

Sailing Through: The Assessment of a Philippine Grief Support Program Using Bible-Based Lessons and Art Therapy

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Abstract

The Sailing Through workshops began in 2018 by my father and I through the Christian Advocacy Reaching Everyone (CARE) Foundation, and first conducted exclusively for our church (International Churches of Christ Quezon City). These support groups address different life challenges such as grief, caregiving for terminally ill loved ones and mental health issues. They are composed of Bible-based lessons, art therapy or creative exercises for self-expression, and smaller subgroups for building more intimate, sincere relationships. Since last year, several opportunities have risen for us to share what we've learned with others. As we continue to share our experiences, more and more have expressed their interest to set up their own support groups and adapt our current model. But before we reach out to train others and conduct groups to help the community, we saw the need for a thorough assessment of the Grief Support Group (GSG) workshops. Through two focus group discussions consisting of short art-related activities, I interviewed four participants of 2018's Grief Support Group and four participants from 2019's Grief Support Group. Through thematic analysis, the results show that the overall experience of the participants fulfills the program's objectives. The strengths of the workshop include teaching the importance of empathy, learning how to listen without judgment, and activities that encourage honoring the memory of those who have passed on. Some areas of improvement include the need for follow-up sessions post-GSG, the incorporation of journal-writing, addressing other forms of loss, and exploring other creative therapies.

Keywords: Grief, Filipino, Art Therapy, Support Groups, Spirituality

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Introduction

The Sailing Through Grief Support Group is one of the many programs under Christian Advocacy Reaching Everyone (CARE) Foundation. These programs were designed to help members of the International Churches of Christ Quezon City (ICOC QC) to address unmet needs stemming from life challenges.

The Grief Support Group program was designed to help people struggling after the loss of a loved one. The support group's curriculum was based off the workbook *Grief Journey In Motion* by Dr. Tim Sumerlin, who came to Manila in July 2017 to teach ICOC church leaders how to conduct grief support groups. What makes our program different from Sumerlin's is that in helping the members talk about what they've experienced and felt, we use art therapy to facilitate discussion.

Objectives of the Sailing Through Grief Support Groups

1. Provide emotional and spiritual support for people who have lost a loved one
2. Establish an empathic community for griever to find comfort and a place to express what they feel
3. Allow participants to share their memories of loved ones who have passed on
4. Encourage the participants to honor the memory of their loved one through creative works

Components of the Sailing Through Support Groups

1. Bible-based Lessons

	Topic
Session 1	Jesus Embraces Grief—Will You?
Session 2	The Father's Heart For the Griever
Session 3	We Reach Out: Our Friends, Family and Grief
Session 4	Your Grief Narrative: A Lifetime of Loss
Session 5	Personal Grief: Why Does This Hurt So Much?
Session 6	This One Hurts the Most: Examining a Relationship
Session 7	Writing Your Narrative: Saying Goodbye to the Hurt
Session 8	Enduring Relationships: Finding Solace and Joy

Table 1: Topics under "Grief Journey In Motion." Copyright: Dr. Tim Sumerlin¹ (2016).

Every session is guided by the "Grief Journey In Motion" booklet by Dr. Tim Sumerlin with a different topic per week. Each meeting begins with a roundtable

¹ Sumerlin, T., PhD. (2016). *Grief Journey In Motion: Finding Peace In Grief Recovery* (Vol. 1). Spring, Texas: Illumination.

discussion led by my father, Andre Publico, and he provides a lesson related to the topic. These Bible-based lessons unpack scriptures that talk about God's heart for the griever and comfort for those who have lost a loved one. For Christians, spirituality and love from God are core values in grief. Without being able to process grief properly, connecting with God in downtrodden times is difficult.

