would work in pairs to create a poem together and describe the meaning the poem would have for them.

Mazza (1999) used the Receptive / Expressive / Symbolic (R.E.S) model of poetry therapy when working with both individuals and groups. The R.E.S model can be broken down into three main parts or modes: 1) receptive / prescriptive, 2) expressive / creative, and 3) symbolic / ceremonial (Mazza, 1999; Stepakoff, 2009). In the receptive / prescriptive mode, individuals are introduced to poetry by either reading or listening to poems. The receptive mode acts as a way of introducing poetry into the therapy. In the expressive / creative mode, individuals create something of their own, be it poems, letters, or journal entries. The individual can express themselves creatively in a variety of ways and at different times and typically the individual shares the writing with the therapist in the room. In the symbolic / ceremonial mode, individuals or families create a ritual, celebration, or ceremony to solidify and symbolize an event that has taken place. An example of a symbolic mode is when a family buries a household pet and writes a eulogy for the lost "family member" (Mazza 1983; Mazza 1999; Mazza 2001; Stepakoff, 2009). The use of the symbolic mode of poetry therapy is not immediately apparent, because of the indirect nature of the ceremony or celebration (Mazza, 2001). For example according to Becvar and Becvar (1993) the difficulty in a divorce can be thought of as "losing the person with whom one has a shared story" (Mazza, 2001, p. 31). Bowman (1994) states that
the loss in the case of a relationship can be felt as the loss of the physical person, the loss of the relationship, and the loss of the dream of the relationship. The dream of the relationship can be thought of as the story each individual had in their head about the relationship (Mazza, 2001). This means that while the two individuals are in the relationship, they may each have a different dream/story about the past, present, and future of the relationship and in a divorce, or other loss of the relationship the individual would then lose their dream/story of the relationship as well as the relationship itself (Mazza, 2001).

The relationship between loss, bereavement, and grief, narrative therapy, and creative writing has been explored by many clinicians such as Neimeyer (1999), Mazza (2001), and McAllister and Wolff (2002). Loss, bereavement, and grief are intense processes that have a strong impact on an individual's perspective, outlook, functioning, and levels of anxiety and depression. Creative writing has been shown to help individuals overcome some of these challenges by facilitating meaning reconstruction. Narrative therapy preaches the use of creative writing, as well as other techniques, for strengthening the new meaning and story. Creative writing and poetry therapy allow individuals a personal experience and connection to the subconscious where the dark and painful emotions of a grieving individual lie. The result is a creative, artistic, and personal way to experience, express, and understand difficult feelings of loss, bereavement, and grief. The result is a powerful way to heal.
CHAPTER THREE - PROJECT AUDIENCE AND IMPLEMENTATION

FACTORS

Loss, bereavement, and grief are universal but unique processes (McBride & Simms, 2001). All individuals experience loss, bereavement, and grief at some point in their lives, but rarely do these individuals have the exact same experience. There has been much research in the field of bereavement, loss, and grief (Bowlby, 1980; Doughty, Wissel, & Glorfield, 2011; Gilliland & James, 1988; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Servaty-Seib, 2004) and there are techniques that individuals may use to try to navigate and understand their individual process (Dennison, 1999; Martin & Doka, 2000; Mazza, 1999; Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Wong & Rochlen, 2009). The problem is that most of the techniques assume a universal approach to a very unique and personal experience (Mazza, 1983). Most of the techniques that currently exist tell the individual how they may feel and how to understand these feelings (Dennison, 1999). The missing piece is in getting the individual to come up with the descriptions of the feelings and their understanding on their own. This project helps guide an individual through that process while allowing the structure, the content, and the timing to belong to the individual themselves.

The project is created out of personal experience of grief and creative writing, the review of the literature, and my psychology and therapy background. A description of the process of this development will be explored as well as a description of the intended audience. The project is intended to be used by all individuals with little or no experience in the field of psychology or creative writing. An outline of the project will be presented as a way to introduce the project and its associated steps.

Development of Project

Creative writing is an important part of my life, but it was not always this way. I started
writing in a journal in therapy three years after the journal was given to me by an ex girlfriend. The journal sat there, as did I, waiting for a spark or a signal to come to me. Needless to say, the journal itself never did get my attention and I did not connect to the journal by osmosis. One day in therapy I was told by my therapist to start writing about some of my thoughts or feelings at home if I was able. At first I was not able. I kept hearing my therapist's voice of "Maybe you could write some of that down" as I was staring at this journal with its only entry written by the person who had given it to me. One day I opened up the journal and made my first entry. It was a short entry but the process was cathartic. This was the beginning of my healing creative writing process. As I got to writing more often and as the writing relieved me of more suffering, I began to write in a more creative way. The words seemed to flow rather than me forcing them onto the paper. I began to pull deeper and deeper feelings out, such as sadness, frustration, and anger, and it was happening in a way that felt natural. It was as if I was not completely in control, but rather that I was just there as a muse to facilitate the writing. The process of writing in this way feels as though when the tension inside my body gets to an overwhelming level, the energy of that tension flows out of the body and into the creation. The experience of this energy flow is healing and relieving. The journal entries soon turned into poetry and that allowed for deeper and more telling journal entries later. This was my journey into the world of therapeutic creative writing. It was a very slow and unguided journey, but a journey that has taught me a great deal about the creative writing process. In creating this project I hope to be able to support and guide this process for others and allow the great joy and restorative experience I have felt from creative writing, into their beings.

The guidebook that I created for this project was developed out of my own experience with healing creative writing. I have been writing poetry as a means of dealing with my
experiences of bereavement, loss, and grief, but I came across it in a purely coincidental manner. Because I did not have much help in the process of using poetry as a cathartic tool for my emotions, it took a long time to get to the point where it was useful. I therefore built upon the experiences that I had and created a step-by-step approach that would allow others to feel as though they have a goal, a mentor, and structure in their therapeutic creative writing journey. The structure will help individuals feel they are not in this process alone.

The first step in organizing the guidebook was to break the process down into different steps. Once the steps were described and stated, means of achieving the steps were defined. Defining the various ways of accomplishing the steps was difficult because of the unique nature of the creative process. It took some inventive thinking to figure out how to create structure and goals for a process that I believe to be inherently without structure. It was also challenging to help an individual come up with a creative response to a structured question. The result is a loosely defined structure and goals that should motivate an individual without tapering their result.

