Complicated Grief: An Arts-Based Trauma-Informed Approach

Jessica J. Porter

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/soe_student_ce
Complicated Grief: An Arts-Based Trauma-Informed Approach

Jessica J. Porter

Winston School of Education and Social Policy, Merrimack College

2024
MERRIMACK COLLEGE

CAPSTONE PAPER SIGNATURE PAGE

CAPSTONE SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CAPSTONE TITLE: Complicated Grief: An Arts-Based Trauma-Informed Approach

AUTHOR: Jessica J. Porter

THE CAPSTONE PAPER HAS BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
PROGRAM IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF MASTER OF EDUCATION IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

Audrey Falk, Ed.D.                      Melissa Nemon, Ph.D.
DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY                  INSTRUCTOR, CAPSTONE
ENGAGEMENT                             COURSE

April 13, 2024                         April 13, 2024
SIGNATURE                              SIGNATURE
DATE                                   DATE
Acknowledgements

I would like to take the time to thank and acknowledge the many people who have supported me through this journey. I have always seen a master’s degree in my future and just didn’t know when or what would fit best. The community engagement degree felt made for me both professionally and personally. To all the many Merrimack professors and classmates via virtual meetings, I thank you for the immense knowledge I’ve garnered, the support through ups and downs mixed with laughter, and from far away, the wonderful community you have provided me to create a sense of belonging. To my friends who have checked in, wished me the best, and gone before me to show me it’s possible and never too late. To my partner for always letting me know he is proud of me and reminding me to be the “tip of the spear”. To my grandparents for believing in me, always. Thank you to my brothers who are my academic role models and to my parents who are my best cheerleaders and always there to listen and lean on. I am beyond grateful.
Abstract

Traumatic loss due to violent death, a death that results from the intentional use of physical force or power, can result in mental health struggles and stigma. Complicated grief, due to traumatic loss, can be felt at both the individual and the community level. A comprehensive community project proposal was presented to a panel of reviewers in the grief, loss, and bereavement community. This proposal was developed to bring awareness to complicated grief, reduce the stigma around suicide and violent death, as well as provide opportunities to grieve safely and healthily. Through artistic expression and a sense of belonging, these projects offer participants the opportunity to find community and create art in memory of their loved ones using a trauma-informed approach. Using qualitative methods, a focus group was conducted, and feedback was collected and then transcribed into a spreadsheet with questions and specific responses. These responses were then coded, categorized, and then analyzed using emergent thematic analysis. Two categories of positive or opportunities to grow as well as challenges and clarifications were classified. The following themes emerged community, voice, choice, empowerment, stigma, funding, logistics, opportunity, resiliency, and trauma-informed strategies. The focus group suggested that a project like this would be beneficial in helping individuals and communities to process complicated grief.
Complicated Grief: An Arts-Based Trauma-Informed Approach

Grief is characterized by negative emotions and descriptors such as anguish, sorrow, agony, and numbness (Mayo Clinic, 2022, para. 1). When there is a death, the loss of a loved one reverberates to all who had a relationship with the deceased. When a death is violent and or unexpected, a mourner’s grief and the affected community’s grief can be heightened, multiplied, debilitating, and defined as complicated grief (Mayo Clinic, 2022, para. 5).

Many survivors of violent loss have increased traumatic responses including long-term physical, mental health, and emotional consequences (CDC, 2024). The World Health Organization reports over 700,000 deaths by suicide each year which would globally average 65 million survivors of suicide loss (Levi-Belz, 2023). The stigma and violence of death by suicide, homicide, and drug overdose affects the social and emotional well-being of family, the circle of friends and coworkers, and the communities that the victim leaves behind (CDC, 2024).

Bereavement or the experience of losing someone significant can be an isolating, often debilitating and misunderstood aspect of the human experience. Everyone will face loss at varying degrees throughout their lives and everyone will grieve differently depending on one’s relationship with the deceased. The grief journey is very personal for each individual community member. Isolation and varying needs and the stigma associated makes accessing adequate support difficult. Expressive art and meaning making has been a tool to support grief work especially due to tragic circumstance leading to complicated grief. Dr. Cathy Malchiodi, renowned international educator in the field of trauma and arts in healthcare speaks to her field, “Art meaning making promotes growth, self-expression, emotional reparation, conflict resolution and transformation” (Pender Baum, 2024).
The purpose of this capstone will be to create a comprehensive community project proposal that will bring awareness to complicated grief, reduce stigma around suicide and violent death, as well as provide opportunities to grieve in a safe and healthy way. Through expression and a sense of belonging, participants will find community and create art in memory of their loved one.

**Literature Review**

The term bereavement means “the state of being deprived of someone” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Researchers explain bereavement as the term that explains the fact of the loss. The term grief describes the emotional, cognitive, functional, and behavioral responses to the death (Zisook & Shear, 2009, p. 67). Grief can lead to extreme hopelessness, insomnia, loss of appetite, suicidal ideation, low self-esteem, and can lead to further physical negative manifestations (Zisook & Shear, 2009, p. 68). Dr. Maureen Malin, a Harvard affiliated psychiatrist, observes that “people who are depressed often isolate themselves and withdraw from social connections, and they often stop taking care of themselves properly” (Godman, 2019, para. 8).

**Contemporary Views on Grief**

The current status of grief support and studies involving participants in their grief journey are often based on the five stages of grief model introduced in 1969 by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying* (Kubler-Ross, 1995). In the late 1960’s Kubler-Ross interviewed over 200 adults with terminal illness. From these interviews she described a theoretical model of five “stages” that these adults experienced during their journey towards death (Corr, 2020, p. 295). The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Within this grief journey, hope was realized and persisted within these stages but many interpreters of *On Death*
and Dying came to overlook this additional aspect (Corr, 2020, p. 295). Along with Kubler-Ross, Freud also is seen as an early pioneer on grief as his model stresses that those grieving are searching for the lost attachment. He describes mourning as the detachment from the loved one who has passed (AIPC, 2010, para. 4). These ideas are based on bereavement as a linear and predictable process of identifiable stages of grief. These stages have been used to understand the aspects of grief, however a more nuanced understanding of grief, especially complicated grief, has emerged. Studies of the individual and community of grief have increased thus increasing the levels of understanding and differing processes of people’s grief journeys. A large body of empirical evidence emphasizes multiple trajectories of grief, a lack of a time limit, and varied reactions and needs instead of a prescribed process (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018).

