

MOURNING AND THE MANDALA

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Abstract

Grief is a universal human response to death and loss. Mourning is an equally universally observable practice that allows the grieving person to express their grief and come to terms with the reality of the loss. An innovative practice to overcome the pain of losing a loved one is mandala therapy in a round sand tray. Mandala in Sanskrit means "circle", the mandala has potential benefit for the treatment mental disorders. It can be included as a therapeutic mourning process within sand play therapy, a therapeutic technique that is based on the free expression of imagination and individual creativity and which can be used with children, adolescents and adults. In the context of sand play therapy, symbols can be defined as objects or figures that represent something else. They can be concrete or abstract. Symbols can take many forms, such as animals, people, objects, or shapes, stones, berries, twigs, flowers, petals and other natural materials. A traditional mandala is a square containing a circle and the pattern inside of the circle is symmetrical and balanced. A Grief Mandala has no pre-set pattern inside of it. The practice of the mandala is always associated with the technique of breathing and visualization. Sand can also represent feelings of being overwhelmed or trapped, as it can easily dislodge and bury things. Sandplay is a form of therapy that offers clients the opportunity to portray feelings and experiences that are inaccessible or difficult to express in words. Sandplay also provides a balance to the extroverted, verbal, and outer-focused everyday world. Mandalas are a wonderful way to tap into the Creative Self, the part of the psyche that thrives in authenticity. Touching the sand encourages the inner Self to come to the surface, which is the goal in making mandalas and sand trays. The use of mandala and sand thus becomes a useful approach in the elaboration of mourning.

Keywords: *Mandala, grief, healing, sandplay.*

1. Introduction

Grief, a universal but deeply personal experience, represents one of the most painful and transformative moments in human life. When facing grief, emotions can be hard to manage and understand. Sadness, anger, guilt, and denial are just some of the phases a person may go through. However, psychological and symbolic tools, such as the mandala, can offer powerful support in this journey, helping to facilitate the process of emotional and mental healing. The mandala, with its cyclical shape, becomes a powerful symbol of acceptance of suffering, but also of rebirth and hope. "A mandala is a geometric figure that represents the harmony, balance, and integration of the universe. In its various forms, the mandala has ancient roots in many spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jungian psychology. Characterized by a symmetrical and radial structure, the mandala symbolizes unity, infinity, and the cyclical nature of life.

In a therapeutic context, the mandala is a powerful tool for self-exploration and introspection. Its use in the grieving process offers a safe space for crying, reflection, and reconciliation with the deepest emotions.

The process of drawing or coloring a mandala invites the person to focus on the present moment, reducing anxiety and facilitating acceptance of the painful reality. The activity itself becomes a meditative act that helps organize confused emotions and thoughts.

Sand mandala therapy, has proven to be an effective and profound approach in helping people process grief and navigate the complex emotions that accompany loss. This symbolic art, which uses colored sand and both animate and inanimate symbols to create temporary mandalas, encourages reflection, meditation, and emotional release, and can be a powerful tool for the healing process.

This study aims to demonstrate how, in a therapeutic context, the creation of sand mandalas can help individuals connect with their pain and with the awareness of impermanence. In sand play therapy, symbols can be defined as objects or figures that represent something else. They can be concrete or

abstract and can be used to communicate complex feelings or experiences. Symbols can take many forms, such as animals, people, objects, shapes, stones, berries, twigs, flowers, petals, and other natural materials. Sand can also represent feelings of being overwhelmed or trapped, as it can easily dislodge and bury things. Touching the sand encourages the inner Self to come to the surface, and this is the goal in creating mandalas and sand containers.

2. Design

This is a therapeutic technique. There is a therapeutic setting in which there is a round sand container, and alongside it are various symbols of both animate and inanimate figures that the patient can place and remove during the session through a creative act. This process helps the patient gradually connect with their emotions, become aware of them, and recognize them. By creating mandalas with sand and symbols, a tangible space is created in which the patient, whether a child, adolescent, or adult, can express their pain, losses, and unspoken emotions. Sand, as a fragile and mutable material, becomes a medium for translating pain into a visual and physical experience. The very process of drawing and manipulating the sand allows the person to express their grief non-verbally, yet meaningfully

3. Objectives

1. Express and manifest pain
2. Reconcile the conflict between permanence and impermanence
3. Restore order and control
4. Promote reflection and meditation
5. Create an act of release and liberation