Reynolds (2017) speaks of the positive and negative aspects of the Christian perspective in the face of grief.² While religion and spirituality provide comfort and reassurance that the bereaved will someday reunite with their loved ones, often faith can be shaken through the loss of a loved one—mainly because Christians don't always know how to properly handle grief. In our grief support groups, we talk about how others have hurt us through the unsolicited advice that pushes us away from God rather than draws us toward Him. Especially for Filipinos, spirituality plays an important role in the grieving process as the Philippines's roots in emotional healing have come from spiritual leaders.³ (Tuason & Arellano-Carandang, 2015)

2. Art Therapy

Malchiodi (2007, p. 17) describes art therapy as a “hybrid discipline” of art and psychology.⁴ As such, the focus of art therapy is not to improve one's skills but to express oneself when words are not enough. I conduct these activities (called Expressive Exercises) following each lesson. Each activity is tied in with the theme of the session. These are done to facilitate discussion and allow the participants to talk about their experiences.

With grief, it is difficult to express or put emotions into words. Having these creative activities allows the participants to engage with their emotions and experiences and translate what they feel onto paper.⁵ (Liebmann, 2006) As the sessions continue, the participants are also able to observe their progress and use the art that they create as a record of their personal reflections. We have found that at first, asking the participants to discuss among one another without any art was difficult, but creating something before discussion acted as a catalyst for conversation within their small groups.

3. Small Groups

In *Grief Journey In Motion*, Sumerlin (2016) strictly recommends to keep every batch with a maximum of 12 participants in order to keep conversations intimate and private. We further divided the 12 into smaller, same-sex subgroups. This provides everyone with equal opportunity to share their experiences and have a safe space for discussion after the art therapy exercises. The size of the group matters as well, as we uphold strict confidentiality rules. We do not allow the participants to share the experiences that others disclose to them, but they are free to share their own personal experiences and learnings outside of the support group. The small size of the group

² Reynolds, Charles, "A GUIDE FOR UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH GRIEF: A CHRISTIAN'S PERSPECTIVE" (2017). Integrated Studies. 64.
<https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/bis437/64>

³ Tuason, M. G. T., & Arellano-Carandang, M. L. (2015). Counseling Around the World: An International Handbook, 117-124.

⁴ Malchiodi, C. A. (2007). Expressive therapies. New York: Guilford.

⁵ Liebmann, M. (2006). Art Therapy for Groups. Hove: Routledge.

also enables better relationship-building among the participants, and for a more “family-oriented” model for GSG.

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectivity of the Grief Support Program, seeking comments and address areas wherein the program can be improved. This study serves as well as an assessment of the program before reaching out to the community and making it available outside the church.

Research Questions

1. What were the experiences of participants that gave them intense grief? How did these affect their lives before the Grief Support Program?
2. How did participants give meaning to their grief before the sessions? After the sessions?
3. What were their motivations for attending the program?
4. In what ways did the personal lives of those who completed the program change? For those still undergoing the program, what have they learned so far?
5. What are the Grief Support Group’s strengths? What areas need improvement?

Methodology

This study consisted of two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The first consisting of 4 participants from the current year’s Grief Support Program and the second consisting of 4 participants from 2018’s Grief Support Program. Each FGD was split into two parts: the first being a discussion on what happened and how losing their loved one affected the participants, the second being a discussion on their memories, honoring the loved one who passed away, and GSG’s role in helping them move forward.

The FGDs were later on transcribed into two Google Doc files. Using Thematic Analysis, important quotes were pulled from the files and attached with comments, which were encoded into an excel file. The file contained nine columns: one for the moderator’s questions, and the rest for the participants’ answers. These codes were sorted into preliminary themes and refined further into final themes.

Results and Discussion



Figure 1: Batch 2018 FGD



Figure 2: Batch 2019 FGD

What were the experiences of participants that gave them intense grief? How did these affect their lives before the Grief Support Program?

Theme 1: They experienced traumatic losses involving injustice, sickness, and natural disasters.

PARTICIPANT	GRIEF EXPERIENCE	CATEGORY
Linda (sister of Miguel)	Father was murdered by relatives	INJUSTICE
Lani	Mother died of kidney failure	SICKNESS
Bernard	Mother was run over by an FX	INJUSTICE
Alec	Father died of cancer	SICKNESS
Miguel (brother of Linda)	Father was murdered by relatives	INJUSTICE
Renzo	Grandfather died of old age; Father died of cancer	SICKNESS; SICKNESS
Kiko	Two brothers died in a storm surge	NATURAL DISASTERS
Lita	Father died of cancer	SICKNESS

Table 2: Grief Experiences and their Categories

Theme 2: The events themselves burn a deep memory.

