

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

The healing power of fairy tales in the grieving process of adults

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Abstract

Death and bereavement are often treated as taboo subjects. It is too painful to broach the topic of death, because it is not a subject people are familiar enough with, so we do not know how to express our feelings, our experiences. Every point of support is essential to maintaining physical and mental health, which is why the work of bereavement groups and counselors is important and the work of letting go and processing loss is a prerequisite for healthy functioning. Folk stories and myths reveal the presence of universal themes and patterns of human suffering, death and grief. The struggles and difficult journeys of the heroes and heroines in folk tales and myths reveal how people feel, hope, suffer, desire and behave in the face of life's challenges. What happens in the story is or can be consistent with what we experience in real life.

This study examines the impact of therapeutic fairy tales on the process of uncomplicated bereavement in adults, with a general focus on the functioning of bereavement support groups and the role of group leaders.

In this research, we used a semi-structured interview method to ask people in bereavement support groups about their experiences in the group and to analyze the impact of the healing power of fairy tales or stories in the therapeutic context, exploring their origin, evolution and effectiveness as tools for emotional healing. The study was conducted with 6 female participants. They talked openly and honestly about their loss and grief, their ways of coping, and how the group's joint grief or bereavement work using storytelling helped them in this process.

Based on the analysis of the thematic content of the semi-structured interviews, it emerges that fairy tales have a lot to offer if listened to carefully: they stimulate the imagination, develop thinking, provide space for tension release and offer a model for solutions. Fairy tales make the personality more open and receptive, relieve anxiety, isolation, depressive states, while increasing sociability, openness to the world. Fairy tales seem to be as relevant today as ever and can play a role in healing trauma in many ways. They offer a rich source of material from which to draw inspiration and to use in the therapeutic approach. What happens in the story is or can be in line with what we experience in real life.

Fairy tales offer solutions, help us to deal with conflicting emotions, detachment, separation, building lasting relationships, but they also touch on deeper issues of life. They have a transformative power, i.e. through the heroes in the story, they make the listener see and then change. Fairy tales provide a rich source of material from which to draw inspiration and to use in the therapeutic approach.

Rezumat

Moartea și doliul sunt adesea tratate ca subiecte tabu. Este prea dureros să abordăm tema morții, pentru că nu este un subiect îndeajuns de cunoscut oamenilor, așa că nu știm cum să ne exprimăm sentimentele, trăirile. Fiecare punct de sprijin este esențial pentru menținerea sănătății fizice și psihice, motiv pentru care activitatea grupurilor și a consilierilor în caz de doliu este foarte importantă iar munca de a renunța și de a procesa pierderea este o condiție prealabilă pentru o funcționare sănătoasă. Poveștile populare și miturile dezvăluie prezența unor teme și modele universale ale suferinței, morții și durerii umane. Luptele și călătoriile dificile ale eroilor și eroinelor din poveștile și miturile populare dezvăluie modul în care oamenii simt, speră, suferă, își doresc și se comportă în fața provocărilor vieții. Ceea ce se întâmplă în poveste este sau poate fi în concordanță cu ceea ce trăim în viața reală.

Studiul examinează impactul basmelor terapeutice asupra procesului de doliu necomplicat la adulți, cu un accent general pe funcționarea grupurilor de suport pentru persoane îndoliate și pe rolul liderilor grupurilor.

În această cercetare, am folosit o metodă de interviu semi-structurat pentru a întreba persoanele din grupurile de suport pentru persoane îndoliate despre experiențele lor în cadrul grupului și de a analiza impactul puterii vindecătoare a basmelor sau poveștilor în contextul terapeutic, explorând originea, evoluția și eficacitatea acestora ca instrumente de vindecare emoțională. Studiul a fost efectuat pe 6 persoane de sex feminin care au vorbit deschis și onest despre pierderea și durerea lor, despre modalitățile lor de a face față și despre modul în care munca comună a grupului privind durerea sau jelierea, folosind povestea, le-a ajutat în acest proces.

