

## A Qualitative Study on the Use of Therapeutic Writing in Processing Grief and Loss

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the role of therapeutic writing in processing grief and loss, focusing on its impact on emotional expression, cognitive processing, and social connection. The study sought to understand the lived experiences of individuals who engaged in therapeutic writing as a means of coping with grief, providing insights into the mechanisms and benefits of this practice. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 20 participants who had experienced significant loss and used therapeutic writing in their grieving process. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with themes identified related to emotional expression, cognitive processing, and social connection. Theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. The analysis revealed three main themes: emotional expression, cognitive processing, and social connection. Therapeutic writing facilitated emotional catharsis, helping participants identify and understand their emotions, reduce stress, and preserve memories of their loved ones. It also aided in making sense of their loss, reframing experiences, solving problems, and organizing thoughts. Socially, writing allowed participants to share their grief, feel understood, build legacies, form therapeutic alliances, and connect with communities. Participants reported significant emotional relief, cognitive clarity, and enhanced social support through the practice of therapeutic writing. Therapeutic writing offers a multifaceted approach to processing grief, providing emotional, cognitive, and social benefits. It serves as an effective tool for emotional expression, cognitive restructuring, and social connection, contributing to the overall well-being of individuals coping with loss. These findings highlight the potential of therapeutic writing in grief therapy, suggesting its integration into clinical practice to support bereaved individuals.

**Keywords:** *Therapeutic writing, grief, loss, emotional expression, cognitive processing, social connection, grief therapy, emotional catharsis, meaning-making.*

## 1. Introduction

Grief is a natural response to loss, encompassing a wide range of emotions including sadness, anger, guilt, and despair (Raphael et al., 2001). The grieving process can vary significantly between individuals, influenced by factors such as the nature of the loss, personal coping mechanisms, and cultural practices. Traditional grief rituals have been shown to provide structure and support during bereavement, yet the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted these practices, complicating the grieving process for many (Arslan & Buldukoğlu, 2021).

Therapeutic writing, including expressive writing and journaling, has been widely recognized for its benefits in managing emotional distress and fostering psychological well-being. According to Furnes and Dysvik (2010, 2011), systematic writing programs can significantly aid individuals in navigating the grief process, promoting emotional healing and resilience (Furnes & Dysvik, 2010, 2011). Writing allows individuals to articulate their feelings, reflect on their experiences, and make sense of their loss, thus facilitating a deeper understanding and acceptance of their grief (Dreher, 2015).

One of the primary benefits of therapeutic writing is its capacity to provide an outlet for emotional expression. Alves et al. (2014) highlight the importance of acknowledging and articulating ambivalent feelings during grief psychotherapy, noting that writing can help individuals confront and process conflicting emotions (Alves et al., 2014). This emotional catharsis can lead to a reduction in distress and an enhanced sense of emotional clarity (Ennis & Cartagena, 2020).

Beyond emotional expression, therapeutic writing also aids in cognitive processing and meaning-making. Savitri et al. (2019) found that expressive writing helps individuals transform their grief into a coherent narrative, facilitating the reconstruction of meaning in the aftermath of loss (Savitri et al., 2019). This cognitive restructuring is essential for moving forward and integrating the loss into one's life story (Breen et al., 2022).

Writing can also serve as a bridge for social connection and support. Sharing written reflections with others can foster empathy and understanding, enhancing relational bonds and providing a sense of community (Finn, 2003). In the context of bereavement, this shared experience can be particularly powerful, as noted by Blueford and Gibbons (2019), who emphasize the role of school counselors in supporting students through anticipatory grief by

encouraging expressive activities (Blueford & Gibbons, 2019).

In the digital age, therapeutic writing has expanded to include online platforms, offering new avenues for expression and connection. Babis (2020) discusses the phenomenon of digital mourning on social media, where individuals share their grief and receive support from virtual communities (Babis, 2020). This digital engagement can provide a sense of solidarity and validation, particularly for those who may feel isolated in their grief (Unterhitzengerger & Rosner, 2014).

The clinical applications of therapeutic writing are diverse, encompassing various interventions and therapeutic modalities. Lichtenthal and Cruess (2010) demonstrate the efficacy of directed written disclosure in reducing grief and distress symptoms among bereaved individuals (Lichtenthal & Cruess, 2010). Similarly, Kaiser et al. (2022) explore the benefits of therapist-assisted web-based interventions for prolonged grief disorder, highlighting the flexibility and accessibility of online therapeutic writing programs (Kaiser et al., 2022).

The theoretical foundations of therapeutic writing are rooted in several psychological frameworks, including narrative therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and psychodynamic theory. Writing provides a means for individuals to externalize their internal experiences, facilitating reflection and insight (Lehmann, 2023; Lehmann et al., 2022). By articulating their thoughts and feelings, individuals can gain a greater understanding of their grief, challenge maladaptive beliefs, and develop new perspectives (Linde et al., 2017).