When asked to describe what happened to them, the participants from Batch 2019 recalled with great detail the pain that they experienced. I was struck the most by Linda and Miguel's accounts of their father's death. Even when they were not part of the same Grief Support Group batch, nor were they in the same FGD, their descriptions of the night of their father's murder were almost identical.

"I was only nine years old at that time [...] it was a happy day actually, because it was at summer time—it was a full moon. Ate Maria asked us, me & Kuya Miguel, to 'Let's kneel down, let's pray. Tata is facing something.' We used to pray the rosary very quickly, but we didn't finish it. Ate Maria started crying, so I was thinking, 'What's happening? What's happening?'" and I heard from afar people screaming then suddenly it was all quiet then suddenly everyone was shouting. And then, a group of men came home and told us, "Pack some things—some clothes of your dad" my sister would ask "Why? Why?" they said, " We're bringing your papa to the hospital." (Linda, 2018 Batch)

"I truly remember May 8 1986 was a full moon [...] as we grew up, we were used to have Ate Maria leading our evening prayer. In the middle of our prayer my father came home [...] with wounds on his head because [...] he was ambushed and hit with bottles on his head. He came home to get his gun. Then my brother, Kuya Bong*, and my mother followed him. After about three hours, at around midnight, our uncles came and said, 'Pack up your things, you have to leave from here. Your father is dead. We have to take him to the hospital.'" (Miguel, 2019 Batch)*

Kiko's brothers were killed in the midst of a storm. He described the evening the typhoon struck in great detail, and shared how the weather was so violent, he felt as though he was being whipped by the wind. Lita was traumatized by how quickly her father died right after being diagnosed with cancer. It was only ten days following his diagnosis that his heart stopped beating. Renzo was not in the same room when his father died, but witnessed the death of his grandfather. These are just a few examples of the many experiences the participants shared. All of them recalled the emotions, the setting, the scene and the people surrounding them the moment their loved one passed away. Some were brought to tears as they spoke about their loss. These memories seemed to come back all at once as they told their stories.

Theme 3: They felt not only the physical loss, but the loss of their "normal" life.

For every participant, there was a deep sense of disbelief the moment they heard or they witnessed the passing of their loved one. Many likened it to watching a movie with the memories so vivid and detailed in mind. The shock of losing a loved one was strong enough to make them question reality itself as though it were a dream. As days, months, and years went by, time allowed the loss to truly sink in and show how different life became without the loved one physically with them.

Lita shared about how she feared seeing a family member get sick, and dreaded going to hospitals because she got "flashbacks" of what happened when her father passed away.

"I felt so scared that another family member would die. A year after my father died, my mother had a stroke. I was so afraid that God would take her. It was so hard for me to imagine that she would be taken away. I struggled seeing another loved one in the hospital. Everything that had happened when my father died came back in flashbacks." (Lita, Batch 2019)

Miguel and Linda spoke of their thoughts following their father's passing. They were 10 and 9 years old respectively. Children often have difficulty grieving out of fear that

once they talk about the loss, the tears would never stop. (James and Friedman, 2009) Death is such a vague and abstract concept that being faced with it at such a young age is overwhelming and unbelievable.

“All I heard was, ‘Your father is gone...’ it [came] from Nana’s mouth. ‘Your father is gone.’ She broke down and cried. I could not understand... what does it mean to say ‘Your father is gone’”? (Linda, Batch 2018)

Miguel shared about how his grief was worsened when he was maltreated soon after his father’s death. He was forced to live with relatives who later on physically abused him. He blamed his father’s murderers for all the other tragedies that followed.

“Everything changed, from the way I looked at life, the way I looked at the world. I started to doubt everything. I doubted everyone, especially those surrounding us. I hated that place, where we lived.” (Miguel, Batch 2019)



Figure 3: Drawings by Miguel on a paper bag symbolizing his memories with his father

The participants spoke so much of the roles that each loved one played in their lives. They would give endearing titles to them such as, “My Tata, my teacher, my idol, my hero,” (Miguel), “Jingjing and Butch, my two best buddies in the whole world” (Kiko), “Papang and Daddy, my favorite subjects to draw” (Renzo), “Tatay, my teacher and provider--taught me how to swim, served me, was there for me” (Lita), “Mama, a leader, konsehala, cook, and teacher,” (Lani), “Mama, a dragon lady but also a sweetheart” (Bernard) and “Papa, a musician and historian” (Alec).