Pe baza analizei conținutului tematic al interviurilor semi-structurate, reiese că basmele au multe de oferit dacă sunt ascultate cu atenție: stimulează imaginația, dezvoltă gândirea, oferă spațiu pentru tensiune și oferă un model pentru soluții. Basmele fac

personalitatea mai deschisă și mai receptivă, ameliorează anxietatea, izolarea, stările depresive, crescând în același timp sociabilitatea, deschiderea către lume. Basmele par să fie la fel de relevante astăzi ca și înainte și pot juca un rol în vindecarea traumei în mai multe moduri. Oferă o sursă bogată de material din care să ne inspirăm și pe care să îl folosim în demersul terapeutic. Ceea ce se întâmplă în poveste este sau poate fi în concordanță cu ceea ce trăim în viața reală. Basmele oferă soluții, ne ajută să facem față emoțiilor conflictuale, detașării, separării, creării de relații durabile, dar ating și probleme mai profunde ale existenței. Au o putere transformatoare, adică prin intermediul eroilor din poveste, îl fac pe ascultător să vadă și apoi să se schimbe. Basmele oferă o sursă bogată de material din care să ne inspirăm și pe care să îl folosim în demersul terapeutic.

Introduction

The use of stories and narratives as a form of therapy can offer valuable insights into the psychology of grief and methods of counseling and therapy. According to Neimeyer and Harris [1], fairy tales can help in restructuring the personal meanings following a death and in reintegrating traumatic experiences within a broader personal understanding. Frank [2] demonstrated that stories allow individuals to organize and make sense of experiences that might otherwise seem chaotic or overwhelming. Research undertaken by Pennebaker and Seagal [3] has shown that expressive and narrative writing can have significant therapeutic effects, reducing stress and improving immune function. These studies highlight the narrative ability to transform trauma into a coherent story, thus facilitating emotional healing. In the same context, White and Epston [4] describe the use of writing as a therapeutic method through which clients can become authors of their own lives, reclaiming control over personal interpretations and meanings. The study conducted by Neimeyer [5] continues to explore how fairy tales assist in reconciling, accepting loss, and constructing new meaning in life following the death of a loved one. This approach is supported by work in anthropology and cultural studies, such as Walter's [6] discussions on how different cultures use stories to structure and express grief. Death and grief are often treated as taboo subjects. It is too painful to address the topic of death because it is not well-known, and we do not know how to express our feelings and experiences. In Romania, there was a period when practicing religion was not accepted, even though religions offer teachings about the laws of life, death, and the afterlife, which means that religiosity and faith can help us accept these concepts. However, the materialist viewpoint is that there is nothing to fear after death. Another reason the topic has become taboo is medicalization. In the past, birth and death occurred at home; today, they take place in hospitals, away from family. At home, we could witness these significant events, making what we experienced less frightening. Nowadays, we need to learn again that death and grief are part of our lives. The approach of palliative and hospice care is very helpful in this regard.

In the therapeutic context, fairy tales offer not only a space for expression but also for reconfiguring relationships and personal meanings, which are crucial aspects in adapting to a new reality without the loved one. [7]

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of therapeutic fairy tales on uncomplicated grief in adults and to analyze the effect of the healing power of fairy tales or stories in a therapeutic context, examining their origin, evolution, and effectiveness as tools for emotional healing.

Research question

How does the use of therapeutic fairy tales and narratives influence the grief process and emotional recovery in adults?

Research methodology

The chosen research method is the semi-structured interview, suitable for capturing complex data and personal details within the context of the study. This methodology allows for flexibility in discussions, facilitating a deep exploration of the impact of fairy tales on the grief process in adults.

The study sample consisted of participants from a support group for the bereaved. The sample included participants from grief support groups that were organized between 2022 and 2023, using a simple sampling procedure, totaling 6 people. The research was conducted 9-10 months after the completion of the group meetings. Participation in the research was voluntary, with the consent of the group members.

Interviews were recorded individually; transcripts were recorded on an iPhone and then transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, I did not regard the interviewees as mere data providers but sought to explore their complex personalities, identities, and was interested in their feelings, experiences, and doubts.

