

Shadow into Light: a Bristol-based arts project for bereavement



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Abstract: Shadow into Light (SIL) is a creative and therapeutic art and writing project offering support to bereaved people over a series of 10 sessions. The sessions are facilitated by a poet and artist, with a counsellor also present. They use word and image to investigate and express feelings and assist development of new coping mechanisms, while developing supportive peer relationships. This article outlines the rationale and aims of the project, and gives detail of what was covered in each session and why. Evaluation of the first two courses held found that the project was meeting its aims. It is hoped that further research could show statistically significant quantitative measures of the effects of the SIL course on participants' mental wellbeing and grief resolution

Keywords: Arts, creative writing, poetry, art therapy, bereavement groups, General Practice

Introduction

Shadow into Light (SIL) is a creative and therapeutic art and writing project supporting bereaved individuals primarily aged 50+. Based at a Bristol surgery, Claire Williamson (poet) and Eleanor Glover (artist) run ten week courses for groups of up to twelve, using word and image to investigate and express feelings, assist development of new coping mechanisms and skills, fostering supportive group friendships in the process. An experienced counsellor, Val Phillips, with Cruse Bereavement Care

experience was present at each session and the project is run with the support and guidance of Dr Gillian Rice.

Rationale

The NHS offers little help specifically for bereaved people. GPs may find it difficult to give individuals sufficient time, over an extended period, to explore the profound and complicated feelings often arising from bereavement. Waiting times for bereavement counselling in Bristol are often protracted, indicating

that local services for those struggling with bereavement could not respond quickly to this need. Consequently some bereaved patients might be given antidepressants and tranquillizer drugs because GPs have identified symptoms of depression, rather than because it is the most appropriate form of help (Valentine, 2010).

Participation in creative activities has been shown to improve mental wellbeing and social inclusion, decrease mental distress, and enhance a personal sense of empowerment (Secker *et al*, 2007). A review of medical literature published between 1990 and 2004 exploring the effects of the arts on health showed that in mental healthcare their use offers new methods of self expression, stimulates creative skills, and enhances self-esteem (Staricoff, 2004).

At Bedminster Family Practice GPs saw positive outcomes in patients who had attended the 'Never Too Late to Create' arts-based group for older people. Faced with a paucity of support for patients struggling with their bereavement, the practice was keen to offer them a creative intervention – a less literal language for self expression through which to communicate the deep emotional significance of their loss (Neimeyer, 2012). The practice decided to run a 10 week group course using writing and art to help bereaved adults. The first two courses ran in 2012, supported by the Rayne Foundation. Two more courses are being facilitated in 2016, supported by Macmillan.

Bereaved adults present particular challenges in their struggle, with critical loss of personal focus and meaning, internal confusion and 'stuckness' alongside the specifics of their personal grief. The SIL project chose to work with adults over 18, bereaved by longer than six weeks through a variety of causes (death of long term partners, of friends and relatives through illness and suicide, and of children).

Recruitment

Planning began a year before the first SIL project. Participants were recruited via personal recommendations from GPs at Bedminster Family Practice, links with staff at the Bristol branch of Cruse Bereavement Care, (who publicised it to those waiting for bereavement support) and adverts in the local and wider Bristol community.

Participants were predominantly over 50, though a few were considerably younger. They were interviewed prior to SIL, giving them an opportunity to detail their loss and discuss with facilitators their readiness to work in a group situation.

The Rayne Foundation, Quartet Community Foundation's Express Programme and the Gane Trust jointly funded the project. Bedminster Family Practice gave support in kind, providing a large meeting room, funding publicity and offering administrative support.

The bereavement groups had an enthusiastic uptake, demonstrating a perceived need. They consisted of people with a wide range of experience, although some were nervous about attempting the arts activities, fearful of their inabilities (as they saw them) being exposed. This anxiety could be

compounded by grief-related behaviours such as forgetfulness, loss of concentration and confidence, and loss of interest in the things they normally enjoy (British Psychological Society, 2016), so sessions were designed to be inclusive and exploratory, with reference to writers and artists whose work it was felt was inspirational and would gently feed the mind.

Aims and objectives

Aims

- To engage bereaved people in art and writing as a way of exploring and expressing thoughts and feelings.
- To create a supportive and cohesive group of up to twelve participants experiencing problems through their bereavements.

Objectives

- For participants to find ways to express feelings that are healthy, safe, productive, and sustainable.
- For participants to engage in purposeful creative activities.
- For participants to share thoughts, ideas and memories.
- For participants to experiment with new coping mechanisms.
- For participants to learn new creative skills that they can continue to develop in the future.

