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PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

Grief Walking in the Sandtray

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We all experience loss and subsequent grief due to physical, emotional, or spiritual disconnection from a person or experience. This human reaction to loss can impact us at any time in life, from infancy to our senior years. Bereavement is the experience of losing someone who was close to you (Madsen et al., 2023). Mourning the loss experience is regarded as our expression of the grief experience. Grief symptoms can include the inability to sleep, eat, maintain focus, or even engage in everyday activities.

Complicated grief (CG) can involve experiencing intense sadness and regret while thinking of nothing else but the loss of the experience or person. You may not even be unable to engage in experiences that would previously bring you joy or believe that you can move forward in your life as a result of this loss.

In CG, the process of transition from acute grief to integrated grief is derailed. Clients with CG typically experience prolonged, intense painful emotions; rumination, often around themes of self-blame; and maladaptive behaviors, including avoidance of triggers to the extent that functioning is disrupted. (Wetherell, 2012. p.159)

We can also experience subsequent temporary upsurges of grief (STUGS), which are brief periods of acute grief (Rando, 1991). These periods can be precipitated by a memory trigger that emphasizes the loss of deceased loved one. Triggers are sensorial, including a smell, sound, or reminder of the deceased loved one. These triggers occur with grief and trauma experiences (Ethlers et al., 2002).

Sand Therapy

Sand therapy has long been regarded as an intervention that assists the client with processing many experiences, including grief and loss. It provides therapeutic distance to upsetting or traumatic memories (Salinas, 2021). "The tactile, nonverbal experience promotes awareness of deeply personal emotional issues within a safe, therapeutic environment" (Webber & Mascari, 2008, p. 1). The builder has an array of miniatures that become a vocabulary for the

builder's story. Miniatures, therefore, can communicate grief and loss themes. These can include religious and religious symbols, holiday-based symbols, coffins (see Figure 1), and cremation accessories. Other more

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Figure 1 Coffin and Outstretched Hands



personal symbols include a park bench and tear soup pot (Schwiebert & Deklyen, 2004). Figure 2, or a candle, may help individuals process their grief. Participants in a workshop presented on Grief Walking in the sand, sponsored by WASTP (Fraser, Heshmati, 2021) identified the following miniatures as symbols of healing for them:

memorial tree, a tiny island, an angry monster, lighthouse, journey, lava rocks, faith symbol, phoenix, empty chair, a cross, A bridge, 2 figures walking together, sad but peaceful item, angel wings, birds of paradise, angel, a bridge, a cardinal bird, a river, space, grim reaper, headstone, butterfly, a tombstone, ashes, a candle, stepping stone, a broken fence. (Fraser & Heshmati, 2021).

Across cultures, sand is both a natural and recognizable substance (Salinas, 2021). Where possible, soft sand is available for use, and a sand tray made of wood or plastic holds not only



sand and miniatures but the expressed experiences. These healing tools are commonly found in a sandtray therapist's healing space and originate from the mother of this intervention Margaret Lowenfeld (2004).

Figure 2 Pot for Tear Soup



As we know, grief experiences can be conscious (explicit memories) or implicit memories. The skilled sandtray witness (therapist) is open to journeying with the builder on a tour of the worlds that show up, which means that the witness needs to be prepared to handle hard and sometimes activating stories of both client and self. This process was coined *grief walking* by the author and used in a workshop presented at the first World Association of Sand Therapy Professionals (Fraser & Heshmati,

2021). It is a journey of two people, contrasted with the typical builder and witness. For this reason, the sandtray therapist must constantly be in a state of self-reflection. They need to be curious about their grief experience and how they can sit in this experience and process both explicit and implicit memories that hold larger space in their field of consciousness if not the collective consciousness.

The Sandtray Worldplay Process

Gisela De Domenico, the creator of the Sandtray Worldplay[®] (2002) approach, identifies the phases of sandtray witnessing as follows:

- *Introduction to the Medium*, where the witness encourages the client or builder to "use any of the miniatures in the space to build a world." If there are needed items, the builder is invited to ask for these, and the therapist (witness) will attempt to locate the same in other parts of the counseling space or create these out of paper, material, etc.
- *Free and Spontaneous Play* can occur when the builder is encouraged to use the materials in the way that feels right to them.
- *Builder Experiencing* phase where the builder is invited to take the witness and themselves on a tour of the world. The tour begins wherever it begins and continues at the direction of the builder.
- *Joint Experiencing* is the phase where builder and witness get to know the world more closely. Questions about the world are asked with curiosity and as much as possible while staying in the metaphor and emerging themes.



