

Working With Grief (Pt. 1): Creating Space

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Author's Note: This is part one of a three-part series on working with grief. This first article is about helping clients create space for grieving. Part two focuses on anchoring inner resources, and part three demonstrates discovering hidden grief through body awareness. Each part includes practical suggestions you can implement immediately into your practice to increase integration of soma and psyche.

Grief is a delicate state whereby the heart gets laid open. Feelings of loss, despair, shock and anger interplay with gratitude, tenderness, vulnerability, and love. Clients come into our office looking for consolation and company in their journey. They may say they "just want to get through it" or "I don't have a reason for living." Crying buckets may have tightened their face, neck, chest, and belly.

With these clients, there is a need to create space both in the body and in the psyche so the journey with grief can be experienced consciously through the lens of the heartmind, and become a portal to the deep inner embrace and presence of *shen*.

Since grief emerges at inopportune times, like at the grocery store or work, people often do not give themselves the time and space to grieve and are quick to re-enter life. Here is where we can intervene by suggesting we help them "create space" in their body and in their emotions in the session so they can feel and listen to what is most important today.

To create space fits well with the function of the lung meridian and the breath. The lung, as we know, is associated with the emotion of grief and the need to let go to make room for new nourishment to come in. It's also about boundary functions and opening to life experience.

I give the suggestion to create space when I notice the person starts thinking, remembering and projecting into the future. They will "talk about" feelings and have thoughts about what they want to do, or about memories of the past.

The well-placed suggestion to create space in the moment leads to table work. I often start by acknowledging the many emotions we feel with loss and grief, and how together we can create a clear space in body and mind to support them in this process.

If there is agreement, I ask my client to identify a place or places in the body that feel tight or restricted with their feelings. I have them check in as I palpate and help them feel jaw, neck, chest, belly. I palpate with the idea of helping them get in touch with themselves. The palpation gives me information about where to place needles and meridians that are calling out.

I often place some local body needles in tight places they have identified and a few meridian-related needles that call to me. If I'm doing Asian bodywork, I hold points in the local area along with related distal points. I keep it simple. With the local needles (or handheld points) I tell people that we are gently knocking at the door to their chest, neck (or wherever the needles / hands are)

to see what's stored there; and I invite them to be with themselves in a gentle way. If the point(s) have a special name or image related to grief, I tell them that also to add the magic of metaphor.

Next, I establish *qigong* awareness. I like to encourage the person to connect with the earth and sky by feeling their back sink onto the earth in a comforting place, and feel the sun and stars shining from above, sending a blanket of light around them. This opens the field of connectedness and "creates space" for intuitive knowing to arise. Encourage clients to be open to any images or feelings that arise as they rest and allow themselves to be in the moment.

If you are doing acupuncture, you can leave them alone for a few minutes to attend to someone else, but be sure to allow enough time with them when you return. Your personal presence and understanding are some of the most important parts of the treatment.

Each of us wants to know that our experience is meaningful and understood. This calms the nervous system and creates the inner psychic space to open to the experience.

If the person needs rest, direct awareness to the felt sense of relaxation in the body, which may include feelings of peace, stillness, comfort. Help them savor the experience and listen to its message. If emotions are present, help them feel, cry, rage. Acknowledge that feelings are important and that you are comfortable with them (if you are).

When the wave of feeling subsides, people often feel relief, clarity, stillness, and/or comfort. These states point to a deeper heartmind presence which emerges in these moments. We can help stabilize it in the person's awareness by naming it and inviting the person to savor the felt sense of the experience in their body.

The secret is to keep referring the person back to their felt experience, be it body, emotions, images, etc., and allow feelings and intuitive messages to come through. Wisdom comes from an internal, guiding presence. This is an important moment that "creates the space" for the person to realize that relaxation, peace and wisdom are within them. This makes the pain more endurable.

At the end of the session, refer the person back to the places in the body that were tight and notice the change. There is often less heaviness, and more openness and spaciousness. You can affirm that they "created space" today for themselves. Acknowledge any information that was released by these areas, and ask the client what they want to remember from this session and incorporate this week.

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