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What is a Palette of Grief?

Palette of Grief is an activity that visually captures grief reactions. Metaphors are the use of rhetorical expression that helps you fully grasp your narrative, which is your story of loss. What would your grief look like if you describe it as an image or object? You may describe what happened as a journey or a roller coaster ride.

For the metaphor, *Palette of Grief*, the primary concept is an artist's palette, which is a thin and usually oval flat tablet with a thumb hole at one end that painters hold and use to blend paint colors. When the palette is metaphorically applied to loss, it becomes that which holds and blends physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual reactions after a final separation.

Where Did the Idea of Palette of Grief Come From?

Barbara Rubel, a suicide loss survivor, found that watercolor painting helped her understand her grief process after her father's suicide. One day, almost finished with a painting, Barbara spilled a glass of water on her palette, which caused the colors to mix into one another. This made her think how grief reactions often blend together.

Brief Description

The task is to create an image of a palette that captures your overall reactions to loss. The graphic image creatively spurs you to a deeper understanding of your grief reactions.

Suggestions for Use

This activity may be completed during support groups, individual counseling sessions, grief therapy, at home, and in healthcare and mental health professional training sessions. Although you may have experienced more than one loss, only focus on one loss per palette.

The Palette of Grief page can be copied before you begin the activity so you can create another palette for another loss. This activity can be used as a springboard to talk about your loss and, ultimately, find meaning in it.

Contraindications for Use

This activity is best suited for use after several weeks have passed since the loss. It should not be done if you are feeling acute intense reactions.

Materials and Supplies

1. Palette of Grief Activity
2. Five different color markers. In a group setting, there needs to be enough color markers so everyone will have the opportunity to use five different colors.
3. Tables are needed in order to write. If no tables are available, clip boards need to be distributed.
4. Optional classical music or meditation music can be played in the background.

Time Requirement

Minimum: 45 minutes. Maximum: 1½ hours.

Basic Procedure

There are five check boxes at the top of the Palette of Grief page that refer to emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and spiritual reactions. You will check off each of the boxes, *one at a time*, as you do the activity and then write your grief reactions within the artist's palette. Emotions, thoughts, behaviors, physical, and spiritual grief reactions are listed on five pages.

Instructions

Read *Let's Get Started* for an understanding of the context and an explanation of each of the five steps in this activity.

How to Interpret Your Palette of Grief

Once you have finished the activity, use "How to Interpret Your Palette" to understand your Palette of Grief.

Customizing the Procedure

For a small group, everyone can share their palettes. The group facilitator or clinician can ask the group to discuss each of the questions on the "How to Interpret Your Palette" page.

In a large auditorium, individuals can share their palette with the persons sitting near them.

You may also want to consider giving one or two individuals an opportunity to share how they have interpreted their palette with the entire group.

Follow-Up

At the completion of this activity, you can explore the Palette of Grief® Guided Imagery.

Long-Term Follow-Up

Also, the activity can be repeated months after the initial creation of a Palette of Grief (e.g., three, six, and twelve months). Retain it for reference and comparison of reactions.

Comments

While the palette is being completed, a clinician, or group facilitator needs to ensure that everyone gets a chance to complete the activity and that time limits are respected.

Let's Get Started

Step 1—Emotional Reactions (Time frame: 5-10 minutes) First, choose one color marker. Use this color ONLY for emotional reactions. Check off the “Emotional” box at the top of the Palette of Grief. Review the page: *Emotional Reactions*. If you felt any of the emotions listed due to your loss, write the word(s) inside your palette. Write one word or several words. Write them large or small. Be as creative as you like.

Step 2—Cognitive/Thoughts (Time frame: 5-10 minutes)

Next pick a *different* marker to represent thoughts. Use this color ONLY for cognitive reactions. Check off the “Thoughts” box at the top of the Palette of Grief. Review the page: *Cognitive Reactions*. If you thought about any of the words listed due to your loss, write the word(s) inside your palette.

Step 3—Behavioral Reactions (Time frame: 5-10 minutes) Next, select a different marker to represent behaviors. Use this color ONLY for behavioral reactions. Check off the “Behavioral” box at the top of the Palette of Grief. Review the page: *Behavioral Reactions*. If you conducted yourself in a certain way because of your loss, write the word(s) inside your palette.

