



# Portland Institute

## For Loss and Transition

### Course Pack

## Grief Therapy as Meaning Reconstruction A Trauma-Informed Approach [Part I]

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**NOTE:**

*This online course is equivalent to a half-day Core Course leading to all Certification Programs offered by the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition. For further details about the various Certification Programs, simply click: <https://www.portlandinstitute.org/certification>.*

## How to Use This Course Pack

A major goal of professional continuing education in all human service professions is to foster our development as *reflective practitioners*, that is as helping agents who can engage a great range of client problems that are often as ambiguous as they are anguishing, and that resist simple solution. This is certainly the case when those with whom we work are contending with preoccupying, prolonged and perturbing grief in the wake of losses that at times are all too similar to our own. The capacity to reflect compassionately but clearly on our own loss experiences as well as on those of our clients helps us “do our work” at both personal and professional levels, so that we can be genuinely responsive to our client’s distress rather than merely reactive to our own.

This Course Pack not only lays out the training materials covered in the video recording, but also provides a basic structure for fostering reflection on the cases, concepts and cornucopia of techniques coherent with grief therapy as meaning reconstruction. It prompts your deeper engagement with the material, encouraging you to learn by *doing*, not merely *viewing* the video and slide-show presentation. The goal is to give you an active familiarity with a sampling of tools that can be creatively deployed in the context of grief counseling and therapy, drawing from the many dozens of methods featured in the fundamental GTMR Certification Program of the Portland Institute, and its growing set of Specialty areas.

If you would like to pursue certification, you need to first enroll in the program at our Store: <https://www.portlandinstitute.org/shop/main>, and use the accompanying Responsive Journal to complete the specified exercises and return the Journal to [carolyn@portlandinstitute.org](mailto:carolyn@portlandinstitute.org) to be granted credit for course completion.

If you have any questions about these procedures, feel free to contact us at the address above.

# Grief Therapy as Meaning Reconstruction

## A Trauma-Informed Approach [Part I]

### Restorative Retelling Summary

#### ***Fundamental Principles***

##### 1) Resilience

- ✓ Client first needs to be stabilized and restored for a sense of safety, separateness and autonomy from the loss experience. Otherwise, he/she will be overwhelmed in the loss imagery and stories, which may only provoke unbearable distress and further traumatize him/her, instead of bringing him/her possible therapeutic effects.

##### 2) Restoration

- ✓ Commemoration of positive, non-traumatic imagery of the deceased and the self can serve as a vital and meaningful counterbalance to the intrusive imagery of the loss experience.

##### 3) Re-exposure

- ✓ It can only begin when client can tolerate the accompanying terror and helplessness. With his/her re-established resilience and a restoration of the living memory of the deceased and the self, a difficult loss story can be told with a change in perspective and mastery, and can be retold at one's will rather than intruding.

#### ***Preparatory Entry***

- ✓ "Would it be a good time to talk about [loss incident] now?"
- ✓ "Supposed we start talking about [loss incident/the deceased], how would that be for you?"
- ✓ "You may share about the part that you are ready to, and pause at any point you need."
- ✓ "If you want, you may close your eyes (with possible breathing/relaxation exercises as warm-up)... and slowly bring yourself back to that scene now."

**Narrative Processes**

## 1) External narrative – The objective or factual story of ‘what happened?’

- ✓ “When you’re ready, you may tell me where you were and what you’re doing at that point.”
- ✓ “How did you get the death news? How did you react at that moment then?”
- ✓ “Who else was with you at that time?”
- ✓ “What did you do/what happened afterward?”
- ✓ “How did you deal with the necessary arrangements thereafter?”

## 2) Internal narrative – The emotion-focused story of ‘what am I feeling?’

During the loss event

- ✓ “What do you recall about your body sensations/feelings when you received the news?”
- ✓ “Suppose I took a picture of you during the incident, what do you think we would see in this photo? How would that reflect on your inner state at that moment?”
- ✓ “If your body could say a word to describe how it was for you at that point, what would it say?”

During the retelling process

- ✓ “Now that you’re in touch with that feeling again, how is it for you?”
- ✓ “Now that you’re recalling and telling this story again, how have your feelings changed, if at all?”
- ✓ “How have you been getting along with your grief thus far?”
- ✓ “If there’s still a difficult feeling lingering in you, what could that be? How come it’s difficult?”
- ✓ “In which part of your body do you think that painful feeling resides? How would you describe it?”

## 3) Reflexive narrative – The meaning-oriented story of ‘what does this mean to me now?’

- ✓ “Which part of this story was the most painful for you to recall and share? Why? How have you been managing it then?”
- ✓ “If you were to go back to the scene again, would you do something similar or would you wish to respond differently? How come?”