How did participants give meaning to their grief before the sessions?

Theme 4: The prevalence of regret, self-blame and personal responsibility made grieving difficult to process.

With the gravity of the experiences the participants endured, I asked how they made sense of their grief before the Grief Support Groups. But with that question came the topic of regret, self-blame, and personal responsibility. Stroebe et. al (2014) defines self-blame in the context of bereavement “making self-attributions about the cause of

the death, and a sense of culpability due to failure to live up to standards of the deceased or one's self"⁶ while regret involves painful thoughts and feelings about the past and wishing things would have been better or at least, different. These are perfectly illustrated in the words of Kiko and Alec:

"I regret how after being a Christian, after knowing that what my dad needed was more than feeding him, was more than giving him medicine, was more than checking his schedule—what he needed was the support of his son, the love of his son." (Alec, Batch 2018)

"‘You missed a lot, mom’ [...] You missed how good my brothers are. You only know me now that you’re staying with me, but you missed my two kids [...] my two siblings they are very good people. They are very good kids. The youngest is just a bit mischievous, but he was the brightest in his class [...] if she only knew she could have—she could have done better as a parent and as a mother." (Kiko, Batch 2019)

This theme permeated in all the stories shared by the participants. Renzo, for example, blamed himself for not being with his grandfather when he dropped his wallet and fell, sending him to the hospital. Lita blamed herself for not fulfilling her father's request for grapes to eat, because his doctor instructed him not to eat before surgery. Miguel and Linda wanted to take revenge on the relatives who killed their father.

Other than regrets made because of what they did not do, the participants also spoke of the moments their loved ones missed out on. Linda wished her father was there during her grade school graduation. She was a valedictorian at her school and was tasked to give a speech, but was disappointed when no one in the audience listened to her. Lita expressed her wish for her father to be at her wedding day to walk down the aisle with her. These were important moments growing up that were laced with heartache by the absence of their loved ones.

Theme 5: Grief changed the participants' personal ambitions.

Kiko lost his confidence, felt like he had no voice to speak up for himself, and gave up on his dream of taking the UPCAT (the college entrance exam for the University of the Philippines).

"...when I lost my brothers part of me was lost confidence vision [...] direction even I don't know what to do. Whatever you had for me that you wanted me to learn in school, sure [...] I really wanted to take the UPCAT [...] but because I had no voice, I [felt] didn't deserve it. I had no confidence. I didn't initiate." (Kiko, Batch 2019)

Renzo shared about how the passing of his father inspired him to pursue Fine Arts in college. He shared about how he and his father shared a passion for art. In this quote, he recalls his father's support and assurance:

"...for my daddy, he died when I was in my last year of high school. For college, I decided I really want to pursue our shared passion, which is art. That's what made

⁶ Stroebe, M., Stroebe, W., Schout, R. V., Schut, H., Abakoumkin, G., & Li, J. (2014). Guilt in Bereavement: The Role of Self-Blame and Regret in Coping with Loss. PLoS ONE, 9(5). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0096606

me decide, 'Yes, I will pursue what my Daddy wanted.' At that time I began thinking it would be so hard to not have my father here, because I really wanted to show him my projects. Every time I would show him my drawings, he would always be so proud of me." (Renzo, Batch 2019)

Kiko's mother was not present with him in the midst of his brothers' deaths while Renzo had his family around him during his father's passing. We can conclude that different situations bring different effects to the future of the bereaved. Some refuse to speak while some use the experience as a motivation. Both responses are valid, respected, and honest.

What were their motivations for attending the program?

Theme 6: The participants joined GSG with the initial goal of helping others.

For many of the participants, they shared that they originally joined the Grief Support Groups thinking that their learnings would help other people, but would later on come to realize that in order to help others, they would need to first process their own grief.