**Intended Audience**

The project originally was intended to be a guidebook for therapists to use with their clients to help their clients deal with the process of loss, bereavement, and grief. The project then expanded to both therapists and clients because, after all, therapists are many times also clients and they too experience loss, bereavement, and grief. Since loss, bereavement, and grief can be experienced by all individuals regardless of their age, ethnicity, culture, sex, etcetera, the project is therefore appropriate for anyone interested in using creative writing as a means of dealing with bereavement, grief, and loss as long as the individual is able to read, write, and comprehend the content of the guidebook.
Personal Qualifications

The guidebook is intended to be used by individuals of all levels of education, of different backgrounds, and of varying skills. Although the guidebook is intended to be as standalone and as universal as possible, prior experience with creative writing or poetry writing can certainly help enhance an individual's healing creative experience. The guidebook is intended to be useful for individuals without prior knowledge of psychology, grief, or creative writing, while also catering to individuals that have some of these skills under their belt. Making this guidebook accessible to such a diverse population is intentional so the guidebook can help facilitate the creative process for the individual rather than creating an experience: The healing occurs through the individual's own experience of creativity.

Environment and Equipment

Different people find creative inspiration from different means, but as a general rule it may be helpful to start by trying to find a quiet space to read the guidebook and to begin writing. As an individual learns more about their own creative muses and inspirations, they are free to write and use the guidebook in any environment that suits them. Some individuals use journals or a notepad, while others prefer computers, laptops, or tablets. Any apparatus that allows an individual to take record of the written word or spoken word can be used with this guidebook. Some individuals may therefore choose to record their voice as a means for dictation or freestyle rap.

Project Outline

The project is broken down into six steps that describe ways of getting from the feelings of overwhelm and/or chaos from grief, bereavement, and loss to finding and solidifying the new meanings that form during the process:
1. Identifying the feelings of overwhelm and/or chaos;

2. Learning ways to separate the feelings from overwhelm/chaos and into more individualized feelings: Freeform / Free-flow writing;

3. Focusing on the individual feelings: once the feelings are more distinguishable, one can focus on the individual feelings and not the overwhelm. This too is a process and not a decipherable and bounded stage;

4. Writing to create change: The written word is not identical to the internal thoughts and feelings. It is a different way of connection;

5. Writing to create meaning: The process of creating meaning comes from the process of creating change. Through writing one can connect to the feelings, and more importantly, to the internally "lost connection" that plays an important part of the chaos; and,

6. Solidifying the meaning: This can be done in many different ways such as sharing ones creations with other survivors of the loss, sharing with loved ones, sharing with the dying, open mics, publishing, etc.
CHAPTER FOUR - CONCLUSION

Summary

The purpose of this project is to create a guide that will allow individuals to start the process of tapping into their creativity in the form of written expression and teach them how to practice and build upon their creative abilities as a way of coping with loss, bereavement, and grief. Loss, bereavement, and grief are complicated and unique experiences. All individuals will encounter loss, bereavement, and grief at some point in their lives, but society does not offer many healthy tools to deal with these complicated emotional experiences. The result is individuals may find themselves in a lonely, dark, and sad place where they may be overwhelmed by the intensity of the emotions and they feel as though others do not understand. This project examines a way of creating a connection to the feelings and emotions that are masked by the *overwhelm* and *chaos* individuals feel when they are in the state of loss, bereavement, and grief. This connection is created by the use of creative writing as a medium for change. Creative writing is used to create new meanings for the individual's situation and solidify this change by what narrative therapists call "re-storying." The process of re-storying is one where the individual finds new ways of seeing their lives by changing the individual's perspective or perception of their culturally and socially biased reality. Once an individual begins to see things from this new perspective, it is important to solidify this new story in order to keep the new perspective rather than falling back into the old one. One way to do this is to write about it. Furthermore, sharing the written work has exponential benefits in solidifying the new story and makes it "real" to all rather than just the individual experiencing the change.

Discussions and Conclusions

The process of creative writing is one that is dear to my heart on many levels. I
personally use creative writing as a tool in dealing with many different situations in my personal
and professional life with my clients. I use creative writing for issues such as relationship issues,
depression, anxiety, and grief. Writing this project and creating this project helped me in these
areas in my life. The subject matter of this project changed many times before arriving at what it
is today. All of the previous versions and ideas did not materialize for me because my heart and
soul were not a part of it. The reason this one worked and others did not is because I was dealing
with so much grief at the time and I believe I was looking for a way to connect to the grief and to
derive meaning from the grief. The process of writing this project was a parallel representative of
the struggles of dealing with loss, bereavement, and grief while trying to write as a way to heal.

In the time since I started this project I was faced with many losses in my personal life.
The thing that remained constant was this project and the feeling that I got when I was able to
articulate my feelings and get an understanding for my feelings in my own grieving process. At
times when I avoided writing, my anxiety grew and I felt lost. Writing was my way back into the
light. I found that the power of writing is one that can be overlooked at times and in this process
I was guilty of overlooking it myself. I learned that it is more important to write anything than to
not write at all as the power is in the written expression. The process of writing poetry also plays
an important role in my life and has been the crutch that has carried me through my process of
dealing with loss, bereavement, and grief. The literature backs up the fact that poetry, narrative
therapy, and grief can complement each other in a variety of ways (Mazza, 2001;
Neimeyer, 1999; Servaty-Seib, 2004). There seems to be a natural progression from narrative
therapy to poetry therapy. The importance of connecting grief to this natural progression comes
from the fact that grief is a lonesome place. Creative writing allows a way of connecting to the
universe in a very personal, unique, and individual way.
Future Work/Research

The guidebook created as a result of this project is a work in progress. This means the guidebook will continue to evolve as we individuals evolve and hopefully it will continue to stay current and relevant to the individuals and those in the field of psychotherapy. This guidebook will be used to teach therapists how to incorporate creative writing as a part of their treatment approaches for dealing with loss, bereavement, and grief by way of seminars. This guidebook will also be used by me in my own practice to enhance my use of creative writing with my clients. Lastly, the guidebook may be made available for individuals to pick it up and use on their own outside of a therapeutic relationship. In the future this guidebook may be expanded upon or even published as a more inclusive guidebook to help individuals with other processes. Other options for expansion include the addition of other forms of creativity, such as art, dance, pottery, or sports.

Poetry therapy is a growing field in psychology, but despite all the information available there are still many holes to fill. Future research on the effectiveness of poetry in relation to different therapeutic issues is yet to be discovered. The relationship of narrative therapy and poetry therapy is still new and their integration into a cohesive supporting therapy has not yet been completely understood. The field of loss, bereavement, and grief has much more research than creative writing and narrative therapy, but it has changed, developed, and molded over the years and is in a constant state of evolution. There is still so much we do not know about the experiences of individuals in the grieving process mostly due to the solitary nature of the process. Future research could attempt to unravel more of the mysteries of the grieving experience by creating a space for individuals to express the emotions in a longitudinal study across the first few years of grieving process of the individual. There is also the possibility to
incorporate journal writing to this longitudinal study as a way to track the emotions over time.
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APPENDIX

Writing Your Way Out of Darkness and Into the Light:
Using Creative Writing as a Way to Navigate Through the Grieving Process

This guidebook was created to help individuals navigate through their internal struggles with the feelings and emotions that come up when they are faced with the loss of someone or something important and significant. I went through so many emotions when I was first faced with death as an adult. I went through some of Kubler-Ross's (1969) stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression in the ebb and flow type of way she describes. I experienced immense amounts of guilt; loneliness and solitude, as if no one else could possibly understand, but most of all, I experienced pain, sadness, and distance. I felt completely disconnected from myself and who I believed I was. It was almost as if I was looking internally for something that was no longer there. I believe the part of me I was missing was really lost. The part that was lost was my internal connection to the people that are now missing from my life.