Step 4—Physical Reactions (Time frame: 5-10 minutes)

Now choose a different marker to represent physical reactions. Use this color ONLY for physical reactions. Check off the “Physical” box at the top of the Palette of Grief. Review the page: *Physical Reactions*. If you experienced any physical reactions because of your loss, write the word(s) inside your palette.

Step 5—Spiritual Reactions (Time frame: 5-10 minutes) Finally, pick a different marker to represent spiritual reactions. Use this color ONLY for spiritual reactions. Check off the “Spiritual” box at the top of the Palette of Grief. Review the page: *Spiritual Reactions*. If you experienced any spiritual reactions because of your loss, write the word(s) inside your palette.

You have completed the five steps. Although the Palette of Grief activity is enlightening, it can be exhausting. If overwhelmed, stop the activity. Focus on your breathing and relax.

Go to “How to Interpret Your Palette” when you feel ready to explore your grief process.

Emotional Reactions

I have accepted what happened.
I am afraid of living.
I feel agitated.
I am aggravated.
I am angry.
I am anxious.
I am apathetic.
I am apprehensive.
I feel betrayed.
I am bewildered.
I am bitter.
I blame myself or someone else for the death.
I am bored.
I feel contempt.
I am in denial.
I feel despair.
I feel detached from others.
I am disgusted.
I am emancipated.
I miss being emotionally dependent.
I feel empty.
I am envious.
I have become estranged from my family.
I fear I might harm myself or others.
I am fearful of losing others.
I feel frazzled.
I am frustrated.
I am grateful.
I feel grouchy.
I feel guilty.
I feel helpless.

I am hurt.
I feel incomplete.
I feel jealous.
I am joyful.
I feel lonely.
I feel longing.
I feel lost.
I need to wear a mask to not show my real feelings.
I am moody.
I am emotionally numb.
I feel nervous.
I am outraged.
I am overwhelmed.
I feel panicky.
I am peaceful.
I am pessimistic.
I am puzzled.
I feel relief.
I feel rejected.
I feel sadness.
I have self-doubt.
I feel shame.
My world is shattered.
I feel emotionally shocked.
I have shut down.
I feel stigmatized.
I am surprised.
I am torn.
I feel useless.
I am vengeful.
I am worried.
I yearn for my loved one.

Cognitive Reactions

I have trouble accepting the death.

I am apathetic.

I avoid certain thoughts.

I avoid reminders.

I have a negative attitude.

I feel abandoned.

I am absentminded.

I don't belong.

I have brain fog.

I think I am going crazy.

I just can't believe it.

I am closed-minded.

I have trouble concentrating.

I feel contempt.

I am not in control.

I am confused.

I criticize myself.

I have trouble making decisions or plans.

I am disorientated.

I have exaggerated thinking.

I think I am a failure.

I have flashbacks.

I am flooded by my thoughts.

I am forgetful.

I have fragmented memories.

I have experienced hallucinations.

I deserve to be happy.

I have homicidal ideation.

I am hypervigilant.

I am indecisive.

I jump to conclusions.

I cannot let it out.

I think life is too hard to endure.

People are tired of listening to me.

I have learned negative things about my loved one that have changed my view of her/him.

My life just seems different.

I feel lost.

I fear I am losing my mind.

I have nightmares.

I obsess about things.

I'm oddly aware of things related to death.

I often think about how short life is.

I am outraged.

I am preoccupied with the deceased and/or with the circumstances of the death.

I must be perfect.

The perception I have of myself has changed.

I can't make sense out of it.

I have made sense out of it.

I have a low self-esteem.

I don't feel safe.

I speculate on what should have been done for my loved one.

I did the best I could.

I think about taking my own life.

I think of my loved one all the time.

I have all-or-nothing thinking.

I have difficulty trusting others.

I have a sense of unreality.

I have unwanted pictures in my head.

I feel worthless.

I repeatedly ask, "Why?"

Behavioral Reactions

I put my feelings into my artwork.
I try to stay active.
I have decreased activities.
I am becoming aggressive.
I avoid reminders of the deceased.
I stay in bed all day.
I have kept the belongings of my loved one intact.
I bite my nails.
I call out to my deceased loved one.
I carry special objects.
I cry and feel tearful.
I have been careless and clumsy.
I have conflicts with coworkers.
My drug use is causing problems.
I have been drinking alcohol.
I am eating very little/too much.
I have become fidgety.
I seek forgiveness.
I have provided forgiveness.
I am compulsively gambling on the internet.
I have become introverted.
I have become impatient.
I am isolating myself from my usual networks.
I lose things.
I mistrust others.
I depend on caffeine and/or nicotine to regulate my mood and energy.
I am moody.
I listen to music now more than ever before.
I visit online bereavement message boards/chat rooms.
I organize to excessiveness.