In addition, the theory of Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2010) suggests that grieving individuals oscillate between two processes in everyday life experience. The loss-oriented stressors, such as confronting the reality of the loss, includes grief work and establishing bonds. Examples of possible difficulties within these stressors are the intrusion of grief, denial, and avoidance. The restoration-oriented stressors, such as adjusting to life without the deceased, includes doing new things and taking on new roles, identities and relationships. Areas of struggle here are the areas of distraction from grief, denial, and avoidance of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Providing opportunities for art-based trauma-informed approaches can provide a creative outlet for individuals to express both aspects of their grief thorough meaning making. Fostering this type of support within a community opportunity can increase success for some.

Robert A. Neimeyer’s narrative and constructivist model in 2001 adds to our understanding of the grief journey and he describes "six key realities influenced by death" as the
following; loss can validate or invalidate our framework of life, grief is universal and unique, grieving is active and either challenges or affirms meaning within their world, emotions help the bereaved to make meaning, find direction, and interpret life, the reconstruction of identity is a social process, and lastly, those grieving adapt to loss and can restore a sense of self by making sense (Bruce, 2007). Because of a significant loss, a person may have a change in their world view and how their grief now fits into their new reality. This new framework will ultimately allow for healing and validation of this new sense of self. Neimeyer’s Meaning Reconstruction Model of Grief focuses on the process of constructing and reconstructing meaning following loss (Bruce, 2007). Through art making, individuals may explore existential questions, find personal significance in their loss experiences, and create narratives that integrate the loss into their broader life story.

Violent Death and Complicated Grief

The U.S. National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) reports more than seven people per hour die a violent death (2019). In 2019, more than 19,100 people were victims of homicide and over 47,500 people died by suicide (CDC, 2019). Violent death includes death by suicide, homicide, and drug overdose. The NVDRS characterizes violent death “as a death that results from the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or a group or community” (CDC, 2024, para. 1). The National Vital Statistics System reports the 2021 mortality due to homicide deaths is 26,031 (CDC, 2024). The CDC reports that more than one million people have died due to drug overdose since 1999 (2022). In 2021, the U.S. reported 106,699 deaths from drug overdose (CDC, 2024). Within 2022, 49,449 deaths by suicide were reported by the CDC within the US (2023).
The definition of complicated grief is varied and treatment in bereavement is still often misunderstood. Within the article, Grief and Bereavement: What Psychiatrists Need to Know, authors explain that complicated grief is when someone isn’t able to heal or sustain a normal state of being because of a heightened state of mourning and this state becomes prolonged (Zisook & Shear, 2009, p. 69). Risk factors during bereavement that may lead to complicated grief can be due to an unexpected or violent death such as suicide or homicide, social isolation, or a loss of a support system. Adding to this is the burden of the effects of stigma and trauma which can lead to a lack of motivation to find support or getting access to healing resources (Tal Young et al, 2014).

**Impact of Violent Deaths on Communities**

Many bereaved express that loneliness and a lack of beneficial social support is all too common. Research shows that this heightens the risk of emotional, mental and physical health problems for those suffering from complicated grief (Zisook & Shear, 2009, p. 69). The burden of mental illness across the globe depicts that those with complicated grief specifically due to violence, benefit from social support and finding community (Cacciatore et al., 2021). For the 85% of people who will know someone at a personal level who had died by suicide, those who are closely related are those who are most adversely affected. For every suicide death, at least six loved ones are directly affected (Tal Young et al, 2014, p. 178).

**A Trauma-Informed Approach**

Community engagement with a trauma-informed approach allows for the community of focus to become empowered, have open collaboration, and decreases the possibility of re-traumatization, all within a safe environment (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 2). Participants asked to share and be vulnerable need a mindful approach focused on their emotional well-being. According to
SAMHSA’s Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, “trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7). A trauma-informed approach is defined by “A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 9).

CDC and SAMHSA collaborated to develop the six guiding principles for a trauma-informed approach. Adopting this kind of approach requires systemic change with assessment and quality control at all organizational levels. Community engagement entails awareness for stakeholders, participants, caregivers, and facilitators. Trauma-informed care creates a sense of safety, trust and transparency, provides the opportunity to have and offer peer support, ensures participant and organizational collaboration and mutuality, the community’s empowerment, voice, and choice (CDC, 2024).

**Arts-Based Trauma-Informed Approach**

After the violent death of a loved one, we can experience emotions that are so intense that emotional and physical functions go numb and disconnect. This response is natural but also can disrupt our normal day to day and way of life. Art-based and trauma-informed expression can help to heal a community from a violent death by creating safe therapeutic opportunities. Designer Maya Ying Lin (1982) designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which stands as an example of art that can bring community together especially on a topic of such severe emotional
derision in our national history. Observers of the wall comment that it appears as a gash on the landscape, an unhealed wound (National Park Service, n.d.). The memorial chronicles 58,318 American lives lost in a war that many had gone unrecognized for in their service or ultimate sacrifice. Although controversial when it was dedicated in 1982, many visit this area along with other statues to leave military dog tags and medals, flowers, photographs and tokens behind to aid in their healing process (National Park Service, 2020). Memorial art can be a way to bring imagery to fears, regulate emotions, help to find their voice, start the meaning-making of their loss, and share vulnerabilities and strengths to others in the community and beyond. There are many ways to bring voice and choice in meaning-making by expressing loss by writing poetry, storytelling, and mixed media.

Art-based and trauma-informed based projects have shown to provide a sense of belonging by creating a community to share space, time, and experience (APA, 2024). Meaning making is expression through art and the “ability to develop new goals and purpose, or to construct a sense of self that incorporates the significance of an experience” (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p. 11-12). This meaning making allows for those challenged by a loss to form and integrate the grief journey into a system of beliefs, expressions of lessons learned, new insights gained, and a renewed strengthening of familiar relations following a loss (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018, p. 12).

In Gorny-Wegrzyn and Perry’s article (2022), the educators speak to the engagement in creative arts and its ability to decrease loneliness, depression, pain, and other health-related issues due to positive psychosocial, physiological, and behavioral responses. Gorny-Wegrzyn and Perry (2022) reflect and use a pedagogy of a compassionate and kindness model. Their work is evidence based and is a qualitative review on creative art activities and health; as well as
receptive and participatory engagement leading to well-being and social connectedness (Gorny-Wegrzyn & Perry, 2022).

