Visualizing Grief: An Exploration of the Stages of Grief through Image and Design

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ABSTRACT

Grief is an emotion that people have felt since the beginning of time, but in modern culture, there is a lack of visual representation of the five stages of grief. Because grief is a highly personal and unique experience, it can be difficult to visualize what those stages may look like for the mass population. However, if one could develop an understanding of what each stage includes, as well as a study of the thoughts and feelings of those who have experienced grief, this research could aid in the creation of an accurate representation of the stages of grief. The subject of grief is hard for some people to understand and empathize with because they are not the ones personally experiencing the pain. For those who are going through the grieving process, it can be hard to articulate feelings and emotions. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to create a body of photographs that fully depicts the five stages of grief: shock/disbelief and denial, anger, bargaining/guilt, depression, and acceptance/hope. The design aims to bridge gaps in understanding and help people connect their thoughts and feelings to the imagery they are viewing in order to aid in the healing process.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Grief is a feeling that all people will experience at some point in their lives. Often, it will turn a person’s life on its head and cause them deep pain. Grief is a hard thing to prepare for and even harder for some people to understand and empathize with, especially when they are not the ones experiencing the pain. For those who are going through the grieving process, it can be hard to articulate feelings and emotions. There is often a sense of judgment and misunderstanding when dealing with grief. The process of grief has no timeline, and it will look different for everyone.

Written research, books, journal articles, blogs, and poetry exist that discuss grief, its symptoms, and ways to cope with it; however, due to the difficult, personal, and ever-changing symptoms of grief, there is very little modern artwork that exists which outlines all stages of the grieving process to help people understand and cope with the grief they are feeling. Works of art often detail only one portion of grief or only display the depressive and angry stages. Although there is artwork on the general topic of grief, there is not an exhaustive body of work in the area of photography that thoroughly depicts all five stages.

The objective of this thesis is to provide a beautiful and comprehensive body of work that holistically depicts the five stages of grief in a composed and insightful way to help others empathize with those who are suffering from grief and help those who have experienced loss cope with their grief. The body of artwork may prove to be useful in therapy sessions, not as a means of treatment, but as a way to help patients formulate their thoughts and feelings, better connect with their emotions, and, in turn, open the lines of communication with their therapists or counselors.
Chapter 2
RESEARCH
Very little modern artwork exists that outlines all stages of the grieving process to help those understand and cope with the grief they are feeling.

The thesis topic is to help people better empathize with those who are experiencing grief by creating artwork that allows for each stage of grief to be explored and depicted.

Can conceptual artwork help people understand, empathize and articulate their grief by illuminating the separate stages and depicting “intangible” feelings?

1. What are the stages of grief?
2. Does the process of grief ever end?
3. Is grief misunderstood?
   • How do friends, spouses, children and family view grief?
4. How does grief display itself in people?
5. Are there health consequences to grief?
6. How does understanding grief help with the grieving process?
   • What therapies are commonly used to treat grief?
   • How do people describe grief?
7. What other artists have used grief as their subject?
8. How can imagery create empathy?
The following research summary presents initial research conducted on the topic of grief and how that can be translated into conceptual artwork. This research summary will prove the need for a conceptual artwork series that fully depicts the five stages of grief in detail.

**What is Grief?**

Grief is something that many people know, but it is often hard to define, understand, and visualize. According to the Miller-Keane Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health, grief is defined as “keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss” (“Grief”). The process of grief can be categorized into five different sections. In her article “Getting Straight about Grief,” M. Katherine Shear discusses these sections in detail:

- **Bereavement** is the experience of having lost someone close; grief is the reaction to bereavement, comprising thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physiological changes that vary in pattern and intensity over time; acute grief is the initial response, a mix of separation and traumatic distress, that is eventually transformed to integrated grief, which is permanent.

- **Mourning** is the process by which the finality and consequences of the loss are assimilated into memory systems, and capacity is restored for joy and satisfaction in ongoing life. When mourning is successful, the deep pain and disruption of acute grief lessen, memories become bittersweet and the bereaved person finds a place for the loss in her or his ongoing life. Death is forever, and correspondingly grief is a lasting response. (“Getting Straight”)

For the purposes of this project, the focus will be on grief and how one handles that reaction. These distinctions listed above are interesting, however, because there does not seem to be an end to grief. It is a process that permanently changes the way an individual thinks, sees other people, and perceives the world.

