

## Process Oriented Meaning-Making: Model for Multicultural Grief Counselling

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the universality of grief, numerous counsellors lack the ability to identify and effectively interact with clients who are experiencing grief using evidence-based methods. Researchers have examined strategies to improve education in grief counselling and have identified best practices, such as socio-constructionist meaning-making techniques. However, these recommendations have not been fully put into practice. In 2023, a research study (Gaur, 2023) was conducted to investigate the utilization of evidence-based recommendations by counsellors in their practice, as well as to examine the content of counselling programs aimed at preparing professionals for the field. It investigated how counsellors-in-training and counselling professionals help clients in session to create meaning. The study yielded a tool that aids in comprehending the specific actions counsellors are employing to effectively facilitate the development of meaning in post-loss therapy sessions. The 8-step guide, known as Process Oriented Meaning-Making (POMM), was created by consolidating the shared experiences of all counsellor participants regarding how they believe meaning-making is accomplished in their sessions. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the utilization of POMM, including practical exercises that can be advantageous for counsellors to integrate into their sessions.

**Keywords:** *Grief, Meaning-Making, Process-Oriented Counselling, Grief Tools*

Everyone understands that grief is a normal, complex, and completely subjective response to a major loss. The way a person deals with loss depends on their own story, which is affected by social norms (Neimeyer, 2006). These grief norms are very personal, don't have a set time frame, and are unique to each person. Grief shows up in clients through their verbal and behavioural indicators, with a focus on how they cope with it (Sanders, 1989; Stephenson, 1994). But social and cultural norms greatly impact the indicators (Breen & O'Connor, 2007; Cicchetti et al., 2016). To put it simply, grief is unavoidable, hard, and expressed in an acceptable way within the cultural norms. Prolonged or difficult grieving is predicted to grow even more after the pandemic (Gesi et al., 2020). This growth is because of the unprecedented number of deaths and losses that occurred during the COVID-19 Pandemic, along with social isolation that resulted in altered mourning rituals that people had to adapt to (Peña-Vargas et al., 2021).

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Mental health practitioners are trained to evaluate clients with grief by assessing situational or developmental indicators of bereavement in order to mitigate the impact of prolonged mourning (Alvis et al., 2023). Given the growing number of instances of grief, it is crucial to understand how counsellors are now addressing the escalating cases in order to provide treatment to clients. These treatments are informed by the latest theoretical advancements while remaining culturally sensitive. Grief research has experienced a substantial shift in the past two decades from traditional theories of mourning, such as the 5 stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969), to modern or constructivist perspectives (Flesner, 2013). Post-loss, those grieving often seek to examine the situation to find meaning and importance. Meaning-making has become more important when seen from a socio-constructionist (Burke & Neimeyer, 2013) perspective as a tool used after experiencing a loss. According to Burke and Neimeyer (2013), people are motivated by a want to attain a sense of significance or meaning in their lives. Individuals who have suffered a loss may create significance in the event in order to fulfil their inherent need to find meaning. Meaning-making research examines the process by which individuals comprehend and interpret their experiences of suffering and the influence of their identity in coping with bereavement (Sands et al., 2011). Process-oriented Meaning-Making (POMM) has stemmed from a research which examined how counsellors-in-training (CIT) and counsellors assist their clients in culturally and individually relevant ways while dealing with loss. The participants for the research conducted by Gaur (2023) were counsellors who were chosen via purposeful sampling, and data was gathered through phenomenological interviews and observations. Gaur (2023) used the van Kaam technique of data analysis (Moustakas, 1994) to categorize each counsellor participant's responses into distinct themes for the study. Synthesizing the responses was the last stage in analysing the data. The researcher combined the textual and structural descriptions to get a thorough knowledge of the phenomena of meaning-making in grief work as observed and conducted by the counsellor participants in their sessions.

The combination of the descriptions culminated in forming by an 8-step organized guide called Process Oriented Meaning-Making (POMM) that summarizes all the stages described by the counsellors to highlight the method that is currently used in grief therapy (Gaur, 2023). This guide ultimately helps in the process of creating meaning after experiencing a loss which is later described in the article. Before we understand POMM, let us look at some key findings from the research that justifies the significance of updated grief work.