Irene Renzenbrink wrote the book *An Expressive Arts Approach to Healing Loss and Grief* (2021). A leader in grief education and art making, she speaks to the definition of poiesis which is “the idea of shaping ourselves and our world through art making” (Lusk, 2022, p. 223). When in the state of complicated grief, meaning making through expressive art can help to shape a mourner’s new reality and sense of self without their loved one. The forward, written by Levine, explains this aspect as Renzenbrink’s fundamental principle of grief and loss work. Renzenbrink explores and brings to light the possibility for those grieving to empower themselves to overcome their suffering by being vulnerable and surrendering to it as they create and get closer to their individual experience of loss (Lusk, 2022, p. 223).

Studies of grief are limited but a multi-country body of study was reviewed by Sonke and other colleagues (2021) showing progress and clear connections between art process and overall health. Their review showed that arts-based interventions can mitigate stigma, social isolation, and lack of suicide awareness by crossing boundaries of place and culture (Sonke et al. 2021). In 2018, a systematic review showed that 27 studies provided examples of visual art creation that helped participants to develop coping skills to regulate their grief (Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018). They possessed ways to express and make sense of their loss by finding ways to preserve the memory of their loved one.

**Sense of Belonging and Community**

McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed the importance of four elements to create a sense of community. The first is membership which is the emotion of and overall sense of belonging. This is a shared sense of personal connectedness where someone can feel how they are a part of
and how the group is related (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The second is influence or a sense of mattering. Flett’s (2021) research on “mattering” is a key construct and is expounded on as central to the concept of community and empowerment. The power of mattering is a vital source of resilience and the ability to adapt. When someone is susceptible to stress or is in distress, mattering provide a “psychological shield” (Flett, 2021, p. 5). Community members who have been marginalized and or mistreated are specifically vulnerable when a sense of mattering is lacking. This deficit is compounded and can lead to negative consequences at the individual level which could lead to problems with mental health (Flett, 2021, p. 5). The third is the fulfillment of needs and the fourth is emotional connection. In terms of grief, providing opportunity to grieve, find solace, and create bonds with others creates community.

Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) framework of the sense of belonging is an integrative approach specifically offering the opportunities to belong. The theory of a Sense of Belonging and Framework are a focus within my community arts-based trauma-informed project. The sense of belonging theory is based on when safety, shared experience, and shared emotional connection are achieved. The article Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research, discusses and adds a framework as a continuation of the 1995 seminal work by Baumeister and Leary (Allen et al, 2021). The 1995 article called The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation (Baumeister & Leary) has become a historical analysis of belonging and interpersonal relationships. Issues with mental health may be precipitated by the lack of feeling of being accepted or included which threatens our sense of belonging. The theory continues to support societal issues addressing isolation, school violence, mental health, and other complex challenges in today’s society. The need to belong influences perspectives, cultural and ethnic
Baumeister and Leary speak to terming the sense of belonging as a “need” rather than simple a “desire” (1995). The reasoning was because if belonging was deprived, people suffer mental health and physical issues. Although the study framed individual belonging, they go on to say that it can also be satisfied by belonging to larger groups, organizations, and communities. The desire to achieve social bonds is both in interaction and mutual caring of others (Allen et al, 2021). Unresolved grief and traumatic circumstances can lead to mental health concerns but with a sense of belonging, participants are able to motivate and find resources. Nunn (2022) shows an arts-based approach within a participatory arts-based research project as an exceptional sphere of belonging as a success. This type of project can foster and mediate belonging and connectedness through art meaning-making. A proposal of art-based trauma-informed community projects ensures a sense of belonging by providing the following: an opportunity to share creatively, education on complicated grief and that participants are not alone, voice and choice of a creative outlet, ways to self-regulate, a trauma-informed safe and brave space.

**Capstone Focus**

The purpose of this capstone will be to conduct a comprehensive community project proposal that will offer multiple opportunities for participants to create a sense of belonging, provide meaning making of their loss, and provide a tool to help community members to grieve after violent death. The projects will focus on distinguishing complicated grief from traditional ideas about grief, as well as exploring various art-based methods for exploring and managing grief within a trauma-informed approach.
**Methodology**

The comprehensive community project proposal was presented to a panel of mental health professionals. Three art-based trauma-informed projects were outlined to bring opportunity to a community who has had multiple violent death occurrences and has the high propensity to complicated grief. As a community, instilling and offering a sense of belonging, community, meaning making, and safety leads to healing and expression of grief as a collective. This visual representation allows for further healing and is a way to decrease stigma around the violent and isolating effects of complicated grief. Using qualitative methods, feedback was collected and then transcribed into a spreadsheet by questions and specific responses. These responses were then coded, categorized, and then analyzed using emergent thematic analysis.

**Community and Participants**

The community of focus for these proposed projects were the communities within the area of Lewiston, Auburn, and Lisbon, Maine and surrounding rural areas. In 2023, Lewiston was the site of the tragic mass shooting of 18 members of their community. After a three-day search of the region, the shooter was located and was reported that he died by suicide. The communities have also had multiple loss due to suicide of youth in the past two years including two who were in the news with public awareness of the circumstances. These events of violent death show that many may be experiencing complicated grief with or without assistance. Often, during these types of events, multiple supports and crisis services are enacted at the time of the tragedy but most of these vital supports decrease and ultimately goes away over time.

Lewiston is the second largest city within the state of Maine with a population of 38,493 estimated in July of 2022 (US Census, 2022). It is also a more diverse population with a combination of non-white residents at 20%, as compared to the non-white population for the
state of Maine at 6.1% (U.S. Census, 2022). This is of importance as it reflects the possibility of intersectionality as well as parts of the community who are asylum seekers. An event like a mass shooting would challenge a sense of safety and belonging to a part of the community who may have already been fleeing a traumatic past.

Another aspect of the community of the mass shooting are represented by the deaf community. Four of the victims were deaf and CNN media reports that Meg Erasmus, clinical therapist and CEO of National Deaf Therapy, stated “This absence of auditory cues can be particularly disorienting and traumatizing. When one person is affected, it ripples through all of us. Our deaf community is incredibly close-knit and interconnected.” She also included “Not being aware of the immediate danger can lead to a sense of vulnerability and a deeper sense of shock and trauma” (Karimi, 2023, para. 6). The article speaks to the communal loss and the nationwide impact. Chief executive officer of the National Association of the Deaf highlighted specific challenges in the near future for this community in particular, “Receiving mental health services from providers who are not fluent in sign language can be problematic and cause further trauma, especially since such providers do not understand deaf culture and/or misunderstand when there are language barriers” (Karimi, 2023, para, 27).