**Who Does Grief Affect?**

Grief is a reaction to a loss, and at some point, every single person will lose something or someone that will cause him or her to grieve. They will lose something or someone, and that will force them into the grieving process. According to Shear, “Each year about 2.5 million people die in the United States, and an estimated 60 million die worldwide. Each death leaves a small group of bereaved people with whom the deceased has enjoyed a close relationship. Mourning is the process by which the finality and consequences of the loss are assimilated into memory systems, and capacity is restored for joy and satisfaction in ongoing life. When mourning is successful, the deep pain and disruption of acute grief lessen, memories become bittersweet and the bereaved person finds a place for the loss in her or his ongoing life. Death is forever, and correspondingly grief is a lasting response.”

Estimating an average of four bereaved people for each death, means 10 million people are bereaved yearly in the United States, or about 3% of the population.” (461). These numbers are staggering. Three percent of the people in the United States are experiencing symptoms of grief, some are unable to communicate, and others are not able to empathize with the feelings that their friends or loved ones might be experiencing.

Colleen Murray, in her article “Grief, Loss and Bereavement,” states, “Paul Rosenblatt and his colleagues (Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson, 1976) found that overt expressions of crying, fear and anger were common, acceptable, and encouraged in most parts of the world, except for some Western culture groups. This suggests that the United States and Canada have never truly been “melting pots” beyond some of the early European nationalities in terms of cultural, ethnic and religious attitudes toward grief, loss and mourning (Irish 1993).”

One of the main reasons for this thesis is that mourning and grieving are often rushed and discouraged in Western culture. This stigma needs to be attacked, and in order to do that, people need to be able to understand and communicate openly about grief and its effects of a person’s life. Kenneth J. Doka, in his work “A-Z of Death and Dying, The: Social, Medical and Cultural Aspects,” describes grief in the following way: “Grief reactions may occur in any situation of loss, whether the loss is physical or tangible (such as a death, significant injury, or loss of property), or symbolic and intangible (such as loss of a dream).” This information is especially helpful for the purposes of this thesis because it breaks down the different definitions, processes, and reasons why a person might be experiencing grief. This information will help formulate the ways in which the visual representation is handled.
Stages of Grief

Grief is a broad term that encompasses a massive number of feelings and experiences. Because grief is so complicated, there are varying opinions on how many stages of grief there are and in what order they appear, but the model that this thesis is based on is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief: shock/disbelief and denial, anger, bargaining/guilt, depression, and acceptance/hope. These five stages will manifest themselves in all people who experience grief, but the order in which they appear may vary. In her article, Murray discusses the fact that grief is often a fluctuation between the stages instead of a linear path; it “more closely resemble(s) unsteady twisting and turning paths requiring adaptation and change, but with no specific end” (“Grief, Loss and Bereavement”).

As Axelrod writes, “The first reaction to learning about the terminal illness, loss, or death of a cherished loved one is to deny the reality of the situation. ‘This isn’t happening, this can’t be happening,’ people often think. It is a normal reaction to rationalize our overwhelming emotions” (“The 5 Stages”). These feelings are a visceral reaction to grief because the human brain is unable to process the information that it has received. Shock/disbelief and denial often end somewhat quickly and turn into anger. Axelrod writes, “As the masking effects of denial and isolation begin to wear, reality and its pain re-emerge. We are not ready. The intense emotion is deflected from our vulnerable core, redirected and expressed instead as anger. The anger may be aimed at inanimate objects, complete strangers, friends or family” (“The 5 Stages”). Anger does not always mean violence, but it is often an inability to fully grasp the severity of a situation. After anger comes bargaining. According to Axelrod, bargaining can also be described as regret: “This is an attempt to bargain. Secretly, we may make a deal with God or our higher power in an attempt to postpone the inevitable, and the accompanying pain. This is a weaker line of defense to protect us from the painful reality. Guilt often accompanies bargaining. We start to believe there was something we could have done differently to have helped save our loved one” (“The 5 Stages”).

Depression often follows bargaining because there is a realization that there is nothing that can be done to change the loss at hand. Axelrod discusses this depression in depth:

Two types of depression are associated with mourning. The first one is a reaction to practical implications relating to the loss. Sadness and regret predominate this type of depression. We worry about the costs and burial. We worry that, in our grief, we have spent less time with others that depend on us. This phase may be eased by simple clarification and reassurance. We may need a bit of helpful cooperation and a few kind words. The second type of depression is more subtle and, in a sense, perhaps more private. It is our quiet preparation to separate and to bid our loved one farewell. (“The 5 Stages”)

Finally, after the process of depression has moved on, one is able to accept what has happened and begin to come to terms with the situation. Axelrod explains that, though this stage is still difficult, it should be cherished, as many do not have the privilege of reaching it:

Reaching this stage of grieving is a gift not afforded to everyone. Death may be sudden and unexpected or we may never see beyond our anger or denial. It is not necessarily a mark of bravery to resist the inevitable and to deny ourselves the opportunity to make our peace. This phase is marked by withdrawal and calm. This is not a period of happiness and must be distinguished from depression. (“The 5 Stages”)

These specific stages of grief will directly affect the visual solution. Each stage will allow for visual exploration and additional research to accurately depict the common feelings during each corresponding stage. These stages of grief typically appear in the
succession listed above, but it is highly likely that a person will fluctuate between stages and even regress to other stages during the grieving process.

