

Development of the Grief Process Scale through music therapy songwriting with bereaved adolescents

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There are available to health professionals and clinicians working with bereaved children and adolescents many available treatment options, ranging from support groups to pharmacological and psychotherapeutic interventions (Forte, Hill, Pazder, & Feudtner, 2004). The use of music therapy and songwriting experiences in grief interventions for bereaved children and adolescents to help them with issues relating to the validation, identification, clarification, normalization, and expression of feelings and emotions has been described by a number of authors and clinicians (Bright, 2002; Dalton, 1999, 2002; Hilliard, 2001; Krout, 1998, 1999, 2002, in press; McFerran-Skewes & Grocke, 2000; Skewes, 2000; Skewes & Grocke, 2000; Teahan, 2000). However, there have been relatively few research studies in the area. In addition, few studies have reported using original assessment instruments designed to measure changes in the grieving of bereaved adolescents due to treatments such as music therapy and other creative arts therapies. In one related example, Goldstein (1990) developed a Songwriting Assessment of Hopelessness (SAH) for use with adolescents with a clinical picture of depression and/or a history of suicidal ideations or attempts. Some of the participants had experienced the death of a loved one. The author related scores on the Beck Hopelessness Scale to those of the SAH. Results suggested that the SAH may be useful for assessing hopelessness. In a pilot study, Hilliard (2001) examined the effects of music therapy-based bereavement groups on the behavior and mood of bereaved

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children aged 6–11 years. Songwriting was used as one of the techniques within an overall cognitive–behavioral treatment approach. Children participating in the music therapy groups showed significant reductions in certain grief symptoms as measured by two standardized measurement instruments, the Bereavement Group Questionnaire for Parents/Guardians and the Behavior Rating Index for Children (Hilliard, 2001). In a phenomenological study, McFerran-Skewes (2001) investigated a psychodynamic approach to music therapy group work with younger, bereaved adolescents. The author conducted and analyzed in-depth interviews with the participants following a course of 10 music therapy sessions. She reported that their desires for freedom, control, fun, and achievement of cohesion within the group were essential in successfully addressing their grief needs (McFerran-Skewes, 2001).

The purpose of the current project was to design and pilot a music therapy-driven grief processing assessment instrument with bereaved adolescents receiving group songwriting interventions.

Method—the current study

Development of grief process areas to be assessed

Grief process areas in the current study were developed through a descriptive analysis of a total of 123 songs previously written by bereaved adolescents who received weekly music therapy and grief counseling over a period of 36 months (Dalton & Krout, 2002). The songwriting process involved working with bereaved adolescents to facilitate the creation of lyrics and music that expressed their core concerns regarding the death of their loved one and how they were coping since the death (Dalton & Krout, 2005). Lyrical themes within the songs were identified and organized by the music therapist into five grief process areas described as understanding, feeling, remembering, integrating, and growing. These five identified grief process areas were then compared to the existing theories and models of bereavement and were found to be representative of them (Anschuetz, 1990; Corr & Balk, 1996; Dalton, 2002; Doka, 2000; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Furman, 1974; Opie et al., 1992; Rando, 1993; Schilling, Koh, Abramovitz, & Gilbert, 1992; Tonkins & Lambert, 1996; Wolfelt, 1983; Worden, 2002).

The first process area of “understanding” represented lyrical statements of adolescents concerned with understanding the cause of their loved one’s death, their reactions to the death, and clarifying if they were “normal” in what they were experiencing. The process area of “feeling” described adolescent lyrics regarding concerns with expression of a variety of emotions associated with the death such as sadness, anger, guilt, frustration, numbness, fear, and resentment. The importance of validating and acknowledging a full spectrum of emotional reactions to a death has been stressed by many clinicians and theorists (Anschuetz, 1990; Bowlby, 1980; Corr & Balk, 1996; Fox, 1985; Furman, 1974; Hiltunen, 2003; Rando, 1993; Wolfelt, 1983; Worden, 2002). The process area of “remembering” represented adolescent song lyrics, which expressed a concern with both good and bad memories of their loved one and contemplating their unique relationship with the deceased. The process area of “integrating” described adolescent concerns with how they would be able to continue and cope with their life activities while experiencing the emotional pain and the changes that

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