There is a big part of me that is gone. It's the part of me that was a grandson to my grandmother; a child to my dad who is now almost a baby and cannot take care of himself; and, a friend and a student to my pottery teacher and, dear, dear friend Linda. All of those internal pieces of me are no longer defined in the same way they were before, but they are still inside of me trying to find something or someone to connect to without a second half to make that connection to. And as long as the feelings and connections to these people are swirling around inside me without a counterpart to connect to, there is an uncertainty. There is chaos.

The exploration of the feelings I describe above led me to structure this guidebook in the
following way. I have developed six steps to help individuals navigate through their bereavement, loss, and grief and find a way to write their way into a better place within themselves. The process of writing to get to a better place is a healing process. Emotional healing is not something that happens all at once; but rather, it is a process that gets better with time and repetition. The structure of the guidebook is set up to lead you from the chaos you may feel while grieving through a process that allows you to define, understand, and experience the feelings associated with your grief through creative writing. The guidebook then teaches you to create your own meaning of their experience and share your meaning and experiences with others in your world. The way to use this guidebook is to read through the guidebook, follow the steps, and write. If and when you feel stuck, it may be useful to reread the guidebook or refer to different parts of the guidebook for inspiration. You can also reread your own writing, or other creative writing for inspiration. Although this guidebook is intended for all audiences, it will not have the same effect on all people. Different people will connect differently to this guidebook and therefore have different results. It may be useful for some to start by reading the entire guidebook and write whenever they feel they can along the way. Others may find it more useful to stay on a single step and continue to write until they feel ready to move on to another step.

This guidebook is meant to serve as a guide on your journey through your grief. These six steps take time and repetition. These six steps and the writing produced as a result of engaging in the process are part of the healing process. The six steps are described below.

The six steps of the guidebook:

1. Identifying the feelings of overwhelm and/or chaos
2. Learning ways to separate the feelings from overwhelm/chaos and into more individualized feelings: Freeform / Free-flow writing
3. Focusing on the individual feelings: once the feelings are more distinguishable, one can focus on the individual feelings and not the *overwhelm*. This too is a process and not a decipherable and bounded stage.

4. Writing to create meaning: Through writing one can connect to the feelings, and more importantly, to the internally "lost connection" that plays an important part of the *chaos*.

5. Writing to create change: The written word is not identical to the internal thoughts and feelings. It is a different way of connecting that creates change.

6. Solidifying the meaning: This can be done in many different ways such as sharing one's creations with other survivors of the loss, sharing with loved ones, sharing with the dying, open mics, publishing...

**The first step: Identifying the feelings of overwhelm and/or chaos**

*Introduction*

The uncertainty and *chaos* of death and grief can feel very *overwhelming*. It can be very hard to recognize, understand, and eventually navigate an individual's way into a new understanding and acceptance after the death of a loved one or the loss of something significant. The uncertainty can feel like an overwhelming flow of emotions that are disjointed and "out of the blue." This feeling of overwhelm makes it difficult many individuals to connect to their feelings at all as they may feel as though they are constantly being swept up by the tornado of *chaos* and *overwhelm*. When an individual is in the midst of the *overwhelm* they may find it difficult to write as their focus is consumed by the *overwhelm*. The purpose of this step is to help you recognize you are in the midst of the *overwhelm*.

*Techniques to Recognizing the Overwhelm*
It is important to note recognizing the exact feelings within the *overwhelm* is less important than recognizing the feeling of *overwhelm* itself. The object of this step is to recognize the times when you feel *overwhelmed* and not identifying individual feelings. The following are a set of things you can do to help you recognize the feeling of *overwhelm* and to prepare you for writing.

- Meditation or other breathing exercises can help facilitate a connection to the feeling of the *overwhelm*.
- Taking a walk or a drive alone without distractions can help facilitate a connection to the feeling of the *overwhelm*.
- Talking about your feelings in order to better understand them or organize them may be a way to connect if you are someone who prefers to engage with people. If so, you may spend time talking with family or a friend or you may see a therapist or other professionals.
- In the midst of the *overwhelm* you may experience many different feelings such as anxiousness, depression, physical and emotional exhaustion, or franticness. When feelings come up, try to pay close attention to the feeling, intensity, and your ability to recognize the feeling.
- There will be many times when you might just feel the intensity and not be able to pinpoint the feeling itself. This is a good indication you may be in the midst of the *overwhelm*.

All or any combination of these options can help you understand your feelings and recognize the *overwhelm*. When you learn to recognize times when the *overwhelm* is starting to show up, you may be ready to start writing.
The second step: Freeform/Free-flow Writing

Theory

Once you can recognize that overwhelm is starting to take over, you can find ways to direct the thoughts and emotions outside of your body and mind through creative expression. This "Externalizing" as a narrative therapist would call it, could allow you some separation from your grief (White & Epston, 1990). Creative expression may allow you to understand and acknowledge your thoughts and emotions in a very different way. The difference comes from a person's connectedness to these thoughts and emotions in a mindful, living in the moment, kind of way. Creative expression occurs when a person is in a state where there is some loss of control. This loss of control allows you to create something by allowing a guided flow out of yourself with just the right amount of direction and motivation. The act of writing allows an individual to channel their feelings of “overwhelm.” This allows the feelings to flow out of the individual rather than swirling around inside creating chaos (Mazza, 1999). One way to facilitate this process of the creative flow of thoughts and feelings is by way of freeform or free-flow writing.

Techniques to Freeform/Free-flow Writing

Freeform/free-flow writing is a technique where one grabs a pen/pencil and paper, or computer and via a notebook, journal, or otherwise allows words to flow onto the paper or computer with seemingly little or no conscious direction. Freeform/free-flow writing can be in the form of sentences, stories, poetry, or individual words (McAllister & Wolff, 2002). The purpose of freeform/free-flow writing is to write and to begin creating a connection to the individual's conscious and subconscious mind. Freeform/free-flow writing can be thought of as the written parallel to brainstorming. The only important thing is to write - to get words onto
paper or on a computer.