In her book Nothing Was the Same, Kay Redfield Jamison states, “You come out of [grief] genuinely stronger, and with a much better understanding of the person you lost and a much better understanding of yourself, your vulnerabilities, and your strengths and what it is you are missing…Grief forces you to do a kind of introspection that is really remarkable” (“Nothing”). This statement further proves that grief changes a person and is an ongoing process. The word “grief” comes from the Latin word “gravis,” which is translated as “heavy.” “Bereavement” comes from Old English, and it means “robbed.” These simple but clear translations encapsulate what the bereaving/grieving process entails.

Murray gives an exhaustive list of the different types of grief and how they manifest themselves:

Death is the event most often thought of as a loss, but there are many others. Tangible losses can be personal (i.e., loss of one’s vision, hearing, sexual activity, or mental capacity; infertility; chronic pain or illness; rape, domestic violence and abuse; or political torture), interpersonal (i.e., divorce, ending a friendship, or death of a loved one), material (i.e., losing a job, leaving one’s country, war-time trauma, changing residence, or becoming homeless), or symbolic (i.e., losses related to racism, role redefinition, or reentry adjustment to home culture). Intangible psychological losses include changes in self-worth due to harassment at work or job demotion; changes in sense of control and safety due to crime, terrorism, or victimization; changes in identity related to widowhood; or changes in worldview related to experiencing a natural disaster or chemical accident. (“Grief, Loss and Bereavement”)

This list substantiates that people can suffer from grief due to any type of loss, and because of that, there is validity in every person’s grieving process.

Personal Descriptions of Grief

Grief is highly personal, and people process it in a variety of ways, depending on the severity and type of loss they are experiencing. Personal accounts of grief give the greatest insight and most expressive imagery into how one felt during that time of life. A story written by Meenakshi Venugopal outlines the emotional, mental, and physical stages of grief that her husband went through when he did not receive tenure at his university. This particular “failure” caused Dallas, her husband, to spiral into the grieving process—not because of the death of a person but, rather, because of something intangible: his job and his dream of receiving tenure. As she writes, “My husband, who is constitutionally thin and pale, grew thinner and paler. He slept badly” (Venugopal 196). Venugopal recognized that her husband’s grief was affecting him not only mentally, but physically. She noted that this failure consumed them. It consumed their thoughts, conversations, and any spare time they had. He was not only grieving; his family was, as well. She recounts telling him that there were more opportunities and that he could find a job elsewhere, but he recoiled from every word she spoke. Those words stung him, and in some way, they pushed him farther into his grieving process. What was truly interesting about Dallas’s story was that once he was able to overturn the decision, his whole attitude and demeanor changed.

Sarah Parmenter, in her article “Living with Grief,” recounts her thoughts and feelings from when her mother passed away. One poignant line of her story reads, “I even convinced myself I was part of the most cruel reality TV programme ever. I had visions of a camera crew arriving at my doorstep and me running back into my Mums arms, vowing to spend more time with her and undo all my wrong doings I’d stupidly convinced myself should have done.”
I’d made” (“Living with Grief”). Parmenter also discusses that she felt her grief made her weak: “For someone who’s spent an entire life proud of the strong façade I could switch on should I need to, I wanted people to know what had happened to me, so it would excuse my quietness at times. I didn’t want them to make a fuss, just hold the knowledge. The biggest security blanket I’ve craved for is for people to not expect too much of me” (“Living with Grief”). Those who are grieving have a lot to say but are often unable to formulate words or even find enough time to tell others how they are truly feeling.

Offering yet another perspective, Hannah Waters, in her article, “The Evolution of Grief, Both Biological and Cultural, in the 21st Century,” discusses the feelings she had after she found out a high school friend passed away. She says, “I felt real physical pain—a biological response brought about by stress hormones—in response to death. Not only was the feeling new to me, but it also didn’t make sense. Mourning left me depressed, unable to work, even unable to eat at times (the real shocker)” (“The Evolution”). In this quote, Fritz depicts the feeling that grief can physically weigh someone down.