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- *Reflection* can occur when the builder is ready to identify or acknowledge if emerging themes align with questions. At times, the builder can connect these experiences to those occurring outside of the world. The builder is always invited to take a photo, and the world may be given a title.
- *The Sacred Undoing* is the final phase that may occur with or without the builder in the room. Sometimes the builder indicates they want to put miniatures away, and other times the witness dismantles the world after the builder has left. When the witness dismantles the world, this is accomplished with deep respect that psyche has shown up within the safe container of the sand tray.

Why use Sandtray in Counseling for Those Struggling with Their Grief?

Sandtray enables the client to process feelings and reactions to events that they may not be able to put in words because their experiences are horrific, foreboding of the loss of the deceased, or just incredibly sad. Grief is a process that can be experienced in different ways, if even in stages.

For example, Elisabeth Kubler Ross identified that the person dying and those who lost a loved one experienced denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (1993). Simon Shimshon Rubin (1981) identified the two-track method of bereavement. Track one focuses on biopsychosocial functioning, including anxiety, depression, behaviors, self-esteem, somatic and health concerns, investment in life tasks, posttraumatic indicators, family relationships, and other interpersonal relationships. Track two focuses on the ongoing relationship with the deceased. The themes in track two include emotional closeness or distance from the deceased, narrative construction of the relationship, the experience of a negative or positive effect of the loss, and preoccupation with the deceased. Also, the feelings of loss, idealization, presence of various elements of loss, including shock, searching, disorganization, reorganization, the impact of memories on the self-system, indications of conflict and problems with the deceased, and memorialization and transformation.

Each of these areas can be journeyed in the sand tray. The witness does not need to direct these grief-walking journeys nor anticipate how the themes show up or in which order. Instead, the witness can observe worlds and track the themes that show up on each builder's personal grief journey. The witness also wants to track their own experience, observing, if not experiencing, the world.

Grief Walking

The author proposes that the following stages of grief walking align with the Sandtray Worldplay© phases. The grief walking stages assist the witness in both recognizing and acknowledging the process they need to support in their role as a witness.



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Sandtray Worldplay® Phases	Grief Walking Phases
Introduction to the medium	Identification that we are experiencing grief as evidenced by the initial miniatures that are being chosen; later affirmed as symbols of grief in the joint experiencing phase.
Free and spontaneous play	Beginning to identify symptoms and feelings of grief. Symbols or images may reflect experiences of loss or experiences of restoration as further expanded on in the reflection phase.
Builder experiencing	Begin to "play with" feelings, experiences, and shared relationships with the dying and life changes resulting from this death. Grief walking often stays in the builder experiencing phase for multiple sessions and extended periods of time. There is no expected time period – this varies from individual to individual, just as mourning has no time limit.
Joint experiencing	The therapist must have processed their own grief to walk alongside a child/youth/adult. Joint experiencing goes through phases of accepting loss and experiencing pain before successfully moving on to the reflection phase. The builder moves through this phase after connecting metaphors and themes. This occurs after the experience of looking closely (with curiosity) at what has shown up in the world.
Reflection	The grief walker's other life spaces simultaneously begin to hold reflection for the walker when they can move through reflection. At this phase, verbalizations that there is a different reality where the deceased is no longer present occurs. Sometimes identification of other strategies/relationships that help to hold the process are shared.
Sacred undoing of the world	The world is photographed. The miniatures are sometimes removed by the builder and sometimes by the therapist after the builder has left the space. The witness may want to hold space for the world over a more extended period of time if they have been touched/ activated and undo the world later, if not even the next day.



Case Example - Antionette

Antoinette was a new clinician who completed her sand therapy education, lined up supervision, and created a space where miniatures of interest to children were well organized. She was ready to start taking on new clients, and then her father died unexpectedly. Her father was not previously ill. In fact, he appeared to be in excellent health, so consequently, his death impacted his daughter intensely. She realized that until she gave herself time to grieve, she couldn't bear witness to the grief experiences of her clients. She, in fact, did some of her own sandtray work with a therapist while discussing her inability to hold these stories with her clinical supervisor. In one such sandtray, she created a world where her father was beside her as she always felt him to be (Figure 3). On the other side of the world, she was crying with her faith behind her (Figure 4), experiencing life events like an engagement and even pregnancy (Figure 5). He was in the corner of the world, so she felt his presence as if he was watching over her (*Free and Spontaneous Play Phase*). She was able to discuss with her therapist that the short timeline between illness identification and his death took her by surprise. The experience evoked feelings of fear that all things we depend on can be taken away from us (*Joint Experiencing Phase*).