"On my way home one time, I asked myself, "Why was I invited to the grief group?" Is there something that I need to learn? As the sessions went by, I realized its purpose. My husband lost family members one year after another; first his mother and next his sister. He would always talk about them, and I'd always tell him to "move on" which I later learned was not right." (Lita, Batch 2019)

Theme 7: The participants were searching for a group they could feel safe in.

"I need help, I need somebody to help me with these things so my expectation was that I would be a better person with people grieving after these sessions because I myself am grieving and I'm starting to maybe progress towards healing—progress towards not hiding." (Kiko, Batch 2019)

A number of participants also found themselves searching for a group where they could safely confide their sorrows and open up to others who could relate. Grief is likened to a weight too heavy for one to carry alone, or to something buried deep inside one's self that just wants to explode no matter how hard it is pressed. And with such painful emotions, grief needs to be handled gently and compassionately.

In what ways did the personal lives of those who completed the program change?

Theme 8: The GSG sessions taught the participants the importance of empathy.

Wondra and Ellsworth (2014) describe empathy as "feeling what another person feels."⁷ Empathy is a skill that is built through being with another person in their grief. It is about understanding the depth and the darkness that takes hold of one's

⁷ Wondra, J. D., & Ellsworth, P. C. (2015). An appraisal theory of empathy and other vicarious emotional experiences. *Psychological Review*, 122(3), 411-428. doi:10.1037/a0039252

thoughts in a time of loss and communicating unconditional care. Linda and Lani shared:

“If I didn’t go through GSG, I probably would be more judgmental of others who are grieving. Maybe I could size up that they are weak and not emotionally strong, but now I have to be more understanding.” (Linda, Batch 2018)

“I think I grew in my ability to listen, because I got tired of it, haha! You know how someone can confess so much to you, and all I could do back then was choose a part of what they said, and deal with that. Now I can somehow read between the lines.” (Lani, Batch 2018)

Theme 9: The 2018 participants observed changes in their character

I asked the participants the question, “If you did not attend the Grief Support Groups, what would your life be like now?” Alec expressed:

“I guess if I didn’t join GSG I’d still be in that unprocessed state, everything swept under the rug, and [would try to] go on with life [...] or look as if everything’s okay and that everything’s under control, but deep inside still be hurting [...] so I think the major part for me was where I learned how to be more in touch with my emotions instead of building a wall and being unemotional and logical.” (Alec, Batch 2018)

Creating a space for empathy comes with a lot of room for change and growth. In our grief support groups, we strictly prohibit others from correcting one another or criticizing a person’s thinking. Whatever character changes the participants experience come from themselves, not from someone telling them what they should or should not do. When we make others feel understood, they grow on their own.

Theme 11: The 2018 GSG participants felt less alone in their grief.

Grief is marked by low feelings such as depression, isolation and loneliness. Stroebe (2018) speaks of how grief poetry is full of sorrowful language.⁸ In this melancholy, it is so easy for one to feel alone and so difficult to believe that others are there for them. Through the Grief Support Program however, many of the participants expressed that they soon felt less isolated when they became involved in the stories and lives of fellow grievers.

“I kept wondering, ‘Am I the only one who feels this way?’ It’s strange cause other people say, ‘Oh, someday that feeling will pass... she passed away already, so you need to move on,’ but they don’t really know what’s going on in my life. So having GSG was good in a way because I started to think, ‘Oh wow, what I feel isn’t abnormal; it’s actually very normal because the others also grieve the same way.’” (Bernard, Batch 2018)

What are the Grief Support Group’s strengths? What areas need improvement?

⁸ Stroebe, M. (2018). The Poetry of Grief: Beyond Scientific Portrayal. OMEGA--Journal of Death and Dying, 78, 67-86. doi:DOI: 10.1177/0030222818792706

Theme 12: GSG teaches the importance of processing one's pain.

Processing grief in the context of GSG is about creating meaning from the memories of the loved one and taking an honest, holistic look at the relationship. Miguel spoke about how grief, if not processed properly can become an endless cycle. When we are able to fully express our frustration and pain, we find healing.