I have outbursts.
I have become overprotective.
I pace.
I look at photos.
I procrastinate.
I am preoccupied.
I have become quiet.
I neglect my responsibilities.
I feel reckless.
I have difficulty with relationships.
I have restless hyperactivity.
I have changed my routine.
I seek out places.
I have problems with sexual functioning.
I have become self-destructive.
I find myself sighing a lot.
I am spending too much money.
I have sleep disturbances.
I am searching for clues.
I am having speech problems.
I need to facilitate a support group.
I have a strained face.
I grind my teeth.
I talk excessively.
I can't talk about it.
I talk about my loss in a grief support group.
I treasure certain items.
I work out at the gym more than ever before.
My work performance has changed.

Physical Reactions

I have aches/pains.
I have new food allergies.
I have arthritis.
I have asthma.
I have backaches.
I have difficulty catching my breath.
I have high blood pressure.
I have butterflies in my stomach.
I feel like I am carrying around a ton of bricks.
I have elevated cholesterol.
I have cardiovascular disease.
I have pounding heart, chest pain, or heartburn.
I have cold chills or hot flashes.
I have a lump in my throat.
I have frequent colds/decreased resistance to illness.
I am constipated.
I am depressed.
I have diarrhea.
I have dry mouth.
I feel dizzy.
I have worsening eczema.
I have lost my energy.
I am exhausted.
I have eye strain.
I have been feeling faint.
I am fatigued.
I grind my teeth.
I have headaches.
I have a rapid heartbeat.
I have increased hair loss.

I have hives.
I have insomnia.
I have “jelly legs.”
I am lightheaded.
I feel muscle tension.
I am nauseous.
I have a pain in my neck.
I have a peptic ulcer.
I feel restlessness even though I am sitting still.
I feel rundown.
I feel intense pangs of separation distress.
My sexual desire has changed.
I feel shaky on the inside.
I find myself sighing a lot.
I have skin problems.
I have shortness of breath.
My sleep patterns have changed.
I have slowed down.
I’m easily startled by noise/touch.
I have stomach bloating or pain.
I have burning in the pit of my stomach.
I have trouble swallowing.
I suddenly sweat.
I have the same symptoms as the deceased.
I have nervous twitches.
I am very tense.
I am thirsty.
I tremble.
I frequently need to urinate.
I have an unsteady voice.
I feel weakened.
I experienced changes in weight.
I feel a void.

Spiritual Reactions

I have abandoned my faith.
I am apathetic about the future.
I make mental affirmations.
I believe in an afterlife.
I created an altar.
I believe in angels.
I feel awakened by my experience.
I have experiences of awe.
I have revised my beliefs.
My beliefs are a source of strength.
I feel blessed.
I have profound coincidences.
I continue the bonds with the deceased.
I have become cynical.
I have detected my loved one's cologne/perfume.
My loved one comes to me in dreams.
I search other faiths.
I need God's love more than ever.
I question why God let this happen.
I can no longer praise God.
I am angry at God.
I feel God's grace.
My view of God has changed.
I don't understand why God did not heal my loved one.
I don't think God cares about me.
My loss is a valuable lesson from God.
I believe that a loving God would never have let this happen.
My loved one is in heaven.
My loved one is in hell.
I heard the voice of the deceased.
I have felt my loved one's presence.
I saw the deceased for a moment.
I feel enlightened.

I have a stronger faith.
I feel forsaken.
I have offered my forgiveness.
I feel grateful.
I use my experience to help others.
I feel hopeless.
I feel hopeful.
I feel an inner peace.
I am joyful.
I feel judged.
I judge others.
I believe in karma.
My life is meaningless.
I have a greater love for things.
I found meaning in what happened.
I question the meaning of my life.
I meditate.
I no longer believe in miracles.
I have difficulty moving on.
I have noticed objects move or disappear/reappear.
I search for proof of life after death.
I find comfort through prayer.
My sense of purpose has changed.
I create rituals that help me.
I no longer attend religious services.
I question why people suffer.
I attend services more than ever.
I enjoy singing hymns.
I have difficulty attending a place of worship.
I believe the world is a bad place.