After a traumatic event, multiple disruptions of a normal grieving process can occur. The aspect that it was human-caused compounds the grief into a higher risk of complicated grief. An event such as a mass shooting and days of uncertainty that this particular event had, increase a lack of security of a place called home. Because of the nature of a traumatic and tragic loss of homicide, suicide, or overdose, many times communities must focus on immediate safety and physical needs rather than emotional ones. A delay of grieving the loss of life, no matter how
compounded, will result in prolonged and complicated degrees of the bereavement process for a community and individuals involved (SAMHSA, 2017).

**Community Panel**

The community leaders who reviewed the proposal are all in the field of bereavement in various capacities.

- Reviewer 1 identifies as a female who is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and has worked both in expressive therapy and as a hospice volunteer. She specializes in Grief, Loss, and Trauma. She has presented and facilitated survivor of suicide workshops internationally and also counsels community members of focus.

- Reviewer 2 identifies as a female who has the following credentials of Masters of Social Work and has a master’s degree in Thanatology which is the study of death, dying, and bereavement. She is a first responder in schools within the community of focus, and trainer and educator supporting suicide prevention and management.

- Reviewer 3 identifies as a male who is a facilitation leader within grief groups in the area of our focus community. He was a facilitator of the in-person bereavement counseling in 2001 for families who lost a loved one from the 9/11 event called America’s Camp for consecutive summers after the tragedy.

- Reviewer 4 identifies as a female who previously was a hospice caretaker and specializes in grief work and artistic expressive modalities. She continues to support those suffering complicated grief with an online presence.

**Project Theme**

The theme for the comprehensive community project proposal is creating a safe opportunity of expression for a community with complicated grief. These communities have
grief due to a mass shooting and multiple youth suicide loss. These losses have happened within the last two years. Key themes to be analyzed in this study include sense of belonging, voice and choice, empowerment, and sense of community. The variables assessed within the study were whether the arts-based trauma-informed projects could create a sense of belonging and community, be an opportunity for voice and choice, decrease stigma due to violent death of a loved one, and provide meaning making for the community of people who have complicated grief.

**Materials**

The collection of data for the comprehensive community project proposal was through a focus group of community leaders all in the field of grief and mental health. The presentation was created in Canva and presented through Zoom. The community-wide arts-based collective started with the introduction including the following objectives; create a sense of belonging and community, educate about complicated grief, decrease stigma, empowerment through voice and choice, provide space for community bereavement, mitigate individual isolation, opportunity for meaning making, using a trauma-informed approach. Partnerships and stakeholders were outlined and included NAMI, National Alliance on Mental Illness, AFSP, American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, MeAD, Maine Association of the Deaf, the cities of Lewiston, Auburn, & Lisbon, Legislative Representation, Strengthen ME, The Center for Grieving Children, and the communities local school districts. A draft of the planning committee was then presented with objectives and an invitation to local stakeholders the bereaved community members, NAMI, AFSP, local school districts, and legislative and city representatives. Objectives included decisions on material, location, and space needs, community engagement strategies, and potential funding strategies.
Procedure

The focus group participants were selected and invited via text and email to participate in a feedback session of the project proposal. Once participants voiced interest, they were given options of dates and times to meet virtually as a group. The participants confirmed a mutual time and day, and the Zoom invitation was sent via email. At the time of the focus group, one participant was late, and this lessened the total time to meet. Once all participants were in attendance, a Canva presentation was shared for the first 10 minutes to give a brief overview of the project (see Appendix A). After the presentation, focus group attendees were asked questions from the focus group protocol (see Appendix B). Feedback was recorded using the Zoom transcript recording tool. Once the meeting was over, participants were thanked for their time and asked if they would be willing to do another brief follow up meeting to discuss the rest of the questions. All participants confirmed their wish to be present and follow up with feedback.

A second virtual time was confirmed by all participants within two days’ time and the invitation was sent. At the time of the second virtual meeting only two of the four panelists were able to attend because of extenuating circumstance. The feedback questions were given to Reviewer 1 and Reviewer 3.

All feedback from the recordings was transcribed and put into a data tool where the information could be sorted and coded. Then the coded information was placed into categories which were rolled up into larger themes. As panelists agreed, expanded upon, and furthered their understanding, these patterns were noted and prioritized.

Results

The interview protocol was developed with a focus on the key themes. The variables of focus were on Baumeister and Leary’s Sense of Belonging Theory (1995), McMillan and
Chavis’s Sense of Community Theory (1986), an arts-based trauma-informed approach, Strobe and Schut’s Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (1999), and Neimeyer’s Meaning Reconstruction Model of Grief (2001).

Question 1 focused on the initial reactions of the proposed projects. Reviewer 3 spoke immediately as the first word to come to mind as inspired, “I am very inspired by this. I think the direction that you are pursuing the work in the community is very engaging. I love the creativity of it. I love the multi-facets and the ever-changing course this takes. As I looked at it, my brain was just firing away and thinking about projects that I could bring to support grief facilitation. I think you started to map out a way to fruition which I think is very well thought through and could be added to very simply. I think there’s the avenue for people to give more diverse feedback on funding and sorts of things that will make this even that much more successful. But inspired was the word that I first think of when you hit the conclusion. So beautifully done.” Reviewer 2 echoed the same and was thrilled with the concept of bringing this to the community. “In working in hospice and bereavement for so many years, it is something that I have longed to do, so to be seeing this coming together and come in action and being written down is really exciting. I love the idea of multiple activities instead of just one so that it offers a richness for people to be able to express themselves. As individuals and as a group, as a community. I love this idea.” Reviewer 4, “Inspired, courageous, intuitive. This project is addressing opportunities where art is incredibly important. Speaking an emotion through visual and all the different layers are as important to the collective of human nature and our grief as normal humans and how we feel around loss and trauma. There’s so many components that can overlap, but you seem to be moving them outward so that we can all experience the healing and be a part of that bigger community and have a voice. When people can’t speak, they can draw and if they can’t, they’re
maybe not ready for it. It may not be how they or a way in which they communicate. There are multiple layers here to do so. The mindful piece, the art, all of this is just so rich. I feel in my trajectory of how I see my own grief and how I could support you, as well as funding and other pieces that want to come together here are the puzzle pieces. This offers many opportunities for that to happen in this area. It’s absolutely beautiful. It’s heartfelt. My heart cracked open and it’s rolling down my cheeks, I’m inspired.” Reviewer 1 concurred what everyone said. “Your proposals of the different projects are so well thought out that there’s so many different parts of it. The piece about stigma, I think you could really expand upon this because stigma is what you’re really addressing many layers of stigma. Many different types of stigma, including personal stigma. It’s not just about that they’re thinking more about how the person died. It’s really what the disenfranchisement of their grief, which you are really putting out there and addressing by making this. Public and community oriented which addresses public stigma. There is some very substantial research which highlights the importance of people speaking about their loss that is evidence based quite recently. The flags, Robert Niemeyer speaks about techniques of grief therapy and there’s a whole chapter on the commemorative flag. I love idea, especially as someone who doesn’t feel talented with drawing things or artwork, the flag and not only what I might put on the flag, but how I might move with that flag. When you were speaking about voice and it is so important to promote participants voice and the voice of the bereaved. It’s a powerful piece of the project and also inspiring. I want to add as well that something that might help with funding would be to add resilience building as one of your goals. Your proposal is chock full of what promotes resilience and empowerment. A lot of times fundraisers might not understand empowerment like we do but there is a big push to promote resilience in our field right now, especially in the world and after a mass shooting. I’m working in my practice with a lot of
intersection around the mass shooting right now. I think the definition that I often quote about stigma is the quote, “the stain on one’s reputation” It resonates and is very prominent for the people I support and work with. What you are presenting is research based on resilience and is all of what you’re doing in these beautiful projects.”

