

An expressive arts approach to healing loss and grief
Working across the spectrum of loss with individuals and communities

Irene Renzenbrink

London: Jessica Kingsley, 2021, 262 pages

ISBN: 9781787752788 (pbk) £24.99

Irene Renzenbrink introduces the reader to the idea of using the arts to assist with the healing of loss and grief experiences in both personal and global situations. She draws on her personal and professional experience to guide the reader in understanding loss from a creative perspective. Aimed at therapists, practitioners, educators and researchers working in this field, a key theme of hope and resilience emerges and is ever present throughout this book.

The reader is taken on a journey that begins with information on the early theorists and researchers who initiated a theoretical knowledge of bereavement and loss. The development of these theories and a change in paradigm explained in chapter two leads the reader towards current thinking that moves beyond the traditional five stages of grief to a model of hope in moving forward. Renzenbrink then acquaints the reader with art therapy and its healing power, its beginnings in mental health and its acceptance in many settings including palliative and dementia care despite early evidence being anecdotal and perceived as secondary to medical evidence. The latter part of the book focuses on personal experiences of the author and other therapists with some secondary reports from members of their groups. Examples of expressive arts healing adds a reality and truth to the text drawing the reader into its world.

The author invokes a welcome feeling of a conversational writing style with unexpected colloquial phrases that are a pleasant surprise. Her belief in the use of arts and love of her work is evident throughout the text which comes to life through the personal experiences of using the arts to heal losses. Each chapter is sectioned by headings which enables the reader to focus and assimilate knowledge which can be particularly helpful for students who often drop in and out of texts for assignments.

Chapter five 'Little Dyings' was particularly illuminating and offered a welcome insight into my own grief and losses by recognising and naming them. This book will almost certainly resonate with its reader, undoubtedly taking something positive from the text.

Acknowledging a UK perspective of co-production and service user involvement, whilst the personal stories add value to the book, it was disappointing that there were few from users of therapeutic services. Whilst respecting the author's view of the importance of providing a safe space for users to be creative in addressing their losses and that this work should be undertaken by those qualified to do so, I am mindful that social workers commonly work with children through artistic mediums to ascertain their story, wishes and feelings. Renzenbank describes a clear demarcation between her roles as a social worker and a therapist in helping a woman whose mother was dying in a palliative care unit but gives little information as to difference in format or process.

Given the demands on funding and resources where referrals to such therapists might be minimal, I had hoped the book would have offered practitioners suggestions as to how they might use the arts in their daily work not as therapists but to improve or enhance outcomes for users of services. Loss and grief pervade social work whether through bereavement, migration, loss of family, home, change in foster care, schools, or illness. and any tools that might assist social workers in their quest to support and enable change in the lives of others would have been welcome.

This book is well researched in all areas of grief and loss as well as the arts approach to healing loss. As a practice educator and ex academic in social work teaching practice education, I would include this book on the reading list for student practice educators and students for practice placement as it offers a vast relevant theoretical knowledge base of loss, development of the arts approach to healing and illuminating examples of personal experiences. The title might attract specialists in grief and loss but the chapters on developing theories, identifying personal and global losses and responses to them are current for practitioners particularly those working with refugees, post- traumatic stress, palliative, dementia care and others. This would provide a valuable resource for the social work profession and education.

Jill Yates

Retired Social Work Senior Lecturer, Director for Practice Learning
& Lead for Practice Education London South Bank University
Senior Fellow Higher Education Academy
Co-Chair National Organisation of Practice Teaching