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Student Research

Scrapbooking as an Intervention to Enhance Coping in Individuals Experiencing Grief and Loss

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Summary of Research Findings

Individuals can experience grief and loss in a multitude of ways, and the wide range of emotions that accompany these experiences can be challenging for many. Engaging in grief rituals is one way to help individuals cope with loss during traumatic and transitional events (Castle & Phillips, 2003). Creating scrapbooks that incorporate personal, symbolic objects is one activity that has been highly ranked as a preferred grief ritual in individuals dealing with loss (Castle & Phillips, 2003). Scrapbooks can serve as a catalyst for communication and discussion between individuals and their families, as well as provide an opportunity to connect and share with peers (McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011). The use of scrapbooks may be particularly beneficial for individuals who have difficulty expressing their feelings with words (Karns, 2002), or for children who are unable to verbalize their feelings (Williams & Lent, 2008). The following six-article literature review examined the benefits associated with scrapbooking for individuals experiencing grief and loss.

Within the articles reviewed, a variety of scrapbooking interventions were described. Some interventions were delivered one on one (Allen et al., 2008; Karns, 2002; Williams & Lent, 2008), while others were offered as part of a bereavement support group for friends, family, and caregivers (Kohut, 2011; McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011). Programs were implemented on a one-time basis (Karns, 2002, Williams & Lent, 2008), as part of three- or four-week interventions (Allen et al., 2008; Kohut, 2011), or as part of an ongoing biweekly program (McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011). Individuals who took part in these interventions included older adults who had chronic, life-limiting illnesses (Allen et al., 2008),

children and adults who had experienced a traumatic or transitional event (Karns, 2002), individuals (children and adults) who had experienced the death of a loved one (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Kohut, 2011; Williams & Lent, 2008), individuals affected by a downturn in the economy (Kohut, 2011), and caregivers whose family members were dealing with chronic or terminal illnesses (Allen et al., 2008; McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011).

After engaging in scrapbooking sessions, individuals experienced decreases in stress, depressive symptoms, and physical symptoms such as pain and difficulty breathing (Allen et al., 2008). There were noted increases in conversation and religious feelings (Allen et al., 2008), as well as an enhanced sense of identity, social connectedness, and independence (Karns, 2002). Other participants reported greater feelings of family bonding, love, strength, support, and pride (McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011). Most importantly, scrapbooking was found to be meaningful in terms of helping individuals cope with loss (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Kohut, 2011; McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011).

When scrapbooking activities were structured as part of a support group, individuals specifically benefited from the supportive environment, in which they could openly share and connect with others in similar situations (Kohut, 2011; McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011; Williams & Lent, 2008). For many of the participants, scrapbooking was identified as an activity that provided a creative emotional outlet (Karns, 2002; Kohut, 2011; Williams & Lent, 2008), a way to gain closure, and a tool to help adjust to new situations (Karns, 2002).

Since this is a relatively new area of research, some findings are limited due to design structure (case studies) (Karns,

2008; Kohut, 2011), and the inclusion of individuals who were already receiving other supports (Castle & Phillips, 2011). Additionally, while some programs included diverse participants (Kohut, 2011; McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011), two focused exclusively on children or youth (Karns, 2002; Williams & Lent, 2008) while another only included participants 60 years and older (Allen et al., 2008). Details on race and culture were not always provided, but one study predominantly included African American participants (Allen et al., 2008). In order to increase the generalizability of findings, future studies should include larger samples that represent individuals of diverse ages and races. Research that utilizes control groups and examines effects over longer periods of time would also strengthen the evidence base.

Nonetheless, the current literature indicates scrapbooking is a normalizing, supportive, nonthreatening, and meaningful activity for individuals experiencing grief and loss that can help them regain a sense of control in their lives (Allen et al., 2008; Karns, 2002; Kohut, 2011), reduce stress (Allen et al., 2008), connect with their feelings (Castle & Phillips, 2003; McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011; Williams & Lent, 2008), improve conversation and interpersonal connections (Allen et al., 2008; Castle & Phillips, 2003; Karns, 2008; Kohut, 2011) and enhance coping (Kohut, 2011; McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011; Williams & Lent, 2008).

Knowledge Translation Plan

Individuals across the lifespan can experience grief during traumatic or transitional events. These events might include death of a loved one, moving, divorce, illness, disability, hospitalization, and loss of employment/income amongst others. Family members who are serving

as caregivers for loved ones may also experience losses connected with changes in their family relationships and situations (Allen et al., 2008). Given the findings summarized above, and outlined graphically in Figure 1, recreational therapists should consider using scrapbooking as an intervention to help clients cope with feelings of grief and loss they may be experiencing connected with a variety of life events.