Several structured therapeutic writing programs have been developed to support individuals through the grieving process. Furnes and Dysvik (2010, 2011) outline a systematic writing program designed to guide individuals in exploring their grief and fostering emotional healing. This program includes exercises focused on emotional expression, cognitive processing, and meaning-making, providing a comprehensive approach to grief therapy (Furnes & Dysvik, 2010, 2011).

Therapists and counselors play a crucial role in facilitating therapeutic writing interventions. Bowman (2021) calls for the development of family grief care models that incorporate bibliotherapy, emphasizing the need for empirical studies to validate these approaches (Bowman, 2021). Therapeutic writing can be integrated into individual and group therapy sessions, offering a flexible and adaptable tool for grief support (Wikander et al., 2012).

While therapeutic writing offers numerous benefits, there are also challenges and considerations to address. Cultural differences in grief expression and writing practices can influence the effectiveness of writing interventions (Greeff, 2023). Additionally, individuals may require guidance and support to engage in therapeutic writing effectively, highlighting the importance of trained facilitators (Matthews, 2019).

Building on the existing literature, the current study aims to explore the use of therapeutic writing in processing grief and loss. Specifically, this qualitative research seeks to understand the lived experiences of individuals who have engaged in therapeutic writing as a means of coping with grief. The study addresses the following research questions:

- How do individuals experience emotional expression through therapeutic writing during the grieving process?
- In what ways does therapeutic writing facilitate cognitive processing and meaning-making for bereaved individuals?
- How does therapeutic writing foster social connection and support in the context of grief?

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study was designed to explore the use of therapeutic writing in processing grief and loss. The study employed a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of individuals engaging in therapeutic writing as a means to cope with grief.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experiences with both grief and therapeutic writing. The sample included 20 individuals who had experienced significant loss (e.g., death of a loved one, divorce, major life change) and who had used therapeutic writing as part of their grieving process. Participants were diverse in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background to capture a wide range of perspectives.

### 2.2. Measure

#### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while providing the flexibility to probe further into specific areas of interest. The interview guide included open-ended questions about participants' experiences with

grief, their use of therapeutic writing, and the perceived impact of this practice on their grieving process.

Interviews were conducted in a setting chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and privacy, typically in their homes or via secure video conferencing platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information.

The interview process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or insights were emerging from the data, indicating a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved several stages:

**Familiarization with the Data:** Transcriptions of the interviews were read and re-read to immerse in the data and gain an initial understanding of participants' experiences.

**Generating Initial Codes:** The transcripts were systematically coded using NVivo software to identify significant statements and phrases related to the use of therapeutic writing in grief processing.

**Searching for Themes:** Codes were organized into potential themes, looking for patterns and relationships in the data.

**Reviewing Themes:** The themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring they accurately reflected the data and were coherent and distinctive.

**Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was clearly defined and named, capturing the essence of the participants' experiences.

**Writing Up:** The final step involved integrating the themes into a comprehensive narrative, supported by direct quotes from participants to illustrate key points and provide rich, contextualized insights.

Throughout the analysis process, reflexivity was maintained to acknowledge and account for the researchers' potential biases and perspectives. This included regular discussions within the research team and maintaining an audit trail of decisions and interpretations.

### 3. Findings and Results

The study included 20 participants who had experienced significant loss and engaged in therapeutic writing as part of their grieving process. The sample was diverse in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, providing a comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon under study. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 65 years old, with a mean age of 45. The gender distribution was balanced, with 11 females and 9 males. Socioeconomic

status varied, with participants reporting a range of income levels: 6 participants identified as low-income, 10 as middle-income, and 4 as high-income. The cultural background of participants was also diverse, including individuals from various ethnicities: 8 participants identified as Caucasian, 5 as African American, 4 as Hispanic, and 3 as Asian. Additionally, participants reported different types of losses, including the death of a loved one (12 participants), divorce (5 participants), and major life changes such as job loss or relocation (3 participants).

