



The Role of Narrative Therapy in Managing Grief in Children and Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the effectiveness of Narrative Therapy in managing grief among children and adolescents, with particular emphasis on the integration of theoretical and practical knowledge in assessing its impact on this population. A qualitative literature review was conducted using the databases PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science, including peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 that focus on narrative interventions for grieving minors. The findings are consistent with, and in some cases extend, existing research, highlighting the significant role of Narrative Therapy in supporting grief processing during childhood and adolescence. Overall, Narrative Therapy emerges as a developmentally appropriate and non-pathologizing approach to bereavement, demonstrating effectiveness in fostering resilience; however, further empirical research is required to refine and expand narrative tools specifically designed for younger populations.

KEY WORDS: narrative therapy, grief, bereavement, children and adolescents, resilience, narrative interventions.

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Introduction

Grief refers to the psychological reaction of individuals to the experience of loss [1]. Within the framework of childhood and adolescent development, grief does not simply constitute a state of sadness but rather a complex process involving a range of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses that children and adolescents typically adopt in their effort to manage and reconcile with the physical loss of a loved one. The way in which these responses are expressed is determined to a significant degree by the influence of the individuals' internal processes as well as the external environment in which they live. Previously, children and adolescents were perceived by their environment as passive recipients of the emotional distress brought about by loss. However, recent studies indicate that they have an active role as agents who shape the grieving process, which is influenced by developmental, cognitive, and socio-cultural parameters [2,3].

It has been found that the ability of a child or an adolescent to understand and manage a loss is linked to the developmental stage they are in. More specifically, one factor influencing the perception and management of grief in children and adolescents is the level of their cognitive maturity. While children tend to find it difficult to perceive and understand the abstract concept of permanence, adolescents often encounter difficulty in integrating loss within the framework of their developing personal identity [4,5]. Also, studies indicate that the socio-economic environment in which children and adolescents live can constitute a decisive framework in which grief is expressed [6].

Narrative Therapy has begun in recent years to constitute an effective therapeutic approach for the management of grief. Narrative Therapy, unlike other psychotherapeutic approaches, does not pathologize the grieving process but perceives the individuals themselves as the experts of their own lives. Specifically, it supports that individuals perceive and interpret the experiences and events they go through via "stories" that can either limit them or empower them [7]. In the field of grief management, Narrative Therapy plays a decisive role as it helps the individual strengthen their ability to create meaning. The process of dealing with grief includes much more than the management of the emotional distress and pain that a loss entails. Specifically, it involves a significant disruption of the individual's personal identity. Personal stories regarding the deceased persons as well as the circumstances of their death function as mechanisms for reorganizing experience and coherence in a constantly changing environment. Modern theoretical approaches support that an effective adjustment to the new reality entailed by loss is the recreation of a narrative life story that

encompasses the loss as part of a continuous sense of self, rather than excluding or ignoring it [8,9].

When loss shatters previous narrative structures, a phenomenon termed a "rupture in the assumptive world", storytelling serves as the primary bridge to overcome psychological instability and emotional chaos. Grief as a state usually threatens the continuity of the personal narrative and pushes individuals to renegotiate their identity in a world without the physical presence of their loved one [10]. This specific process has a complex character as it involves the reconstruction of roles, responsibilities, and self-perceptions that had been created in the individuals' relationship with the deceased. Narrative practices help individuals reinterpret their connection with the person who has died with the goal of maintaining a continuous relationship despite its definitive "erasure." Studies so far indicate the utility of the ability to articulate a coherent narrative of loss in the degree of individuals' emotional adaptability to the new reality. More specifically, the results of studies converge on the view that the making of meaning of loss through narrative allows grieving individuals to balance the reality of loss with the demands of their daily lives [11].

Additionally, it has been found by studies that the degree of structural composition and flexibility of the grief narrative constitute important factors in the successful emotional regulation of individuals in grief. Specifically, individuals whose narratives are characterized by cognitive and emotional complexity tend to develop more effective grief management strategies. In fact, the integration of conflicting positive and negative emotions entailed by a loss within the framework of individuals' narratives has been found to contribute to the reduction of depressive symptoms and emotional distress [12]. Also, long-term studies indicate that the formation of a cohesive narrative regarding grief can lead to significant psychological benefits such as the reduction of cortisol levels and anxiety [13]. Additionally, narrative flexibility, which refers to the ability of individuals to reframe grief through different temporal and relational perceptions, strengthens psychological resilience and helps individuals in grief balance the permanence of loss with the continuation of life's path [14].

In recent years, the importance of Narrative Therapy is indicated by a significant number of studies. Nevertheless, there is a significant research gap. Specifically, the existing literature focuses more on adult populations, resulting in a smaller number of studies focusing on the needs of children and adolescents in grief. Additionally, there is a small number of studies regarding the way specific techniques and tools used within the framework of Narrative Therapy affect the way grief is managed in children and adolescents.

Therefore, there is a significant need to cover this research gap through the investigation of the combination of theoretical and practical knowledge in order to examine their degree of effectiveness in the population of grieving children and adolescents, which is the main goal of the present study. Partial goals of the study are a) the synthesis of the theoretical background of Narrative Therapy with the therapeutic goals of grief management in children and adolescents, such as emotion regulation and the correction of non-functional patterns of thought and behavior, b) the investigation of the role of the social environment and family dynamics in the creation of the narrative reconstruction of loss in children and adolescents, and c) the identification of the deficiencies of the existing literature and the proposal of future research directions for empirical study.

