

A Maker's Guide to Grief:

An analysis of how craft provides solace during bereavement.

Why is this important to me?



I chose to research this topic because it was my hope to better understand my own circumstances relating to bereavement, in order to help other people, who are experiencing similar senses of loss, through the medium of craft. The current self-care movement means that society is becoming more aware of the importance of a positive mental wellbeing. It is my belief that reconnecting with traditional craft practises could provide an answer for people's needs for a therapeutic outlet.

AIMS

To document the different approaches adopted during bereavement by carrying out interviews with individuals and field specific experts.

To determine what similarities are presented across all recorded coping methods, and therefore enhance our understanding of to what extent craft is effective as a healing process.

METHODS

A combination of written and verbal interviews with: craftspeople, respondents, and counsellors was carried out. These findings were cross-referenced with literature, studies and journals exploring similar themes. The approach taken towards this research project was as a craftswoman who has experienced several significant losses in her young life so far.

What is GRIEF, and how do we experience BEREAVEMENT?

"The reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one." - S Freud (1914-1916)

"Related to a favourite belonging, a house move, a habit that has to change through circumstance, or an appreciation that your life isn't what it should be according to what you see in others' homes." - Interviewee Six (2017)

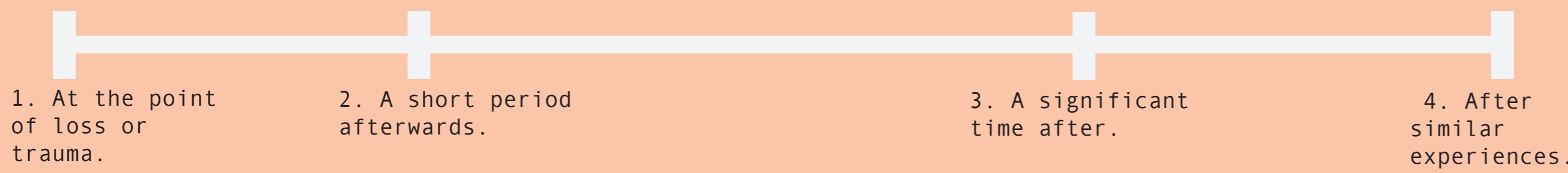
"Similar qualities of being irresolvable and lacking a distinct sense of closure." - Interviewee 18 (2017)

It can manifest itself through physical, emotional or psychological reactions.

The external implications of bereavement can also occur in many different forms:

"Day to day loss, financial, practical, changing of plans, loss of future plans, changes to remaining relationships." - Interviewee Six (2017)

The recall and analysis of grief becomes multi-layered, depending on how and when one processes their feelings, for example whether they are processing it:



RESPONDENTS

If respondents did not resort to craft, then alternative physical activities provided them with solace during their bereavement. For example:

- The use of physical movements to cope with emotional distress.
- Instant emotional and expressive responses through drawing or writing.
- Sensory connections through: music, films or smells.
- Spending time with specific people.
- Planting a memorial tree.

Further research showed that objects, whether crafted or otherwise, could also provide solace.

An object has sentimental value if:

- It has an obvious human quality.
- It was worn or anthropomorphizes the memory of the lost person.
- It has a direct link to the departed; it was made by, or for them; owned, bought, or worn by them; or has shared memories.
- The object was valued by the departed, regardless of function.

The research indicates that experiencing loss opens up new emotional responses in those that have been bereaved.

The sentimental objects recorded during research often reflected themes of time to the respondents', this symbolizes that our "time on this Earth is finite" (Interviewee 7, 2017).

Craft is an effective form of therapy because:

- It requires the application of natural materials.
- Makers project their strive to reach maximum potential onto inanimate objects.
- Makers can connect with their understanding of themselves within the world.
- Craft offers the maker a sense of control, as a holistic process.

Craft is an effective distraction from feelings of loss because:

- It is both mentally and physically engaging and relaxing.
- It is an alternative form of meditation; makers can enter a state of flow.

- A sense of personal fulfilment from a thorough approach to the creative process.
- Making is a positive response to something as distressing as death and loss.
- The products of the craft therapy process can continue their healing capacity beyond the experiences of the maker.

Craft is effective at reconnecting makers with their loss, by:

- Reminding them through the physical use of their bodies.
- Entering into a state of flow, finding their loved ones are present in their thoughts.
- Providing comfort through the knowledge that the departed was aware of the maker's practise prior to their death.
- Embodying characteristics of their loved ones through participation in the creative process.