Beyond these reactions, Murray writes on how grief impacts health:

> Grief related to bereavement can result in negative consequences for physical health, including susceptibility to illness and disease, new symptoms (often similar to those the deceased had endured), aggravation of existing medical conditions, anorexia or loss of appetite, energy loss, sleep disturbances, a drop in the number and function of natural killer cells, and long-lasting changes in both the brain and gene expression. (122)

Adding to the list of consequences, M. Stroebe and W. Stroebe note that physical and mental effects of grief can include the following symptoms:

Affective manifestations include depression, despair and dejection, anxiety, guilt, anger and hostility, anhedonia, yearning, longing and pining, and loneliness; behavioral manifestations include agitation, fatigue, crying, and social withdrawal; cognitive manifestations include preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased, lowered self-esteem, self-reproach, helplessness and hopelessness, suicidal ideation, a sense of unreality, and problems with memory and concentration; physiological and somatic manifestations include loss of appetite (or appetite gain), sleep disturbances, energy loss and exhaustion, somatic complaints, physical complaints similar to those that the deceased had endured, changes in drug intake, immunologic and endocrine changes, and susceptibility to illness and disease. (“Grief and Bereavement”) During the grieving process, the lack of self-care, eating, and sleep can lead to exacerbating mental illnesses that may already exist.

Additionally, M. K. Shear and her colleagues make the distinction between grief and complicated grief: Nearly a century ago, Freud wrote, “Although mourning involved grave departures from the normal attitude toward life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to a medical treatment. We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interferences with it as useless or even harmful.” Research has proved Freud largely correct, but not entirely. It is now clear that grief can be complicated, just as wound healing can be complicated, such that intensity of symptoms is heightened and their duration prolonged. (“Complicated Grief”)
Some people can experience complicated grief, which happens when a person is unable to move through the five stages of grief successfully. This was the topic of conversation in an article written by Shear and her colleagues; they discuss whether or not complicated grief meets the criteria to be included as a mental disorder in the DSM-5. In the mental health community, there is a large discussion on whether grief (and complicated grief) should be categorized as a mental illness. After much research and discussion, they conclude that “a new category of complicated grief is needed in DSM-5 and suggest that the management of bereaved people can be improved by this and other modifications to the DSM-5” (Shear et al. 112). It is a rather common consensus that complicated grief should be added to the DSM-5 because it morphs into something larger than grief and would likely need to require a treatment plan because it incorporates itself into other mental illnesses.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is not entirely necessary to focus on whether or not complicated grief is considered a mental illness, but what should be noted is the fact that people often see those who are grieving as “crazy” or “out of their mind” simply because they cannot understand what that person is going through. In her article clearly; having physical identifiers will help with creating a visual connection. The visual solution will attempt to articulate the fact that someone who is grieving is not at all “crazy” or “out of their mind.” The purpose of this thesis is not to make someone uncomfortable, but instead, it is to help people understand and empathize.

Grief Therapy

Because grief manifests itself in so many different ways and for many various reasons, it is clear that research is needed to see how therapy and counseling techniques are being utilized. Suzanne Lister et al. discuss Freud’s Mourning and Melancholia in their article “Current Bereavement Theory: Implications for Art Therapy Practice.” They write that Freud’s (1971) Mourning and Melancholia set the foundation for grief research and understanding. “Therefore, the critical features of Freud’s model were: (a) grief is intra-psychic; (b) one must confront the loss; (c) the purpose of grief is to relinquish all attachment to the deceased; and (d) one returns to normal.” (Lister, 246) Later in life, Freud changed his line of thinking to include that some forms of grief cannot allow a person to return to normal. Based on previous research, it is clear that a person does not return to normal; rather, they adapt to their new circumstances. Their grief has changed them. Because of the personal nature of grief, there is no right way to perform grief therapy but there are ways to make the therapy process more connective.

Storytelling

Many art therapy techniques employ the use of storytelling in some manner. Research shows that creative writing, storytelling, journaling, poetry, expressive dance, music, painting, and drawing are all used as grief therapy. Many people consider talking to a therapist the best way to handle grief; however, the use of creative expression allows one to express a greater range of emotions than talk therapy alone. Hilda Glazer and Donna Marcum discuss using storytelling in their grief therapy sessions with children in their article, “Expressing Grief through Storytelling.” As they note, the beauty of storytelling is that stories can be either imagined or real. In a child’s mind, things that are imaginary can hold as much validity as things that are real. Additionally, Glazer and Marcum explain how
encouraging patients to share their stories can be a source of healing, as well:
Telling one’s story is a part of mourning. In support groups, the sharing of stories is a critical element of the process (Harvey, 1996). It is therapeutic to tell one’s story; the individual is able to verbalize the events and feelings. At the same time, when a person hears the stories of other people and hears their responses to his or her story, that individual realizes that others have had the same feelings about and experience with grief and mourning. (132)

For the purposes of this thesis, this particular approach should prove to be helpful because viewers will be able to relate to stories and place themselves within them. When they are able to see their stories from the outside, looking in, they can begin to heal. According to Sandra Bertman, “Creative expression often bypasses intellect to allow a greater range of emotions than talk therapy alone can evoke” (274).