Results

The body of research concerning the adoption of narrative therapy in the management of child and adolescent grief can be categorized into four broad areas: individual narrative interventions, family narrative approaches, group and school programs, and digitally mediated narrative practices. Some of the studies adopt designs based on the pre- and post-application of interventions and indicate that reductions can be achieved in symptoms such as emotional distress, depressive symptoms, avoidant behaviors, and emotional expression. Also, longitudinal studies, although few in number, indicate benefits regarding narrative coherence, and meaning-making can be linked to effective adaptability over time.

Furthermore, several of the conducted studies focus on the use of narrative therapeutic processes more as vehicles for achieving therapeutic change rather than as means of minimizing grief symptoms. This fact is consistent with modern developmental models as well as theoretical models of grief that perceive adaptability during the period of bereavement as a continuous, developing process of integration rather than resolution. Although the existing research evidence does not yet allow for safe conclusions, the consistency of the results across different clinical settings suggests the positive role of narrative practices in managing child and adolescent grief.

Individual narrative approaches in managing child and adolescent grief

Empirical studies of the last decade regarding individual interventions for children and adolescents in grief indicate the significant role of Narrative Therapy in promoting psychological adjustment to a reality brought about by the loss of a loved one. Although there is a limited number of randomized controlled trials (RCTs)

to provide more secure conclusions, the results of the majority of existing studies adopting correlational and longitudinal methodologies indicate that there is a connection between narrative therapeutic frameworks and the developmental needs of young populations.

One of the points on which the majority of conducted studies focused is the structural quality of grief narratives. Kaplow et al. [17] focused on the narratives of children who had lost one or both parents and found that the degree of narrative coherence played a significant role in the degree of psychological and emotional distress. Specifically, it was found that when the coherence of children's narratives was high, meaning the children used reflective language, then a lower intensity of depressive symptoms was presented. Therefore, the way in which children and adolescents express their experiences regarding grief also functions as an indicator of psychological adaptability. Also, narrative coherence functions as a key mechanism that facilitates the cognitive integration of loss and, by extension, promotes the emotional processing of loss as an event required for their recovery.

In the field of the adolescent population, a widely investigated narrative intervention program on which existing literature has focused is Trauma and Grief Component Therapy for Adolescents (TGCTA). This specific program uses structured narrative activities to help adolescents organize and manage traumatic experiences such as the loss of a loved one [18]. The results of these studies indicate that adolescents who participated in this specific program showed a significant reduction in emotional distress and sadness, post-traumatic stress symptoms, as well as facilitated improvement in their daily functioning. Also, it was found that narrative elements within the activities allowed adolescents to embed their loss into a broader life story and, by extension, to promote emotional regulation and the formation of a stable personal identity. An additional intervention investigated by existing studies of the last decade is Narrative Reconstruction Therapy (NRT), the results of which have indicated that the autobiographical coherence of grief narratives is linked to the reduction of negative psychological symptoms [19].

Group, school, and community-based narrative interventions

Apart from narrative interventions provided at an individual level, some studies have turned their interest to group-based narrative approaches that usually take place in school and community settings. Within the framework of group interventions, techniques and practices such as collaborative storytelling, peer witnessing, and collective meaning-making are adopted as means of minimizing the sense of loneliness that loss

entails. School settings have been found to be particularly fertile environments for such interventions. The majority of conducted studies have focused on the group application of the TGCTA model. Also, randomized trial studies have found that adolescents participating in group narrative intervention programs tend to show a significant reduction in feelings of intense sadness compared to those receiving standard care or receiving no therapeutic intervention [18,20]. Studies have also found that the most important point of the intervention facilitating positive change is the recognition of "turning points" within the narration of the grief story, as well as the integration of memories of the deceased into future life narratives [18]. Peer support groups within school settings also play a very important role. The results of studies from the last decade indicate that guided storytelling among peers contributes to improving the way and degree of emotional expression, strengthening social bonds between children and adolescents, as well as minimizing feelings of grief.

The contribution of community intervention programs encompassing narrative practices is also significant. Longitudinal studies indicate that the sharing of stories about deceased persons within a supportive community environment contributes to a healthier and more long-term adjustment of individuals after loss [10,21]. Specifically, it was found that children in these specific community settings tended to maintain "adaptive bonds" for a longer period of time, as well as to incorporate the event of loss into their evolving identities. Additionally, some studies have focused on bereavement camps, which constitute spaces where groups of children and adolescents participate in activities involving rituals and memory-sharing activities. The results of the studies indicate that the participation of children and adolescents in these specific camps contributes to the alleviation of symptoms of loss-related anxiety [22]. Also, within these activities, individuals are facilitated in externalizing their grief and constructing shared meanings regarding the loss.

An additional result emerging from the literature review process for the needs of the present study is that there is a limited number of studies focusing exclusively on narrative practices. The majority of studies investigated the effectiveness of narrative practices within broader therapeutic programs. For example, some studies that were randomized trials focused on the effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in the management of grief by children. Within the intervention, they integrated elements of narrative practices and found that there were positive results. Specifically, it was found that the integration of narrative practices such as the creation of a "grief story" led to a significant reduction in

symptoms of grief, depression, and avoidant behaviors

[23].

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