Emotions☐

Thoughts☐

Palette of Grief®

Behaviors☐

Physical☐

Spiritual☐



How to Interpret Your Palette

Refer to the five checked boxes as a reminder of what each color represents. Palette of Grief will become the starting point that helps you manage your grief reactions. Questions to consider:

- Are you surprised by the way your palette turned out?
- What beliefs do you have about yourself now that you finished a Palette of Grief?
- What value do you get out of seeing your reactions on a Palette of Grief?
- Has your Palette of Grief given you a greater perspective about loss?
- Can any positive psychological change occur due to your struggling with your grief reactions?
- Can you make meaning out of your Palette of Grief?
- If a color stands out, what type of reaction does it represent?
- Which three words on your palette are you comfortable discussing?
- If there is a word that is upsetting, what is the significance of that word?
- Did you deliberately exclude some words because it was too painful to write them down?
- Do you believe that your grief reactions should be avoided?
- Do you believe that your grief reactions should be accepted?
- Have you given yourself permission to grieve?
- Do you believe that if you shared your palette with others who are bereaved, it would help you feel connected to them?
- Can you predict what will happen if you find positive ways to manage your grief?
- With a sense of curiosity, what do you want to explore now that you have finished your Palette of Grief?

Palette of Grief®

Palette of Grief® Guided Imagery for Suicide Loss Survivors

The palette of grief can be experienced to a clinically significant level. This visualization is a guided relaxation script for suicide loss survivors who may be avoiding reminders of the deceased or having trouble recalling positive memories of the deceased. The guided imagery can help those bereaved by suicide find meaning in their loss.

Customize the Procedure: There are three ways to use this guided imagery. Slowly read the guided imagery to yourself. Pause often to experience the relaxing nature of the script. Ask another person to recite the guided imagery to you. Make sure that the person speaks slowly and pauses often. Tape yourself or someone else slowly reading the script and then listen to the recording.

Room Setup: This is a seated guided visualization. Find a comfortable place to sit and remain seated throughout the visualization. Keep distractions to a minimum.

Time Requirement: Thirty minutes. The guided imagery is designed to be read or listened to in an unhurried manner. The pace is slow to allow you time to focus on the experience.

Visualization Script

Picture yourself in a relaxing place. Sit comfortably as you bring your awareness to your body. Be patient with yourself as you sit in the stillness. Move around a bit to get loosened up. Notice any unpleasant sensations. Sit up straight. Then let all your muscles go loose and feel your body relax.

Slowly breathe through your nose. Feel your nostrils fill with air. Exhale through your mouth. Breathe through your nose again. Exhale through your mouth. Notice the rhythm of your breath. Pace your breath, as you do this guided imagery. Guide your attention to your neck. Tense your neck muscles. Slowly release the tension. Bring your attention to your head. Gently roll your head in a small circle, then reverse. Allow your face to be calm. Sigh deeply. Let the air leave your lungs. Slowly breathe through your nose and exhale through your mouth.

Guide your attention to your back. Slowly move around to alleviate any tension in your back. Bring your awareness to your shoulder blades. Gradually extend your spine to the sky. Roll your shoulder blades. Drop your shoulders back down. Feel the tension release. Bring your awareness to your upper arms. Be still as you move down to your lower arms. Guide your awareness to your wrists, palms, and fingertips. Slowly sense the energy in your fingertips.

Bring awareness to your hands. Stretch out your fingers and slowly make a fist three times. Then let your hands gently fall on your thighs. Now, put your arms in front of you like you are pressing a ball into water. Do this a few times. Move at your own pace. Then let your hands gently fall on your thighs. Now that you have loosened up, think about a peaceful place that you have already been to or one you would like to visit and picture yourself taking a walk. Bring your awareness to a long inviting path in front of you. Approach and become aware of your surroundings. It feels safe. Listen to the soothing sounds. What are you curious about as you envision this healing place? Visualize yourself moving ahead. As you walk, your feet feel light beneath you. Pay attention to your legs. Imagine your legs lighter than air, lifting you into each

step. Take your time. As you look ahead, you notice a person sitting on a large rock. You have yearned to see this person again. Sit on the rock. Observe how your body feels as it contacts the rock. This person wants to listen to you and help you to let go of anger or emptiness you might be feeling. Notice the thoughts that are occurring with this experience. Stay here for a few moments and share your loss. (Pause.) What does speaking to this person mean to you? Is there any benefit in speaking with this person? (Pause.)