### ***Grief Conceptualisation***

Largely, grief work done after the COVID-19 outbreak led to most of the information in the study. The results show that COVID-19 has made it harder to deal with and process grief during therapy (Gaur, 2023). According to Gaur (2023), grief and grief-related traumas have seen a major rise in the presenting problems in counselling sessions post-pandemic. Due to the nature of grief in the current times, it is observed that it is becoming increasingly common to conceptualize grief as a comorbid concern in sessions. At the moment, counsellors benefit from thinking about grief therapy through the lens of trauma work as it gives them evidence-based methods they can use to implement some sort of grief work. However, the lack of formal training in thanatology from a trauma-based perspective, highlighted the importance of teaching CITs and counselling professionals the current models of grief and ways to facilitate meaning-making in their sessions.

Grief shows up in many forms during therapy. In sessions, grief often presents with a range of co-morbid physical and socio-emotional problems, such as self-doubt and self-esteem issues, abandonment issues, and sexual life and relationship difficulties (Gaur, 2023). The

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loss of a loved one is often seen as a personal failure, which hinders the process of recovering from the emotional pain. This shift in attention from the deceased person to the grieving individual's perceived inadequacy may impede healing from the traumatic experience. The loss of a beloved may lead to feelings of loneliness and heightened abandonment issues that are hard to overcome, therefore making the pursuit of finding purpose in life after the loss very arduous. The absence of trust, the abruptness of the loss, and the overpowering emotions contribute to the complexities of the process of rehabilitation and the creation of meaning. Therapy relies on a therapeutic alliance, which involves building a working relationship. However, some counsellors face difficulties in establishing a basic rapport due to the client's lack of trust and reluctance to form new connections. This poses a challenge to the initiation of therapeutic work. The nature of co-existing concerns along with grief complicates and adds to the complex trauma individuals face while in their mourning process (Gaur, 2023).

Additionally, grief reactions include the complex processing of emotions and ideas at several levels. The complexity arises due to the client's identity and socio-cultural expectations, which hinder the process of creating meaning. There are no established guidelines on the expected emotional response of a grieving individual; yet, societal customs condition us to believe that mourning is associated with adverse or unpleasant feelings. We often overlook the fact that death may serve as a source of comfort for the departed, who may have been experiencing significant anguish, or as a means of escape from an abusive relationship for the grieving individual. Considering the intricacy of these circumstances, the research uncovered that counsellors lack the necessary training to identify and assess the presence of positive emotions, such as relief or release that arise from finding meaning in the process of recovering from sorrow (Gaur, 2023).

### ***Counsellor Knowledge Of Grief***

67% of the counsellor participants did not have any formal training in grief counselling, while the remaining 33% of the counsellor participants who received formal grief work training acknowledged that it helped them conceptualize and diagnose the clients' presenting problems better (Gaur, 2023). The study concluded that formal grieving modules currently taught in some programs do positively contribute to the counsellors' self-efficacy. Nevertheless, the results acknowledged the need to provide updated and contemporary training in grief education (Gaur, 2023). The counsellor participants also acknowledged the limitations of popular grief models such as the Kübler-Ross's (1969) stages of grief since it was simplistic and did not adequately address the diverse groups they were working with. The acknowledged several challenges that hinder the conceptualisation of grief while working with clients from a diverse background (Gaur, 2023).

### ***Counsellor Challenges to Meaning-Making***

#### **Non-Dominant Identities**

The client-counsellor interaction is influenced by the various identities of both parties, which in turn influences the counsellor's ability to comprehend the client's grief. The study's findings indicate that counsellors recognised the significance of managing identities between themselves and their clients. However, they also showed a lack of readiness to handle these dynamics effectively to address grief-related problems (Gaur, 2023). Although it may be impossible to have complete knowledge of every component of one's identity, counsellors indicated a receptive and accepting attitude helps to understand the impact of one's identity on the process of grieving, particularly when it hinders the ability to find meaning. Client identities that are not dominant, such as the intersectionalities of gender, sexuality,

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ability/disability, and marital status, might hinder the process of recovering from grief (Gaur, 2023).