**Table 1**

*The Results of Thematic Analysis*

| Categories                       | Subcategories              | Concepts                                                            |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Emotional Expression          | 1.1 Catharsis              | Release of emotions, Writing as an outlet, Emotional relief         |
|                                  | 1.2 Identifying Emotions   | Naming feelings, Awareness of emotions, Emotional clarity           |
|                                  | 1.3 Coping Mechanism       | Stress reduction, Emotional support, Self-soothing                  |
|                                  | 1.4 Enhanced Understanding | Insight into grief, Reflective thinking, Emotional insight          |
|                                  | 1.5 Memory Preservation    | Documenting memories, Keeping a record, Honoring the deceased       |
| 2. Cognitive Processing          | 2.1 Sense-Making           | Finding meaning, Understanding loss, Making sense of events         |
|                                  | 2.2 Reframing Experiences  | Perspective shift, Positive reinterpretation, New narratives        |
|                                  | 2.3 Problem-Solving        | Identifying solutions, Practical coping, Planning steps             |
|                                  | 2.4 Structured Reflection  | Organized thoughts, Systematic review, Cognitive clarity            |
| 3. Social Connection and Support | 3.1 Sharing with Others    | Sharing writings, Social validation, External feedback              |
|                                  | 3.2 Feeling Understood     | Empathy from others, Recognition, Relational closeness              |
|                                  | 3.3 Legacy Building        | Writing for posterity, Creating a legacy, Communicating stories     |
|                                  | 3.4 Therapeutic Alliance   | Bonding with therapist, Trust in the process, Collaborative healing |
|                                  | 3.5 Community Building     | Group writing sessions, Support groups, Peer connections            |
|                                  | 3.6 Validation of Feelings | External validation, Feeling acknowledged, Social acceptance        |

#### 3.1. Emotional Expression

##### Catharsis

Participants frequently described therapeutic writing as a means to release their pent-up emotions. Writing served as an outlet, providing emotional relief during intense moments of grief. One participant noted, "When I write, it's like I'm pouring out all my sorrow onto the paper. It helps me to feel lighter."

##### Identifying Emotions

The act of writing helped individuals to identify and name their emotions, leading to greater emotional awareness and clarity. As one participant shared, "Putting my feelings into words helped me understand what I was really going through. It was like I could see my emotions clearly for the first time."

##### Coping Mechanism

Therapeutic writing emerged as a significant coping mechanism, aiding participants in reducing stress and providing emotional support. A participant mentioned,

"Whenever I felt overwhelmed, I would write, and it would calm me down. It became my go-to way to cope."

##### Enhanced Understanding

Writing facilitated a deeper understanding of the grieving process and provided insights into participants' emotional states. One interviewee explained, "Writing about my grief allowed me to reflect and gain insights into my feelings. It was very enlightening."

##### Memory Preservation

Many participants used writing to document memories and honor the deceased. This process helped preserve the memory of loved ones. "Writing down our memories kept my loved one alive in my heart. It was a way to keep their spirit close to me," one participant expressed.

#### 3.2. Cognitive Processing

##### Sense-Making

Therapeutic writing helped participants find meaning in their loss and understand the events that transpired. One

participant stated, "Writing helped me make sense of my loss. It was a way to process everything that happened."

#### Reframing Experiences

Through writing, participants were able to reframe their experiences, shifting perspectives and creating new narratives. "Writing allowed me to see things differently. I started to find some positive aspects in my grief journey," said one participant.

#### Problem-Solving

Writing assisted in identifying practical solutions and planning steps to manage grief. A participant noted, "When I wrote down my thoughts, I could see the problems clearer and figure out ways to handle them."

#### Structured Reflection

Engaging in structured reflection through writing helped participants organize their thoughts and achieve cognitive clarity. "Writing helped me organize my jumbled thoughts and see things more clearly," mentioned one interviewee.

### 3.3. Social Connection and Support

#### Sharing with Others

Participants found value in sharing their writings with others, receiving social validation and feedback. One participant shared, "Showing my writings to my friends and family made me feel understood and supported."

#### Feeling Understood

Writing enabled participants to feel empathy from others and strengthened relational closeness. "When I shared my writings, people understood my pain, and it brought us closer," a participant said.

#### Legacy Building

Writing served as a means to create a legacy and communicate stories for posterity. "I wrote so my grandchildren could understand what I went through. It's a legacy I wanted to leave," one participant explained.

#### Therapeutic Alliance

The process of writing fostered a therapeutic alliance with counselors and therapists, enhancing the healing process. "Writing in my therapy sessions helped build trust with my therapist. It felt like we were working together," said one participant.

#### Community Building

Group writing sessions and support groups provided a sense of community and peer connections. A participant noted, "Writing in a group setting made me feel less alone. We supported each other through our words."

#### Validation of Feelings

Receiving external validation through shared writings helped participants feel acknowledged and accepted. "When others validated my feelings through my writing, it made me feel heard and accepted," mentioned one interviewee.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the use of therapeutic writing in processing grief and loss, identifying key themes related to emotional expression, cognitive processing, and social connection. Participants reported that therapeutic writing facilitated emotional release, helped them identify and understand their emotions, provided a coping mechanism, and preserved memories of their loved ones. Additionally, therapeutic writing aided in making sense of their loss, reframing their experiences, solving problems, and reflecting in a structured manner. Socially, it allowed participants to share their grief, feel understood, build legacies, form therapeutic alliances, and create community connections.