A great example of using the arts in grief therapy can be found in Ryan and Lister, who created a project for survivors of suicide titled “Nothing Prepared Me for This.” When a person loses someone to suicide, there are different sets of feelings that accompany the traumatic event.

People often blame themselves for what the person did and think that they could have done more to help the person, which adds an entirely new dimension to the already debilitating feelings of grief. Because they feel shame, it often causes them to close themselves off, which can be even more detrimental in the healing process. The techniques Ryan and Lister explored were writing and performing, which go hand-in-hand with photography. They had their participants write down their thoughts in a stream of consciousness to help them unashamedly connect with their thoughts and emotions.

They found that people who wrote down their feelings for as little as 15 minutes over 3 days helped bring about improvements in mental and physical health. These findings were found across all ages, genders, cultures, social classes, and personality types. They performed their study in a workshop setting. The participants began with a “stream of consciousness” exercise, where they wrote out all the things they were thinking and feeling. This would be an effective therapy technique, and in addition, this will be a highly important creative process to utilize for the creative portion of this thesis. For those that might not be inclined to writing, one can use images, instead. It would be easier for a person to choose an angry photograph to describe their feelings, as opposed to digging up angry feelings and trying to portray them in writing form.

In another case study, “A Story of a Healing Relationship: The Person-Centered Approach in Expressive Arts Therapy,” Sunhee Kim details the healing process of one of her patients. Kim begins this article by recounting the theories of Carl Rogers and his daughter Natalie Rogers. Both Carl and Natalie Rogers believed in using expressive art therapy to get to the root of grief that was causing pain in a way that made it easier for patients to express it. This positive environment lets the bereaved feel opened, honored, and free of judgment because they are not having to openly discuss their feelings. This also allows for expressions that are not socially acceptable, such as outrage, aggression, anger, and violence.

Kim goes on to discuss a story about one of her clients: Mrs. H, a 72-year-old Korean-American woman. Mrs. H seemed afraid to express her thoughts and emotions with anyone, so she approached Kim about attending an art therapy painting class. In this class, she did not say much, but instead, she began painting. This is when Kim realized that Mrs. H had more to say, but she was too scared to let some of those feelings resurface. Kim instructed Mrs. H to begin writing her feelings on the back of her paintings. She did not tell her what to write or how to write it; she just told her to write. Mrs. H wrote in fragments, sentences, paragraphs, and even poems. In these writings, Kim was able to see that Mrs. H had feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, loneliness, isolation, emptiness, sadness, and depression over the loss of her husband and her son. In these paintings, she was able to express her feelings without words, because working through art let her process those feelings and memories that were associated with her pain. Mrs. H confessed, “I feel my spirit and soul have been nourished, and my life has been changed into a bright, energetic, and positive one.” (Kim 98).
Imagery and Empathy

Writing and communication are a great place to start when dealing with empathy, but often, words do not allow for a person to connect completely. In his article “Linking Mechanisms: Emotional Contagion, Empathy, and Imagery,” Thomas G. Arizmendi writes of the need to use imagery in acts of empathy: All definitions of empathy have in common one’s ability to ‘take the perspective of the other person’ (Decety & Jackson, 2006) via our imagination. As Gordon Allport (1961) suggested, empathy involves the ‘imaginative transposing of oneself into the thinking, feeling, and acting of another.’ How do we ‘image-in’ what it’s like for that other person to feel what she is experiencing? The use of imagery represents a cognitive linking mechanism to help us transition from emotional sharing to empathy. (409)

The use of imagery in talk therapy would allow for a broader understanding of what the patient might be feeling.

Other Artists and Their Exploration of Grief

The creation of mourning art has been around since the beginning of time, but

Jacqueline Atkins, in her article “Mourning Art,” discusses the creation of mourning art in folk art history. Atkins’s article focuses on the category of folk art that includes needlework, painting, ceramics, and jewelry. The needlework and painting served as expressions of sorrow, loss, and remembrance, whereas the jewelry served as a token of recognition or a memorial of the deceased. In the early nineteenth century, mourning art began to capture people’s attention. Historical events such as the Second Great Awakening and George Washington’s death served as a catalyst for this movement. At one point, mourning art was created before an artist or person even died because it was considered to be a more beautiful subject than landscapes.