Course facilitation

An artist (Eleanor Glover) and poet (Claire Williamson) planned and co-facilitated ten two-hour weekly workshops for twelve participants. They worked together (1st and 10th sessions), and individually (alternate sessions 2-9).

During each session a trained counsellor and previous Cruse Bereavement Care volunteer and supervisor (Val Phillips) was present. Her role was to offer immediate support for participants who became emotionally overwhelmed and to discuss additional support and counselling options, if desired. Integrating the counsellor as an embedded resource enabled participants to focus on their creative work without feeling emotionally responsible for their peers.

A timetable was designed as a journey with a beginning, middle, and end, allowing resonance with narrative. Each session had a similar structure: individual work, moving into sharing, incorporating a break for informal interaction. Art and poetry interleaved, containing shared themes reflecting the Hero's Journey (Campbell, 1993). Working with broad themes helped the practitioners to respond spontaneously to the group as sessions evolved. Care was taken to support participants in preparation for seasonal breaks and for the ending.

Artist, poet and counsellor worked as a reflective team, discussing every participants' journey, and designing each session to meet the group's needs. A description of the sessions is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Timetable, activities and aims

Day	Facilitator	Theme/Activities
1	Poet and artist	Sanctuary – Safety – Opening – Writing and Art Activity: Creating a working alliance. Web of words and art activity a theme of keys, creating a symbolic 'circle of light,' writing words on individual 'keys' and threading them onto a ring made of card. Aims: To build a safe space for creating and sharing (Clarkson, 2003), encouraging group cohesion by using collaborative writing (Golden, 2000) and art activities.
2	Poet	Resources – Writing Activity: Employing words and images from the natural world (landscapes and animals). Aims: To connect the self with a wider picture and find resources (animal companions) and a sense of belonging in natural imagery (Mabey, 2013).
3	Artist	Resources – Art Activity: Origami and mark-making activities to music, and collage 'painting with paper' techniques. Aims: To encourage making simple choices, concentration, and rest for the grieving mind (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).
4	Poet	Setting Out – Writing Activity: Responding to a poem on the theme of listening, and creating a Pantoum poem. Aims: To connect with listening to oneself for validation and contain feeling in poetic form. Hearing ones' own lines coming back in the repetition of a Pantoum to clarify and explore feelings (Field, 2006).
5	Artist	Journey to a Special Place – Art Activity: Making a folded book to hold shared ideas re. self-care strategies. Creation of landscapes and birds using mixed media. Aims: To embody emotion in a private space. Considering 'bird' as a symbol of spirit in need of a landscape to feel fully alive. Equipping the group with resources for the break.
C		SEASONAL BREAK
6	Poet	Reflecting from a New Land – Writing Activity: Respond to a poem about 'beginning again'. Write 3-line Haiku style poem. Collaborative sharing of Haiku. Aims: To reconnect with the group and creative process. Creating 'action plans' through new beginnings and ritualising transition (Hedges, 2005) through sharing.
7	Artist	Being with the Essence – Art Activity: Expressive mark making in white media on black paper, experiencing transformation. Focusing on an object with personal resonance. 'Blind drawing' in white on white paper, then charcoal, lastly releasing light with rags, and eraser. Aims: To modulate emotion by being in the moment; working with the body, accepting qualities of impermanence, reflected in the transience of nature (Mabey, 2013). Learning something new and reconstructing cognitions as a building block against catastrophic thinking.
8	Poet	Crossing the Bridge towards Home – Writing Activity: Using responses to questions within a poem, renewing a sense of seeing and childlike wonder in the world. Aims: To work with the body to connect with inner-child and remember bonds with loved ones (Moss, 2012). Recapturing meaning to take forward into life.
9	Artist	Crossing the Bridge towards Home – Art Activity: Creating a card to share. Choosing an illustration from a children's book, isolating part of the image and recreating in chosen media. Silent mark-making 'conversation' in pairs. Aims: To confirm a sense of being a group member and prepare for the last session. Sensing resonance in an image and owning it; making choices and poesis – making something new (Levine, 1997). Sensing the power of a conversation mapped without words.
10	Artist and Poet	Sanctuary – Safety – Closing – Writing and Art Activities: Writing cards for one another. Completing evaluation questionnaires and scales. Discussion of follow on activities and participants meeting independently beyond the group. Aims: To consider the ending of the group. Evaluating the experience. Making action plans and future goals (Bolton, 2010).

