The Rhythm of Grief:
A Maltese Gestalt Therapists' Perspective

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Conception of the research idea

Rationale for the Study:

Given that the therapist's self is a fundamental tool in therapeutic work, it is crucial to understand how a therapist is affected by loss, and in what ways this personal experience may impact their therapeutic practice. If the therapeutic relationship is one of the best predictors of success in therapy (Yontef, 1993; Finlay & Evans, 2009), it becomes pertinent to explore how therapists conceptualise or make sense of their loss to understand how this might impact their way of working therapeutically.

Although in recent decades, there has been a revival in addressing issues surrounding grief, there remains little research addressing psychotherapists' experience of their own grief and its impact on their well-being, development, and clinical work, and to my awareness, none from a Gestalt perspective. Therefore my study attempted to address this gap.

Aims of the Study:

1. To explore Maltese Gestalt psychotherapists' lived experiences of grief following the bereavement of a significant other through death.

2. To explore how Maltese Gestalt psychotherapists manage their client work amid their grief.

Research Questions:

1. How do Maltese Gestalt psychotherapists experience their grief following the loss of a significant other through death?

2. How is their therapeutic work affected because of their grief ?

Literature Review - Early Theories:

- Mainstream bereavement theories which have informed thought and practice over the past 100 years or so, and to help me and the reader better understand the grieving process.

- The works of Freud, Bowlby, and Kübler-Ross were significant in constructing the meaning of grief as an individual, symptomitised, private, inner experience. However, these models encourage completion of unfinished business, letting go of the relationship, and moving forward without the deceased (Neimeyer, 2014).

- Societal expectations that there are stages of emotion that everyone should follow, and that grief should be a time-limited experience with a definite endpoint, may play a role in the mourner's attempt to cope with loss. Such expectations may cause difficulty for those who do not grieve in the socially expected way.

Literature Review - More Recent Theories:

- The field has seen a shift from more traditional stage theories of grief to more postmodern or constructivist theories (Archer, 2008; Attig, 2000; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001; Stroebe et al., 2010; Worden, 2009).

- The emphasis on helping bereaved individuals has shifted from a focus on recovery to helping bereaved individuals accept and adapt to their loss.

- The concern now is with the process of assisting bereaved individuals to establish stability and healthy functioning in life.

- The process of assisting bereaved persons entails reorganizing individuals' self-identity and worldview after their shattering experience of loss.

- The process requires time and support from other people.

Theories of Grief – A Concluding Remark:

- While there is still merit in the early grief theories and models, contemporary models have been a positive development because they place grief in a wider context and take into account the importance of factors such as attachment styles, coping strategies, and culture.

- Gestalt psychotherapists need to understand how theories of grief have progressed over time to conceptualize and make use of the most current and appropriate theories. This helps to identify when additional support is appropriate and, in this way, improve grief and loss support for the bereaved.

Literature Review cont.

- This chapter proceeds with the influence of attachment theory in understanding loss and the more recent advances in the neurophysiology of grief.

- Attention was also given to the field of posttraumatic growth and how this may apply to the bereaved psychotherapist.

- A discussion on the inter-subjective nature of the therapeutic relationship followed, emphasising the importance of understanding how therapists are affected by their losses, and how this might affect the therapeutic encounter.

- Empirical research on bereaved therapists' experiences, drawing on anecdotal accounts, surveys, and qualitative research was then presented to provide a picture of the research available to date.

- Throughout the chapter, particular attention was given to the Gestalt perspective on bereavement, grief, and mourning.

The Research Framework
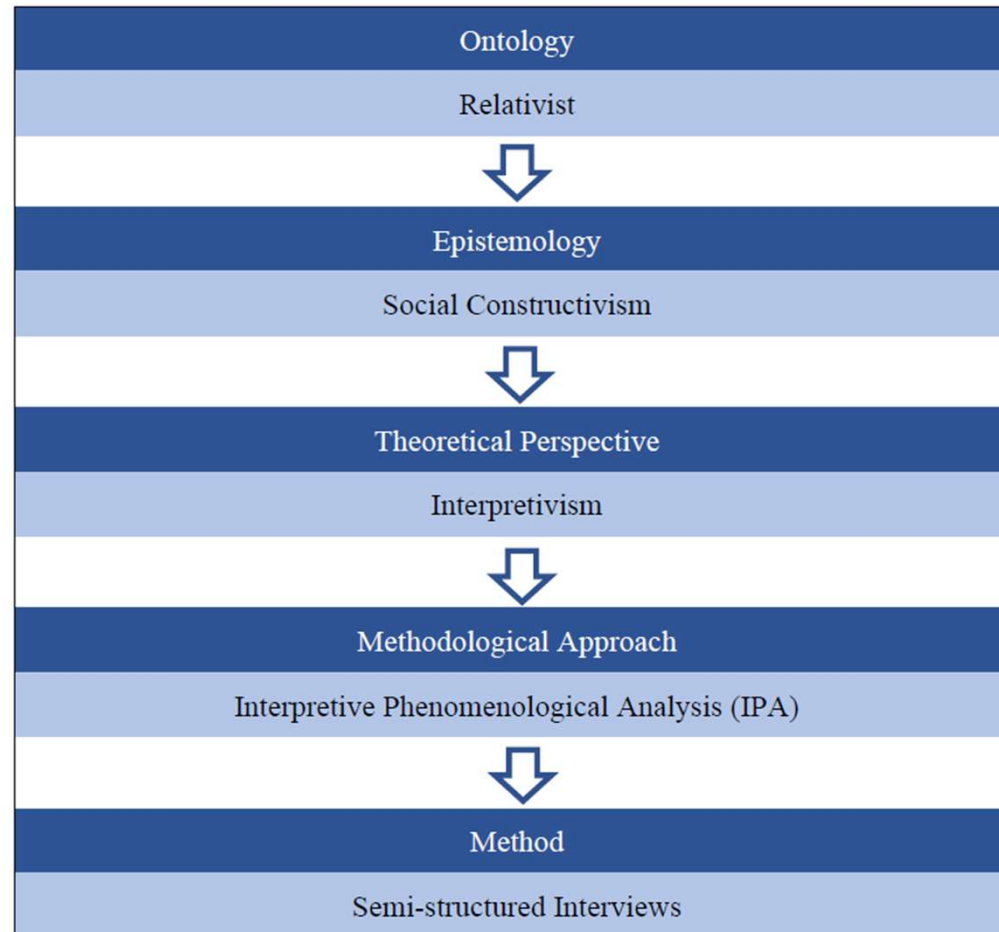
Notes on Ontological and Epistemological Positions:

- It was based on my assumption that participants' experiences of their grief would be based on their realities and interpretations. Hence my research study assumed a relativist ontology.

- Understanding this reality led me to assume a social constructionist worldview.

Research Design:

I chose a **qualitative design** since:

- It values each individual's unique experiences and seek to unravel the meanings underlying them by capturing detailed personal accounts.

- It explores lived experience at a level of detail impossible for quantitative approaches to capture.

Research Paradigm - Hermeneutic Phenomenology:

- **Heidegger** bridged the gap between phenomenology and hermeneutics through the concept of 'dasein'. He argued that our engagement with the world and our understanding of the meaning of "the things themselves" is always accessed through interpretation and we inevitably bring our prior experiences, assumptions and preconceptions to the process of interpretation.

- Interpretation arises from the co-construction between the researcher and the participant. This is reflective of the constructivist paradigm, where knowledge is created as the knower and would-be-known interact (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

- Hermeneutic phenomenology answers the ontological question of my study by supporting the idea of multiple realities, as opposed to one absolute reality.

Methodological Approach:
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

- It is committed to explore the essence of the lived experience of people and how they make sense of their experiences, therefore, it is an experiential qualitative approach to research. (Finlay, 2011)

- It acknowledges the active role that the researcher has in the process of the study. (Smith et al, 2009)

- It adopts interpretation in order to develop new knowledge and understanding. The implication of this form of research perspective is that knowledge is co-created. (Larkin et al, 2006).

- It's strength lies in its flexibility and ability to stimulate creative individual responses to the research process. (Smith, et al, 2009)

- IPA as a methodology does not aim to achieve empirical generalisations, but rather theoretical transferability which can provide significant contributions to existing knowledge bases in the field, as well as open new avenues for investigation. (Reid et al, 2005; Smith et al, 2009)

Reflexivity and Reflexive Methods Employed:

- An important aspect of my research methods was that of maintaining a reflexive stance throughout my study, this being central to interpretative phenomenology. Critically analysing my own reflective accounts then became a reflexive act.

- Reflexivity involved both functional personal reflexivity.

- Reflexive practices were initiated from the planning phase of the research.

- Related notes were eventually included in memos so that they would be readily accessible at all analytic stages.

- Reflective notes which related to each interview were also written in memos where I wrote my feelings and observations before, during, and after each interview.

- With every entry, I would reflect on how these feelings and observations could impact my data collection and analysis.

Methods:

- Approval of the dissertation proposal was given by the members of the Gestalt dissertation research ethics committee, and the committee members for the thesis proposal defence of the EAPTI – GPTIM.

- In line with the idiographic principles of IPA, a small sample size was obtained (N=8) as I was not aiming to make general claims about a large population.

- IPA favours purposive sampling because of its ability to illuminate specific research questions or areas (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

- My sample was homogenous in that they are all Maltese Gestalt psychotherapists, females, with more than two years of clinical experience, lost a significant other, and presently work with clients.

Ethical Guidelines:

- EAPTI-GPTIM (2018) research ethics and guidelines strive to maintain and promote high ethical standards, and therefore, I adhered to this guide to ensure that the research process was underpinned by a respectful and trustworthy approach.

- Particular regard was paid to ensuring consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and the reduction of potential for harm.

- Ethical approval for this study was given by the Doctoral programme ethics committee (EAPTI - GPTIM) once all the ethical aspects of the research process were ensured.

- As I met with each of the participants, and before asking them whether I could turn the recording button on, the consent statement was reviewed and discussed to ensure that they felt safe participating.

- I also allowed for a few moments of conversation at the beginning of the interview to help them feel settled, to help ease the participant into the interview, and to help create a rapport.

Data Collection:

- I adopted the semi-structured interview approach as they provide important opportunities for enquiring about situational meaning, collecting everyday theories and self-interpretations, and allowing the possibility for the emergence of discursive understanding through interpretations.

