

# Grief Therapy as Meaning Reconstruction



Portland Institute  
For Loss and Transition

## Specialized Program: The Art of Grief Therapy

The new Portland Institute (PI) Specialty Track “*The Art of Grief Therapy*” offers in-depth professional training in creative techniques of grief counseling, applicable in work with both individuals and groups. Building on the PI’s meaning-oriented framework, the program acquaints participants with a broad range of art-based techniques, which give professionals skills to help clients reaffirm or recompose a world of meaning that has been challenged by the loss.

The impact of profound loss often goes beyond literal language and is better expressed and explored in a less word-bound medium. Moreover, the most profound new meanings can be often accessed initially only on the implicit, and preverbal level. Art can be a needed bridge to the world of new meanings, as it can give voice to ‘unspeakable,’ which often must be heard to guide us to cross the river of mourning. Moreover, people may build a healing relationship with their grief and pain, if it is transformed into a form of art.

This specialization program is addressed to practicing therapists and counselors who are interested in enriching their practice with artistic methods that promote healing and growth in the practice of grief therapy.

Time: 6 days (42 hours) + optional peer supervision day (4 hours)

## Specialty Outline

### Module I: The Art of Grief Therapy (4 day-long workshops)

This part offers practices animated by the expressive arts, whose goal is to help clients formulate a sense of the impact of the loss, discover the personal and interpersonal resources by which they can cope with it, and build a bridge toward the practical changes required to embrace both their grief-related emotions and the life that now opens to them in their loved one's physical absence.

This section also includes modules focused on the personal development of the therapist, in which art based techniques are introduced to become more aware of their own losses and related grief. These modules feature experiential work, in which participants can directly experience the application of arts techniques and learn 'from within,' on the base on their own experience.

Participants will learn a variety of techniques and approaches related to the following areas of work. Because a broad spectrum of art based techniques is available, the selection of methods may vary depending on the presenting faculty.

- **Day 1: Working with the Body:**
  - *Analogical Listening and Conversing with the Canvas*, to access implicit, bodily sensed meanings
  - *Recomposing the Body in Grief* to work with the bodily felt sense of loss and to become aware of implicit emotions and integrate them.
  
- **Day 2: Recomposing the Self in Loss and Transition:**

- *Composition Work (CW)*, using contemplative art to symbolize aspects of one's relationship with various aspects of oneself and significant others
- *Dialogical Self Practices* of voicing and body work to deepen reflections and access "promoter positions" that provide resources for needed change
- **Day 3: Theater and Performance:**
  - *Mask work* to symbolize continuities and discontinuities in one's inner sense of self and social persona in bereavement, and to experience how this influences relations with others
  - *Symptom Dialogues* to discover what suffering has to tell and teach the bereaved
- **Day 4: Creative Writing:**
  - *Virtual Dream Stories* to harness the healing power of imagination, allowing clients to process themes of loss in their own lives through the lens of metaphor and make-believe
  - *Poetic Processing* to voice grief, explore ambivalent losses, and consolidate personal and group change

## **Module 2: Practicum Studio (2 day-long workshops)**

This module permits guided practice in the introduction and facilitation of the arts-based techniques to reaffirm or reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by the loss in specific problems and contexts, as trainers work with small groups of participants (4-12) to implement different methods. The Practicum Studio also encourages case consultation regarding the use of arts-assisted practices with bereaved children and adolescents, parents, partners, or people suffering traumatic loss, as through the suicide or overdose of a loved one. Case studies can also be used to illustrate the applications of arts-based methods within a broader therapeutic process.

### **Objectives**

- describe core principles of the RES model as it applies to written and performative art therapy interventions following loss

- use visual arts modalities to express and explore personal meanings of loss and to process them with another
- practice the use of mask work to identify personal and relational impediments to the social validation of grief
- implement 3 different forms of poetry therapy to give voice to grief and foster solidarity with other mourners in a group setting
- compose symbolic depictions of the impact of loss using collage to represent and transform the impact of bereavement

### **Substantiation:**

As contemporary models of bereavement have become more nuanced and empirically informed, so too have the practices available to grief counselors and therapists.

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### **Participants:**

The program is aimed at therapists who have experience in grief and loss care. Participation in Specialization Tracks does not require completion of Basic Certification, however Specialized Certification does.

### **Modifications**

- The program is designed to be flexible, and in collaboration with PI faculty can be modified according to the preferences of particular organizations.
- Different techniques and clinical challenges (e.g., loss of a child, violent death loss, end of life care, non-death loss, career transition) can be

- emphasized to meet the needs of practitioners in different contexts of practice.
- PI can flexibly accommodate different sizes and compositions of learner groups, from small “in house” training of a dozen agency staff members to medium size groups of post-graduate students in the helping professions to hundreds of credentialed practitioners.

*For more information on the costs and availability of training, contact:*

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Certification in Meaning Reconstruction in Loss,  
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