- Begin by allowing the space and time for creativity to flow. Set aside a time when you can be alone with a means of writing and try to spend as little as 5 minutes sitting and writing.
- Carry a journal or small notepad where you may write down ideas when a certain feeling comes up or when an inspiration of any kind surfaces.
- When you share some of the feelings of overwhelm with the person from step one, friend, family, or professional, start bringing a means of recording some of the ideas that come up in conversation.
- Continue to pay close attention to your feelings and think of ways you may write the feelings down. Then, as quickly as possible, find a means of writing and try to write anything that may come out.
- If you find it difficult to write anything at all, try to write your thoughts as you hear them in your head as a starting point

**Examples of Freeform/Free-flow Writing**

*I felt lonely. Stuck in darkness. I cannot seem to escape the feelings of emptiness. It is as if something is missing from inside me yet I can't figure out what it is. The hole where now there is only a pain seems to grow with every waking moment. Making me want and desire, but I know not what I want. I feel as though there is a tornado of memories of my grandma, my dad, and Linda and they are just swirling around inside, not leaving any room for me. Not leaving a tiny bit of space for me to feel that what I have done is okay. I feel so much guilt for the things I could not have stopped and it humbles me to know that I am not immortal. Yet the guilt deceives me into thinking that the guilt is what's important. And so I go through the motions of life, carrying a*
full gut of dark matter, pain, and slush and pretend that everything is going to be just fine, when all I really know is that I am still alive. I am here and they are not and I want no part of that. My mind goes off into the undoable again. I want to change the rules for the world so that I don’t have to feel this pain anymore. This pain does not go away they say. It changes, it morphs, it takes on a different meaning.

Meaning, there's a word I can work with.

The above example of freeform writing was written at a time in my life I was feeling very overwhelmed, but I was not able to recognize it. All I knew was everything sounded like it was "too much." "Too much work, too much effort, too much to think about, and too much to feel." I had no room for anything else to be added to my life, because I was filled to capacity with the overwhelm. One day, after many days of my teacher urging me to "just write about my experience in the moment," I sat down in front of my computer and stared at the blank screen. It was at this moment something inside of me allowed the creative flow of energy out of my mind, body, and soul and onto the computer. This was my way of freeform/free-flow writing, but there are many other ways to engage in this task as well. What is eventually written is not important during this step.

An example of freeform/free-flow writing as it is connected to an emotion is shown below. In this example, I was taking a creative writing class where I was asked to draw what I was feeling in the exact moment. What I drew was a stick figure with big blocks on his shoulders. After the drawing was complete we were all asked to write about the feeling depicted in the picture. I tried to focus on the feeling I had at the time - the feeling of the weight I felt I was carrying. Below is what I wrote.
Strong Fighter Carry All

Face centered, emotion defenseless,

Fear acknowledged, remorse no more,

Pain, emotions, regret, no more.

Pain. Can't take this weight anymore,

Just want to find another,

To replace this once known entity,

With my now born wishful sanctity,

This pain, this pain, this pain.

Stuck. I'm stuck. I'm surrounded.

Nowhere to grow, no person left inside,

No authority on my side,

Just a measly little breath of a life I once used to be,

But lost now all to purple fade,

I, must elevate!

The above example shows how I was able to connect to my feelings at the time of writing this poem. Before the exercise of writing this poem it would have been difficult for me to express my feelings, but the poem serves as that expression. The poem helped me not only "Externalize" my feelings at that moment, but it also gave me a theme to think about and concentrate on in my future writings.

Exercises for Freeform/Free-flow Writing
In trying to get words onto the paper or computer screen you should take a deep breath and answer the following questions

- What am I feeling right now?
- What is my body doing or feeling?
- Where is my mind right now?
- What do I feel in my stomach?
- What do I wish about the loss? For example: I wish my ____ didn't die. I wish I was more ____. I wish life was ____.

Through the process of freeform and free-flow writing you may start to notice themes in your writing. In the event that a theme is not prevalent, you can try to focus on the emotions experienced in the moments of writing and continue writing in the freeform/free-flow way. If a theme does begin to arise, then the next stage of writing can continue in a free-flow type of way, while channeling attention, thought, and awareness to the theme or specific feeling. As you continue writing and focusing on the theme, you may start to connect to, think about, and pursue this theme in your writing. Some ways of focusing on the theme are described in the third step.

**The third step: Focusing on an Individual Theme**

*Theory*

During this step of trying to separate out an individual theme, thought, or feeling from *the overwhelming* the individual can begin the healing process (Antzoulis, 2003; Stepakoff, 2009). The difficulty with healing during *the overwhelm* is that there are too many emotions and the intensity is usually so powerful healing may feel impossible (Mazza, 2001; Neimeyer, 2001; Wong & Rochlen, 2009). *Overwhelm* takes over the individual and keeps them lost, stuck, and alone. *Overwhelm* keeps the individual in a space where there is no room for anything else
because *the overwhelm* by definition is more than someone or something can handle; an overpowering or excessive amount of anything. Focused writing allows the individual to start to connect to the themes that start emerging, but it also allows the individual to begin the process of creating meaning from their experience of *overwhelm* (Neimeyer, 2001).

Narrative therapy encourages individuals to focus on themes in their lives and find ways of deconstructing the themes to better understand their context (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy looks at an individual as being separate from a problem they may be having and the problem as separate from the individual (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). This separation can be implemented by way of creative writing about an individual theme which allows the individual to physically "Externalize" the theme or problem. The individual can then see the theme or problem on the page and begin the process of better understanding its context. In processing the context of the problem, a narrative therapist might ask the individual about times when the problem does not exist, or times when the problem does not show up in the same way or intensity as described. This time when the problem's impact is of a lesser degree, or when the problem does not exist at all is considered a "Unique Outcome," (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). This process is better illustrated in the poem *invisible* in the example section further on in the reading.

Creative writing has been used as a technique to help individuals focus on their feelings for many years (Mazza, 2001; Neimeyer, 2001; Wong & Rochlen, 2009). Creative writing exercises can help an individual connect to a theme or feeling in their lives and focus on that theme. The focus allows the individual to dig deeper into the feelings associated with the theme and gain a better understanding of themselves which promotes healing (Antzoulis, 2003; Bowman, 1994; Briggs, & Pehrsson, 2008; Mazza, 2001; Neimeyer, 2001).
Techniques to Focusing on an Individual Theme

The process of being able to focus on a theme is an extension of freeform/free-flow writing. This process consists of connecting similarities in the existing writing and learning how to build on those similarities.