- Semi-structured interviews are flexible in that they allow the precise wording and order of questions to be contextual and responsive to the participant's developing account. This felt crucially important to me as I was keen for the interviews to be participant-led to the greatest extent possible since the individual experience was the crux of my research question and my chosen method.

- Prompts as a way of elucidating areas of discussion for participants, were also incorporated into the interview schedule. These were utilised as and when it was felt necessary. In some cases, I did not adhere strictly to the interview schedule since it was important to allow participants to steer their explorations to a degree in order to capture their unique experiences.

The Interview Guide:

Question	Aim (What am I trying to find out?)	Reflections on my expectations	Potential Issues	Prompts
Can you describe the nature of your bereavement?	1. Obtaining facts of the situation – how long ago it happened; relationship to the deceased. 2. Giving the participant a chance to say what happened and give a context before talking about the experience.	This may begin to answer other questions in the interview.	Assumption that context is important to connection and understanding.	Time since loss? How did they die? Expected/unexpected?
How did the bereavement affect you?	To understand the most salient aspects of the experience.	Perhaps experience will relate to the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions	Assumptions that the loss impacted the bereaved therapist negatively.	Can you describe your feelings following the bereavement?
Can you describe how you made sense of your loss?	I am interested in process, perhaps sense making, and how one gets through the experience. I am also attempting to explore the potential for growth.	1. I expect to see some some change in perspective, worldview - whether positive or negative. 2. People may have made significant changes to the way that they live as a result of the experience.	I am expecting that there has been some positive change, but there may be none, or change may be viewed as negative.	How did you think about your loss and why it occurred? How did you experience life following your bereavement? How did this impact your self-image and your perception of life?
What is supporting you/ supported you to cope during your bereavement process?	To understand the participants' coping strategies and other support systems	I expect this to vary according to the resiliency and worldview of the participant.	I am expecting this to vary according to the relationship and attachment with the deceased.	How did you cope following the bereavement? What was particularly difficult/helpful?
Can you describe the impact of your bereavement on your therapeutic work?	I am interested to explore whether the therapists' own bereavement effected their therapeutic process.	I expect participants to inform that their own bereavement improved their therapeutic presence and the depth of understanding their clients.	Issues pertaining whether to disclose feelings about their personal bereavement with clients.	How did you experience the therapeutic encounter with your client in light of your own bereavement? How was your way of working or your therapeutic style affected, if at all?

Data Analysis:

Data analysis followed systematically the six-stage approach as outlined by Smith et al. (2009).

- **Step 1** - I immersed myself in the reading and re-reading of the original data, checking the transcript for accuracy against the recordings, to ensure that the participant remains central to the analytical process. Initial annotations were made in one margin, with exploratory comments describing initial interesting thoughts about the content.

- **Step 2** - This phase aimed to produce a detailed and comprehensive set of notes about the data by commenting on the narrative while staying close to participants' explicit meanings. I entered summaries of content, connections between different parts of the transcript, and initial interpretations in the margins of the table.

- **Step 3** – Whilst analysis of the previous stage was focused on the line-by-line data, this step required me to look at bigger chunks of text to discover emergent themes.

- **Step 4** - This phase involved drawing together the emergent themes.

- **Step 5** - After I had completed the first case and produced a table of themes, I followed the same procedure for all the remaining cases.

- **Step 6** - After analysing each interview, the following step consisted of collating every case to identify patterns. Superordinate and subordinate themes were created for all participants.

Master Themes and Subthemes:
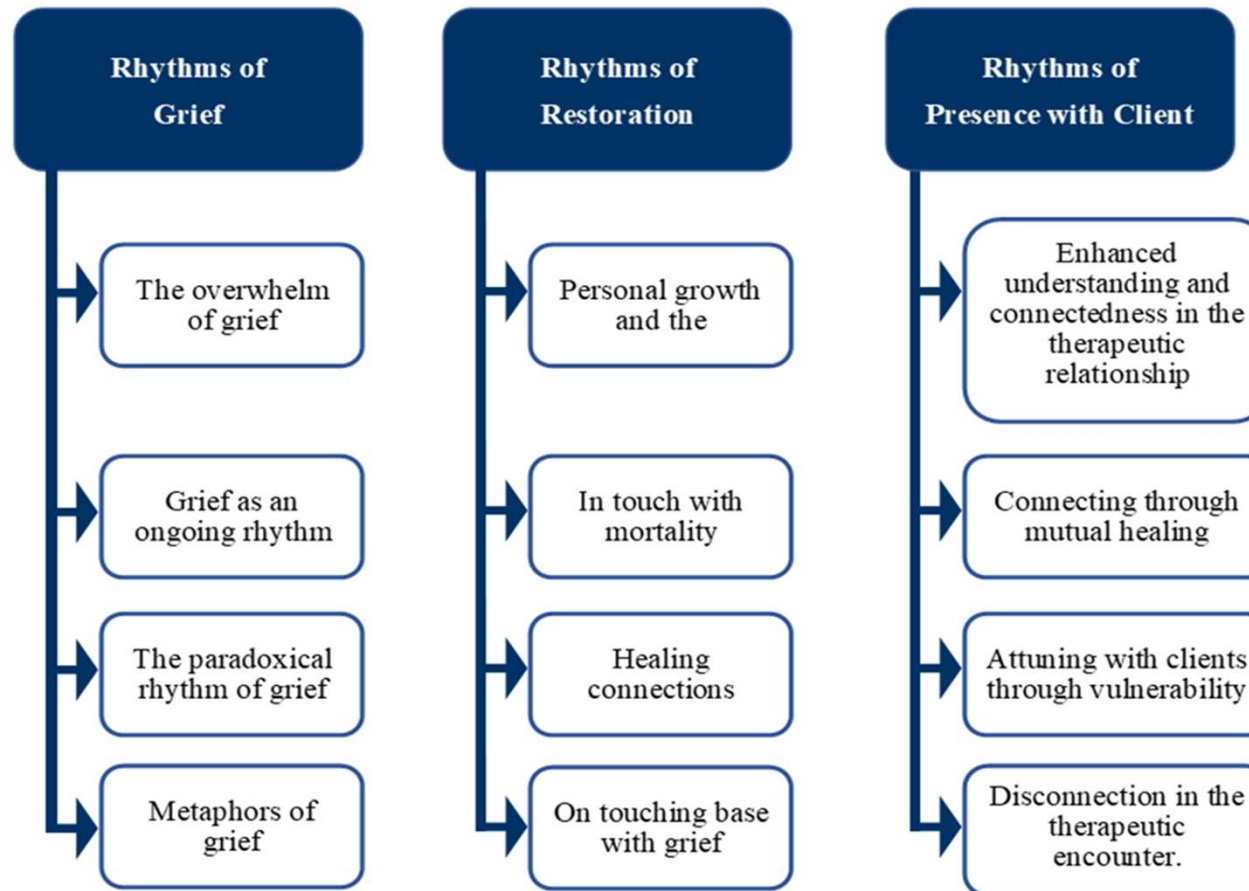
Master Theme 1: Rhythms of Grief:

Subtheme 1: **The Overwhelm of Grief**

This subtheme featured the holistic impact of grief on the life of the participants. Three dimensions where highlighted:

- Psychological Impact of Grief

- Physiological Manifestations of Grief

- Behavioural Manifestations of Grief

Master Theme 1: Rhythms of Grief: cont.

Subtheme 2: Grief as an Ongoing Process

Participants confirmed that grief is an ongoing process and it is never completely settled. The loss is always with the grief-stricken person and it can be triggered by anything, implying that grief is innate, and an emotion that brings along other emotions with it, such as sadness, despair, rage, and anger. Most participants implied that grief is normal and that it is simply a natural part of life. This suggests that grief is something we do, not just emotions that befall us. If grief is something done, it opens the potential for it being an activity that can be done skilfully, as well as a skill that can be learned.

Master Theme 1: Rhythms of Grief: cont.

Subtheme 3: The Paradoxical Rhythm of Grief

As I immersed myself into the participants' lived experiences, I realised that such paradoxical experiences were composed of concurrent opposing elements, suggesting that turning toward loss is a paradoxical process. For example, some of the participants highlighted the tension between encountering grief alone, yet also with others; feeling fundamentally separated, yet a part of a shared human experience.

They did not negate the reality of physical death. Nor did they deny the reality of the emotional loss caused by this physical annihilation. Yet paradoxically, not only in the first moment or the first months of the loss, but perhaps on and on for years to come, there is a presence of the person who has died. There is the reality of that person inside the grief-stricken that contradicts the fact that the deceased is no longer physically alive.

Master Theme 1: Rhythms of Grief: cont.

Subtheme 4: Metaphors of Grief

Participants often emphasised how they found the experience hard to quantify and articulate in words. Throughout the interviews, there were evident limits to how much the participants could convey the sensory experience of grief without using metaphors to better describe their overwhelming experience. Evidently, metaphors have the unique character of capturing both extremely personal as well as universal aspects of human experience. In this way, they contain and reassure the grief-stricken person in ways everyday language cannot.

Examples of metaphors as described by the participants:

A dark black hole and the black tunnel with cracks in the wall to let light through:

 ... loneliness is the deepest hole [pause and sniff] a deep black hole... at the same time, I see a black tunnel which I hope to be able to walk through until I can breathe with less pressure...[longish pause...and a little smile]... you know, I actually can say that with the support around me, I could see some light through the cracks in the tunnel. (Lily)

The corridor of cobwebs as described by Hazel:

 ... It's a little bit like walking through a corridor with cobwebs. The cobwebs are my grief and they will stick to me at some point in time… (Hazel)
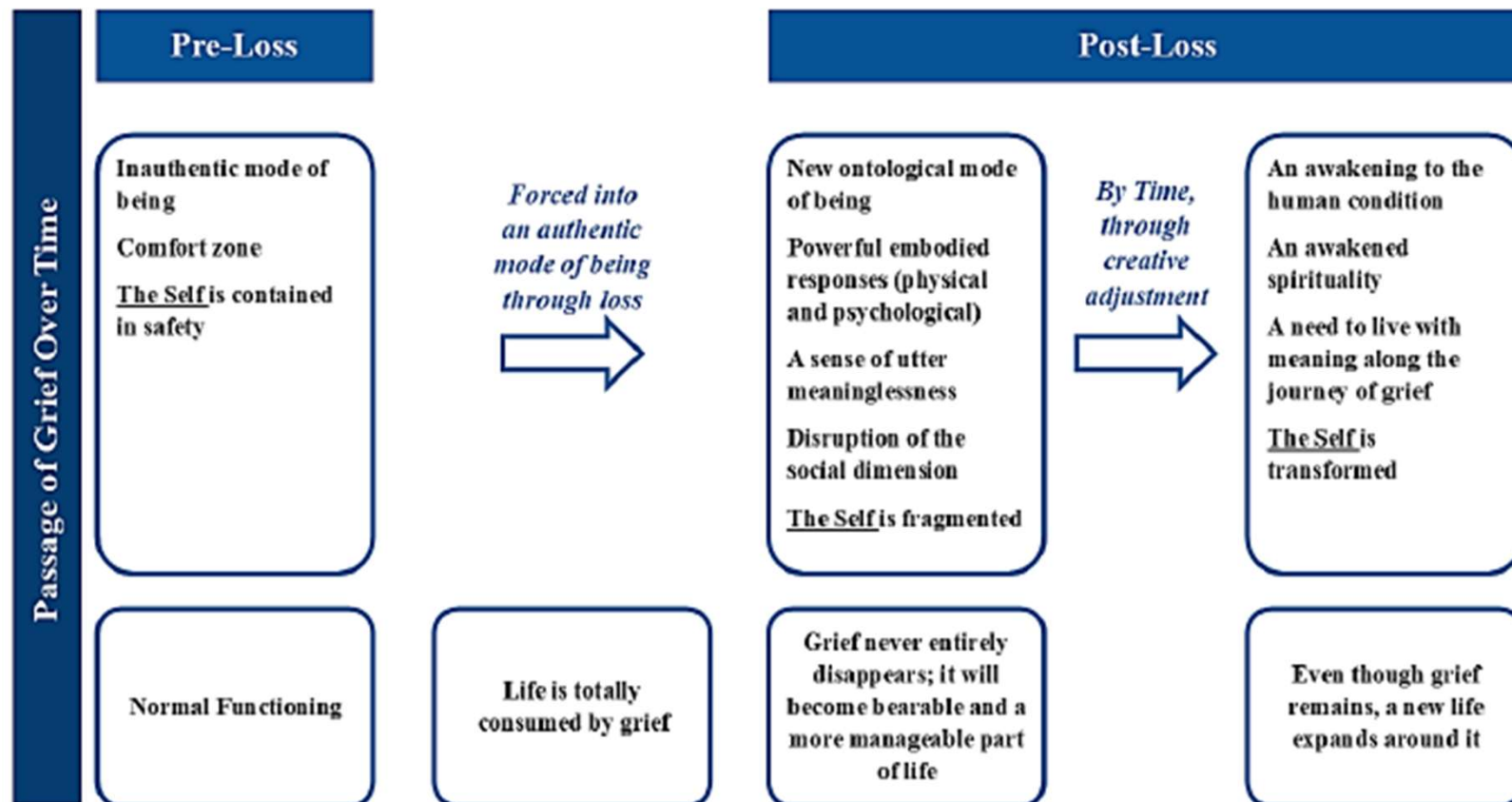
The broken vase:

 … It shatters you completely. Your identity shatters you. Your identity is fragmented, it's like you're this beautiful vase that's been broken into many pieces and I think the process of bereavement involves putting those pieces together. So, it's meaning-making, it's rebuilding a different identity. (Tulip)

The sandy beach:

 … The image that I often come up with is me standing on a beach and it is sunrise, it is very, very peaceful, and the water had just moved out ...[pause]... and I am on my own. Shortly after my sister died, I went to the beach ... So I used a creative process and the movement of wanting to do something. I drew several figures in the sand to represent my family members who passed. I looked at them as I spoke to each one... until the water reached and swept them away... it felt a natural process and I felt so calm. As I walked   further in, I pick up some sand and let it fall through my fingers... (in hindsight she explained) it falls but you can pick it up whenever you want. You don't have to worry about not picking it up. You're just practicing letting go. (Myrtle)

Although people may think that grief slowly gets smaller with time, in reality, grief remains the same but slowly life begins to grow bigger around it. This is depicted in the following figure: (Passage of Grief Over Time: Bugeja, 2022)

Passage of Grief Over Time

Pre-Loss

Inauthentic mode of being

Comfort zone

The Self is contained in safety

Normal Functioning

Forced into an authentic mode of being through loss

Life is totally consumed by grief

Post-Loss

New ontological mode of being

Powerful embodied responses (physical and psychological)

A sense of utter meaninglessness

Disruption of the social dimension

The Self is fragmented

Grief never entirely disappears; it will become bearable and a more manageable part of life

By Time, through creative adjustment

An awakening to the human condition

An awakened spirituality

A need to live with meaning along the journey of grief

The Self is transformed

Even though grief remains, a new life expands around it

Master Theme 2: Rhythms of Restoration

Subtheme 1: Personal Growth and the Re-construction of Self

Personal growth is understood by participants in this study as perceiving positive outcomes in various aspects of life following the loss of a significant individual. It refers also to a bereaved individual's ability to overcome challenges through a change in their personality, such as developing hardiness, or through a change in their relationships with others. It is also evident from the findings that the participants' experiences of bereavement have had a considerable impact on their therapeutic practice. The findings also highlight the fact that the quality of this impact continues to change over time as a result of the participants' enhanced understanding of themselves and professional development.