Working with males who aren't accustomed to expressing their emotions after grief might be difficult in certain communities (Gaur, 2023). In grief treatment, males who aren't encouraged to speak about their feelings find it hard to be vulnerable. Due to various discriminatory social taboos, closed queer clients find it difficult to heal from sorrow (Gaur, 2023). Queer people sometimes mourn alone, unable to express their feelings, due to societal constraints that prevent them from expressing themselves or their relationships. The death of an ally may also eliminate queer people's support, which makes mourning adaptively difficult. Additionally, disabled clients cannot convey their sorrow effectively, which hinders meaning-making (Gaur, 2023). Disabled clients may grieve the death of a caregiver on whom they were heavily reliant, which may cause additional stress and anxiety that are generally overlooked.

### ***Language and Multicultural Barriers***

The presence of linguistic differences might be a challenge in providing grief therapy to multicultural clients who may instinctively process trauma in their mother tongue. Given the prevalence of the English language in the counselling profession, counsellors have difficulties in appropriately translating the native language terms used by their clients in their official notes (Gaur, 2023). This poses obstacles in properly understanding and diagnosing the client's presenting issues. Attaining meaning in the face of death may be challenging because of the cultural and social taboos around death and the societal reluctance to mourn the loss of someone who died in a manner that is not socially approved, such as alcoholism or death by suicide (Gaur, 2023). The presence of culturally appropriate rituals or belief systems that might facilitate the process of finding meaning in life may sometimes be misunderstood as hallucinations or an inability to cope. In some situations, these practices may even be misinterpreted as signs of prolonged grief, therefore causing the risk of ill-diagnosis (Gaur, 2023). Therapists who deal with clients who have diverse beliefs about what happens after death have difficulties in understanding the nature of their sorrow and struggle to appropriately perceive their client's feelings and ideas without raising concerns about diagnosing them.

Keeping such unique perspectives in mind, conceptualizing grief through an objective stage-wise processes may seem too simplistic in the face of diverse barriers that a counsellor has to navigate in their sessions. Additionally, stage wise grief recovery may mean that there is a definite end to grieving, thus creating pressure on the bereaved to work through the stages and 'heal' quickly. This study took into account the importance of socio-cultural factors that significantly contribute to adaptive grieving, and informed counsellors with best practices that can be undertaken while working with diverse facets of grief.

### ***Process Oriented Meaning-Making***

The summative data analysis from the study revealed that all counsellor participants, while lacking formal academic training in evidence-based best practices, had a shared comprehension of the process of meaning-making. While not all participants were trained in the socio-constructionist modules of grief, they shared similar approaches to how they are currently promoting meaning-making in their sessions. Process Oriented Meaning-Making (POMM) is a comprehensive approach consisting of 8 steps that outline the actions performed by counsellors that ultimately helped them create meaning in their sessions. The

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counsellors highlighted parallel themes (see Table 1) in the process, revealing how they presently assist in meaning-making with their clients.

**1. Double Listening.** White (2006) used the term ‘double listening’ to describe his method of attentively listening to two streams of narrative in clients while they disclose the effects of a traumatic experience. Based on the concept that people possess numerous narratives, double listening requires the therapist to focus on two distinct kinds of accounts concurrently. In this scenario, counsellors are advised to listen to their clients while establishing a therapeutic bond actively. In addition to that, they should also focus on possible counter-transferences and be aware of any ideas or emotions that may emerge in connection to their own encounters with trauma/grief or belief systems.

**Exercise for Practice 1:** Counsellors should listen to what is being told to them as client’s experience through grief while they freely talk about their mourning. At the same time, counsellors should make a written note of their personal feelings about the information presented, any countertransference that may appear, and their cultural biases that come up during the sessions.