Key elements of Shadow into Light

A working alliance

On the first day of the workshops a 'working alliance' was created. A list of 'group guidelines' were written and agreed by participants. The most important ideas to both groups included: *There is no hierarchy of grief, and: These sessions are not about being or becoming 'good at' art or poetry but about having a warm and enlightening experience together. Whatever you produce is good enough.* These guidelines freed participants from comparing need or perceived 'quality' of output, helping to create an atmosphere of equality between adults of different educational and cultural backgrounds, a sharing of exploration and personal expression.

'..everyone mixed in with thoughts, feelings and importantly, emotions.' (SIL Feedback, October 2012)

Sharing local stories

Creating writing and artwork and sharing together, both in more intimate small groups and the wider group, distanced participants from dominant stories about bereavement which 'do not sufficiently represent their lived experience' (White and Epston, 1990, p40) to share and know the less dominant and hitherto unmet stories within their loss, through reflections and discussions provoked by the writing. Shared universality of loss, even if unspoken, helped to 'normalise' the pain of bereavement, and lift a sense of isolation.

'It helped with my loneliness and made me realise that I'm not the only one.' (SIL Feedback, October 2012)

'A point in the week when the isolation of grief and losing one's life partner is temporarily assuaged.' (SIL Feedback, October 2012)

Use of metaphor, symbol and the natural world

Throughout the workshops, poet and artist worked with metaphor and symbol, and the catharsis engendered by externalising and making concrete the sensations within (Jung, 1964).

'Ways of looking' included writing from appealing images in the landscape and the animal world, providing support and allies from nature, as Mabey writes, 'intelligence in nature is this deep-time, evolved capacity to adapt, to be creatively resilient' (Mabey, 2013).

Creative writing interventions

Creative writing sessions aimed to support participants to find words. As Robinson (2000) discovered, the more specific the description, the more 'referential activity' occurs between 'symbolic and sub-symbolic' systems (p84), allowing people to discover first images and then articulation for their emotions,

which has a beneficial effect on wellbeing (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996).

Participants were introduced to ways that stimulated the naming of their experience, and the 'how' of telling their stories.

Activities included reading and writing in response to poems by other people. Materials were chosen carefully. *Wild Geese* (Mary Oliver, 2004) acknowledges both 'despair' and finding 'your place in the family of things'. John Fox's poem, *When Someone Deeply Listens to You* (1995), suggests that there is a possibility that we will be met by a listener and '*a beloved land that seemed distant/ is now at home within you*'.

Writing in poetic form (Haiku and Pantoum), offers an alternative to habitual speech rhythms. Pantoums use repetition powerfully, bringing words back to the author. Haiku are short and offer space and a slowed rhythm. When focusing on the 'rules' of form, content arises with less censorship (Field, 2006).

Participants considered points of view as a theme. Using Wallace Stevens' (2006) *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* originally published in 1954, participants considered the same topic from multiple angles.

Art interventions

Art sessions encouraged the development of a personal visual language to use 'when words fail', (Liebmann, 1986, p8) a visual journey underpinned by examples of word and music without the imposition of unnatural divisions 'learning to liberate the creative energy of wonder and awe' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997 p358).

Though not individually analytical or clinical, this part of the course could be described using Liebmann's definition of art therapy (1990, p13): 'the use of art in the service of change', or Thomson's (1989, p3) 'art does the therapeutic work'.

Experimenting in an accepting space, and visually communicating feelings, participants frequently created something new and concrete. 'In the process of making anything a person not only illustrates his inner life, but moves beyond personal expression to make something which stands by itself' (Zinker, 1978 p16).

The art process encapsulates personal choice, and the acceptance of destruction and transformation. Practice of more flexible thinking can assist restoration of a sense of hope.

'I've loved accessing new aspects of myself through art ... the whole course has opened me up in a safe sort of way I felt so tightly closed down most of the time.' (SIL Feedback, May 2012)

Counselling support

The counsellor's role was a counselling skills role within the group, as opposed to a therapeutic relationship with group members, as follows:

- To sit alongside other participants and take part in activities and attune to the group (McLeod & McLeod, 2011).
- To bring forward facts and statistics around bereavement as appropriate to support participants in normalising their

experience, by naming, reframing and making sense (McLeod & McLeod, 2011).

- To support participants who became overwhelmed by emotion to regain their window of tolerance (Ogden *et al*, 2006).
- To explore participant's support avenues and provide information on counselling resources if this was what the participant requested (McLeod & McLeod, 2011).

