

Beyond Goodbye: The Life Imprint

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Seek strands of continuity in the relationship to the deceased, as well as points of transition.

1. Maintaining thematic integrity of our self-narrative implies cultivating a continuing bond (CB) with the lost loved one (Silverman, Klass), rather than “saying goodbye” or seeking “closure.”
2. *Keeping the connection:* Field & Friedrichs studied 30 widows at four months and two years post-loss, signaling each to record CB manifestations and positive and negative mood 4 times per day for two weeks. *Results:* Negative mood and CB associated *across* individuals in both groups, but *within* individuals, higher CB associated with more positive mood for later, but not early widows.
3. Therapeutic techniques: Life imprint, biographies of deceased or relationship, linking objects, lifelines

Recommended Readings

Neimeyer, R. A. (Ed.) (2012). *Techniques of grief therapy: Creative practices for counseling the bereaved*. London & New York: Routledge. [95 chapters by leading clinicians briefly presenting a vast range of practical tools to use in grief therapy, each with clear instructions and anchored in a case study.]

Neimeyer, R. A. (2009). *The art of longing*. Charleston, SC: BookSurge. [contemporary poetry of loss]

Neimeyer, R. A., Harris, D., Winokeur, H. & Thornton, G. (Eds.) (2011). *Grief and bereavement in contemporary society: Bridging research and practice*. New York: Routledge. [Comprehensive handbook on new conceptualizations of grief, with focus on different types of loss, special populations and therapeutic issues and methods; each chapter is coauthored by prominent researchers and practitioners to thoroughly integrate scholarship and practice.]

Clinician's Toolbox: Life Imprint (Vickio, with modifications by Neimeyer)

In a sense, we are all “pastiche personalities,” reflecting bits and pieces of the many people whose characteristics and values we have unconsciously assimilated into our own sense of identity. This “inheritance” transcends genetics, as we can be powerfully or subtly shaped not only by parents, but also by mentors, friends, siblings, or even children we have loved and lost. Nor are these life imprints always positive: at times, we can trace our self-criticism, distrust, fears, and emotional distance to once influential relationships that are now with us only internally. Take a few moments privately to trace the imprint of an important figure in your life, and then, at your discretion, discuss your observations with a partner.

The person whose imprint I want to trace is: _____

This person has had the following impact on:

My mannerisms or gestures:

My ways of speaking and communicating:

My work and pastime activities:

My feelings about myself and others:

My basic personality:

My values and beliefs:

The imprints I would most like to affirm and develop are:

The imprints I would most like to relinquish or change are:

Variations and extensions:

- *Documentation:* As homework, have person write a paragraph about each to reaffirm the connection
- *Letters of gratitude:* Write a “thank you” letter to deceased for the “gifts” they have given us
- *Survey:* Interview several other people about the imprint of the deceased on them to deepen appreciation of his or her life
- *Directed telling:* With the dying or using empty chair for the deceased, directly express the impact of their life on your own