**2. Validation of feelings.** Acknowledge and embrace any emotions or sentiments that may arise in relation to the client's experience of death or bereavement. Counsellors are advised to avoid making assumptions about the client's emotions based on commonly observed societal responses to death. Counsellors should actively strive to provide a secure and supportive atmosphere where clients feel at ease to freely examine and express any emotions and ideas that may arise as a result of their grieving, regardless of whether these reactions are socially conventional or anticipated.

**Exercise for Practice 2:** Use the emotional wheel to help clients identify what emotions they felt at different instances of their mourning (right after the news of the death was received, after the funerals, while performing cultural activities relative to their mourning process etc.). Once the client is able to identify the emotions, ask them to write about how they knew they felt those feelings at that time.

**3. Refraining.** Avoid questioning or disrupting any ideas or feelings expressed by the client. Counsellors are advised against pressuring clients to delve into elements of their grieving that they may not be emotionally prepared to confront. Instead, they are urged to meet clients at their current state of readiness and help them articulate the specific issues that are troubling them in relation to their experience of loss. Counsellors should embrace and validate the client's current state in order to foster the development of a therapeutic connection and trust. At the same time, to strengthen and prepare for step 5, counsellors should validate the client’s lived experiences and provide space to talk about tasks that may be too difficult to complete as a result of their trauma and grief processing.

**Exercise for Practice 3:** Using sensitive broaching, ask about the cultural/ethnic rituals that they had to perform as a part of their mourning process. If the clients are not ready to answer some questions, verbally ask for permission to flag that for a later time when they feel ready to talk about it in the journey through therapy.

**4. Scan for non-singular emotions.** Take note if the client expresses a certain emotion, such as melancholy, and also shares a personal story that portrays the deceased in a positive light, rather than only focusing on their death. It is crucial to determine if clients have

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positive affect combined with an undesirable feeling when it comes to the loss. Evaluating the presence of non-singular emotions indicates the first evidence that the clients are capable of coping with the despair of grief while also being open to recognizing the positive aspects of their connection with the departed.

**Exercise for Practice 4:** Using the emotional wheel, guide the client to look at maladaptive as well as adaptive emotions, in regard to their grief. Even though at first the client may not be able to identify the adaptive/positive emotions, persuade them to refer to anecdotes that they remember about the deceased individual that generate some comforting emotions in them.

**5. Grief Tracking and Active Visualization.** Identify and highlight a recurring pattern or achievement of a task that was originally too challenging to do, such as arranging a meeting with a friend for coffee, decluttering the closet of a loved one if they resided with your client, looking at a photo of the deceased, and other similar activities. Analogies and grieving metaphors are effective tools for illustrating progress by discussing a personal experience in a way that is devoid of cultural or religious connotations and may be easily comprehended by clients from any cultural or religious background. By using grief tracking and active visualization techniques, clients are motivated to persist in their efforts to regain resilience after a traumatic experience.

**Exercise for Practice 5:** Actively note and track behaviours that the client recorded during step 3 and take time in session to comment on the progress observed. Find a few analogies and grief metaphors (such as the spiral staircase) to provide psychoeducation what progress may look like during mourning.

**6. Scan to assess client positionality.** As part of client development and session preparation, counsellors are advised to ask themselves a crucial question: Can clients detach themselves from their sorrow or feelings of loss to have a clear understanding of life? They must do so using the protocol presented below (see Exercise for Practice 6). Assessing the client's positionality will assist counsellors in effectively addressing the client's sorrow and adapting the degree of treatment based on the client's readiness and advancement. If clients can detach themselves from their grief and attain an objective understanding of mortality, the counsellors should proceed to steps 7 and 8. However, if this is not possible, the counsellors should repeat steps 1-6 until they ascertain that the client can effectively process their trauma without being burdened by feelings of guilt, sadness or self-blame stemming from the loss of their loved one.