There are certain formulas and imagery that made an appearance in most of the artwork. Classic Christian symbols associated with death were included; it was also required that one or more mourning figures in classical posing were to surround the tomb, and the female figures were to be young and graceful.

Atkins offers further details on these pieces of mourning art:

Every mourning picture would also have included one or more of the following elements in a verdant landscape replete with symbols that reinforced the idea of resurrection: a willow tree, representing regeneration and resurrection; evergreen trees, suggesting eternal life after death; oak and elm trees, for strength, dignity, and transitory life; ferns, for solitude and humility; a fallen tree or broken flower, to symbolize a good life cut short; a departing ship, for a completed journey; a church or cathedral, for faith and hope; a house or village as representative of the earthly home; and a garden, to suggest heaven, or the Garden of Eden. Additional elements such as angels, cherubs, garlands, flowers, and birds might also be included, and each would carry its own specific and recognizable symbolism.

Overall, the pictures represented an idealized and perhaps sentimentalized view of eternity as well as a reflection of the romantic glorification of pastoral life. (“Mourning Art”)

Mourning artwork was usually left unsigned by the artist, but often, they would leave an inscription. Mourning pictures began to see a decline in the 1830s, but mourning jewelry made a reappearance during the Civil War. The most popular type of jewelry during this era were lockets or brooches: “Mourning jewelry might also be rimmed with seed pearls, which typically represented tears, or with black enamel as a sign of bereavement” (Atkins). By the end of World War I, the use of mourning jewelry virtually disappeared. Even though traditional mourning art began to decline, the creation of art while mourning was something that people continued to make. Every piece of artwork was supposed to tell a story, to share what that person, thing, or memory might have meant to the artist. The main theme found in the visual research is that artwork needs to maintain a narrative in order to connect with the viewer.
A visual analysis began for artwork that uses grief as its subject matter in order to gain a better understanding of how darker work communicates to its audience and to see how other artists have depicted grief. Priscilla Frank, in her article “A Brief History of Artists Grappling with Loss and Death,” compiled a list of artwork that was created by artists who were grieving during the time of the piece’s creation.

One of the pieces that was the most powerful was a simple photograph of a woman holding a bird on her hand and another photo directly beside it that was a close-up of the ring in the photograph. These images clearly communicated loss because the woman had no longer in the photograph, but her ring was still there. Tangible, seemingly ordinary objects hold worth because they once belonged to the deceased. Humans do not merely connect to things that walk and breathe. Often, value and meaning is found in the most unexpected of places. An article written by Anne Quito discusses a sculpture constructed of wire and 4000 pounds of stone created by Celeste Roberge. In this sculpture, the figure is bent over, and it looks as though her weight makes it impossible to stand up. The meaning behind this piece and the reaction that her viewers have communicates strongly that people very clearly remember what grief feels like. Although the original sculpture was not intended to depict grief, many people saw her as being in that manner of thought. There are many artists who have used grief as their subject matter, but often, it is one photograph or painting; it does not typically encompass the entire grieving process. Artwork pertaining to grief is often sad, but there are many other feelings that are manifested during the grieving process, and they go hand-in-hand. There are also numerous books, blogs, poems, and other resources written on grief, but they do not contain narrative visuals. Because there are many resources available, this thesis will serve as a striking complement to the strong narratives written about grief.

**Creation of Conceptual Artwork**

In an article written about the creation of conceptual photography, “Illustrating Ideas with Digital Images: Insights from Contemporary Conceptual Photography,” J. Suler makes the point that society focuses on verbal skills more heavily than visual language of primary process thinking. Conceptual photography always offers an “idea” or “concept” to its audience. There are two ways to deliver that message: directly and indirectly. With the direct approach, the photographer shows the viewer what he or she believes and what he or she wants them to see. In the indirect approach, the subject matter might be more ambiguous, which will cause viewers to have to draw their own conclusions. The indirect approach allows for viewers to place their own feelings, memories, and emotions into the photograph. As Suler writes, “Due to the ambiguity of these conceptual images, subjects tend to project meanings into the story they tell based on their own, often unconscious, emotions and life experiences.” (104).

