Directed Journaling to Facilitate Meaning-Making

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CLIENTS FOR WHOM THE TECHNIQUE IS APPROPRIATE

Clients who are having difficulty making meaning of their loss, but who have expressed at various junctures aspects of their sense-making or benefit-finding processes in session. Benefit journaling is contraindicated for individuals who (1) are still experiencing intense acute grief symptoms for whom contemplation of positive consequences associated with the loss may appear offensive; and (2) have not revealed any consequences that could be construed as positive in the therapist’s judgment.

DESCRIPTION

“Storying” our experiences allows us to incorporate and organize disruptive life events into our self-narratives, fostering a coherent sense of identity and shaping emotional reactions and goals for the future (Neimeyer, van Dyke, & Pennebaker, 2008). Such storytelling is a large component of the therapeutic encounter, after all. Likewise, a great deal of research has demonstrated the psychological and physical health benefits of expressive writing, which traditionally involves individuals expressing their thoughts and emotions about their most traumatic or stressful life event (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Smyth, 1998). However, studies of bereaved individuals writing about their loss do not always demonstrate the same benefits, which may be because the writing was open-ended rather than directed (Lichtenenthal & Cruess, 2010; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2006). Without guidance, grieving individuals may not write about topics that are helpful, or may, in fact, end up engaging in unhelpful coping behaviors, such as rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). In contrast, when provided with direction and focus, grievers may profit from journaling. One recent randomized controlled trial showed, for example, that directing participants to engage in meaning-making processes through their writing resulted in lower levels of prolonged grief, depressive symptoms and posttraumatic stress symptoms, with the effects of benefit journaling being especially salutary. Moreover, these positive results actually increased over the months that followed (Lichtenenthal & Cruess, 2010).

When applying this technique in therapy, we commonly encourage clients to write freely and spontaneously, for at least 20–30 minutes, on several occasions, drawing on one or both of the following intentions.

Sense making entails addressing the client’s own questions about how and why the loss occurred, specifically with respect to its circumstances and causes related to the loved one’s
health, their own or someone else's actions, or a higher force. This often involves focusing on how the loss fits into the client's core meanings, perhaps prompted by questions such as:

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

Benefit finding involves seeking the positive significance of the loss, the silver lining, if any, in the dark cloud of bereavement. This may be registered in any important domain, such as in terms of life goals, values, purpose or relationships with others. Questions that help prompt such reflections include:

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

When we use this technique with clients, we often encourage them to journal on these themes outside of therapy, and to then bring their writing into sessions for processing and further reflection. Alternatively, we may capitalize on journaling that clients have spontaneously performed on their own, providing direction to expand upon this writing and further craft the meaning they have begun to make (Neimeyer et al., 2008). The therapist may highlight various facets of the writing, such as cognitive schemas underlying the client’s belief system, related assimilation of the loss, conflicting ideas and the potential for their reconciliation, and other shifts in thinking that may have taken place across the writing sessions. When changes in how the client has made sense of the loss are less pronounced or a struggle to make sense of the loss remains apparent, the therapist may discuss the potential threat to the client’s belief system that this loss may be causing. Given that writing frequently prompts the type of emotional expression believed to be an important part of adaptive grieving (Stroebe et al., 2006), the therapist may capitalize on clients’ engagement in this process and highlight their ability to experience and tolerate distressing feelings as they struggle to find meaning in their pain.

CASE EXAMPLE

Gayle Rose sought therapy with me (RAN) a few months after the death of her middle son, Max, at age 19 in a vehicular accident. Among the narrative methods she found helpful in exploring

* Gayle requested that I use her son’s actual name, rather than the conventional pseudonym to disguise his identity, as a way of honoring him and drawing on the tragedy of his death to offer something of value to the grief therapy community and the clients we serve. I am only too happy to do so, as I take inspiration from Gayle’s integration of this traumatic loss in a way that affirms her core life meanings. Those readers interested in further expressions of benefit finding in the wake of Max’s life may wish to learn more about Team Max, the remarkable virtual social network pursuing “vigilante philanthropy” in the form of dozens of humanitarian projects, from feeding the hungry to delivering medical aid to earthquake-stricken communities. For more, visit Team Max on Facebook at: http://www.facebook.com/groups/42807539787/.
and ultimately transforming her grief was directed journaling, which she used not only to vent her anguish over Max’s death, but also to seek affirmative meaning in it. One outgrowth of her meaning-oriented journaling was the following letter, sent four months after her son’s funeral to the many supporters who had rallied around her family in the aftermath of the shared tragedy.

My dearest friends and family:

I want to personally thank you for the beautiful cards, letters, food, flowers, and donations to Street’s Ministries and other worthy charities in memory of our beloved son, Max. I am so moved by the outpouring of love and support for our family and I vowed to write everyone a personal note. However, what I hope to express requires more space than the note card allows, so please forgive this letter.

Grace has surrounded me. The sharp blade of grief that threatens my heart has been blunted by the beauty of the love and prayers from each of you. It has become evident that pain and grace are of one piece. They are separate, but one; each the bearer of the other.

Since January 3, I have begun to see my life in a larger context. I am able to abandon my self-image as an independent person and see myself as interdependent; my grief shared among each of you through grace. There were divine moments of grace in the hospital in Wichita; grace in the loving arms of family and friends in the immediate days before the funeral; communal grace of shared pain on January 8th, when the church overflowed with love for us and for the witness of Max’s life; and steadfast grace as Max’s friends continue to show up on Friday nights to ‘hang out’ as they always have, and as notes and gifts are left in my mailbox along with letters of such poetic beauty that I’m left breathless and profoundly blessed.

As I conscientiously walk the path of parental grief, I have discovered that time does not heal all wounds. Healing is an active process, not a passive one. It doesn’t happen to us, we must participate in our own healing. It is a gift we give to ourselves the moment we decide to “open” to that which has broken us. So I am taking the time to grieve; to face the sadness and loss and not attempt to step out of its way; to savor each card and letter, to meditate, to walk in the woods, to be present for Morgan and Mikey, and to ponder the story of Max’s life and legacy.

This loss has thrown me into a heightened state of awareness. I will never be the same. Through a new lens, the world looks different and yet grace is the gift of seeing that which was there all along. I find new strength in family and friends and understand that the only vitally important purpose in life is the giving and receiving of love. I have looked into the face of impermanence and am mustering the courage to live a life of meaning that reflects the profound importance of Max’s life.

Thank you for being bearers of grace; for it is grace that will wrench something beautiful out of the jaws of this tragedy, and it is grace that binds us to each other and to Max now and forever. My gratitude knows no bounds. Thank you.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Many clients naturally use journaling as an expressive outlet, but it is unclear whether all such forms of writing are beneficial. However, controlled research has demonstrated the utility of guiding the writing process with clients who are struggling to find meaning in their loss or in their lives in its aftermath (Lichtenthal & Cruess, 2010). Writing can facilitate creation of an adaptive, coherent narrative about how the loss of a loved one fits into the larger scheme of the writer’s life and worldview. The written piece can then become a resource for reflection that reinforces the meaning made at the time of writing and further
stimulates the ever-dynamic meaning-making process. In a phrase, reflective writing can help us make sense of a world that doesn't. While no panacea for the pain of separation, it can help griever find significance and reorientation in a life that has been challenged by loss.

References