Question 2 focused on participants finding voice to lead to empowerment and advocacy. “Photovoice is a way for participants to find a voice, empowerment, and advocacy. In your experience with this community, what do you see as a challenge using this technique and visual representation? When these challenges arise, how would you best move forward?” Reviewer 3 referred to some pretty interesting photovoice projects going on around the world and “they’re really powerful ways to build community. I don’t know of any struggles with it in particular but I think the technology available as a resource would be a driving piece of funding. And this isn’t a challenge to, it’s actually a benefit is that once you’ve captured something digitally, there’s a whole other world of output that in its own right is an artistic form. I really appreciate that this has pentacles that can reach for a long way and manifest itself in many different variations. I appreciated the visual of the panels on the ground as to how this all lives on beyond a singular project. This would make it less ephemeral and more permanent and something that can be continued and carried on for many years to come. Panels can change and others can contribute. I think getting the technology into the hands of people will help as the first move. It would be something that needs to be secured. It’s interesting, what does a voice look like as an image? I mean really there doesn’t need to be any words at all or said, it can be simply imagery which is powerful. I love that.” Reviewer 4 asked for further explanation as to what photovoice was because she hadn’t previously known of this term. It was explained as a research tool and visual way of expression. There was some confusion as to whether it would be with the mural or as a
stand-alone artwork. It was then described as to how someone might use a photo of their loved one or an image that represented a special place or time that was important to their loved one. An image of a sunset or a butterfly or other iteration could signify the deceased rather than the way in which they passed. The act of expressing this would empower a participant to memorialize their loved one in a respectful and positive expression of the bereavement process. Reviewer 4 appreciated the clarification as she was new to the term of photovoice. “It’s happening all the time, I mean we are constantly wanting to remember and memorialize our loved ones as humans. We all need it, so having a place, in this space is amazing. The healing potential for that to bring it together as a community and to heal as a community is meaningful.” Reviewer 1 added additional practical or basic challenges in terms of doing this by asking a few questions. “How would it be stored long-term and in what manner? Could someone get a piece back? What could be the plan? The banner for the AFSP walks come to mind that was similar in terms of keeping something or reusing. My sister and I would participate year after year and it was very symbolic and had things about my brother and we loved it. The banner was so meaningful and was used each year and this year it wasn’t there and was a wonder of its presence and brought negative feelings as to where it could be. This would be an important onset to creating. Explaining to participants here’s how we will store and safeguard it. Also the confidentiality and the need around releases would be addressed as well. All a part of the safety and trauma-informed approach.” Reviewer 3 declared that she “loved the idea of the large boards and how it could be permanent. A big challenge would be not only funding but the location and if there was a place to donate a space to be able and available.” She could see a permanent installation specific to the mass shooting especially as a national tragedy. Possibly focusing on a community of survivors of traumatic loss the project might not want something that is permanent so that you can go back
year after year and then do this as an event. Some of the same people and then new people may participate. “You may want to consider something on a smaller scale and tells a particular story as people move along stations. If it was permanent the exchange of stories could happen year after year.” Reviewer 3 added that Preble Street’s memorial night holds a vigil each year for the homeless population who have passed away in the city of Portland, Maine. He finds it unbelievably powerful. “One of the things they did this year is they scrolled the names by shining them on the smooth vertical surface of the stature and monument in monument square. The names are projected and reminds me that is could be done simply as a digital input output and not hard material that could be shown at an event in various communities. The images and words shown as the symbol. There isn’t a takeaway or product but is powerful in a large gathering to share as a community.”

Question 3 focused on The White Flag Project offering an opportunity to view grief as a collective community. With this particular proposal, what challenges could come from this approach? How could these challenges be managed? Reviewer 3 as well as the other reviewers asked for clarification and how this project would unfold? Reviewer 3 voiced that it almost sounds too big or too vague as it feels like multiple messages. She wrote down the question “Will we surrender to the stigma and silence?” and loved that message. “This tells me, we might start off with white flags but we need to alter them in some way so that we’re not surrendering to that stigma or letting it take over. So it does feel like this project needs to be fleshed out a little bit more. Giving lots of options to the community but also have a particular focus for people to follow. Guidance but also an avenue for participation.” Reviewer 1 indicated that “flags can be a way to communicate, and this could be a way to start it.” As Reviewer 3 mentioned, “not a fan of surrendering to grief or stigma as that can have multiple meanings or be challenging to some.
Perhaps a counteracting of some sort and communicating a different message of the commemorative flag or what to call it. The idea of having a flag or something of fabric that can be moved or waving in some way is very traditionally empowering. The presentation of this project needs more of an introduction of that concept or reasoning and what the meaning making is behind it. Reviewer 4 expressed this word, surrender means a lot to a lot of us in different ways and that particular word can have a polarity around it. There’s the light side of surrender and there’s the stigma around it, being the dark side of surrender. So I think that it may be that word or the vibration around the word where I get caught up. I see something completely different in surrendering as an action and the opposite of passive. It’s participatory and empowering.” Reviewer 3 also expounded on the use of the word surrender and the context of the description, stating he was not sure of the alignment. “The white flag isn’t necessarily surrender, it can have a lot of different definitions.” As he was listening to the proposal and everyone’s comments, what came to my mind for him was peacemaking. “Making peace with the grief you’re holding. Embracing that was my interpretation. It could be semantics but making sure that the objective is enriched by the term of the project.”

