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Expressions of Grief and Change in the Poetry Projects of Bereaved VCU Students

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Introduction

Dealing with a loss can be an incredibly traumatic and distressing experience for the individual(s) whom are left to deal with the grief. The mourning process can vary by each individual and culture, and each individual may not process the grief in the same way. Likewise, adult college students are among those individuals whom are unique to their experiences of loss and because of this, oftentimes do not seek the appropriate help or guidance during this emotional and sensitive period of time. According to Holland, Currier, and Neimeyer (2006), at least 40% of College Students have experienced some sort of loss during their college academic career (2006). Still, there is not enough information and further research can be done to understand fully how adult college students cope with their grief and loss (Schnider, Elhai, & Gray 2007). According to Schindler et al., a serious and traumatic loss can change from the normal grief that everyone feels to a more deeply inflicting, Complicated Grief (CG) of it at times, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (2007). One of the main causes of CG and PTSD is the lack of a social support and the proper emotional support that many college students lack when they are in school (Schindler et al., 2007). In addition to the proper social and emotional support, Schindler et al., further propose that it is vital for college students to have efficient emotional and adaptive coping skills which can aid in the healing process as well as helping them grow from their loss (2007). Courses that are designed to help combat stress and teach students to effectively express their thoughts and emotions are helpful. The Stress Management course at VCU has implemented such ideas into the course work and in the process of receiving college credits, students are better able to express their emotions and thoughts, including the feelings of loss or grief.

Expressive writing has been used to express feelings of joy and sorrow (Pennebaker, 1989). As a way for college students to express their thoughts and emotions, expressive writing can be a way for students to engage in effective emotion focused coping and in the process grow from the loss (Pennebaker, 1997). In an effort to understand the different stages of grief that a student experiences through their loss, alphabetical poems have been implemented into the Stress Management course. These poems are a specific style of writing that were chosen among several expressive/autobiographic writing exercises available to students. Rando’s “six R’s” theory which suggests that the bereaved complete its processes while grieving: Recognizing the loss, reacting to it, and finally relinquishing it, is used here to explore the process of receiving college credits, students are better able to express their emotions and thoughts, including the feelings of loss or grief

A replication in which a different grief process model is used for coding could be done to compare significance of the models. Undergraduate students at Virginia Commonwealth University enrolled in a stress management course were given the opportunity to complete several expressive writing grief assignments. Eighty students completed a writing project that required them to write a poem in which they expressed their thoughts and emotions. The exercise was extremely helpful. I did not think that it would help as much as it did. I am not a “writer” and would usually not try exercises like that on my own. Primarily I attempted this exercise for the extra credit benefit and it unexpectedly positively helped my own personal life. I would definitely recommend this as an extra credit or assignment for future classes.

Procedures

A stress management course at VCU allows students to complete loss-focused writing exercises, including autobiographic “alphabet poems” for course credit. An alphabetical poem is a form of expression in which an individual reacts to an event (in this case a loss some kind) by reflecting on the experience in 26 lines. Each line begins with one letter of the alphabet, and progresses in alphabetical order. The current study aims to test the hypothesis that stages of grief (based on Rando’s (1993) popular “six R’s” theory) are expressed by college students in these writing exercises. A further hypothesis was that student would show progress through the stages from the beginning of their exercises to the end.

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Participants

Eighty students completed a writing assignment. Of these, 56 students (mean age: 21.9 years; 80% female; 33.9% African American, 32.1% Caucasian, 12.5% Asian and Latino, respectively) completed an end-of-semester feedback survey regarding the usefulness of these exercises (a 70% return rate). Of these, 47 students produced code-able alpha poems.

Data Analysis

• Poems were analyzed using a structured QUALITATIVE coding procedure
• A coding scheme was developed based on knowledge of Rando’s (1993) theory and actual reading of sample poems
• Two teams that include undergraduate students meet together to code the alphabetical poems

Poems are coded using a coding scheme based on Rando’s “six R’s” theory of grief. Each line is read through and analyzed word by word.

• The lines can be analyzed individually or as a set of lines.
• As the students read each line, they determine if any of the stages in the theory are represented.

Conclusions

Students do express both positive and negative emotions when completing expressive writing assignments. They do tend to express Rando’s six grief processes and show change within poems, progressing from early processes to later processes.

A replication in which a different grief process model is used for coding could be done to compare significance of the models with expressive writing and different examples of change.

