

Portland Institute

For Loss and Transition

Course Pack

Suicide & Overdose Loss as a Crisis of Meaning: Assessment and Intervention in Traumatic Bereavement

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Note: This course satisfies credit requirement for 2 Technique Modules toward the Portland Institute's Certification in Grief Therapy as Meaning Reconstruction (GTMR) or Certification in Grief Therapy for Suicide Bereavement (GTSB). For more information about certification, click: www.portlandinstitute.org/certification.

Suicide & Overdose Loss as a Crisis of Meaning: Assessment and Intervention in Traumatic Bereavement

My Safe House in Times of Storms

Therapeutic Intent

- To assist clients to acknowledge the challenges and detect potential risk factors encountered or foreseen in the aftermath of a tragic loss.
- To help clients identify constructive internal resources and supportive figures in the face of this difficult loss.
- To facilitate clients' post-loss adjustment by reconstructing their self-concept and surrounding systems for adaptive transition.

Logistics

- Two pieces of printer paper (blank and/or coloured)
- Coloring materials (e.g. metallic / gel markers, color pencils, oil pastels / crayons, chalks etc.)
- A pair of scissors and glue / scotch tape

Construction of "My Safe House"

1) The "Storms" as the Backdrop

- As you go through this aftermath, what challenges have you been experiencing?
- If you were to look at the path ahead, what do you foresee will be difficult for you?
- Suppose there's anything that you're afraid of or worried about, what would that be?
- If you can draw out all these challenges / difficulties / fears / worries, how would you like to illustrate them, be it through certain symbols, or colors you choose and strokes that you make? You may plot them out around the edges of this piece of paper.
- If there're any words or phrases that best represent or express these challenges / difficulties / fears / worries, what may come to your mind? You may pen these down on this paper too.
- Let's take a moment to sit with these storms. Imagine yourself being in the center of these storms. Notice what is stirred up in you, be it some feelings, thoughts, or body sensations. You may note these down in the center space of this piece of paper.

2) The "Safe House"

- In the midst of these storms around you, suppose you need to find a safe house to seek shelter during this stormy period, what kind of house do you need to keep you safe? You may draw it out in any size, shape, structure and colors, with any features, as you like on the other piece of paper.

- As you look at this house, if its foundation represents some core beliefs, values or principles of living that remain or become important to you despite what's going on in your life, what would form this foundation? You may pen these down at the bottom of your house.
- If there are any people around you that can serve as pillars to support you, like walls surrounding you to protect you, who may come to your mind? You may list down as many names as you like around your house.
- If the roof of this house represents different strategies that will help you weather through these storms, be it things that may bring you comfort, places that may make you feel safe or grounded, or activities that may soothe your distress or recharge you, jot down as many ideas as you have on top of your house.

3) Installation of the Safe House

- Now, put your Safe House in the midst of the Storms. If you prefer, you may cut your Safe House out and stick it onto the "Storms" paper.
- Let's sit with this for a while and take a good look at your Safe House in the midst of the Storms. How is it for you? Any observation / thoughts / feelings arising in you now? Is there any difference as compared with your earlier state when you sat with the storms without your Safe House?
- If it's not already included in your original drawing, I'd like to invite you to add a door on your house. Suppose this door invites you to enter this Safe House whenever necessary, what will help remind you and bring you in? What kind of door would you like to install? Where do you want to place it? You may draw it in any size and shape, with any structure, pattern and features.
- Similarly, if it's not already in your drawing, I'd like to invite you to add a window, or as many as you like. This window allows you to look out from the Safe House. Where would the window(s) be? How would the window(s) look like? As you look out from the window(s), what kind of scene would you like to see out there? How would this symbolize the path or future that you envision?
- As you stay in this Safe House, is there anything else that you need? E.g. supplies? Companions?
- Coming back to the door, how would you know that you're ready to get out of this Safe House? What do you need to facilitate your transition?

Post-Construction Processing

- How was the entire construction process for you?
- Did anything strike you in the process? What do you make out of that?
- Did any parts of this process make you realize something that you were not aware of previously?
- Was there any part that was tough for you? How come?
- Suppose there is something in this process that brings you some consolation or enlightenment, what could that be?
- Looking at the Safe House, what does it say about you as a person?
- If this process inspires you to do something for yourself (or others), what might it be? How would you go about it?

Restorative Retelling

Preparatory Entry

- Would it be a good time to talk about [loss incident] now?
- Supposed we start talking about [loss incident/the deceased], how would that be for you?
- You may share about the part that you are ready to, and pause at any point you need.
- If you want, you may close your eyes (with possible breathing/relaxation exercises as warm-up)... and slowly bring yourself back to that scene now.

Narrative Processes

1) External narrative – The objective or factual story of ‘what happened?’

- When you’re ready, you may tell me where you were and what you’re doing at that point.
- How did you get the death news? How did you react at that moment then?
- Who else was with you at that time?
- What did you do/what happened afterward?
- How did you deal with the necessary arrangements thereafter?

2) Internal narrative – The emotion-focused story of ‘what am I feeling?’

During the loss event

- What do you recall about your body sensations/feelings when you received the news?
- Suppose I took a picture of you during the incident, what do you think we would see in this photo? How would that reflect on your inner state at that moment?
- If your body could say a word to describe how it was for you at that point, what would it say?