Master Theme 2: Rhythms of Restoration _{cont.}

Subtheme 2: In Touch With Mortality

Participants elaborated on an increased self-awareness that emerged from their loss and revolved around their own limitations and the realization that life is intertwined with death. They seem to have emerged with newfound strength, as well as an enhanced awareness of their humanity and vulnerability. Some participants related to the idea that their experience had caused an awakening of what was already there in an undeveloped or latent form. This is in line with the idea that it is only through experience that we gain the opportunity to see, or get closer to, other aspects of ourselves, such as our own mortality. Without these experiences, these other parts of ourselves have no reason to emerge and therefore remain out of our consciousness. The experience was in this sense transformational.

Master Theme 2: Rhythms of Restoration cont.

Subtheme 3: Healing Connections

Two central themes that emerged from this section are that grief is the other side of the coin of love (when you love, you are vulnerable to the loss of the beloved), and that mourning itself is the healing process of recovering from such a deep loss.

Master Theme 2: Rhythms of Restoration cont.

Subtheme 4: On Touching Base with Grief

All of the participants reported finding the interview experience useful to reflect on the phenomenon of their grief in this open, free-flowing yet committed way. They were unprepared for what had emerged during their interviews with me. This sense of surprise and uncertainty perhaps mirrors the ambiguity and uncertainty that permeated their experience of grief, as well as their attempts to reconcile this with their therapy work.

Master Theme 3: Altered rhythms of presence with clients

Subtheme 1: Enhanced Understanding and Connectedness in the Therapeutic Relationship.

As I analysed my data, I became keenly aware that much of what the participants were telling me was to do with the connections that have been made with their clients in the aftermath of personal loss and as a result of their own grieving process. Whilst all had very unique experiences, it seems that the felt intensity of their loss forced them into a different reality: one which was both paradoxically similar and different to previous grief experiences as they grappled to come to terms with the intrusion of loss and grief into their everyday existence.

Master Theme 3: Altered rhythms of presence with clients cont.

Subtheme 2: Connecting Through Mutual Healing

The participants felt that they appreciated their chosen work, and liked being in a helping role after their loss. Several spoke of the beneficial nature that providing therapy had on their own journey of loss. The participants' ability to remain open to the impact clients can have on them as therapists, and their capacity to learn and change as a result of these interactions is illustrative of the intersubjective stance that characterises the psychotherapeutic relationship.

Master Theme 3: Altered rhythms of presence with clients cont.

Subtheme 3: Attuning with Clients through Vulnerability

In an effort to describe moments of shared vulnerability and emotional attunement, participants referred to the therapeutic relationship as an internal state in which they were open to being effectively touched and impacted by the experience of the client. It is a quality of presence in which therapists sought to find a corresponding emotion or experience that allowed them to navigate ambiguous terrain. Most of all, participants found moments of shared vulnerability to be moments of profound connection and mutual understanding that facilitated a deeper sense of intimacy.

Master Theme 3: Altered rhythms of presence with clients cont.

Subtheme 4: Disconnection in the Therapeutic Encounter

The vulnerability of the grieving therapist is also a paradoxical experience. All participants experienced their grief as an intrusion into their life-world, one they could not have been prepared for. Although most of them emphasised the importance of putting their grief aside and getting on with their work, some felt triggered and disconnected by certain clients in the aftermath of their loss.

An Integrating Statement of my Findings:

Evidently, the loss of a significant other, regardless of how or when it presented itself, is experienced by the participants of this study as an unexpected intrusion into their lives. Participants got disoriented by the changed world around them, and the new experience of the self in the aftermath of loss. Taking the time and attending to their sense of overwhelm, together with giving attention to self-care, were identified as important aspects of the grief journey. Such a journey served to enhance both their therapeutic resources and their personal and professional identity. Over time, they came to accept their grief and recognised its importance, and their stoic attitude toward themselves softened. Ultimately, they learned to embrace their experience and are using it without fear during their therapeutic encounters as deemed necessary.

Discussion: Methodological Considerations and Critical Reflections

Strengths of the Study:

- This study is the first of its kind locally, thus, the findings are critically important to the growing body of knowledge on therapists' bereavement grief from a gestalt perspective. Moreover, the findings have the potential to be theoretically transferred.

- A major strength of this study was its commitment to the qualitative process, with online face-to-face interviews to gain insight into the richness of the lived experience in a way that a quantitative study would have not.

Strengths of the Study cont.:

- The manual coding used in my analysis allowed me to achieve an intimacy with participants' narratives that might not have been possible through computer analysis. As a result, my findings reflect my immersion in participants' experiences, as well as a strong interpretative element reflecting my role as a co-contributor to the research findings.

- I feel that the use of IPA was particularly appropriate in investigating the lived experience, and allowed common existential themes to arise without losing fight of its idiosyncratic nature.

- Moreover, its guidelines for analysis gave me a sense of security and confidence in carrying out the analysis with rigour and reflectivity.

Discussion: Methodological Considerations and Critical Reflections cont.

Limitations of the Study:

- IPA's methodology is ambiguous and scientifically weak because it does not allow for the replication of results if a different researcher were to investigate the data of the same participants. However, IPA recognises the skill of the researcher as a fundamental element in the creation of good research, as opposed to simply following a method. With this in mind, I have managed the tension between efficacy and creativity in this research.