Now, say goodbye to this person. Focus on how you are feeling as you say goodbye. Take a healing breath. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Exhale anything that doesn't comfort you. You feel grounded. Do this at your own pace. Continue on the path. Notice how your legs feel. The ground is firm. Become aware of the landscape. Look up to the open sky. The path is winding. The walk feels good. As you look ahead, you notice someone sitting on a wooden bench. As you approach, you recognize this person. As you slowly walk toward the bench, your feet feel lighter than air. Be mindful of what you are sensing as you walk toward this person. Your eyes meet and you sit down. This person needs to tell you something. Listen to the words being said. What does their voice sound like? Listen to what you need to hear. (Pause.)

Reflect on the lasting words this person has spoken to you. Let this person know how their words make you feel. Say goodbye when you are ready. (Pause.) What does listening to this person mean to you? Is there any benefit in listening to this person? (Pause.)

Now, imagine yourself walking along a path. Picture yourself in a peaceful, safe place. Stop for a moment and notice your surroundings. See the colors around you. What do you see? What sounds do you hear? What do you smell? Allow this place to nourish you. (Pause.)

You notice a small chest in front of you. The sunlight is shining on the chest. As you look closer, you notice a card on the chest. Your name is on the card. You open the chest and find a letter inside addressed to you. Take the time to read the letter and when you are done reading, place it back inside the chest or do with it as you wish. (Pause.) Who wrote you the letter? What does this person need to tell you? (Pause.) Has the letter helped you with any confusion you might be feeling? (Pause.) What does reading the letter mean to you? Is there any benefit found in reading this letter? (Pause.)

The time has come to take a path that leads you home. Allow peace and light to pass through your body. Scan your body for any place that still feels tense. Pay attention to the sensation and let go of the tension. Recognize the tiny changes that are happening in your body. (Pause.)

Take a healing breath. Witness the breath as it enters your body. Witness it again as you exhale.

Take a healing breath. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.

Take a healing breath. As you bring your attention back to the outer world, slowly stretch out your arms in front of you to the point of mild tension. Slowly bring your shoulders forward, up, and back. Do these shoulder curls two times.

Slowly push your right palm toward the ceiling, while pushing your left palm toward the floor. Then slowly push your left palm toward the ceiling, while pushing your right palm toward the floor.

Next, place your hands on your heart. Be aware of how you are feeling as the exercise ends.

About the Speaker Author

Barbara Rubel, BS, MA, BCETS, DAAETS, is a professional speaker for corporations, conferences, universities, and government agencies. Barbara is a champion for professional well-being and has pioneered a unique approach to addressing postvention and vicarious trauma by bringing a deep understanding of thanatology and personal resilience to her work. Her speaking engagements are designed to give audiences powerful and practical strategies that can be implemented immediately.

As an author and speaker, Barbara guides you through the theory and the practice of her approach. She is a sought-after keynoter and seminar leader whose list of clients span more than 500 organizations. You will learn a practical method to better serve suicide loss survivors. She is herself a bereaved daughter; three weeks prior to Barbara giving birth to triplets, her father died by suicide. Her story was featured in the Emmy award winning documentary, *Fatal Mistakes: Families Shattered by Suicide*, narrated by Mariette Hartley.

Barbara is the author of, *But I Didn't Say Goodbye: Helping Families After a Suicide* (3rd ed.), and the 30-hour continuing education course book for nurses, *Loss, Grief, and Bereavement: Helping Individuals Cope* (4th ed.), sold through Western Schools. She is a contributing writer to *Thin Threads: Grief and Renewal*; Open to Hope's *Fresh Grief*; *Coaching for Results: Expert Advice from 25 Top International Coaches*; *Keys to a Good Life: Wisdom to Unlock Your Power Within*; and *Remembering Our Angels*. She has also authored numerous articles on coping with loss and building personal resilience.

In 1995, Barbara created and facilitated *Sharing Our Loss After Suicide (SOLAS)*, a grief support group for suicide loss survivors. She served as an adjunct teacher at Brooklyn College where she taught undergraduate and master's-level courses in Death, Life and Health; Children and Death; Health Crisis Intervention; and Health Counseling. Barbara was also a hospice bereavement coordinator.

Barbara is a consultant with the U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center (OVCTTAC) and co-wrote its training curriculum, *Compassion Fatigue/Vicarious Trauma*. Barbara received a bachelor of science degree in psychology and a master of arts degree in community health, with a concentration in thanatology, both from Brooklyn College. She is a board-certified expert in traumatic stress, and a diplomate with the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress.

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