Question 4 asked “The mural is meant to foster a sense of empowerment. How might this creative collaboration be challenging and how could we navigate those challenges?” Reviewer 1 spoke to the locality of the art and wondering where these projects would be located. “The symbolism of memories with hearts or animals works but may ask people to bring some sort of token so that it increases the choice.” Both reviewers 3 and 1 spoke to defining needs by age group for accessibility as well as developmental needs in terms of grief.

Question 5 asked the reviewers to reflect on their past experiences and asked, how do you think a sense of belonging could be instilled for the individual participants and the community as
a whole? In terms of a sense of belonging, do you see that this emotional collaboration would be beneficial, and how so? Reviewer 4 brought up the aspect of impermanence for her and what this could be. “Whether it’s burnt, planted, or so that it becomes part of the environment. I could see this as coming full circle and could be a part of this project. The expression or art is burnt and goes into the air and we release it, this may have an appropriate space as an aspect in this work. The Summit project for grieving veterans is an example that my partner and I have been a part of and supported those grieving. They move the stones to different summits and share the incredible stories of their loved ones. Similar to what is being proposed here, they do it every year and they come back and it’s incredible, so empowering and powerful. Homeless and veteran communities that don’t always have a voice or have a sense of belonging.”

Question 6 addressed the key theme of voice: I mentioned participants finding a voice. In what ways do you see that these projects provide this? In regards to participant’s choice, do these projects provide this and do you have any suggestions to navigate this? Reviewer 1 expressed that “all aspects of this project help provide an avenue for people to find their voice in whatever modality they find comfortable with. And even to have the option to explore avenues that that they don't feel comfortable with and sort of test that to see if there is something to be had for them. Whether I mean for instance you know somebody may feel really uncomfortable with the camera or may not have a camera but they say to themselves oh you know what I'm going to try that and see what that inspires in themselves.” Reviewer 3 expanded on the above and said that for him the word that goes hand in hand with voice is language. “Language is another way of saying what art form are people comfortable using to find their voice? You know some people don't want to learn new languages and some people gravitate towards learning new languages and I think you offer a safety net for both avenues to be explored.” Reviewer 1 added that
“another way to say that was I've often said in workshops that I've done even is like you want to know what people prefer and finding out people's preferred modalities. Having input from the community and what might stretch them or what might not be preferred would be important.”

Question 7 engaged the theme of instilling a trauma-informed approach. Trauma-informed care’s framework focuses on a program that understands the impact of trauma, recognizes the signs and systems of past trauma, responds by integrating trauma knowledge practices, and actively seeks to resist re-traumatization. Safety, trust, choice, empowerment, and fostering resiliency are some of these components. Using these art approaches, how can we ensure these trauma-informed care strategies? Reviewer 1 described artistic endeavors with people who have been bereaved and how approaching it from a way in which you want to do it that’s not re-traumatizing. “How would that look helping people prepare for participating and helping them afterwards? Or the producing of vulnerable states during the process. The context of how you would be implementing how it would be trauma-informed needs to be clearer.”

Reviewer 4 brought up the Dougie Center as being a great resource. “They have already done many similar programs and ways to ensure safety mechanisms. Adding strategies like breath work and having a collective ways to help when participants are feeling vulnerable.” Reviewer 1 agreed and added that peer support along with practices that include pre-group and post-group activities afterwards where all come together to share and make sure people are okay and safe.

Reviewer 3 closed this question with acknowledgment to continue to reach out for resources within the community would be beneficial. “To tap into grief-inspired artists and musicians would be a powerful influence in this work. Also could help on the fundraising piece. Those who couldn’t participate could donate an art piece or something to support this project. Another idea would be to access “feel-good” and eco-friendly products that you’re using. Using toxic-free and
materials that are good for the community could be a great way to bring interest and possibly an avenue for fundraising. In closing, I think this is just a wonderful project. I think the community needs something like this and thank you for spearheading this inspirational work.”

Question 8 asked with your past experience in mind and the complexities of grief, how do community art projects like these ensure the safe process of grief while allowing for multiple ways of expression? What might be some ways to improve these projects to allow for more meaningful processing? Reviewer 1, “I think you can have as a goal to give people a voice and that is where the creative arts are so powerful with grieving. Through the modalities, you are providing an opportunity for people to have a voice. You're giving a lot of choices for many different options that people can do through 3 dimensional. They can do a quote or simply add a handprint which are non-threatening choices. I think you've done a really good job in terms of suggestions to navigate it. It's really around offering a lot of options, a lot of possibilities to navigate their grief and healing as well as giving examples so they see options.”

Panel

All of the panelists were within the bereavement community. Three were female who all have worked in hospice care. One female and one male work as facilitators with bereaved families. Two have credentialing in expressive modalities such as movement and dance as well as the visual arts. Two have studied Thanatology which is the study of death, dying, and bereavement. Two have worked to support others during global mental health issues such as Ireland’s International Survivors of Suicide Loss event and America’s Camp to support the bereaved of 9/11. Three work with survivors of suicide loss. All four understand and identify as having complicated grief at some point in their lives.
**Photovoice Findings**

The photovoice project had the most logistical data to sort through. The addition of technology access, possible funding sources, as well as the question of display were all concerns. The visuals within the presentation supported the reviewers understanding of the project. Reviewer 3 was not familiar with the type of project and needed clarification.

**White Flag Project Findings**

The White Flag project needed the most explanation of its overall goal after presenting the project. The reviewers spoke about the movement and benefit of the symbolic nature and the data showed that this project could have a lot of merit in terms of empowerment and decreasing public and personal stigma.

**Transformative Mural Findings**

The Transformative Mural Project brought up comments on age development in terms of grief as well as levels of accessibility for all. This was seen as a positive and the level of choice of opportunity for healing was repeated by all reviewers. The ability to leave a token of remembrance and add this to mural expressed a sense of belonging which the reviewers felt would be attainable to many. Place and space would be a factor and whether it would be permanent or a way to connect as a community year after year on the anniversaries in the future.

**Overall Themes**

The qualitative data was classified and broken into analytical units. Two categories of positives or opportunities to grow as well as challenges and clarifications. The following themes emerged community, voice, choice, empowerment, stigma, funding, logistics, opportunity, resiliency, and trauma-informed strategies.
**Discussion**

Overall, the panel was in favor of the comprehensive community project, felt inspired, and had many positive pieces of feedback to make it successful. Some areas of clarification needed were the white flag projects main outcome, adding resiliency to the narrative especially in terms of funding, and additional specifics were outlined that were of a logistical nature. The mass shooting event was a clear bereavement need concerning the panel as well as the trauma-informed process and having clear steps to guarantee this for all participants as much as possible.