- The findings presented in this research study are just one interpretation and hence remain tentative, emergent, and uncertain. Despite this, discussions with my supervisor and other experts in IPA allowed for validity checking through reflection and how participant experiences were interpreted. I also presented preliminary interpretations to my peer group and sought feedback on the authenticity of my work.

Limitations of the Study cont.

- Focusing on the sample, while relative homogeneity was achieved, there was no limit set in terms of how long ago the death had taken place, the issue of time scale may have had implications for mapping the participants' journey through grief since they were at different points in their processes when interviewed.

- With interviews relying on participants' recollection and subsequent interpretation, the span of time may have produced discrepancies. However, a key finding of this study is that grief is a cyclical and highly individual experience, suggesting that time-bound comparisons may not be appropriate.

- Another issue relates to the context of loss. The inclusion criteria of this study did not specify the type of bereavement the participants had experienced, or the circumstances in which the loss occurred.

Limitations of the Study cont.

- Another issue relates to the context of loss. The inclusion criteria of this study did not specify the type of bereavement the participants had experienced, or the circumstances in which the loss occurred.

- Moreover, another difficulty might have been the role I had as a researcher, and at the same time being a Maltese Gestalt psychotherapist like my participants. Alternating between an insider and outsider's perspective might have been helpful in some ways, allowing for a deeper understanding of common issues, yet might have had the disadvantage of over-identification with aspects of the data.

Validity and Quality of the Study:

This study sought to address each of Yardley's (2000) four criteria for assessing validity and quality in qualitative research.

Sensitivity to Context:

- To ensure that my analysis and interpretation were sensitive to participants' accounts, I employed IPA with an ideographic focus on individual context and conducted interviews in a way that facilitated participants' ease of disclosure.

- I engaged in a reflexive practice to identify how my role as a researcher might be impacting on the various processes in the research and myself.

- I also sought to ensure that my analysis and interpretation were sensitive to social context by undertaking a thorough literature review, and by contextualising my findings in relation to existing theory and knowledge.

Validity and Quality of the Study: cont.

Commitment to Rigour:

- Participants were sampled carefully to achieve a reasonably homogenous sample appropriate to the research question.

- Considerable time was spent devising and amending the interview schedule.

- Analysis was undertaken based on the careful transcription of the interviews.

- Each major theme was explored systematically and in-depth and was related to the existing literature in the field.

- Importantly, it was also supported by extracts from the narratives of more than half of the participants.

Validity and Quality of the Study: cont.

Transparency and Coherence:

- I sought to describe each part of the research process in detail, from how participants were selected, to the stages of analysis that guided my explication of findings.

- I also included a reflexive account of my role in the research process consistently throughout the study in line with IPA's methodology.

- Moreover, I sought to use clear and concise language towards presenting a coherent argument, supported by evidence to establish a fit between my research and its theoretical assumptions.

Impact and Importance:

- While I view the findings of this study as illuminating and interesting, I invite the reader to assess this for themselves.

Theoretical Implications:

Psychoanalytic Theory in the light of Gestalt theory

As I reviewed the grief and bereavement literature, my thought process aligned with Stroebe and Stroebe's (1991) claim that there is a lack of clarity around the conceptualisation of grief work. If the term 'grief work' carries certain assumptions, such as relinquishing ties, it contrasts with the contemporary research in favour of continuing bonds. As much as the grieving of my participants felt laborious, it was also transformative. In this light, I propose the term 'grief encounter' instead of 'grief work' as grieving was experienced as deeply intimate and personal by my participants. This resonates closely with Drisner's (2017) suggestion when she proposed the same term and for the same reason in her study.

Theoretical Implications: cont.

Attachment Theory in the Light of Gestalt theory

- The findings of this study lend support to Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory, when he referred to the pain of separation from an attachment figure, and particularly to the first phase of numbing. Interestingly, Bowlby explained that he chose the term disbelief as opposed to denial because "carries with it a sense of active contradiction, whereas disbelief is more neutral" (p. 87).

- His explanation of the bereaved experiencing both belief and disbelief aligns with the subtheme of this study *the overwhelm of grief*, where some of the participants described being in a state of surrealism. Moreover, the participants did not deny that their loved ones were dead, which supports Bowlby's refusal to use the word denial. Instead, the participants felt the tension between reality and their intense aversion to it.

Attachment Theory in the Light of Gestalt theory: cont.

- The intensity of loss seems to have diminished over time for some participants but did not remove the felt absence of their loved ones altogether. This implies that these participants did not seem to move through phases per se, but they did not attest to the first year or so being unique as they adjusted to their new devastating reality, thus supporting Bowlby's description of numbing.

- Moreover, participants who experienced several losses were vocal about the fact that as therapists, they had developed a level of awareness that facilitated a more active acknowledgement or confrontation with their loss.

- Participants' accounts lent some support to the notion of 'grief work'; the findings show that integration and re-organisation of the loss experience occurred over time, with participants adjusting gradually. This is in line with the findings of Calhoun & Tedeschi (2004), De Santis (2015), and Horwell (2018).

Attachment Theory in the Light of Gestalt theory: cont.