The social benefits of craft therapy are:

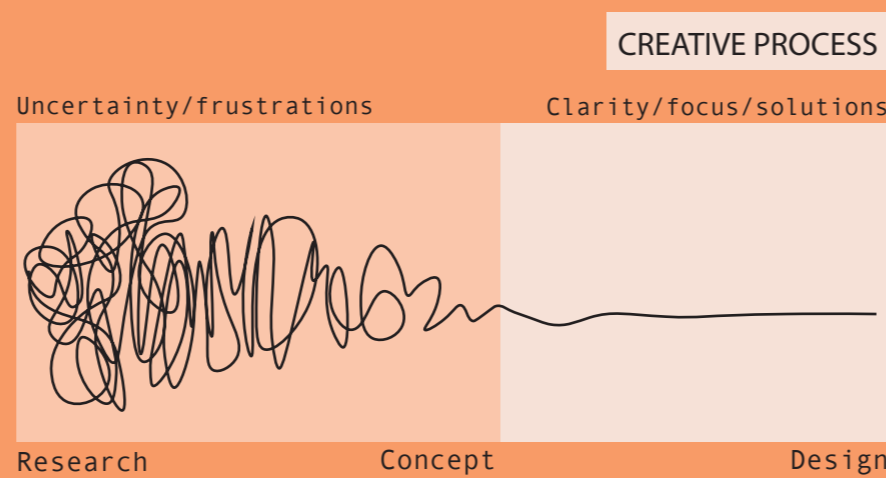
- Connecting with loved ones through making.
- Bonding with new people by joining support groups that offer workshops, or specific craft groups.

These opportunities to share knowledge and life experience are not only necessary for the heritage of craft, but also the rehabilitation of those suffering from grief.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many similarities between the stages of grief and the making process:

- The maker's approach sets a rhythm to life, through the ordering and solving of problems, which is a transferable skill.
- Both craft and experiencing loss help strengthen a sense of character, such as resilience, patience, accuracy, and determination.
- Experiencing loss can be a catalyst for increased productivity, through the acknowledgement that life is short, therefore craft becomes a vehicle for living.
- The appropriation of craft may change during the bereavement process. This depends on how and when an individual is processing certain feelings.



COUNSELLORS

A healthy relationship with ones own experience of grief leads to a more fulfilling and better quality of life.

Breaking the taboo of discussing death and loss through therapy or counselling has been to be effective by the work carried out by:



Leonie Serbrock, a youth worker and children's bereavement counsellor in Northumberland, uses craft-based approaches in her therapy, such as puppet making, or creating sand jars.



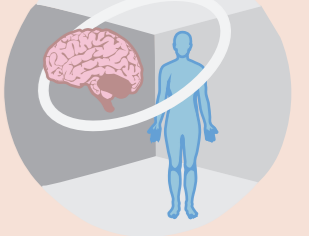
Oxford's Centre for Enablement provide occupational therapy through woodworking and craft workshops.

This is the case, because...

1. Communicating is easier once engaged in a physical activity, as it:

- Reduces the need for eye contact.
- Allows for comfortable silences.
- Provides an element of focus for a busy mind.
- Relieves tension through a physical activity.

2. Use of the 'third space' prevents the Cartesian divide of the mind and body. There is a higher success rate in therapy when patients are able to embody learnt knowledge.



CASE STUDY

Celia Pym demonstrates the powerful emotional nature of handmade objects, as she finds the intimate nature of her craft, darning knitwear, allows respondents to reconnect with their lost loved ones through the repairing of sentimental items of clothing.



"The things brought to me seemed to have a lot to do with grief and loss... People would bring me things belonging to someone maybe who had died...It seemed to me that that's what's important about these encounters, the mending is just the sort of byproduct of it" (Pym, 2017).

MAKERS

Often makers turn to processes that come naturally to them, crafts that don't require a lot of physical or mental energy. Alternatively, some makers turn to crafts that they had lost touch with.

In both instances what is present is how those experiencing bereavement revert to known patterns of behaviour, and crave activities that form a routine. This offers the maker a sense of security and normalcy.

A proportion of makers may turn their attention to learning or practicing new crafts. This gives them the opportunity to establish new memories, and is often the case some time after the loss.

Craft is a form of therapy that may be turned to because:

- It gives purpose to life.
- It helps record life events.
- It thanks those who show support.
- It is inexpensive.
- It is accessible from home.
- It helps maintain sanity.

Independent practise can be beneficial because:

- Individuals learn to be comfortable with their own company.
- It reinforces a sense of self control, and confidence in abilities.
- It provides the maker with peace, and time to reflect.
- It reminds the maker regularly of their worth as an individual.
- It shows visible improvements in personal development.

The negatives of solitary crafts are:

Any sense of discontent can result in the festering of negative thoughts whilst working independently.

- Emotionally venting through craft carries risks of making mistakes, which is likely to increase feelings of self-doubt.
- Forcing craft onto those who are not comfortable doing it, may find it a more stressful than relaxing activity.