My two biggest key takeaways from the panel was that the projects provided choice and voice and that the collective could be a solution to community stigma. The multiple projects allowed for various contributions of expression for participants wherever they are in their grief journey. The modalities were flexible and had an appropriate engagement that would elicit opportunity for voice leading to empowerment and healing as a community. This empowerment
could be a strong conduit for the decrease of stigma surrounding the bereavement of a violent death. These projects could provide that space for participants as one entity to bring awareness to complicated grief and the stigma that surrounds it by bringing it out into the affected community.

Within the White Flag Project, I tried to be mindful of the way this project could possibly change over time so I simplified it in its initial presentation. Perhaps it was too simple and not detailed enough. The flags would symbolize a surrender and of taking back the participant’s narrative of a tragic death and start to heal from complicated grief. Surrender was a polarizing term within the data results and the language would need addressing. Language and having a common dialogue for the bereaved is important. Using non-threatening language and having mutual defined norms and word usage provides a safe and controlled atmosphere. Introduction of new terms as well as being mindful of the use of polarizing wording should be prioritized. These safeguards will help to mitigate re-traumatization. I was also cognizant of the deaf community that has been so affected and what this symbol and motions could evoke. Movement and music was an additional point of data that was missing and would be an important area to pursue and strengthen for inclusion and empowerment. Including American Sign Language and rhythmic expression would be a key element in supporting the entire community.

In terms of trauma-informed and incorporating meaning making within Neimeyer’s theory, specific questions need to be asked to ensure a positive outcome for each of the projects within the collective. How to help people with pacing the process and a safe way of creating something that could be very deep and possibly triggering for them in some way? The panel suggested that a pre and post group session for all facilitators as well as initiating a peer support model would provide pacing and plan for crisis interventions. Would people come together and create collectively and individually or create on their own and then come together? Panelists
mentioned that this could be a guidepost of the committee in planning the events concerning size and capacity. How would the projects flow and how to begin to regulate participants in a trauma-informed approach? Smaller events prior to a large community event was suggested in terms of allowing for leveled approaches for participants in various stages of grief. Pre and post groups provide peer support for facilitators as well to better cope and ability to support participants wherever they are in their grief journey. How does it go out to the community, the invitation, the setting, and how would pacing look if all projects were part of the opportunity as a true collective community experience? Some of the panelists have been in communication with Lewiston and the surrounding areas specific to the mass shooting and community needs. They spoke to the wish and need being voiced from these communities to grieve together. The panel agreed that communication with the local entities such as the newly formed Maine Resiliency Center would be an important first step. The Center benefits those who have been directly affected by the Lewiston mass shooting.

Further strategies to increase social capital would create a sense of belonging by increasing benevolent experiences with others in the community. These opportunities provide a protective barrier to adverse experiences and can alleviate complicated grief symptoms. Baumeister and Leary’s Sense of Belonging shows that belongingness has multiple and strong effects on emotional patterns and on cognitive processes. The availability for people enduring complicated grief to embark in events where they can strengthen social bonds by interacting and feeling the mutual caring of others creates mattering and belonging. Stroebe and Schut’s theory of Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement highlights multiple ways of experience to establish bonds and form new relationships. Neimeyer’s Meaning Reconstruction Model of Grief speaks to grief and the need for the bereaved to have a social connection.
Providing a “container” was an additional suggestion as providing containment when working with the bereaved would be beneficial for future studies. This shell or “psychological shield” helps allow individuals to find community by building resiliency during these vulnerable times. A trauma-informed project provides this type of opportunity and has volunteers and professionals who are trained to give peer support. This provides regulation to those most vulnerable by the creation of pre-group and post-group options for participants as well as the support staff facilitating the projects.

Language and having a common dialogue for the bereaved is important. Using non-threatening language and having mutual defined norms and word usage provides a safe and controlled atmosphere. Introduction of new terms as well as being mindful of the use of polarizing wording should be prioritized. These safeguards will help to mitigate re-traumatization.

**Limitations of the Project**

Limitations of the project were that the review panel consisted of only grief experts and did not include the following community members; family members of the victims of the Lewiston, Maine mass shooting, the deaf and hard of hearing representation, the city officials specific to leadership and planning, or members of health and rescue specific to the proposed local communities. There is limited data on bereavement specific to violent death and complicated grief. The proposal itself was missing key aspects to budget, technology, and the logistics of the events. The trauma-informed approach needed additional pre and post events in order to ensure an overall positive result. These aspects left questions and need clarification from the review panel.
Implications for Future Projects

This community-wide, arts-based, trauma-informed collective is a positive contribution to the community engagement field. The need for bereavement services for this community unfortunately is not always at the forefront of people’s minds. The mental health of our communities should be a high priority. Those suffering grief as well as complicated grief would benefit from more opportunities to heal and find voice as collective communities for overall prosperity and growth. More opportunities and modalities concerning bereavement would lead to less isolation, decrease in the stigma associated with traumatic loss, and lead to more resilient community members.

To expand on these projects, offering more virtual peer support opportunities for those who are in isolation is another way to engage more people who are not at the level of group participation. Speaking about ways of connection and resiliency would strengthen individuals and make them feel more a part of the community and create a sense of belonging. This would then lead to empowerment and connection and hopefully more community engagement. Each of these projects could be expanded both creatively and in capacity. Suicide, homicide, overdose, and mass shootings can happen anywhere. The negative impact is devastating and can have debilitating ripple effects. Many mental health issues are directly linked to an individual’s ability to grieve due to a lack of resources, education of importance, stigma and societal lack of awareness, and substance abuse. These projects could have a lasting and far-reaching effect if done well and reproduced in other communities creating bonds and empowerment along the way. Other projects like Wreaths Across America, The AIDS Quilt, The Japanese Phone booth, all have been a visual representation of memorial with successful results.
References

https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409


https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497

https://doi.org/10.7556/jaoa.2007.20039

https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0252324

https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/prevention.html
https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818809766


https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2022.2095182

https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/complicated-grief/symptoms-causes/syc-20360374


https://www.nps.gov/places/000/vietnam-veterans-memorial.htm


https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610621995838


Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). SAMHSA’s concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. 

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2017). Tips for survivors: Coping with grief after a disaster or traumatic event. 
https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma17-5035.pdf


World Health Organization (n.d.). Social Determinants of Health. https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab=tab_1

Appendix A

Presentation

COMMUNITYWIDE ARTS-BASED COLLECTIVE

Jess Porter

PROJECT OVERVIEW

A proposal of a community-wide arts-based collective creating a Sense of Belonging, Space for Healing, and Empowerment. Each project will have an emphasis on the trauma-informed process.
COMMUNITY

Community members experiencing COMPLICATED GRIEF and the associated STIGMA, ISOLATION, and LACK OF BEREAVEMENT options as a community.