As stated, these intense feelings also motivated Antoinette to seek consultation from a supervisor who assisted her by helping her to identify

Figure 3 Just a Girl and Her Dad



Figure 4 A Crying Woman and the Cross





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ways she could professionally give herself personal space to grieve (*Reflection Phase*). This meant she consciously decided not to take on a full caseload. She also decided to pause working with clients who have grief issues (including loss of home due to fire or natural disasters), given these experiences were identified by Antoinette as ones that could share the same belief: *that all things can be taken away from us*. She recognized that she needed to accept this realization and develop personal and professional coping strategies.

With both support activities, she felt competent to provide grief support again but needed to move through her own stages of grief to be able to do so.

Case Example: Meridith

Meridith also lost her father, but her loss had been one of disconnection. Her father had left her, her siblings, and her mother after having an affair. Instead of maintaining a relationship with his children, he moved many hours away. He provided financial support but was physically and emotionally absent. This left Meridith feeling angry as a young woman because she felt responsible for supporting her mother before leaving home to go to college. The family attended a faith community that had an affordable counselling program available. Though Meridith didn't initially identify that she was grieving, she eventually created sandtrays where she processed her feelings of anger, sadness,

Figure 5 Dad Watching Over Life Events





Figure 6 Disorganization of Her Family with the Loss of Father



and eventual acceptance (Kubler Ross, 1993). She found Rubin's track two themes (1981) of great benefit as they helped her make sense of how someone can grieve when an individual isn't permanently gone, such as in the death experience.

In one sandtray, she reflected on the disorganization of her family with the loss of her father (Figure 6), and then in another sandtray reorganization (*Free and Spontaneous Play*). Through these sandtrays, Meredith came to terms with the realization that her father had emotionally left her and her siblings a long time before he had physically moved out of the home. A seashell showed up in each of these worlds (Figure 7). It "needs to be there," she said with conviction. Later, she was able to reflect that the seashell held a voice only she could hear. The voice was ultimately her inner voice that reassured her that she was loved by many people and she would be ok

Figure 7 Seashell – The Voice Inside



with their love and her own self-love. She could continue to walk through life, reminding herself she is not alone (*Reflection Phase*).

Case Example: Aamir

Aamir was a 27-year-old male who was dating a Canadian girl. He identified that in his community, culture, and family, it would not be acceptable for someone to seek help from a counsellor. Aamir would go to the Imam of his mosque; however, his girlfriend also strongly encouraged him to attend



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therapy sessions. While in therapy, he struggled with touching the toys as "he was a man" (*Introduction to the medium*). After a few sessions, he started to touch the sand while first identifying the resiliency resources or restoration oriented coping (Neimeyer & Smigelsky, 2018) he had in his world. These included his university, mosque, friends, and even his Canadian girlfriend (Figure 8).

These were a juxtaposition between his many cultures. He was able to share the world of his first country. The world of the refugee camp and then the world of his Canadian friends, work, and life. Once comfortable, he began to share atrocities he had seen in the refugee camp. He was able to show his sadness in the sandtray of losing his community, friends, and even grandparents. He was able to place miniatures in the tray that communicated the resources he hoped to continue to use in his new country. These included a book for the Quran, his family, and his work (*Reflection Phase*).

Figure 8 Resiliency Resources



Conclusion

Grief is part of the human experience. As children, we may lose pets or grandparents through death. We may also lose childhood friends who move away or lose things we value. As we grow, experiencing loss is inevitable. We experience these losses sometimes somatically, spiritually, or cognitively. Grief isn't like other experiences of hurt that can be addressed with a bandage, surgery, or medication. We walk with grief, figure out our relationship with grief and incorporate the learning into our lived experience. One wonders how our experience of grief is connected to our attachment style, given we can experience grief differently depending on our relationship or perceived relationship with the deceased and the cumulative loss itself. Grief treatments, including complicated grief intervention, can focus on the feelings associated with the loss experience and emotions, thoughts, and hopes for the future, sometimes referred to as restoration orientation (Dodd et al., 2022).

Sand therapy is an approach that can focus on either (or both) depending on the grieving stage of the builder. Sand therapy can assist by giving voice to our experiences so we can acknowledge them and identify how to go on because of them or despite them. It is also likely that just as the client is grief walking, so is the therapist. Therefore, when we finish a session by



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thanking the builder for sharing their world or their heart (Figure 9), however, we may also be thanking the builder for mirroring our own.

Figure 9 Magnetic Hearts



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