"In the GSG classes I learned the importance of mourning and grieving. I understood that grieving is a process, and without processing it the right way, your grief can cycle endlessly." (Miguel, Batch 2019)

Lani shared the same sentiments, commenting on one of the lesson on "excess baggage" and our art therapy activity on "What's in my Grief Journey Suitcase?" She spoke about how the activity allows the participants to look back on what they lost, and the pain they currently carry with them.

"What impacted me was the lesson on excess baggage. [...] With all the pain that you need to embrace, there are things you'll need to let go of and leave behind, yet at the same time, there is something else left to be honored." (Lani, Batch 2018)

Theme 13: Art Therapy is a helpful tool in beginning self-expression.

The participants saw the art therapy exercises as helpful tools for discussion. Some found expressing themselves to be difficult at the start, but the activities brought out the deep emotions and memories kept within.

"The artworks helped. It was an opener for [me] to express what's going on inside of me. Sometimes it's not really what the drawing says, itself but it's an opener or a starter for you to tell what you feel deep inside. Those activities really helped me so I know how to begin sharing my story." (Linda, Batch 2018)

"I gained a sense of eagerness and a reason why I would make artworks—and that is to show my memories. I feel the sadness deep in my soul, but I can translate it into something I can look at, and something that I can remember." (Renzo, Batch 2019)

I especially appreciated this quote from Lita, who spoke about how the art therapy activities brought life back to the memories she shared with her father. In all the research I've done on art for healing, I have never heard of anyone speak about how catharsis through creativity can recall positive emotions. This was a gem for me to hear.

"For me, the artworks give back color to my past, and the good memories I had. At the same time, I'm able to express my feelings and thoughts, and I am reminded of how beautiful my memories with my father were when I draw." (Lita, Batch 2019)

Theme 14: As a new program, the Grief Support Groups have more ideas to explore.

1. Follow-up sessions post-GSG

"I wished we had follow-up sessions after [...] this was the first time that we got together since it ended. I felt like we gained some understanding of how to process

grief, but there's still more that needs to be processed afterwards." (Linda, Batch 2018)

2. Keeping journals for each session

"If I can suggest, I think journals would help as well." (Linda, Batch 2018)

3. Addressing other loss issues

"As for the second batch, I feel that they're dealing with a different kind of grief. I see that most of them need to process a relational kind of grief. Other than the death of a loved one, it's more of the death of a relationship." (Lani, Batch 2018)

4. Exploring other creative therapies

Although this was not explicitly stated as something that needed to be improved in the program, Miguel expressed how he struggled sometimes with the drawing exercises. Though the Grief Support Group exercises don't strictly call for drawings (other activities include creating collages, sculptures, or memory boxes), I considered his reflections on poetry as his personal form of therapy.

"I think art is a language—it helps me, because I can release what I need to release. But sometimes, if I can't draw it, I'll try writing it through poetry because for me that's my first language." (Miguel, Batch 2019)

Conclusion

For the Sailing Through Grief Support Program, the overall experience of those who have been part of GSG shows that participants enjoy the workshops and benefit from the lessons, activities and relationships that they build. According to the participants, the strengths of the workshop include: empathy for others, lessons on how to listen without judgment and what to say versus what not to say, and creating artworks that enable self-expression. They also spoke of suggestions for improvement such as follow-up sessions post-GSG, journals, addressing losses of other kinds and exploring other creative therapies.

It would be worth exploring how other forms of creative therapies can work in bereavement groups such as drama therapy, poetry therapy, dance therapy or even music therapy. As Sailing Through continues to conduct more workshops, it would also be worth exploring if art therapy is the best mode of expression or if the other forms of creative therapy are better suited for caregivers support groups or mental health support groups.

The integration of art therapy with the Bible-based lessons can be further explored into how the activities can be reproduced. If others were to be trained in the future to conduct the Grief Support Groups, it would be wise to prepare a guide or worksheets behind the concepts for the art therapy activities.

For other bereavement support groups, it is worth exploring a small group model where participants are given equal opportunity to share their thoughts. It is also

preferred that if someone were to join a support group, if not all of the members know each other, each participant should be accompanied by a friend or someone they already knew before the support groups began.

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