The counsellor described the unique positioning of her role as the 'St John's ambulance of counselling within the group', allowing the writing and art 'work' and reflections to remain central to the group activities.

An example of reframing bereavement was bringing forward the need for respite during grieving, as suggested by Stroebe and Schut (1999) in their Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement. This was notably absent from ideas shared by the group participants around self-care. This intervention encouraged the group to show more of their enjoyment of the activities and to laugh together. One participant, sighing with relief, said, *'it felt like breaking a spell in my mind'*.

A hand signal system was in place to indicate to the counsellor if someone was feeling overwhelmed, so that it was their choice to leave the group briefly in order to sit with their feelings for a while with someone who could listen. One participant described this time as having *'helped heal a thought around feeling separate'*. She then returned, reconnecting with others and resuming group activities.

Outcomes

Each course aimed to assist the building of a new chapter beyond bereavement. Through meeting and working with a new group of people sharing commonality of experience – listening, seeing, learning, trusting choices of colour and word, participants experienced totally new things and exercised discarded abilities. The team witnessed internal shifts, evident in word and image, however tentative. Each course also offered new tools for life, encouraging members to follow up what they had learnt by joining arts groups locally.

'...invaluable and one of the most important things I've ever done. Without it I am certain I would have drowned in my grief.' (SIL Feedback, May 2012)

Group diversity added stimulus to the mix, with mutual support and understanding evident between those of different ages or situations, the common factor of loss providing a powerful link of empathy as they embarked on shared creative goals.

'Being with like minded people gave me strength, hope, love' (SIL Feedback, May 2012)

'a shared goal seems to promote the bonding process more deeply.' (SIL Feedback, May 2012)

Evaluation

All participants completed evaluation questionnaires at the end of their ten-week course and seven were interviewed six months later to give additional feedback.

Comments in questionnaires and interviews suggested that we had met our aims and objectives, as follows.

For participants to engage in purposeful creative activities

'The structures given for the poetry helped to organise my thoughts and actually make a start.' (SIL Feedback Questionnaire, May 2012)

'To come to a space where you knew you were going to be asked to do something. That then gives you the scaffolding to explore things within that and the strength to do it and also within a group of other people who you know have experienced similar things.' (SIL Interviews, October 2012)

To find new coping mechanisms through art and writing

'The combination of doing something practical, while thinking about these things was very, very powerful and I found it more therapeutic than simply talking.' (SIL Interviews, October 2012)

'For me there is a definite element of feeling of being stuck and being able to use creativity to unstick and to move around it.' (SIL Interviews, October 2012)

'I've come out of the course realising that poetry and art to express the pain is something I have to remember to keep doing.' (SIL Interviews, October 2012)

To create a supportive and cohesive group of participants, all experiencing problems through their bereavements

'The gathering together of people all struggling with bereavement does not sound as though it could necessarily be a positive experience, but it was.' (SIL Interviews, October 2012)

'In a society where three years after your bereavement you are supposed to be alright and you are not, there's so much in your life that you can't mention; ...suddenly to be with other people who are in the same boat just felt a huge relief.' (SIL Interviews, October 2012)

To have a positive impact on participants.

'I think the course for a lot of people there was a life raft. Whilst actually not giving you a specific destination, it was at least pointing you in the general direction of where life could go after bereavement and so yeah, I thought it was absolutely wonderful.' (SIL Interviews, October 2012)

'I had about six weeks of counselling and I don't think even then I got as far down to my depths, rebuilt things, as we did when we were discussing the poems that we had written.' (SIL Interviews, October 2012)

Conclusion

The Shadow into Light project was a success, with participants reflecting an initial sense of meeting the aims, and a sustained effect in interviews three months later.

Participants completed quantitative mental wellbeing and grief questionnaires before, at the end of, and three months after the SIL course. After the course around 70% had an improved mental wellbeing score, and more than 50% a lower grief score. We initially hoped to follow this with more robust quantitative research, and a 'control' group of individuals from the waiting list for counselling at the Bristol Cruse office. Following up the control group proved problematic, but with funding for more admin support, and continued partnership working with Cruse, this could be achieved.

If larger numbers of participants and controls could be involved in a future study, the project could provide statistically significant quantitative measures of the effects of the SIL course on participants' mental wellbeing and grief resolution. ■

Shadow into Light has received funding from Macmillan to support two further series of workshops in 2016.

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