- Of particular interest from the findings of this study is the fact that one of the participants seemed to have suffered complicated grief since, at the age of one year, she lost her baby sister, of whom she has no recollection. However, the consequences of the event, being abandoned by her mother because of her depression, and by her father, because he had to take care of his wife, left the participant marked with embodied trauma. This manifested in self-destructive behaviours and an inferiority complex. Reflecting on this case, I am in touch with the advances from neuroscience, informing us how the brain develops in the first two years of life and how it continues to change throughout our lifetimes.

Practical Implications:

Three key themes have been identified as providing important insights into Gestalt therapists' experience of grief and how this affects them during their therapeutic encounters with clients.

- From the standpoint of emotions being complex and intertwined, naming them may seem simplistic and limiting. For this reason, where the bereaved may find it difficult to express certain feelings, metaphor may provide a way. On a practical level, this would allow working at a deeper level than the factual meaning of loss, which in the experience of some of the participants and my own experience of working with bereavement, is where transformative change takes place.

- The importance of a continued bond was positively represented in this study. This maintenance of the bond gives weight to the movement away from the idea that successful grieving involves 'letting go' of the loved one. The shift involves loving those who departed in presence to loving them in absence and integrating the loved one into the new self-narrative as a crucial part of meaning-making. In therapy, this would involve working with the bereaved individuals to find ways of their choice to maintain the bond.

Practical Implications: cont.

- Participants at times felt both disconnected and connected with their clients. This paradox reflects the nature of the therapeutic process, which is both mutual and asymmetric; while allowing ourselves as therapists to be affected by our clients, we must also manage that impact so as not to lose sight of the therapeutic endeavour.

- Given that it is from our bodies and senses that we experience and understand the world, and given the powerful physical manifestations of grief, working with the individual's sense of embodiment will be a key part of an existential-phenomenological approach to therapy. However, while a phenomenological approach may be beneficial here, it may be necessary to adopt working in other ways to address symptoms such as anxiety, flashbacks, and panic attacks.

Recommendations for further research:

Since this research seems to have been the first to do so from a Gestalt perspective, it opens up the possibility for further exploration.

- The sample size involved in this study naturally restricts its ability to provide generalised findings; it would therefore be beneficial to conduct further such studies to refine and consolidate common existential themes, which can then be validated using larger samples in quantitative studies.

- Diversifying gender participation would also enhance the quality of the sample. Investigating gender differences around grief would provide yet another portal for discourse and study. This is especially interesting in relation to coping behaviours, as gender differences and behaviours seem to be a neglected topic.

- This study also sheds light on the therapeutic process of bracketing. Further research into this area is recommended, especially in situations where therapists are vulnerable.

Recommendations for further research: cont.

- There is also the opportunity to explore other aspects of loss in one's life; participants in this study have been bereaved by the loss of a significant other through death. Examining and differentiating the impact of particular types of loss could be useful in understanding bereavement in Gestalt psychotherapists.

- An individual's experience of grief - genetic, cultural, spirituality, religion, experiential, familial - all impact how grief is perceived and processed. Even though such dimensions were not given any particular mention by most participants, it would be interesting for further research to include an investigation into the role of culture, religion, and spirituality, on the impact of the grieving experience.

- This research did not examine the impact the therapists' bereavement had on their clients; therefore, future studies may include data both from therapists and clients for a better understanding of the impact of therapist bereavement on the therapeutic process and outcome.

Implications and Recommendations for Education:

Do we know that we have a right to grief?

Do we know how to grieve? Does our context allow for a 'safe permission' for the grief-stricken to grief?

Are our support systems (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, therapists) adequately informed to be able to provide a safe environment for one to grieve?

- Perhaps it is high time to specifically include the topic of grief and grieving as a skill in our national educational curricula.

- Local councils may hold workshops on the topic to empower their communities.

Implications and Recommendations for Education: cont.

Are Gestalt psychotherapists adequately trained and resourced to contain such grief and be there to offer adequate and appropriate support?

- In view of this, the topics of loss and grief, in particular, the theoretical shift by some grief and psychoanalytic theorists from the withdrawal of attachment to a changing and continuing bond to what is lost perhaps need to be infused into discussions during our training programmes and continuing professional development workshops/seminars. Furthermore, Gestalt students may be encouraged to reflect on their own lived experiences of loss and grief, thereby initiating a level of self-discovery which has likely not yet been tapped.

- Viewing grief as a skill has profound implications in working with the bereaved, suggesting that a bereaved person can be engaged in working with their strengths and capacities, and assisted in increasing these capacities. This can be a source of empowerment for clients.

Max Scheler and grief:

It was suggested to me to get familiar with Max Scheler's work to strengthen the sociological viewpoint.

Scheler's philosophy is part of the realistic strand of phenomenology which is distinguished from Husserlian transcendental phenomenology.

In regards to his theory of 'The Nature of Intersubjectivity', in which all levels of human togetherness, and not merely individual problems, are addressed. Therefore, standing together in grief might be regarded as a kind of mutual (cognitive-emotional) 'off-loading' because, rather than experiencing isolation and undertaking the 'work' of grief alone, the bereaved members are supported by one another, and their shared emotion intensifies their feelings of mutual understanding and connection.

This offers an interesting anthropological study ! ... An individualistic vs a collectivists stance of grieving.