

Using Art as a Coping Tool in Grief

by Kelly Brown, LMFT

You've seen it mentioned on lists of coping strategies for navigating grief – draw, paint, take photos or generally just “create art” – but how exactly might art help and where are you to start? Hopefully this article can help answer some of those questions and give you or your family some additional coping tools during this tender and challenging time.

How Can Art Help Me?



For tens of thousands of years, humans have turned to visual arts (painting, drawing, sculpture, and photography) to help us explore, process, and express a wide array of feelings, with grief and trauma right alongside deep love and immense joy. Now, through science, study, and experimentation we understand the many uses of art as a healing aid.

If you are acutely grieving now or have ever experienced the loss of someone close to you, you are viscerally aware that grief breaks us open, bringing deep and powerful emotions to the surface and making us feel raw and vulnerable. Often when we are broken open, we exist in a place beyond words. In this place, visual art can be a light in the darkness.

From scribble drawing with a carefully selected color to more elaborate mixed media sculptures there are a variety of creative activities that may support our grief work and a variety of benefits we may experience from working with art. For instance, art may help us find a bit of *comfort* in our grief, as it can be a safe place of refuge and a container for overwhelming emotions like anger, fear, and anxiety. It may create space that provides *relief* from the intensity of loss or help us transform challenging feelings into more manageable (or at least comprehensible) ones. There is also ample research to suggest that the act of making art can be physiologically *soothing*, calming our nervous system and inviting our bodies to relax. This is a



wonderful antidote to the stress response that is usually active in full swing when we are grieving.

Art can also help us *integrate* our experiences by balancing the right and left hemispheres of our brain. While telling our story activates the language portion of the left brain, art activates the creative centers of our right brain allowing a processing and release of emotions that often can't happen through talking alone. Frequently, the images we create with our right brain help us *make sense* of our inner feeling states, allowing us to bring language back on board to describe something that was previously nebulous. More fluid forms of art like painting or shaping clay can support the *exploration* of our innermost selves, help us bypass our defenses to get to the root of our experience, and may even support us in shaping a new self when we feel ready to do so.

On top of these many benefits, art can be incredibly *empowering*, giving us a sense of *control* when everything in our lives seems so out of our control and a *sense of accomplishment* when we may be struggling to make the bed in the morning. We may even find it to be *life-affirming*, to provide a renewed *sense of beauty* in our day, or to reveal a *connection to something larger* than ourselves.

Whether you've previously considered experimenting with art as an additional coping skill or not, I hope you'll consider it now. You don't need fancy supplies or an elaborate studio to get started. Start with what you have in your home and let the creative process guide you from there.

Where Do I Start?

As you read over some of the benefits of incorporating art into your toolbox of coping strategies, you may find yourself saying, "But I'm not an artist," "I haven't picked up a crayon since I was in kindergarten," or "Art is for children." You may also notice an inner critic getting ready to judge your final product or keep you from even setting a pencil to a page. Let me assure you that art is for *everyone* and the *process* of creating is more important than the outcome. Here are a few steps to get started.

- 1) Find or create a space just for yourself where you won't be interrupted, where you can spend as long as you like with the creative process. Art often brings us into a liminal space where we lose track of time and connect with something outside of ourselves. You may even decide to encourage this by bringing in flowers, a candle, or a photo of



your loved one to your creative space. (Note: Time and space may be hard to come by. Work with what you have, even if it is not perfect.)

- 2) Consider whether you want to work in silence or if you will feel more supported by music in the background. Experiment with what feels good to you. (Note: Instrumental music or nature sounds are generally recommended over music with lyrics to keep our right brain engaged.)
- 3) Select an activity and material that match your energy level and emotional state.
 - a. If you have a lot of energy you may choose a large piece of paper or a creative process that involves movement, for instance, painting while standing up, ripping up tissue paper for collage, or squishing clay. If you notice you have limited energy, start with something small. An example may be a simple doodle with pen and paper.
 - b. If you are feeling particularly out of sorts, you may want to select a more concrete art project such as mindful coloring from a book, sketching something supportive with a pencil, or selecting images from magazines to put into collages. If you are having a hard time touching into feelings and desire to do so, you may explore working with clay, watercolors, or other paints – art forms which are more fluid and may invite our feelings to flow. The more fluid the material, the more feelings it will activate whereas the more static the material the more thinking it will stimulate.
- 4) Gather your supplies so you will have what you need at your fingertips.
- 5) Take a deep breath, allow yourself to settle into the space and get started. Listen to your energy level to see how much time you want to spend creating but aim for a minimum of 15 minutes.