4. Methods

The sand mandala practice is used with patients who choose a mindfulness path. Mindfulness, which focuses on attention to the present moment, awareness, and non-judgmental acceptance, integrates well with this therapeutic technique. In the grief processing journey, a round sand container is used, a therapeutic practice that combines the art of mandala with the symbolic use of sand, becoming a particularly powerful tool in grief processing. This methodology, integrates sand as a physical and metaphorical medium to express pain, the transience of life, and the healing process. The use of a round container is a powerful symbol of cyclicity, inclusivity, and containment of emotions. Sand, with its fragile and easily manipulable nature, symbolizes the impermanence of life and human emotions. It is a substance that can be shaped but, at the same time, can slip away quickly through one's fingers, suggesting the transience and end of all things, including experiences of loss. Sand reminds us that life, like death, is fleeting, and even pain can be transformed over time. In this case, the round sand container represents a safe and protected space in which to gather emotions, allowing grief to be explored and experienced without. During a session, the person can work with sand and figurines, shells, stones, etc. to create symbolic representations that reflect emotions, conflicts, or inner dynamics. The use of mandalas, often drawn or created in the sand, can be a central aspect of the therapy, as the mandala is seen as a symbol of integration and balance the fear of being overwhelmed. The session includes:

1. **Preparation:** Setting up the environment and selecting the tools.
2. **Work with sand:** Manipulating the sand and creating shapes or mandalas.
3. **Reflection and discussion:** Analyzing and reflecting on the process, guided by the therapist.

The journey lasts for 16 sessions of 90 minutes, with a weekly cadence.

Creating a calm and protected environment is essential. Before beginning, it is important that the person facing grief feels safe and takes a moment to center their mind. A psychological assessment is conducted regarding grief and its emotions, and the same assessment is made at the end of the therapy process.

The creation of the sand mandala can be done alone or with the assistance of the therapist, but in any case, it must take place in a calm, uninterrupted environment. The sand container is always round. The color of the sand varies according to the patient's choice and the stages of grief. Sand can also represent feelings of being overwhelmed or trapped, as it can easily displace and bury things. Sandplay is a form of therapy that offers clients the opportunity to represent feelings and experiences that are difficult to express in words or are inaccessible. Sandplay also provides a balance to the extroverted, verbal, and outward-focused everyday world. Touching the sand encourages the inner Self to come to the surface, which is the goal in creating mandalas and sand containers. With hands, a spatula, or other tools, the person can begin shaping the sand inside the container, drawing circles, spirals, or other forms that evoke

their experiences. The act of slowly building a sand mandala can serve to express pain non-verbally, allowing it to be processed tangibly. The process of creation is the therapeutic aspect. Every gesture, every movement of the sand, is an opportunity to release repressed emotions, confront fears, and resistances related to loss. Once the mandala is complete, the person can sit in front of it and reflect on the meaning of the shapes and colors chosen. Creating a sand mandala is a process of self-exploration that facilitates the emergence of unrecognized emotions or those difficult to express in words. After completion, the reflection and processing begin. Finally, the destruction of the mandala allows for "letting go" of pain. The sand that is scattered symbolically represents letting go of suffering to make space for new emotions, for inner renewal. The act of destroying the mandala is a step toward accepting the cyclic nature of life and death, and the need to continue on the healing journey.

5. Discussion

The person who created the sand mandala processed their grief, and the act of destroying it at the end of the process became a moment of accepting the reality of death. Working on the sand mandala allowed the person to regain a sense of control, calm, and connection to the present. This type of meditation fosters connection with emotions but also with the unconscious mind, allowing the person to explore their feelings of grief in a non-judgmental way in a safe and protected environment. At the final moment of the therapeutic process, when the sand mandala was destroyed, it represented the release of pain. This final act can be liberating, freeing the grief from the weight of unchanging suffering and making space for healing. Sand mandala therapy offers a unique opportunity to confront grief in a deep, creative, and transformative way. Through the process of creation, reflection, and destruction of the mandala, individuals can face the pain of loss in a safe, therapeutic context, finding comfort and hope in the awareness of life's impermanence. This invites a path of inner healing, promoting acceptance, resilience, and reconciliation with one's pain.

6. Conclusion

Using the sand mandala as a therapeutic tool in grief processing is a profound and transformative experience that encourages deep reflection on the transience of life and emotions.

Through the act of creating a mandala, patients are invited to express their pain, sorrow, and confusion in a tangible form. The act of constructing the mandala can be seen as a ritual of reconciliation with the loss, allowing the person to process the pain and find meaning in the grief. As the mandala takes shape, it becomes a rite of passage, helping the individual gradually transition from a state of loss and suffering to one of acceptance and peace. This process of creation and destruction within a contained, mindful practice offers the opportunity to release heavy, stuck emotions and embrace the changes that come with the grieving process. By integrating such practices into grief therapy, individuals are not only given a space for expression but also a means to regain control over their emotions and their narrative. The mandala, as a symbol of unity and integration, becomes a way for them to rebuild their emotional world in a way that respects the past but also opens up to future possibilities. The therapeutic use of the sand mandala, therefore, offers a unique and powerful pathway for navigating the complexities of grief, ultimately supporting the individual in finding a new equilibrium after loss.

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