The findings underscore the significant role of therapeutic writing in emotional expression. Participants described writing as a cathartic process that allowed them to release pent-up emotions, aligning with Alves et al. (2014), who emphasized the importance of acknowledging ambivalent feelings during grief therapy. The ability to name and understand emotions through writing was crucial in providing emotional clarity and relief, a benefit also noted by Ennis and Cartagena (2020), who found that therapeutic writing helps individuals confront and process conflicting emotions (Ennis & Cartagena, 2020). This emotional catharsis is consistent with Dreher's (2015) assertion that writing promotes emotional healing by allowing individuals to articulate their feelings and reflect on their experiences (Dreher, 2015).

Therapeutic writing's role in cognitive processing was evident in how participants used writing to make sense of their loss and reframe their experiences. Savitri et al. (2019) found that expressive writing helps individuals transform their grief into coherent narratives, facilitating meaning-making (Savitri et al., 2019). This cognitive restructuring is essential for integrating the loss into one's life story, a process supported by Breen et al. (2022), who highlighted the importance of cognitive processing in reducing anxiety and depression in bereaved individuals (Breen et al., 2022). Participants in this study also reported using writing to solve problems and plan steps, reflecting the structured reflection and cognitive clarity (Finn, 2003).

The social benefits of therapeutic writing were also prominent in the findings. Participants valued sharing their writings with others, which fostered empathy, understanding, and relational closeness. This aligns with Finn (2003), who emphasized the power of shared experiences in enhancing social bonds. Digital mourning, as described by Babis (2020), further highlights the importance of social connection in the grieving process, where virtual communities provide support and validation (Finn, 2003). Additionally, Blueford and Gibbons (2019) noted the role of school counselors in supporting students through anticipatory grief by encouraging expressive activities, demonstrating the potential of writing to build therapeutic alliances and community connections (Blueford & Gibbons, 2019).

The findings of this study align with and extend previous research on the benefits of therapeutic writing in grief therapy. For instance, Alves et al. (2014) and Ennis and Cartagena (2020) both highlight the role of writing in emotional expression and catharsis, consistent with the current study's findings (Alves et al., 2014; Ennis & Cartagena, 2020). The cognitive benefits of writing, such as sense-making and reframing, are also supported by Savitri et al. (2019) and Breen et al. (2022), who found that writing helps individuals transform their grief into meaningful narratives and reduce psychological distress (Breen et al., 2022; Savitri et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the social benefits of therapeutic writing, such as sharing with others and building community connections, are consistent with Finn (2003) and Babis (2020), who emphasize the importance of social support in the grieving process (Babis, 2020; Finn, 2003). The current study also supports Blueford and Gibbons (2019) and Furnes and Dysvik (2010, 2011), who highlight the therapeutic alliance and structured reflection facilitated by writing (Blueford & Gibbons, 2019; Furnes & Dysvik, 2010, 2011).

While the study provides valuable insights into the role of therapeutic writing in processing grief, there are several limitations to consider. First, the sample size was relatively small, with only 20 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The diversity in the sample, while enriching, also means that individual differences in cultural and personal contexts might have influenced the results in ways that are not fully captured. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Finally, the cross-sectional design of the study means that it captures participants' experiences at a single point in time, without

considering how these experiences and the benefits of therapeutic writing might evolve over time.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in understanding how the benefits of therapeutic writing unfold and change over time, providing a more dynamic picture of its impact on grief processing. Additionally, experimental designs could help establish causal relationships between therapeutic writing and specific outcomes, such as reductions in anxiety and depression or improvements in emotional clarity and social connection. Exploring the role of cultural factors in shaping the experiences and effectiveness of therapeutic writing could also provide deeper insights, as different cultural contexts may influence how individuals engage with and benefit from this practice.

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for incorporating therapeutic writing into grief therapy. Therapists and counselors should consider integrating structured writing exercises into their practice, providing clients with prompts and guidance to facilitate emotional expression, cognitive processing, and social connection. Group writing sessions could be particularly beneficial, fostering a sense of community and shared experience among participants. Additionally, digital platforms and online interventions could expand access to therapeutic writing, particularly for individuals who may feel isolated or unable to attend in-person sessions. Training programs for therapists should include modules on therapeutic writing to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively implement this approach. Finally, collaborations between researchers and practitioners could help develop evidence-based guidelines and best practices for using therapeutic writing in grief therapy, ensuring that clients receive the most effective support possible.

Grief and loss are deeply personal and challenging experiences that require compassionate and effective support. Therapeutic writing offers a promising approach to grief therapy, enabling individuals to express their emotions, process their thoughts, and connect with others. As the literature suggests, writing can be a powerful tool for healing and transformation, providing a pathway to navigate the complexities of grief and loss. This study seeks to further our understanding of therapeutic writing in the context of grief, contributing to the development of holistic and empathetic care for bereaved individuals.

## Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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