Remember that it is not *what* is created that matters, it is the process and the feelings evoked. Anyone can use art as a means of coping and healing, even if you have never taken an art class or you think you don't possess a creative bone in your body. If you find yourself feeling sad, crying, or heavy, know that these are all normal reactions to grief and that it is healthy to let the emotions move through you. However, you will want to allow yourself time to close your creative process as it may open up very strong feelings. One suggestion to close is to take a physical step back to view what you've created, give it a name, and end with some deep belly breaths and words of kindness for yourself. You are doing a wonderful job supporting yourself.

How Can I Support Bereaved Children Using Art?

Art is a very powerful way for children to express themselves too. When words don't come easily, art speaks. When you are supporting grieving children, create space for them to get in touch with their feelings, memories, hopes, and dreams in a visual and tactile way. Provide them with paper, markers, or whatever you have available. You don't need much – a pencil and a piece of cardboard will do. You may even sit down and create something together as a family. One key thing to remember when you are in the presence of others creating is to avoid commenting on *what* you think you see in someone else's art and instead give them the opportunity to share if they'd like to.

Below are a few activity ideas you may use as starting points to open the door to creativity.

Art Activities for Young Grieving Children

- Draw a picture of your favorite memory with the person who died
- Sculpt with playdough something that makes you feel better when you are sad, mad or worried



Art Activities for Grieving Teens

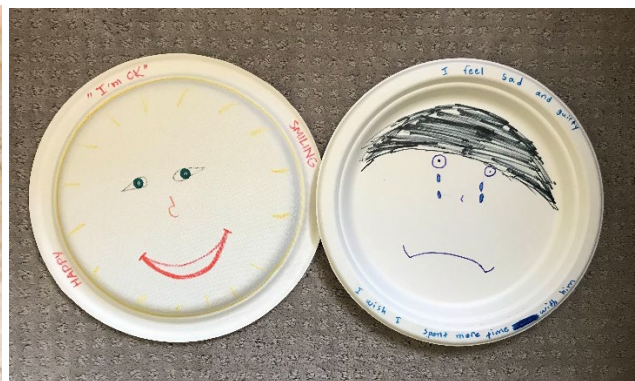
- Create a collage out of magazine cutouts (Optional themes: what supports me, a collection or things my person liked or that remind me of him/her)
- Cut a large colored heart from construction paper and glue a photo of your person in the center. Write or draw memories of him/her surrounding it.

Notes: Teens often prefer to work with symbols as they externalize feelings and experiences and many teens enjoy collages as they remove the pressure of creating something out of nothing.



Art Activities for Grieving Families

- Draw or sculpt your "family"
- Make or decorate masks that reflect as individuals how you are feeling inside (inside of mask) and what you show to others (outside of mask)



Art Activities for Grieving Adults

- Color in a mandala using colored pencils or pens
- Doodle with your non-dominant hand then color it in
- Draw or paint what your grief is like for you in this moment





In Closing

There are so many ways to engage with art that make it approachable as a coping skill in grief. If these ideas don't resonate with you or your family, search for others that might or better yet -- follow your own intuition about what feels right in the moment. Reviewing and reflecting on art pieces created throughout our grief journey can be a helpful way of noticing how our feelings and experiences have changed over time, giving us perspective and hope for the future. It is our hope that art becomes something that provides you comfort, relief, control, understanding, an emotional release, a sense of empowerment and accomplishment, beauty, a connection to something greater than yourself, or any combination of the above. Best wishes on your creative journey.

If you find yourself needing more support or guidance from a specially trained Grief Counselor, please contact our Bereavement Department at By the Bay Health by calling (415) 526-5699.