- Begin by reading your writings and grouping together any connecting themes, ideas, thoughts, or feelings. The connections can be relationships between parts of written passages, and do not have to connect in their entirety.
- Now that you found connecting themes, pick one to focus on.
- In focusing on a particular theme, idea, thought, or feeling give it a name such as: lost, life isn't fair, why me?, I hate the world, life ever after, love, fear, etc. The process of creating a name is a way of focusing and connecting pieces. This process can also be done by discussing the themes in the writing with family, friends, or professionals.
- Once you have come up with a name try to write in the same freeform/free-flow way you have been writing. If writing at this point becomes difficult, it may be useful to refer to the exercises at the end of this section.
- Now read the piece you have just written and try to connect it to previous ones and see if any others connect to it. The process of focusing and connecting pieces is in itself an iterative process.
- Continue to repeat these steps as you continue to write. You do not have to reread or connect to every written piece every time, but as you refine this process you will find you gain a better sense of what connects to what.
Examples of Focusing on an Individual Theme

When I wrote the poem "invisible" below, I was discovering, both in my therapy and in my writing, the theme of feeling "rejected." As my therapist and I continued to work on tracking my themes we discovered, by continuing to "Externalize" this issue of rejection, that what was happening was something that was outside of me. "Rejection," which is the way a narrative therapist might "Externalize" my feeling (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990), was getting in the way of my relationships. And the way that rejection was showing up in my life at the time was in the form of having another person not accept and reflect my emotions back to me in a safe, loving, and caring way.

This was not the case with all of the relationships in my life at that time. When my therapist asked me about the times when I did not feel this rejection, which is what narrative therapists call a "Unique Outcome," (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990) I stated that when I was with my grandma I felt total unconditional love and safety. This led my therapist to pursue the theme of this "Unique Outcome" towards exploring an alternate story to the rejection. The process of figuring out how rejection played a part in my life became abundantly clear when my therapist then asked me to write about how my grandma made me feel "visible." I wrote the poem "Invisible" below in response to my therapist's request.

Invisible

The power of creation, mind allocation,

Fear of loathing, not really knowing,

The time to move, while in this groove,

Is now, not never,
The first contender, can't come close to me,

I am visible you see,

I appear every time that the danger is near,

I come from the dark, with a single spark,

I implore, I adore, but not before,

I speak my truth, to a river of youth,

You can't take it away,

My endless emends, are here to stay,

I tell you, it's true, I care about you,

It's not that hard, to say that out loud,

So why is it so, that so many people,

Can’t hardly say, that they feel that way?

Why is it so, that they don’t even know?

That pain is pain, and a kiss nor a hug,

Will never ascertain,

Wrongful truth or feeling.

Why is so hard to be hug dealing?

I used to be a spirit, but now I’m a man,

I used to cry at night, but now I understand,

Why I still cry to this day, but as I do the tears go away,

And as they do, they mean a lot more too,
And as they flow, shoot you just don’t know,

The power of time, is a great crime,

When left unsolved, it will not dissolve,

Under the toughest conditions, a baby’s nutrition,

Is more important,

Than money, or fights, or power, or color,

Or self,

Or anything else,

I was once an empty spirit, but now I am a man,

Full of love and ambition, full of the strength to start a nation,

Full of the glory, that someone once told me,

That I would be something special,

Not just a tree, not confused with a neighboring entity,

Not refused when approached with sanctity,

Revised, televised or even just improvised,

I am no longer that empty spirit,

I am a man that survived despite,

All that thought of my demise,

I was doomed before I was born,

To an older brother, genius T-shirt worn,

My skills concealed, not ever revealed,
Till recently born, a new T-shirt worn,
With ripped sleeves, a collar deceived,
Into a new thorn,
This story once told, now a new chapter sold,
Old lyrics sung, and the spirit dies young,
I was once just some empty spirit, but now I’m a man,
A man who can see,
That invisible, I will never be

Exercises for Focusing on an Individual Theme

Once a repeating theme, thought, or feeling is recognized, you can continue to focus their attention on this theme. But at times it may be difficult to come up with a theme, to notice connections between different works or writing, or it may be difficult to write once a theme is realized. The next set of exercises are designed to help you progress if these hurdles get in the way.

- The feeling/thought I feel/think right now is _____.
- Now take a deep breath and repeat the word from above 3 times.
- Take another deep breath and repeat the word in your head and write it down on a piece of paper 3 times.
- Ask yourself the following questions one by one. In between each question spend a few moments taking in deep breaths and try to connect to an answer. As answers come up, write them down.
  - Why do I feel/think this?
Who is the feeling/thought about?

Where is this feeling/thought coming from?

When do I feel/think this?

One way of achieving this is by asking questions such as “What is this anger about?” or “Who am I angry at?” if anger is the recurring theme for example. Another way of focusing is to write a word or phrase that represents the theme on a piece of paper or in large font on the computer screen and spend some time looking at it. Other forms of focusing include meditating on the word, repeating it in one’s head, or engaging in things that remind the individual of the theme, thought, or feeling. The important thing is to focus on the theme while allowing space for other thoughts or feelings to be there.

The fourth step: Writing to Create Meaning

Theory

When we write we give meaning by creating, or giving life to the theme, thought, or feeling (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008; Denisson, 1999; Gladding & Mazza, 1983; White & Epston, 1990). Writing is a way of nurturing and feeding a seed that will one day grow into a plant. The process of this nurturing comes about when an individual is able to take a word like "anger" and create, give life, give birth to something that is so much more than just that one single word (Denisson, 1999; Mazza, 1999). The power of the word becomes personally infiltrated and meaningful to that individual in a very different way than before the writing occurred.

The new meaning can many times give an individual a new perspective. The new perspective or "Alternative Story," (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990) as a narrative therapist might say, can allow an individual to believe they are not defined by a single emotion for example.
Examples of Writing to Create Meaning

The poem below describes and gives meaning to how I felt about "anger":

Anger

Shit, I feel like shit,
I can't sleep, don't enjoy eating,
I'm sick, but can't define this feeling,
It's like coal scraping my insides,
Feeding me dirt, I feel like I'm broke,
My heart empty, heavy filled with steel,
But won't let me feel this anger, I must fear,
The winds of change forgot to pass through this young man,
And though there is less hate, less debate,
Less of me that feels that need to cry,
To have another alibi,
To put down, to clown
To use sarcasm, just not to frown,
But still I hide for fear of me is,
Still inside,
The anger so strong, so pure,
The dark side's got me, I must find a cure,
I've found it, it's here,
I must speak my truth, now it's all clear,
When I write this white light, embodies my soul,
My whole spirit wants to explode,
Great spirits in forms of infinite theorists,
Comprise my solid-less theory of god,
Form fitting creatures make up the truth,
Full fledged, fully abused,
Reduced to a worry, to a sorrowful story,
To a kid born morphed from the throne to a pile of heap,
Should we weep? Or should we teach?
We can explore no longer, unless it makes us stronger,
We must fill this room to the brim with light,
Our energy, our hunger, will fuel this fight,
Anger,
Come out and play,
I am ready, I am not made of clay,
I am strong, but flexible,
I am wrong sometimes, but still I'm invincible,
I can deal with you without a doubt,
Come on, come out, play,
I was born ready for you, so come out today!