Suler discusses that intangible ideas are often the hardest to illustrate, because they do not have visuals attached to them. He suggests using a dictionary, thesaurus, and online image search engine to help formulate ideas. Often, intangible concepts will require a combination of different contexts in order for it to be successful because it is hard for a person to instantly recognize something that might appear differently to other people. The conceptual photographs of grief in this thesis need to be overwhelmingly compelling in order for the audience to pay attention to them and analyze the subject matter. The audience will need a strong connection point to each image in order for it to be considered successful.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this research chapter, the graduate student identified the needs for this particular work of art to help supplement therapies that already exist and to help family members and loved ones empathize with those who are grieving. Once again, this body of work is not meant to act as a treatment plan; instead, it is better seen as a supplement to the therapies and resources that already exist. Grief is a difficult and burdensome topic, and this thesis will help bring light and understanding to a dark time. Although there is artwork on the topic of grief, there is not an exhaustive body of work that exists with solely photographs.
Chapter 3

PROCESS & SOLUTION
VISUAL CONCEPT

As stated in my research, I was looking for a way to connect people to their thoughts and feelings through a photographic solution because there is not a body of work that depicts all 5 stages of grief in its entirety. The way that I decided to handle this task was to take 15 miniature photo series that depicted different types of grief and the feelings associated with the 5 stages of grief. These images would be placed into a publication that combined imagery and type to create a cohesive design that is raw, beautiful, and personal.

The photo concepts carried a majority of the weight for this project as they are the initial point of visual connection. In this chapter, I will discuss the photo concepts and poetry first and later discuss how I combined those photographs and design to create a powerful display of the 5 stages of grief.

PHOTOGRAPHY CONCEPTS

As stated in my research chapter, grief is a deeply personal experience. In light of this, I could not just tell one story or narrative through the entire publication because it would not allow for enough connection to each person reading it. I wanted to be sure that I was not just depicting one type of grief or one emotion; instead, I wanted to highlight the fact that grief can be a response to many different situations in life.

There were many ideas that accompanied this plan. I had originally considered doing 5–7 photographs that depicted each stage of grief but were not necessarily connected otherwise. The problem with this line of thinking was that the project needed more of a narrative aspect to help tell an entire story. I finally settled on the idea to do three different miniature series for each stage of grief. Each series would tell its own story and be accompanied by its own poem. This structure would showcase the different types of grief but also show each specific part of the mourning process and the emotions often associated with those types of grief.
Naturally, I began with the first stage of grief: shock/disbelief and denial. Because shock/disbelief and denial encapsulate different experiences, two of the three series focused on denial and one focused on shock/disbelief.

**Sting**

The first of these series involves a model with long curled hair holding a bouquet of dead roses. The model is dressed in pale, simple, delicate clothing with a seemingly oblivious and blissful look on her face. This links back to the research I conducted on this stage of grief; as Julie Axelrod writes, “The first reaction to learning about the terminal illness, loss, or death of a cherished loved one is to deny the reality of the situation. ‘This isn’t happening, this can’t be happening,’ people often think. It is a normal reaction to rationalize our overwhelming emotions” (“The 5 Stages”). Therefore, the idea behind this series was to show that the model is stuck, tangled, and entrapped in her current situation. She is unintentionally ignoring her problem and is blissfully ignorant until she pricks her wrist on a thorn of one of the roses and begins to bleed. The drop of blood reminds her that she is indeed alive and needs to address the reality of the death that she is currently holding onto.

While preparing for this photograph, I dried out a bouquet of light pink, maroon, and white roses, as well as carnations with baby’s breath and greenery; this aided in the creation of an innocent and soft color palette. The addition of silk ribbon in the aforementioned color scheme helped add softness and fluidity to the photos. For location, I used a large patch of thickets behind my house. This added an element of isolation and chaos. I placed the model in an opening within the thickets, providing a strong foreground and background. I tangled her hair into the thickets and placed the bouquet in her hands to make it look as though she was walking and became trapped. When photographing this scene, I wanted to ensure that there was a shallow depth of field that added a creaminess to the photos that furthered the idea of blissful ignorance. Not only did I want to focus on the model’s ignorance; I also wanted to highlight the death that she was quite literally holding onto (i.e. the bouquet).

The poetry for this particular series was easy for me to write. I have experienced the effects of death a number of times, so I thought back to my experiences and emotions during those times to help formulate a pungent prose: “Petals dry, leaves fall, the prick of a thorn, a sting, a drip of warm blood, and just like that . . . I remember that I’m alive, and you’re not.” I directly related the imagery in the photographs to the poem. The dead petals that are falling from the flowers, the dried leaves that are crumbling, the sharp sting of a thorn, and the warm drip that one feels as blood runs from a cut are all things that we know of but often do not associate together. The poem was to depict the harsh reality that she is surrounded by death, as well as the loss that she has just experienced and the reality that there is no way to hide from it forever. Emphasis is placed on the fact that this is going to be a painful experience and that she will have to embrace what has happened to her and begin the grieving process.
Shattered
The second photo series depicts a well-dressed man standing on a city sidewalk with a phone up to his ear. He is motionless and has a traumatized look on his face. The viewer can tell that there are people in the background, but he is frozen. A single tear rolls down his cheek, and the phone slips out of his hand. The phone lands on the sidewalk, shattering the screen.