**Exercise for Practice 6:** Fill the protocol with relevant information and provide evidence based on the work done from step 1-6, to move onto the next steps:

Client Positionality	Assessing (what does the client do to support positionality)	Evidence (what does the clients say to support positionality)
Markers for detachment from the overwhelming emotions	Emotional: Behavioural:	
Markers for reconciled meaning of life	Emotional: Behavioural:	

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**7. Find what is lost as a by-product of death.** While grief is a social phenomenon, the loss caused by the death is a personal one. For instance, the tragic loss of a child to cancer may result in the female caretaker experiencing a profound sense of identity loss as a mother, caretaker, and nurturer. Identify and address any aspects of the client's identity that have been lost as a result of death. When the counsellor helps clients comprehend their own losses throughout the grieving process, it facilitates the chance to identify what needs to be rebuilt or reconciled with as a part of the new reality after the loss.

**Exercise for Practice 7:** Focus on separating the client from the loss by assessing what is lost due to the grief. Ask directed open-ended questions such as “what have you personally lost in the process of this grief?” “How has your identity of [identified marker] changed after losing [the deceased]?”

**8. Resilience and Hope.** In this step, the counsellor actively challenges the client to build a capacity to bounce back and have hope in order to regain what has been lost or come to terms with the new reality, all while fostering continuing bonds with the deceased and eventually finding purpose. An essential aspect of finding purpose in life is developing the ability to bounce back from traumatic experiences and maintain a sense of hope, knowing that difficult times will eventually come to an end. When a client lacks hope, it becomes challenging to establish any restorative significance regarding a trauma. Therefore, counsellors are encouraged to help clients find hope to continue living their lives via behavioural or cognitive rehabilitation to find meaning and sense in their altered life post-loss.

**Exercise for Practice 8:** Develop a plan of action that the client is passionate to pursue to help re-instil resilience and hope. For example; if the deceased passed away to cancer, some clients may want to start an awareness campaign for cancer survivors, if the deceased passed away due to suicide/violence, some families create a scholarship fund in their name to continue the legacy. Finding tangible, addressable and identifiable tasks/lifestyle not only keeps the memory of the deceased alive, but also honours the life lived.

**Table 1 Process Oriented Meaning-Making Flow Chart**

Step	Process	
1	Double listening	] Repeat steps until the client is able to reach a neutral positionality and is not overwhelmed by guilt or self-blame before moving onto steps 7 & 8.
2	Validation of feelings	
3	Refrain from challenging	
4	Scan for non-singular emotions	
5	Grief tracking and active visualization of the progress	
6	Scan to assess client positionality	
7	Find what is lost as a by-product of death	
8	Build resilience and hope	

*Note. This table explains the steps that guide the process oriented meaning-making that the counsellors can facilitate in their sessions.*

### **BENEFITS OF POMM**

Process Oriented Meaning-Making is a method in which the counsellors practicing in the field can refer to a guideline to manage their grief sessions and help clients in an evidence-based socio-constructionist approach. At first, the clients are encouraged to experience and acknowledge any feelings that may occur as a result of losing their beloved. POMM

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emphasizes on the counsellors' commitment to creating a secure environment in their sessions. They are encouraged to do this by being deliberate in their approach and asking about their clients' emotions without passing judgments. This approach allows clients to freely express themselves without worrying about conforming to societal norms. Through POMM, counsellors also prioritize encouraging clients to openly express their thoughts and feelings, without being concerned about societal taboos associated with the loss. In addition to discussing their emotions, individuals are encouraged to address the practical matters that need their attention after death such as culturally specific mourning rituals that may be overwhelming at the time. POMM gives importance to allowing clients the time to recover and readjust to life after experiencing a loss. It also ensures that the clients' cultural traditions are recognised throughout the process of readjustment. By emphasizing the need to use dialectical thinking when deciding which aspects of a Western pedagogy-based diagnosis may be relevant to the client, POMM emphasises on external variables such as race, culture, and ethnic customs as important aspects of post-loss recovery.