- COMPLICATED GRIEF
- STIGMA
- ISOLATION
- LACK OF BEREAVEMENT

COMMUNITY

Community members experiencing COMPLICATED GRIEF due to a traumatic loss.

- MASS SHOOTING
- HOMICIDE
- MULTIPLE LOSS
- SUICIDE
- OVERDOSE
OBJECTIVES

1. Create a Sense of Belonging & Community
2. Educate about Complicated Grief
3. Decrease Stigma
4. Empowerment ~ Voice & Choice
5. Provide Space for Community
6. Mitigate Individual Isolation
7. Meaning Making
8. Trauma-Informed Process

PARTNERSHIPS & STAKEHOLDERS

- NAMI, National Alliance on Mental Illness
- AFSP, American Foundation of Suicide Prevention
- MeAD, Maine Association of the Deaf
- Lewiston, Auburn, & Lisbon
- Legislative Representation
- Strengthen ME
- Local School Districts
PLANNING COMMITTEE

Invitation to local stakeholders
Bereaved Community Members,
NAMI, AFSP, The Center for Grieving
Children, Local School Districts, &
Legislative Representatives

Objectives
• Material, site, and space needs
• Community engagement
  strategies
• Potential funding strategies

SCOPE OF PROJECT

PHOTOVOICE WALK
SENSE OF BELONGING
  • Create a Sense of Belonging
  • Educate about Complicated Grief

STORYTELLING
SENSE OF COMMUNITY
  • Create a Sense of Community
  • Meaning Making
  • Trauma-Informed Process

WHITE FLAG PROJECT
MEANING-MAKING
  • Decrease Stigma
  • Empowerment ~ Voice & Choice

TRANSFORMATION MURAL
TRAUMA-INFORMED
  • Provide Space for Community
    Bereavement
  • Mitigate Individual Isolation
Participants will create multiple large photos of remembrance of their loved one & grief journey.

Photos will be displayed on a walk so that participants will follow a path of remembrance.

White flags are handed out to participants with the invitation to change the narrative of their loss.

Options to display - Display individually created flags or as a collective artwork & event
“Will we surrender to the stigma and silence?”

White flags symbolize a surrender. Participation in this project will invite the bereaved community to take charge of the associated stigma and silence and be seen and heard.

TRANSFORMATION MURAL

Participants will add a 3-dimensional token to a wall to symbolize their loved one. Participants will be invited to tell their stories and add words to the mural depicting their loss and add words to the mural depicting their grief journey.
“There is always hope”

“WE BEREAVED ARE NOT ALONE. WE BELONG TO THE LARGEST COMPANY IN ALL THE WORLD ~ THE COMPANY OF THOSE WHO HAVE KNOWN SUFFERING.”

“What we have once enjoyed deeply we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.”

~ Helen Keller
Thank you

porterjj@merrimack.edu

Feedback

“What are your initial reactions to the project I have proposed?”
Photovoice is a way for participants to find a voice, empowerment, and advocacy. In your experience with this community, what do you see as a challenge using this technique and visual representation?

The White Flag Project offers an opportunity to view grief as a collective community. With this particular proposal, what challenges could come from this approach?

The mural is meant to foster a sense of empowerment. How might this creative collaboration be challenging and how could we navigate those challenges?

Given your past experiences, how do you think a sense of belonging could be instilled for the individual participants and the community as a whole?
I mentioned participants finding a voice. In what ways do you see that these projects provide this?

In regards to participant’s choice, do these projects provide this and do you have any suggestions to navigate this?

Trauma-informed care’s framework focuses on a program that understands the impact of trauma, recognizes the signs and systems of past trauma, responds by integrating trauma knowledge practices, and actively seeks to resist re-traumatization. Safety, trust, choice, empowerment, and fostering resiliency are some of these components.

Using these art approaches, how can we ensure these trauma-informed care strategies?

(SAMHSA, 2014)
With your past experience in mind and the complexities of grief, how do community art projects like these ensure the safe process of grief while allowing for multiple ways of expression?

What ways might improve these projects to allow for more meaningful processing?
Appendix B

Focus Group Protocol

Introduction:

Thank you for joining me in my presentation of a comprehensive community project. I appreciate your time and feedback. Please share your thoughts openly and critically as it will help the creation and development of this project.

I plan to record this to review the feedback. Do I have your permission? [YES / NO]

Your participation and feedback will be confidential and each of you will be referred to as reviewer #1, reviewer #2, etc. with your defining title and demographic information.

Questions:

1. What are your initial reactions to the project I have proposed?

2. Photovoice is a way for participants to find a voice, empowerment, and advocacy. In your experience with this community, what do you see as a challenge using this technique and visual representation? When these challenges arise, how would you best move forward?

3. The White Flag Project offers an opportunity to view grief as a collective community. With this particular proposal, what challenges could come from this approach? How could these challenges be managed?
4. The mural is meant to foster a sense of empowerment. How might this creative collaboration be challenging and how could we navigate those challenges?

5. Given your past experiences, how do you think a sense of belonging could be instilled for the individual participants and the community as a whole? In terms of a sense of belonging, do you see that this emotional collaboration would be beneficial and how so?

6. I mentioned participants finding a voice. In what ways do you see that these projects provide this? In regard to participant’s choice, do these projects provide this and do you have any suggestions to navigate this?

7. Trauma-informed care’s framework focuses on a program that understands the impact of trauma, recognizes the signs and systems of past trauma, responds by integrating trauma knowledge practices, and actively seeks to resist re-traumatization. Safety, trust, choice, empowerment, and fostering resiliency are some of these components. Using these art-approaches, how can we ensure these trauma-informed care strategies? (SAMHSA, 2014)

8. With your past experience in mind and the complexities of grief, how do community art projects like these ensure the safe process of grief while allowing for multiple ways of expression?

9. What might be some ways to improve these projects to allow for more meaningful processing?
Wrap up & Request:

As we wrap up, I would ask if anyone has any final thoughts or key takeaways from my proposal or the targeted community in particular you would like to add?

Again, thank you for your time, invaluable insight, and amazing feedback. As I mentioned, this has been recorded and I will be reviewing it. I would like to request the opportunity to follow up with you if a need arises for clarification. Would this be possible? [YES / NO]