During the retelling process

- Now that you’re in touch with that feeling again, how is it for you?
- Now that you’re recalling and telling this story again, how have your feelings changed, if at all?
- How have you been getting along with your grief thus far?
- If there’s still a difficult feeling lingering in you, what could that be? How come it’s difficult?
- In which part of your body do you think that painful feeling resides? How would you describe it?

3) Reflexive narrative – The meaning-oriented story of ‘what does this mean to me now?’

- Which part of this story was the most painful for you to recall and share? Why? How have you been managing it then?
- How did you make sense of the death now? As compared with the initial phase, has there been any shift in your perspectives?
- How has this loss experience made a difference to your life?
- Having gone through such a loss experience, and arriving at where you are now, what did you discover/learn about yourself? What does it say about you as a person?
- If there is anything that could bring you comfort from this loss experience, what would that be?
- “How did this incident change your priority and values in life and life outlook?

Appendix

Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale – Short Form (ISLES-SF)

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements with regard to [the stressful life event]. Read each statement carefully and please note that for these statements, a response of 1 indicates that you “strongly agree” and a response of 5 indicates that you “strongly disagree.”

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I have difficulty integrating this event into my understanding about the world.	1	2	3	4	5
2. This event is incomprehensible to me.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am perplexed by what happened.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Since this event happened, I don't know where to go next in my life.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I don't understand myself anymore since this event.	1	2	3	4	5
6. This event has made me feel less purposeful.	1	2	3	4	5

Note: A sum of all items can be taken to compute a total Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale-Short Form (ISLES-SF) score. Likewise, Items 1, 2, and 3 can be summed to compute the Comprehensibility-SF subscale, and Items 4, 5, and 6 can be summed to compute the Footing in the World-SF subscale. The portion of the instructions in parentheses may be altered to make the measure applicable to different groups of interest. The numbering of items here does not correspond to the numbering used for the full version of the ISLES (Holland et al., 2010).

Reference:

Holland, J. M., Currier, J. M., & Neimeyer, R. A. (2014). Validation of the Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale-Short Form in a bereaved sample. *Death Studies*, 38, 234-238.

The Sudden-Bereavement Needs Inventory (SBNI) **(Bottomley & Smigelsky, 2022)**

Instructions: Below you will find a generic list of grief-specific needs that individuals bereaved by the death of a loved one commonly express. We would like to know the role these needs play in your life *at this current time*. Please read each statement and select the response to indicate how important this need is to you.

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
1. To eat well	1	2	3	4	5
2. To sleep well	1	2	3	4	5
3. To exercise regularly	1	2	3	4	5
4. To successfully complete the task(s) of the day	1	2	3	4	5
5. To maintain financial balance	1	2	3	4	5
6. To receive valuable information and/or advice from professionals	1	2	3	4	5
7. To be walked through/introduced to various support resources	1	2	3	4	5
8. To better understand the grief journey following this type of loss	1	2	3	4	5
9. To have time to reflect on life	1	2	3	4	5
10. To have an ongoing connection with God	1	2	3	4	5
11. To have an ongoing connection with my spiritual self	1	2	3	4	5
12. To be with those who experienced a similar loss	1	2	3	4	5
13. To receive valuable information and/or advice from others who have experienced a similar loss	1	2	3	4	5
14. To express my thoughts and feelings regarding the loss with those who experienced a similar loss	1	2	3	4	5
15. To find some sort of benefit in the loss	1	2	3	4	5
16. To make sense of the loss	1	2	3	4	5
17. To understand who I am after the loss	1	2	3	4	5
18. To express my thoughts and feelings about the loss with those I love	1	2	3	4	5
19. To have my grief witnessed (acknowledged, respected, appreciated) by others	1	2	3	4	5
20. To be emotionally supported	1	2	3	4	5

All items should be summed within their respective factor.

Factor:

1. Pragmatic Needs
2. Informational Needs
3. Spiritual Needs
4. Relational Needs
5. Meaning Needs
6. Emotional Needs

Items:

- 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
- 6, 7, 8
- 9, 10, 11
- 12, 13, 14
- 15, 16, 17
- 18, 19, 20

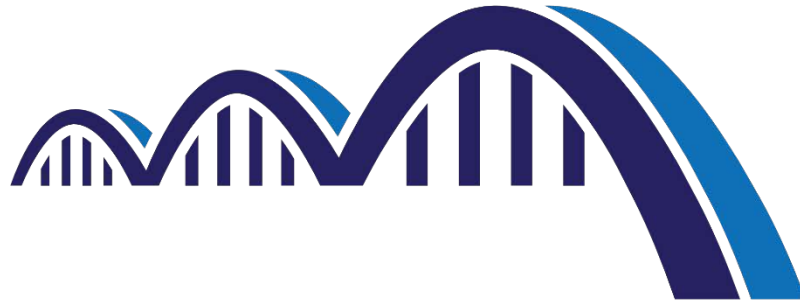
Citation:

Bottomley, J. S., & Smigelsky, M. A.. (2022). Bereavement in the Aftermath of Suicide, Overdose, and Sudden-Natural Death: Evaluating a New Measure of Needs. *Assessment*, 107319112210811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191122108113>

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