In this poem I described my anger and how it manifested in my body. I described my
relationship with anger, and I separated it from myself as a standalone entity that I am in battle with. Here I was able to "Externalize" the feeling of anger from myself which created a new meaning for me. The new meaning or "Alternative Story," (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990) as a narrative therapist might say, allowed me to believe I was not defined by anger and my anger was not all consuming. The poem allowed me to believe I was in a position to fight my anger and possibly metaphorically defeat it. This poem was rich with meaning for me because this new definition of my anger allowed for possibilities I had not previously considered.

It is important to remember the process of writing is a process like any other and has its ups and downs. Sometimes it is difficult to write and other times it is easy, rewarding, and beautiful. Remember this lesson both in times when writing is discouraging, as well as, encouraging.

**Exercises for Writing to Create Meaning**

The process of writing to create meaning can vary vastly from person to person, but the common theme of meaning creation is a person's personal connection to the meaning. These exercises will help you find ways of connecting to that personal meaning within yourself.

- Since meaning is such a personal thing the first step is to realize the deeper you can go with unraveling your feelings and exposing yourself in your writing the closer you will get to your deeper meanings.

- In order to begin unraveling the protective layers you can start by writing some things that make you uncomfortable. For example you can ask yourself the following questions:
  - What is the most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to me?
  - What scares me the most?
What would happen if I were the last living person on this planet?

What might I do or feel if you were faced with death?

• Once you feel a bit more comfortable with these questions you can get into some deeper ones such as:
  o The reason I was placed on this planet is to _____.
  o My role in my family consists of _____.
  o My goal in life is to _____.

The fifth step: Writing to Create Change

Theory

Writing to create change is an iterative process of evolution and growth. Writing to create change occurs through multiple works over a period of time (Dennison, 1999; Neimeyer, 2001; White & Epston, 1990), but the advantages of the change are enormous. The advantages are the change can be lasting, the change can promote healing, and the change can be re-experienced. When an individual writes a series of works that create a positive change for them, they can use those works as a tool to re-experience this positive change. This re-experiencing occurs when an individual revisits their works in any way. The re-experiencing promotes the sustainability of the change and therefore the healing. Narrative therapy also encourages individuals to think of their lives as stories that can be rewritten and therefore changed (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy supports the process of writing to create change or as Neimeyer (2001) calls it "Meaning Reconstruction."

The change occurring from the writing process is not about completely changing an individual. The change is more of the growth or the movement of the individual into a more desirable state (Dennison, 1999; Mazza, 1999; Stepakoff, 2009).
**Techniques to Learn How to Write to Create Change**

Writing to create change is a process that happens over a series of writing pieces. The following steps are designed to help guide you to effectively begin the process of change.

- Change occurs by stringing together creative writing pieces that have meaning. Therefore the first step in creating change is to write meaningful pieces.

- As you write more meaningful pieces, pay attention to the theme of the writing piece itself. Is it happy? Is it sad? What feeling, thought, or emotion does the writing piece represent?

- As you continue to write about the same theme look for changes in the theme itself. For example a letter that a person might write to someone they may have lost might always end with a questioning of what they could have done to help them. In this scenario that person's question might morph with some iterations into something more like "What did I do to help them?"

- Once you notice even the slightest change in outlook or perception, take that change in by utilizing some of the techniques from steps 1, 2 and 3. Do some breathing or meditating, write the theme or word down, or repeat it to yourself. Try to focus in on the change.

- Change creates more change. As you continue to notice and focus in on the changes that are occurring, more changes will follow.

- If you struggle with finding change in your pieces, try asking yourself some questions about change in general. Questions such as:
  - How do I feel about change? Do I like it, or dislike it? Why, or why not?
  - Where in my life do I experience the most change?
○ What have I changed in my life and how did it feel?

- It is not always easy to recognize change in your own pieces so at times it may help to read the piece out loud to yourself or to take a break from pieces for a bit and then come back and read them. You may be surprised at the different things they may invoke in you. Reading something out loud already changes the perspective for the reader and can facilitate more change.

**Examples of Writing to Create Change**

This first example of writing to create change is a piece that I wrote while working on this guidebook. As I trying to make sense of my experiences of navigating through my own grief, I was writing parts of the guidebook as well. The process that I was dealing with internally was showing up more and more whenever I tried to engage in writing the guidebook and eventually I wrote this piece which not only described my feelings at the time, but it also allowed me to see how far I had come.

Writing allowed me to slowly chip away at the walls that protected the feelings I was not ready to fully experience and divulge through audible words. Writing allowed me a way out of the darkness. (The darkness here is the overwhelm from step 1.) I felt as though with every poem or journal entry I was using a little tiny hammer to chip away at the walls of the dark cave I was in. At first I could not see a difference. It was still dark all around. All I knew was the walls felt just a bit different because they were not quite as smooth as before. (This is similar to step 2 where writing just to write is a beginning of something still unknown.) The walls now had little chips on them which allowed me to feel as though they were not impenetrable. It was dark, I was scared, and I felt alone. (The process of writing is showing up here as the feelings are strong and the overwhelm seems as though it may be coming back.) As I continued to write and focus on a
specific feeling, it was as though the chips in the walls were now concentrated on a single area. (This single area was my step 3. It was my way of focusing on a theme.) This single area then allowed me to dig deeper and chip harder into the wall until I could see just a tiny shimmer of light. (The digging deeper was through the use of step 4; Writing to create meaning.) The light shining through felt so good. The light was my hope. My hope was that I was not alone, I deserved better, and I was not going to be in darkness forever. Here the light was my new meaning. As my writing revealed more of my emotions it gave me perspective and strength. (This is the beginning of step 5. It is the beginning of change.) It gave me the window to the light in my cave. Writing did not completely remove me from my cave of deep, dark, and lonely feelings, but it started to shed some light. (More change is occurring in this last sentence.)

Another example of writing to create change came about from the poem Anger I shared in step 4. Through the poem I found new meaning for anger, but in the process I also discovered that although I invited anger out in my poem, I was also very afraid of its consequences. This poem therefore also allowed me to connect to my fears. In the next poem I wrote in my journal, I started by addressing my relationship with fear. It began like this: "On that note, I wrote, I rode! My fears set aside, my bitter demise, has desperate eyes..." based on this poem it didn’t seem like I was ready to deal with or write about my fear at that time, but because of the previous poem, I was planting a seed. I was opening the door to the process of connecting to the fear at a future time. This process I describe is one where each poem, journal entry, letter, or other creative writing piece peels off one more layer and allows you to dig deeper into your feelings. This does not mean that every poem or written work will automatically lead to something new and exciting, but some works will. This is the process of creating change.