Description and functionality of the support group for bereaved adults

In the specialized literature, beginning with Freud [8], the process that a grieving person must undergo to cope with loss, has been known as the *work of mourning*. The essence of the process is to confront loss and accept the reality of loss to make the process less complicated. Stroebe and Schut [9] define the work of mourning as "an active cognitive process requiring ongoing effort, in which the person works on separating from the deceased by confronting the loss and focusing on memories. It is essentially an awareness of the reality of the loss, and repressions and suppressions indicate pathology". [10]

The support group for bereaved individuals offers assistance and support to those in grief, focusing primarily on the need for support and mutual help, and learning skills in a comfortable and safe setting. It primarily provides participants with a safe space for expression. It creates a framework in which participants can rediscover their own resources to overcome more challenging moments. Bereavement support groups consist of ten two-hour sessions, held every two weeks, which foster inner self-awareness among participants alongside processing their loss (see Table 1). Regular meetings and structural techniques are designed primarily to facilitate the exchange of thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to grief. The experience of being connected to others helps participants feel that they are not alone in their situation, that others are in a similar situation, and that recovery is not as swift or as demanded by society. This gives them legitimacy from both peers and group leaders to experience and express negative feelings, providing relief and a certain degree of freedom. Confidentiality and respect for each participant are mandatory conditions. The experience of understanding,

acceptance, and attentive listening to their feelings has a tension-relieving effect.

The group remains open until the end of the second session, allowing new members to join and existing members to reconsider their participation. The group is closed from the third session onwards, working with a fixed number of participants thereafter. This contributes to the group's dynamics and provides an opportunity for deeper internal work, building on a more stable long-term foundation.

Table 1 - Structure of the support group for bereaved adults

Meetings	Topic	Purpose
1	Introduction / Building Trust	To introduce themselves, explain the rules, and create a safe atmosphere where group members can talk about themselves, encouraging continued participation.
2		
3	Feelings	To help group members feel they are not alone in their loss, encouraging them through others' stories to talk, share, and remember, which can provide solace.
4	Questions and Answers	To explore, recognize, and express their feelings and thoughts about their loss through various means.
5		
6	Adaptation Techniques Fairy Tales (as a therapeutic tool)	To find in their lives things that bring them joy or can help and comfort them in times of sadness.
7		
8	Strengths	To develop self-image and increase self-confidence
9	Creating the Future Image	To look towards the future, make plans, and discover desires through discussions and creative techniques
10	Farewell	To detach from the group leader.

The method of therapy through fairy tales/stories is presented in more details. People in grief often find themselves isolated, alone with their pain, and even when helped, there will always be aspects that only they can address themselves. I selected a story in which the protagonist is at one point very alone, and in this state, he is able to mobilize his inner resources and problem-solving strategies.

The Tungus (Siberian) story *Lotilko's wings* (<https://soundcloud.com/user-876224086/lotilkos-wings-read-by-tibor-wallinger>) provides an accurate depiction of the model of loss and its various stages. There is a sense of deprivation, negotiation, anger, and the bitter realization that no one can take away our pain. However, the healing power of fairy tales lies in their ability to not only accurately describe the emotions

of loss, but also offer the possibility of moving forward. Deprived of wings, Lotilko has no choice but to rely on his own resources, to build new wings and use his own skills to overcome the trauma he has suffered. In this process, he is aided only by his own will and diligence. Once he achieves this, he begins to build the new wing. The key is persistence and willpower.

Like Lotilko, we need many, many feathers to build a new wing, but, like him, we can do it. And then we need not fear anything, for we know that, no matter what happens, we can always develop/build new wings.

The fairy tale is read by the group facilitator, and then the activities begin with the simple question, "Which character are you?" or "Who do you want to resemble?" or "Where are you in the story?"—this is the moment when the processing of grief takes place through the therapeutic fairy tale.

Results and Discussion

The study was conducted with 6 female participants: five residing in urban areas and one in a rural area. Two participants have higher education, while the other four have secondary education.

Participant 1 is over 55 years old. At the time of joining the support group for the bereaved, she had been grieving the loss of her husband for 6 months due to an illness, after 21 years of marriage. On the day of the funeral, she was forced to move out of the family home, as her husband owned the property of her son from a previous marriage. She lives alone; her adult children have families of their own, and she has a very good relationship with them.