Future research should be done to test the change and overall coding of poems to actual stage of the writers grief.

References


Overall Proportion of Change

The last 2 stages were not as represented both being less than 35%.

• A 2-proportion test was done to determine if the majority of the poems exhibited change from the beginning to the end of the poem. The last showed significant proportion that proportion of poems that changed (p<.038) was significantly greater than (p=.05; 2 x 2), p<.05. Therefore we have sufficient evidence to the hypothesis that the majority of poems show change in expressed stages of the grief process from beginning to end.

Selected Student Responses to Open-Ended Questions

Think back to when you were actually doing the writing. Please describe your experience. What emotions or memories were triggered? Was it a positive experience, or a difficult experience, or both? Please explain if possible.

The emotions that were triggering were extremely overwhelming for me. I didn’t think that any of the issues or really talk about them in detail until I had to complete the assignment. I think that helped me really my way to bring up the issue that I had to deal with.

Think back to how you felt and what was on your mind in the hours just after finishing the writing project. What emotions or physical feelings were you experiencing? At this point, did you feel that the writing exercise was a positive or negative experience, or both? Please explain if possible.

I started after I finished writing my poem (shared it with a friend). Before, I got into the song and it helped. The experience was really helpful and added a positive experience (even though I cried). Every time I speak about my dad in the past I recall that he’s really not here. It helped me practice speaking about him.

Overall, evaluate the writing exercise. Was it helpful to you? Was it a positive experience? A negative experience? Would you use expressive writing again in the future? If yes, why? If not, why not? Would you recommend this as an extra credit or assignment for future classes?

This exercise was extremely helpful. I did not think that it would help as much as it did. I am not a “writer” and would usually not try exercises like that on my own. Primarily I attempted this exercise for the extra credit benefit and it unexpectedly positively helped my own personal life. I would definitely recommend this as an assignment for future classes. People may not be aware of what can come out of an exercise like this.

Frequencies of Coded Content

• Examples of the first 4 stages of Therese Rando’s grief model were all present in over half of the poems.

Frequencies of Coded Emotions

On average, each poem includes 3.5 positive emotional statements, and 4.5 negative.

Average Frequency of Emotion

The poems had more frequent negative emotional statements than positive overall, but a significant majority (77%) had at least one of both.

Frequency of Occurrence

Frequency of Poems With Each Emotion

Example of a Coded Alpha Poem

A time

Beyond my Control, came too quickly. Recognize

Disintegrating, my heart… React & Negative emotion

Ever so quickly, Fear took over my soul. React & Negative emotion

Grieving for an

Hi the bathroom floor React

In tears I asked why Negative emotion

Just tell me why. Recollect

Keep her with me forever. Recollect

Let her precious voice play like a Melody, in my ear. Recollect

Never let her leave me. Recollect

Open her eyes and bring her to me. Recollect

Please, O’Lord just bring her back. Recollect

Quickly not a word was spoken. Recollect

Realizing one will resurface her dear Stoll. Reinhabit

This tantalizing voice quietly says, Understand she will not hunt more. Recollect

Ventures through one ear and out the other. Recollect

Weak and hopeless I felt. Negative emotion

Xerobing our time together in my mind over and over. Recollect

Yet her soul has finally found its resting place. Recollect

Zon is where I will see her again. Reinhabit

Average amount per poem

Conclusions

Negative emotion

Positive emotion

Average Frequency of Emotion

Rando’s Six R’s Theory

• Recognize the loss: First, people must experience their loss and understand that it has happened.

– Person states what has happened

• React: People react emotionally to the loss.

– People state their thoughts of their loss

• Recollect & Re-Experience: People may remember memories of their lost relationship (events that occurred, visited places together, or daily date moments that were experienced together).

– Could, would, should

• Relinquish: People begin to put their loss behind them, realizing and accepting that the world has truly changed and there is no turning back.

– After/Give Peace

– Forgiveness

– Accepting that the loss has happened and that things are different

• Beginning to move on

• Rand/React: People begin the process of returning to daily life and the loss starts to feel less acute and sharp.

– “washing the feelings away I feel relief”

– Going back normal / baseline

• Rebuild/React: Ultimately, people re-enter the world, forming new relationships and commitments. They accept the changes that have occurred and move past them.

– Continuing bonds

– Able to create/pursue new relationships