### ***Significance of the Findings***

Counsellors have found significant rewarding experiences as they work through the post-loss trajectory using the steps suggested that built POMM. They have indicated that in using a combination of these 8 steps, they found observable signs of reduced distress and pain as initial indicators of progress in their clients' journey toward recovery. Providing a representation of task-completion and proficiency in minor everyday tasks further contributes to the advancement of individuals undergoing grief counselling. Counsellors emphasize the significance of acknowledging the achievements in the client's progress to inspire them towards personal development by building self-efficacy. Counsellor participants disclosed that they currently examine mourning via the perspective of trauma and recognise that the client's identity and multicultural background are crucial factors in their process of finding meaning. Stemmed in upholding the multicultural and multi-identities of the clients, POMM acts as a guide for counsellors to use while helping grieving individuals. Counsellors observe indicators of progress when a client directs their focus on their own grief and evaluate what they have lost as a result of the death. They then assist the client in reconstructing their life in a way that is meaningful after experiencing the loss. These indicators assessed by using strategies mentioned in POMM, reflect the intricate ways in which grief affects all aspects of a human being, and how they must re-form themselves in order to heal.

### ***Recommendations for Future Work***

The study's findings emphasize the significance of comprehending every facet of grief conceptualization in order to assist in the process of generating meaning, which is the ultimate goal of post-loss recovery. Counsellor participants extensively recognised the lack of effective training to address grief-related issues and the lack of guidelines to provide culturally appropriate treatment plans (Gaur, 2023).

The need for a new and improved counsellor education program that includes up-to-date and modern grief modules is abundantly clear (Gaur, 2023). A reformed counsellor-education program that includes updated socio-constructionist approaches to trauma & grief work, emphasizing meaning-making, is needed. In the study by Gaur (2023), counsellors admitted their programs were underprepared and they needed to learn more about updated trauma literature. Grief pedagogy through the lens trauma work can help counselling courses become more consistent. Recommendations for enhancing counsellor education programs also encompassed expanding the scope of grief that may arise during therapy sessions (Gaur,



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2023). Participants recognised that engaging in grief work aided in understanding the comorbidity of grief in their clients. However, they suggest that the grief education curriculum should not solely focus on grief related to death. Incorporating living losses into grief education will enhance students' understanding of grief work, particularly among those who have not experienced grief related to death. As a result of the emergence of COVID-19 and the subsequent high mortality rate, the participants have encountered difficult manifestations of grief during their sessions. Every participant believed that counsellor education programs should enhance the readiness of trainee counsellors to operate in the field, ensuring they have the necessary skills to identify and address grief or grief-related issues efficiently.

The counselling objectives varied between participants from India and the United States, which in turn impacted the strategies they used to address the issue of grief. Participants engaging in counselling in India often saw it as a kind of support that led to tangible benefits for clients, enabling them to acquire and retain valuable insights. Consequently, their emphasis was on solution-focused approaches. By contrast, participants in the United States mostly engaged in affect-oriented treatment, emphasizing emotional catharsis rather than teaching clients coping skills. The participants' perspectives on the counselling process affected their understanding of grief recovery in their clients. Thus, the counsellor's self-efficacy relies heavily on what they perceive is the goal of therapy, or what they wish their clients to achieve. Following a socio-constructionist approach of meaning-making, counsellors can adhere to their styles of work in grief session. Tools such as POMM will aid in helping the counsellors conceptualise their clients' presenting problem through a multicultural approach. This highlights the importance of making tools, such as the POMM, that can be individualized by the counsellor as much as the client; since having curatable tools will only enable grief counsellors to work effectively and from a strength based approach.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Process Oriented Meaning-Making (POMM) is a systematic method that enables counsellors to effectively and sensitively assist clients in navigating the intricate landscape of grief. POMM facilitates individuals in genuinely exploring their emotions and experiences without being constrained by societal norms or objective expected stages, by creating a secure and non-judgmental environment. POMM prioritizes both emotional expression and practical considerations, such as cultural rituals, to ensure a thorough approach to healing and adjustment. The framework's focus on dialectical thinking highlights its ability to be applied in various cultural and personal situations, promoting a sophisticated comprehension of grief that goes beyond inflexible diagnostic models. POMM, with its iterative guidelines and client-centred approach, not only aids in the recovery process but also commemorates the milestones and personal development achieved during the grief counselling journey.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

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