Participant 2 is between 46 and 55 years old. She joined the group because she lost three close people within a single year—her partner and a beloved father. Her mother and siblings live abroad, and her relationships are not without issues.

Participant 3 is over 55 years old. She lost two siblings within a year and feels she hasn't even gotten over her husband's death, which complicates her situation further. She lives alone and has a good relationship with her two adult children.

Participant 4 is between 46 and 55 years old. She lost her mother four months before the group sessions began. She has two siblings but feels that they experience the pain of their mother's loss very differently.

Participant 5 is over 55 years old. Five months before the group started, her life partner passed away. Her grief has affected her significantly, to the point where she can no longer work. Her only son lives abroad.

Participant 6 is between 46 and 55 years old. She lost her partner five months before the start of the support group. The grief has significantly impacted her, making her unable to perform her work tasks. Her only son lives abroad, and she feels she cannot cope with the situation alone.

Participants reported that they found the story interesting and were somewhat surprised. They experienced both positive and negative thoughts and feelings while listening to the story. They felt angry and resigned towards the negative character, but also felt that their tension and anxiety were relieved. They identified with one of the characters, which helped them better understand their own feelings. They gained hope and the strength to move forward.

"It was instructive. I was calm, felt good, and relaxed. I can tell you, all these things made me realize things I didn't know before. For example: our resources are sometimes our greatest help. ... It was good, pleasant. I felt good ... I felt at

peace. We were given a task to look ahead in a very positive way and to imagine where we would be and what we would be doing in five years. Well, I thought, now I need to take Lotilko's wing from the story, step away from myself, and start planning as positively as possible. Then I felt encouraged by Lotilko's perseverance. Yes, because he had lost his wings, I felt I had lost everything, that I had lost my wings. I couldn't move forward, but now I can look ahead." (Interview 1)

"I felt as though I was in the story and really let my emotions and feelings flow freely. Bad feelings, relief, anger... I felt all sorts of things. I realized that my life resembles the events in the story. The characters in the fairy tale were both good and bad. I remembered the characters from the story, and then, one by one, family members, friends, and neighbors appeared, both good and bad. There I understood that in people's lives, there are both good and bad people, among whom I also live." (Interview 2)

"I was calm; at other times, I was always tense. I wasn't anxious; it was as if I were in that forest, among the trees, observing the events there.... I was worried about why Teventey's wife was afraid to tell Lotilko the truth. I remember comparing my relationship with my brother to this husband-wife relationship. I was also afraid of him because he was unpredictable. I knew that because of his illness, he was aggressive, but I was also afraid of him. So, I always did things his way." (Interview 3)

"I felt at peace when I realized that the characters in the story faced similar difficulties to mine." (Interview 4)

"I was indifferent. I was dismissive of the story. I wasn't interested. I didn't let it get close to me, so I couldn't identify with it. However, during the discussion about the fairy tale, I also realized that the story actually has a lot to say and, at the same time, offers something. Lotilko relied on his own resources. The story made me understand that I don't need to distance myself from myself, but rather to get closer to myself to understand myself better. It helped me dare to express what I felt or what I wanted." (Interview 5)

"I remember feeling good. I wasn't upset or tense. I was calm. Of course, I felt anger towards the negative characters in the story. I liked the calmness and care of the hero, Lotilko. It was reassuring that there was no doubt he couldn't manage; he gathered the necessary feathers and began to build his wings." (Interview 6)

In the therapeutic impact section of the interview, they discussed how they related to the characters and events of the fairy tale. They were inspired and empowered by the perseverance and struggle of the hero. Some felt that the fairy tale was effective in assisting them through the grieving process, allowing them to express their feelings of loss and that the story provided guidance during difficult times.