Scrapbooking interventions can be implemented individually or as part of a support group in a variety of settings, including hospitals, community centers, schools, individuals' homes, and day programs. As personal mementos can help individuals validate relationships and relive special memories (Castle & Phillips, 2003), therapists should consider ways for participants to come to sessions prepared with these items.

During the scrapbooking process, the recreational therapist should use leading questions to guide discussions and encourage participants to express their thoughts and feelings in creative ways. The therapist should introduce participants to each other, explain and demonstrate the process of scrapbooking, provide prompts for pages and journaling (Kohut, 2011), and facilitate the sharing of scrapbooks among participants. Additional sharing can occur with family members either during or following the session (Allen et al., 2008; Kohut, 2011). For participants experiencing difficulty initially coming up with ideas, it may be helpful to show them examples of previously assembled scrapbooks. Scrapbooks are most meaningful, however, when customized to each individual. Therefore, everything from photographs and drawings to poetry and personal mementos can be included within the scrapbook (Karns, 2002), and the therapist can help partici-

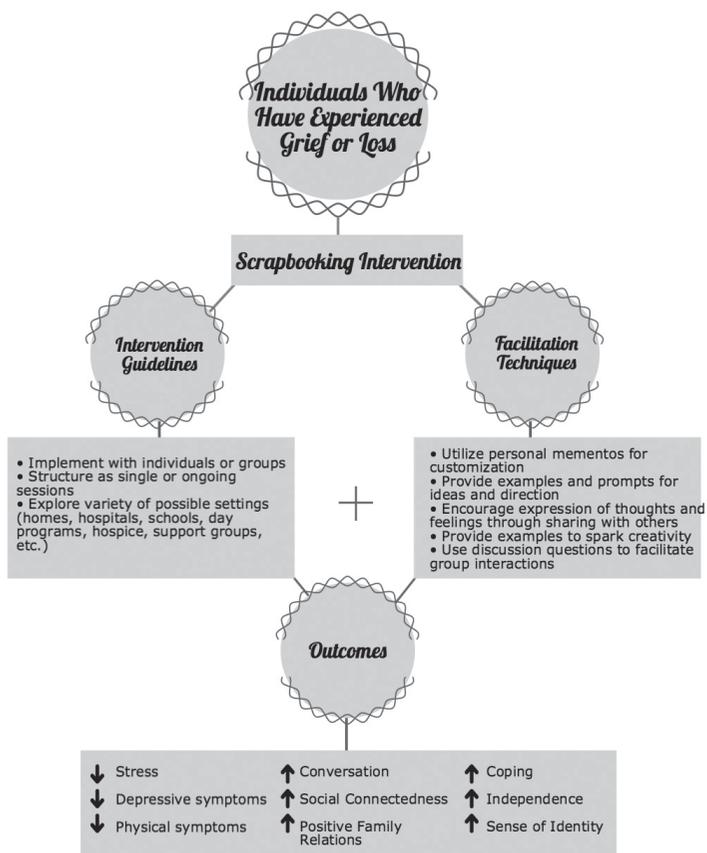


Figure 1. Scrapbooking Intervention to Cope with Feelings of Grief and Loss

pants to identify symbolic items that have significant personal meaning for inclusion in their scrapbook (Castle & Phillips, 2003).

Therapists working with children need to recognize that those under the age of seven will respond best to opportunities to use artistic creation and symbolic play to express their feelings (Williams & Lent, 2008). Regardless of age, however, scrapbooking can be used as an alternative to traditional talk therapy for individuals, groups, or families to explore and express emotions (Williams & Lent, 2008). This particular type of reminis-

ing has been ranked more helpful than some more traditional forms of counseling such as attending a bereavement support group or participating in individual grief counseling or psychotherapy (Castle & Phillips, 2003).

When using scrapbooking in a group setting, therapists should capitalize on the supportive atmosphere and encourage participants to share their books with each other. This allows individuals to share their emotions and pain, often prompting further sharing and psychological healing (Kohut, 2011). The ideas, concerns, and fears expressed in a scrap-

book can facilitate discussion amongst group members or with counselors, therapists, and other professionals (Karns, 2002).

Therapists who have limited time to work with clients can start them off with a single scrapbook page (McCarthy & Sebaugh, 2011) and then encourage participants to add to their book on their own. If a caregiver is involved, scrapbooking can be structured as an activity that the two individuals do together, as this can

have benefits for both parties (Allen et al., 2008).

Given the limited research in this area, therapists should also aim to document outcomes and record protocols and session guidelines that can be replicated by others. This will foster continued growth of the evidence base since it appears scrapbooking interventions can be a creative outlet for diverse individuals and allow them to find personal meaning during a variety of traumatic or transitional events.

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