It is important to note the change occurring from the writing process is not about
completely changing you. The change is more of the growth or the movement of the individual into a more desirable state (Dennison, 1999; Mazza, 1999; Stepakoff, 2009). For example, in the poem example anger in step 4, I was not trying to change myself from an angry person to a person who is not angry anymore. On the contrary, in that case I was actually trying to tap into my anger and allow the feelings of anger to rise to the surface so I could genuinely experience the feelings of anger and thereby create a new and different relationship with the anger. The new relationship with anger was one where anger was allowed, not feared, and not repressed. Anger is just one example of a common feeling you may have in the grieving process. The meaning created during the creative writing process is your way of expression, interpretation, and your way of understanding and being. The most important aspect of the process is to allow yourself to create your own meaning in your own grieving process.

In a place where you may feel lost or alone, the process of creating change is in itself healing, but this process is not the only way to heal. Another very powerful way of healing is by sharing your experience with others.

The sixth step: Solidifying the Meaning

Theory

Sharing something as intimate, deep, and meaningful as one's creations is difficult (Dennison, 1999). It takes courage and a certain tolerance of emotional vulnerability to be able to share a creation with others. Sharing has many benefits such as, reducing depressive symptoms, and improving psychological well-being (Wong & Rochlen, 2009). The act of sharing a creative writing piece allows the individual to externalize and create separation from the feelings to a different degree than when originally written. When an individual writes, there is a separation or an "externalization" of the emotions from the individual and onto the paper or computer screen.
(Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). This "externalization" allows the individual to get some perspective regarding the feeling because it is outside or separate from the individual. This perspective can be seen as the "Unique Outcome" of narrative therapy (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). This deeper, more differentiated perspective comes from having a positive, healthy, and accepting sharing experience with another person. The separation that is created when an individual can share their creation with others exceeds that of just the act of writing alone (White & Epston, 1990).

There are different forms of sharing creative writing such as: reading a poem or a creative piece out loud to another, writing letters, publishing, or communicating through the internet via email, chat, Skype, etc. Narrative therapists believe letter writing to be a powerful way to solidify meaning (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). According to White and Epston (1990), there are many different letters, such as, redundancy letters, letters of prediction, letters for special occasions, and many more that help individuals thicken the "alternative story" (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). As I stated before, when an individual is grieving, they may feel lonely, alone, isolated, misunderstood, stuck, and as if no one can understand their feelings (Bowman, 1994; Stepakoff, 2009; Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Worden, 2004). When an individual writes those feelings down, they transform into a "Storying" (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990) that describes the individuals experience in a unique and personal way. When the individual shares this very personal and unique way of describing their own feelings something magical seems to happen. The magic that happens is the individual's personal experience is felt by others as if it was their own. This is not the case always and for everyone, but what's important to notice is how an individual can use creative writing as the language that allows an individual to transform a very personal experience into something that can seem universal.
**Techniques to Solidifying the Meaning**

When it comes to sharing something as personal and intimate as your writing, it is important to find the right person to share with (Dennison, 1999; Mazza, 2001). When you share your writing, you allow yourself to be susceptible to placing yourself in a very vulnerable position which can be very healing, but also potentially damaging (Dennison, 1999; Mazza, 2001; Morgan, 2000; Servaty-Seib, 2004). It is important to choose wisely when sharing such intimate parts of yourself, as the damaging effect can change the meaning from having a healing effect to one of pain and suffering. The danger is that when an individual shares and is vulnerable a negative or hurtful response may cause more harm than good (Mazza, 2001). To create emotional safety in this process I have organized the following:

- Choose a person to share your creative writing in the same way you would choose someone to share your innermost thoughts or feelings.
- The person you share with should be someone you know well, trust, and feel would have a caring or empathetic response.
- Since it is not possible to anticipate a person's response to something new, you should use your best judgment, start with a more neutral and less triggering piece.

**Examples of Solidifying the Meaning**

I wrote the poem 84 about my grandma a few years before she died. It was the first time I was able to connect to my feelings of her getting old and the fact I would be losing her in such a profound way. I then decided to share the poem with her by reading it to her out loud. When I shared my poem 84 with my grandma I felt an invitation to begin the grieving process of her death. The realities of her frailty, her impermanence, and her mortality were already on my mind, but I was not able to tap into the feelings associated with these realities until I wrote this poem.
And it was only after I read the poem to my grandma that I was able to delve further into the depth of the darkness where the scary feelings of her mortality as well as my own mortality lived. The poem 84 is below.

84

84 is not so strong anymore,

Although before,

She could cook, clean, and sow,

But no more,

84...but she loves like much more,

Whether it was yesterday, or when I was 4,

She was there, she was aware,

She can read a person with a single stare,

She is amazing in every way,

Yet she still wants to win the lottery til this very day,

Not for her, you see,

She has 3 kids, 4 grandkids, and 3 great grandkids, one of whom is me,

And although she’s 84,

She still feels that she needs to feed and support, and fill with love, chicken soup, and hope,

84 is not as strong as before,

But to me, she is stronger than I could wish for,

She adores me with her eyes,
Her thoughts of me, keep her alive,
She keeps me aware, and focused,
Reminds me who I am, gives me purpose,
She loves me so much,
That I can’t bear to think, where I’d be without her touch.
It is clear to me today, that a love like that does not go away,
And that a little boy without a mother, can grow up to be a successful lover,
And that a man with a future, must have had a woman to look up to,
I can say out loud,
My grandma’s the greatest woman alive,
And if I haven’t said it before,
I love you grandma now even more,

My grandma was visiting us from Israel as she used to do every year for about 3-4 months, and it was during this visit though that I was starting to notice that she had changed in some ways. Her strength was not quite where it used to be, but her spirit was still strong as ever. She was always so good at disguising her physical weaknesses with her overpowering determination, but it was this year that I noticed a change that she could no longer hide. She was getting older and weaker and there was no way to hide it anymore. This realization was not one that I was consciously thinking about until I wrote this poem. The writing of the poem allowed me to connect to this reality that was buried in my sub-conscious. As you continue to write, you may find this connection to the sub-conscious happens more frequently. The more the connection happens the easier it is for it to happen again. When I wrote the poem 84, my grandma was in
Israel and I was thinking of her and missing her. It was the feelings of missing her and longing for our connection that I believe sparked me to think of what she meant to me; who she was as my grandma. These thoughts led me to think about her unavoidable upcoming death. Her death was the theme I was focusing on at that time which is one of the things I was processing in therapy. It was through my therapy and writing I was able to understand the importance and impact of our relationship. When my grandma came to visit again some months after I had written the poem, I felt it important to share with her. This process of sharing is highlighted by narrative therapists as a way of "Thickening the Alternative Story" (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990).