"The part of the fairy tale that touched me the most was when Teventey took Lotilko's wings. I felt as though my own wings had been taken away. That's when I realized that I too had lost my wings, that I lacked the strength to move forward." (Interview 1)

"I was emotionally affected by that part—and I got very angry and furious—when the 'evil' Teventey's wife, the birds, and the people did not help Lotilko. I identified with Lotilko and his struggle. Yes, there is a way out of everything. There is a ray of light at the end of the tunnel. The light is there; you just need to see it." (Interview 2)

"The fairy tale helped me express my feelings. It had a positive influence on me. I was able to express myself better after discussing the events of the fairy tale. I thought that if

Lotilko managed to remain kind and helpful even when abandoned and in need of help, it encouraged me to keep fighting to be the person I was. It made me realize that change does not come without struggle and perseverance. It took me away from self-pity." (Interview 3)

"While Lotilko went into the forest to gather new feathers, I thought that my feathers were my group members along with the group leader. You feel like the world is collapsing around you, and yet, little by little, with this help, you build a new life. My new wings helped me move forward." (Interview 4)

"I lost my faith after my partner died. I had the feeling that, somehow, I felt I was deprived of my faith, which I couldn't find. I was searching for it because I missed it. But I couldn't find it. I felt as if even God was against me. I couldn't connect with Him. So, I was lost, gone like Lotilko's wings. I made the connection between these two things. I'm not soaring yet, but I'm gathering those feathers and feeling that I have strength, that there is a way out. I feel that the story helped me in the sense that, while Lotilko was searching for his wings, I was searching for something... I try to gather my strength from here and there. I fill myself with every little good and beautiful thing." (Interview 5)

"I was inspired by Lotilko's story. It made me realize that my children need me. I need to continue living; I can't be of any use to anyone in such a weak state... My feathers, my strength, my courage, and my self-confidence. I need to work with them to regain them." (Interview 6)

Most respondents, in the section on group interaction, stated that listening to the story was an experience that helped them connect and communicate. They were able to talk about their feelings and support each other. It confirmed for them that they all shared a similar fate. They found that they had empathy for one another. Regarding the reactions of other group members to the story, the interviewees said they were generally surprised, but all listened to the fairy tale calmly and with great interest. They also reported that the discussion about the story took place in a pleasant, good, and cheerful atmosphere. One person reported feeling less connected to others because they were preoccupied with their own thoughts.

"We listened to the fairy tale together. I remember it was quiet; everyone was listening. At the end, we had such a good discussion about the fairy tale. Everyone shared the thoughts and feelings they had while listening to the story. That's how we learned which part of the tale one liked and which the other didn't. We had a positive attitude towards discussing the story. Only Aunt I., who was not flexible due to her age, had difficulties with this. She always said it was difficult and that she couldn't cope. But if you don't try, if you don't want to do it... I asked... We encouraged each other." (Interview 1)

"Everyone listened to the story calmly. So, everyone was just interested. We discussed the details together, who liked it or didn't like it... We were like children, saying 'I see myself in the story' or 'Oh, I'm still here begging those around me to help,' we laughed and told each other 'See, you still believe in fairy tales,' meaning you were expecting a miracle from someone else, believing in promises that your life would be better... We giggled together, cried together throughout the story, so everything was due to compassion." (Interview 2)

"It was very interesting; people might think that we just cry here. Yes, yes... we cried a lot, but we also laughed at our own misfortunes. We were moved by each other's stories and felt empathy for the other person. I felt that there were

other burdens to bear, not just mine. Not just Lotilko in the story, but also us, listening together. We have similar feelings, but at the same time, different ones." (Interview 3)

"We smiled at each other, everyone listened quietly, and when we reached the end of the story, we praised how clever Lotilko was. Some group members identified with Lotilko, while another group member identified with Teventy because he couldn't use his wings. I would say I was neutral, but they could relate to the character who resembled the hero in the fairy tale. I was busy with the wings. We really enjoyed the story; at one point, we talked so loudly and enthusiastically about the events in the story. We found a common voice again." (Interview 4)

"I'm sure there was compassion, but it might seem selfish, but from my point of view, everyone was occupied with their own problems, with their own thoughts." (Interview 5)

"While discussing the fairy tale, one of the group members said they felt as if they were right there, on-site. Yes, it was good to find this group where I was understood. And I found it. I felt that they had compassion for me. They accepted that you can be insecure when you are young. During the discussion about the story, I felt that they were understanding towards me." (Interview 6)

The section of the interview discussing the relationships with characters and elements of the fairy tale shows that there were characters and events that had a particularly strong impact on them. These facilitated change and development, helping them realize that there is a way out. It reinforced their own struggle for healing and a new beginning. They responded that they needed time to find and harness their own strengths and resources. Their personal lesson from the fairy tale is, unanimously, that one should not give up: with patience and will, one must seek every possible support. It is possible to live again by activating internal resources.