- ✓ “How did you make sense of the death now? As compared with the initial phase, has there been any shift in your perspectives?”
- ✓ “How has this loss experience made a difference to your life?”
- ✓ “Having gone through such a loss experience, and arriving at where you are now, what did you discover/learn about yourself? What does it say about you as a person?”
- ✓ “If there is anything that could bring you comfort from this loss experience, what would that be?”
- ✓ “Did this incident make you realize something new about life and/or yourself? If yes, what is it?”

### ***Clinician’s Toolbox: Becoming Our Own Audience for the Retelling***

Both ethically and clinically, it is commonly worth “trying on” a therapeutic technique ourselves before implementing it in therapy, as it gives us a bit of an insider’s view of how the technique feels to the client, and what its constraints and possibilities are. So here, we invite you to try a form of *Restorative Retelling* with yourself as the only audience, sharing your reflections on the process afterward, but retaining total confidentiality over the content of your story. Here are some guidelines to assist in the process.

1. ***Find your safe place.*** *Step away from the computer and find a comfortable seat in a place that offers the right blend of privacy and security. Take your phone with you, opening an app for voice recording.*
2. ***Loosen up.*** *Closing your eyes, go to a quiet, meditative place, or simply take several long, slow and deep breaths, releasing concerns of the day, or even concerns about “doing it right” in this exercise. Just spend a few moments with yourself, compassionately, much as you might with a client accepting the invitation to reopen a vulnerable story of loss.*
3. ***Choose a focus.*** *Ask yourself, “What story of loss do I feel ready to explore?” All of us have many possible stories of the loss of people, places, projects, possessions, professions... the list is long. Wait for one that feels tellable, at least in part, and perhaps somewhat familiar—maybe a death of someone important years ago, or an experience of moving away from a beloved home. Avoid losses that feel heavy, traumatic, or recent. This is simply an exercise, not therapy, so choose something that feels sufficiently important to make it meaningful, but also sufficiently processed to make it safe to revisit, and then step back from in 15 minutes. You’ll know when it’s right, and of course you can stop at any time.*

4. **Identify a beginning.** *With the loss of a loved one, you might begin at the point of the death, or when you first learned of it; with an illness, upon first receipt of a serious diagnosis; with a job loss, with the notice of dismissal or furlough. Try to begin with a clear moment of experience, where you can recall the context, the conversation, the concrete situation. Then begin speaking, with your eyes closed, just as a client might do with your invitation in your office.*
5. **Orient to the instructions.** *Before beginning, refer to the Restorative Retelling guidelines included in this Course Pack, and especially the Narrative Processes section on External and Internal Narratives. Just get a sense of these questions; you don't have to remember them exactly, and you might find that you don't need their prompting to carry the story forward. Just naturally tell the story slowly, pausing now and then to feel what is most important to spend time with, tacking back and forth between what was happening in the story world (who was present, what was said, what you saw or heard) and what was occurring in your internal world of thoughts, feelings and body sensations. Voice the relevant emotion, just sitting with it without having to "solve" it. If stronger feelings come, just observe them, and remind yourself that it's okay. You can of course stop at any time but see how it feels to retell the outer and inner story slowly for about 15 minutes. Look for a natural point to stop, perhaps at the end of "chapter" in the story, with no need to rush toward its conclusion.*
6. **Reorient to reality.** *Perhaps responding to a timer that you have set with a gentle chime, allow yourself to stop after 15 minutes, or at a point of your choice. Then just take a couple of minutes to feel your body in the chair, notice the play of light on your closed eyes, and notice the random sounds of the room or the outdoors. Gradually open your eyes and say "thank you" to yourself for re-opening a significant story for re-telling.*
7. **Review the retelling.** *Turn off your recorder, and replay your retelling, pausing as you desire to reflect, make a note, or consider what further question or prompt you might have introduced at various points if you were this person's therapist, and were interested in deepening the process. Resist evaluation and allow yourself to feel respect and compassion for the storyteller—in this case, yourself.*
8. **Reflect in writing.** *Scanning the additional questions at the end of the Restorative Retelling guidelines, choose 3 or 4 of the Reflexive narrative questions that interest you, and in your diary or on your computer spend another 20 minutes or so answering them, or noting your observations about your experience in a free-flowing way. What do you make of your own brief dip into retelling, and what value do you imagine it might have in therapy for*

*a client struggling with a difficult loss? What precautions would you take to ensure that the retelling was restorative and not retraumatizing?*

Conclude by summarizing a few of the main points of your experience in a paragraph or so, holding private anything you wish.

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[www.portlandinstitute.org](http://www.portlandinstitute.org)