Reading the poem to my grandma was a wonderful experience. It was a great moment of connection and understanding between two loving individuals. I felt so loved and happy to be able to share such a vulnerable part of myself and have it be completely accepted without judgment and with absolute unconditional love. This was just the beginning of the many healing effects of the experience of sharing the poem, and a very vulnerable part of me with my grandma.

The experiences that I shared with my grandma during her dying years were irreplaceable, but often, death or a loss come as a surprise or an accident and the individual has very little time to process the loss, because the loss has already occurred. Most often an individual will only start the grieving process after the loss occurs. In a situation where the loss had already occurred, the individual may be faced with more chaos and confusion and have a more difficult time sorting out their feelings (Stepakoff, 2009).

This was the case for me when my friend Linda died of cancer at the age of 50. Linda was diagnosed with cancer close to 3 years before she died. I found out Linda died from an email
sent to me from her partner. Below is an excerpt from the email I wrote back to Linda’s partner after her death.

Dear ..., 

I did not know or hear it from anyone, but I knew in my heart that Linda was gone. I could just feel it and I think that is why I did not email you any sooner. I was afraid to find out the sad truth that my dearest friend; a wonderful, giving, generous and loving woman was no longer with us. Linda was always such a bright ray of sunshine. She lit up every room she was in and was the spirit of everyone. She carried us all with her presence and I believe that she left little sprinkles of that in everyone’s heart she ever touched. She touched so many people with her positive ways ......I love and loved Linda very much and I felt how much she loved me too. She was one of the few people in my life that I felt such a deep connection with and I feel privileged to have known her......it was the beginning of a wonderful almost 8 year friendship. I know I am going to miss her so much, but right now I still don’t really believe that she is gone. You know, I left on the night of her birthday party and I just couldn’t hold it together. I started bawling in the car because I felt her slipping away. I wished and hoped and prayed that it would not be, but neither you nor I have any control over it. The world is a much sadder place as of October 29th and it is not fair.

... I feel that it is so important that you were there in her last moment and as hard as that must have been, I believe it will be priceless to know in your grieving process... ...No matter what I do to help, it still won’t be equal to what spending time with Linda has done for my life. She is a life mentor in so many different ways...

Writing this letter to Linda’s partner was therapeutic for me, and sharing it with her was therapeutic for us both. The experience I was dealing with in losing Linda was far different than
the experience Linda's partner was dealing with, but my letter tapped into a feeling that we both
shared. Creativity is about making something that is unique, different, and out of the ordinary.
Although creativity is a unique and personal experience, it taps into a connection we all to share,
the desire to let down our guard, the desire to let others in, and the desire to be loved. As you
continue to write and to share your writings with others your creativity will have the potential to
touch others and build deep connections. These connections will serve as your new meanings
and perspectives and you will be able to solidify your meaning of your grief and possibly of your
life. Creative writing was the key for me and I hope it can be the key for you too.

Conclusion

This guidebook is a tool that may be used to help you navigate your own unique grieving
process. This guidebook is broken down into steps to help you deal with a loss to go from a place
where you may feel lost, lonely, angry, depressed, etc. to a place where you may be able to
create your own meaning of the loss you may have experienced. Although this guidebook may
seem to be comprehensive because it describes a process from start to finish, it should by no
means be considered the only solution. This guidebook should serve as one possible companion
in the lonely process of grieving.

It is also important to understand the process of using this guidebook may bring on more
intense grieving feelings at first as the purpose of the writing is to release and experience feelings
in their raw form. Intense grieving feelings can be very difficult for an individual to experience
on their own. You should seek support when grief seems overbearing. There are many support
systems available for grieving individuals that may be helpful for you during such times. There
are grief support groups of all different kinds - both for a fee and free. You may also be able to
reach out to other family members, friends, and close companions for support. You may choose
to seek out professionals, such as, therapists, social workers, teachers, life coaches, or religious figures to discuss the difficult feelings when they arise. Other helpful sources may be self help books about grief and reading one's own writing. The grieving process is difficult and lonely. You should try to get support in any way possible to help you feel less alone and to allow you to continue on your journey.

Nothing in this world can change the fact that we all experience loss. Nothing has been able to change the fact that we are all mortals and therefore not going to live forever. Writing has not only taught me the importance of connecting to this reality, but it has also shown me the cure to mortality. The cure IS the writing and the sharing. I hope you will have a similar experience in your writing process. I hope you will find ways to integrate writing as a helpful tool in your lives. We all shape this world by our interactions, our connections, and our writing. The written word is powerful and lasting.

**Epilogue**

The experience of writing this guidebook was in itself a therapeutic process, but it was also very difficult. While writing this guidebook I was grieving the recent losses of very significant people and things in my life. As I started working on this guidebook it seemed as though more losses were occurring in my life. I spent some of my time trying to avoid writing as the writing would bring up more of the feelings I was trying to run away from. The feelings of fear, anger, despair, sadness, loneliness…the list goes on and on. All of these feelings would surface every time I sat down to write and then they would take me into the overwhelm, and I would want to run. However, the beauty of my guidebook was in my premise, in my belief, that writing, was and is, the answer for me.

Writing I believe was the way to navigate through my grief. My writing would allow me
to develop hope. My writing would guide me into the light and out of my lonely, dark place. My writing would help me heal. This was all true, but it was a long and difficult road to get here. I feel as though I wanted a solution so much of the time. I wanted a pill I could take and it would just make all the pain go away. A pill or a fix that would allow me to feel, and think, and be the person I was before the losses, before all of the grief, but that is not possible. The writing process taught me that some things in life cannot be fixed; they just have to be endured. I wanted to feel better or more relieved when I would work on this guidebook as if the guidebook was supposed to make me feel better about the grief I was feeling. But I learned that too was an illusion.

Writing is a process. Grieving is a process. There is no cure. As I approach the end of my guidebook I realize the process of writing my guidebook has allowed me to get closer to resolving my grief in a significant and powerful way. I now have a written account of my experiences that I will share with others and read by myself and to the people who care about me and be able to connect on a deeply emotional level. It is only now that I can clearly see the significant impact writing this guidebook has had on my grieving process. I truly believe writing this guidebook has allowed me to feel as though I have in some way concluded or resolved my grief. I don't mean to say I do not and will not feel this grief again, but I do mean to say it now seems approachable and integrated in my life. It is my belief that not only will following these steps help others to getting closer to resolving their grief as well, I also believe the act of reading this guidebook will allow others to begin their journey in resolving their grief.
REFERENCES