"I think of Lotilko, who set out on his own to gather feathers. He had no help from anyone. I realized that I have to gather myself if I want change. I realized that my feathers are the group members, the group leader, the games and exercises we did in the group sessions. My feathers were those that had a positive effect on me. I gathered them all here, in the group." (Interview 1)

"The character Teventy resonated with me the most. And all those who could have helped Lotilko, but didn't, were afraid of Teventy. ... I realized that there is a way out of anything; he made himself wings again." (Interview 2)

"The character Teventy marked me very strongly with how bad someone can be. The fairy tale helped me try to be a better person, to help others more than I did before. Yes. And if I have problems... If I face difficulties, I should try to overcome and resolve them on my own, and if I don't succeed, I should dare to ask for help like Lotilko." (Interview 3)

"Teventy's wife, because she didn't help Lotilko. Nor did the birds. So, even if they could have, they didn't help. It was as if they wanted Lotilko to say: 'Free yourself,' 'Move on, overcome,' 'Rise up.' The lesson from the story is: You need to see the possibilities of a new life. So, you need to continue on this path. When my mother was ill, the most important thing in the family was to be able to help. Since I was the only woman, I naturally had more responsibilities. Now I need to start taking care of myself, thinking about myself. These meetings have taught me to look for what helps me, what makes me move forward, or what I can hold onto when I feel I don't have enough strength." (Interview 4)

"The birds, for example. When they said they were very afraid of Teventy. I couldn't understand why they were afraid of Teventy. I had a similar fear of death. You have to accept death. Once we are born, we die. We cannot avoid it. But memories stay with us. We have to learn to live with it. Lotilko's story taught me that I need to look for the opportunities offered to us. And these opportunities might not be within arm's reach but inside us." (Interview 5)

"Teventy tried to fly, but in vain, because he couldn't take off. That is, it's not always as you want it to be. It promotes change, progress. The story promotes the realization that there are things we, as humans, cannot change. We cannot surpass the will of God. God gives us the power, the opportunity to heal. Lotilko also had the chance to gather feathers and build new wings. So, there is a way out, a path to follow, a place to go." (Interview 6)

In the final stage of the interview, when interviewees had the opportunity to add any further comments or aspects of their experience, it was revealed that participating in the support group helped them process their grief in several ways. The community and emotional support, sharing of experiences, safe and trustworthy environment, the tools, techniques, and methods used—all contributed to facilitating confrontation and finding a way to heal. At the same time, they recommend this group activity to anyone who is in the grieving process.

In light of the experience of several completed groups and based on the results of the interviews, I agree with the statement that support groups for grief are among the most effective options for help in uncomplicated grief.

Study Limitations

The research faces limitations related to the subjectivity of narrative interpretations and the cultural diversity of the stories, which can influence the generalization of results. Additionally, limited access to participants at different stages of grief may constrain the depth of analysis.

Conclusions

Based on the thematic content analysis of semi-structured interviews, it emerges that fairy tales have much to offer if listened to attentively: they stimulate imagination, develop thinking, provide space for tension, and offer a model for solutions. Fairy tales make persons more open and receptive, alleviate anxiety, isolation, depressive states, while increasing sociability, openness to the world, and, not least, activity. The solution models learned from stories are stored within us and later activated when needed. Even if we do not consider fairy tales to be "healing stories," we can feel their soothing, comforting, and reassuring effects. There are many ways to process a loss experience. Whether done in a bereavement group or individually, true healing can only be achieved through experiencing emotions and confronting oneself with the pain of loss. This self-awareness work requires honesty, courage, and perseverance. The advantage of support groups is that the grieving person does not have to go through this difficult path alone, as peers and group leaders can provide a range of support and models. However, it is important to remember that each grief process is unique, so it is up to the grieving person to feel and decide what is the appropriate healing path for them.

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