Personal experiences served as inspiration for this concept. I once had to deliver bad news to a friend whose family member had committed suicide. When she first heard the news, she stood frozen and shocked until she was able to process the news; shortly after, she collapsed on the floor in a hysterical manner and began shaking and crying.

Shock is included in the first stage of grief because often, people are unable to process the information that they just heard and, therefore, question if it even happened. There was not much preparation necessary for this image other than choosing a location. I wanted to make sure that there was a city background of some sort to showcase the fact that the man was frozen, and other people were living their normal lives around him while his seemed as though it was shattering. I also needed to find an old phone that I could shatter the tempered glass screen on; this was important because I wanted to show the clear message that this person has, in a sense, shattered under the news that he has heard. This photo series is a little more realistic because it is depicting a scene that happens quite often in the face of bad news.

For this series, the poetry reads, “I don’t remember what happened exactly. I don’t remember what they said. All I know is my heart broke in two the second the phone slipped out of my hand. In that moment, my world shattered.” This poetry directly relates to the imagery, but it tells a familiar story that a lot of people face. For example, when my mother told me that my father had passed away, I collapsed into a puddle of tears and screamed, “you’re lying.” Denial and shock go hand in hand with each other because our minds need time to process what we are going through.
Let It Burn

The third and final series within denial consists of a well-dressed, seemingly well-educated male model who is sitting casually in a burning chair with a burning book in his hand. When I first dwelled on the word denial, I immediately thought of someone ignoring the fact that their world is burning down around them. Considering that it would be somewhat difficult to burn down the entire "world," I simplified the concept to a chair. The chair holds symbolic meaning because the model is making an active decision to sit on it. He chooses to purposely ignore the situation, knowing it would cause him pain. Through my research in personal blogs as well as my own personal experience, I find it true that people often actively ignore a situation even though that action will likely cause them more pain in the end.

In order to complete this photograph, we first had to find a chair that would look suitable in a photograph but also fit the subject—my husband, the only one who would let me sit him near a burning chair. I also needed to create close proximity between the fire that is raging and the person sitting in the chair. This proximity was important to show that this particular tragedy was very close to him. Additionally, this photograph had to be shot in a series and then compiled together for safety reasons. First, the book was lit on fire to capture detailed shots of the burning pages and the ashes blowing away. The subject was then sat in the chair with the burning book; his legs were crossed, and his face was stoic and almost pompous toward the fact that he was seated in a burning chair. After all the reference photos were taken, we poured a line of gasoline along the bottom and back-side of the chair and lit it on fire. My camera was mounted on a tripod to ensure that the angles remained the same. Once I was happy with all of my reference photos, I made sure to take a number of different angles and focal lengths to ensure that I had enough variety within my photographs because I knew that I would not be able recreate the scene later.

The photographs then had to be compiled and composited to create the scene of a man sitting on a burning couch. The burning chair, the subject, and the book are all separate pieces that were manipulated to create a convincing photograph. This is the only photograph in the publication that has extensive manipulation due to the safety concerns surrounding it. This particular series lent itself to a more realistic form of poetry: "If I pretend long enough, the pain will go away. The fire will die down, the smoke will clear, the ashes will blow away and just maybe, maybe the burns will heal. Until then, let it all burn... if I can just pretend." Again, this imagery captures the idea that the man is aware of the pain that his actions are going to cause him, but he is choosing to do it anyway. In a way, this is showing that he is trying to gain control of the situation.
The second stage of grief is anger. We all know the many ways that physical anger can look like, but I wanted to make sure I showed the concepts of internal anger as well, because not all people will show their anger physically. As Axelrod writes, “As the masking effects of denial and isolation begin to wear, reality and its pain re-emerge. We are not ready. The intense emotion is deflected from our vulnerable core, redirected and expressed instead as anger. The anger may be aimed at inanimate objects, complete strangers, friends or family” (“The 5 Stages”).

Flames
The first series of photographs in this stage depicts a woman who is collecting things from a past relationship—letters, pictures, gifts, and more—and placing them inside a box. She scratches out the face of her lover on the photo and takes everything out to a fire pit. She pours gasoline on the box of memorabilia and lights the box on fire. Close-up photographs show pictures of them burning and a letter being eaten up by the flames. This series served as a way to illustrate that this woman is so angry at what had happened in her past relationship that she is willing to set all of her memories on fire. She did not want to hold onto anything or remember the pain that this relationship had caused her.

She is angry at her ex-boyfriend, and at this moment, she does not care that she is destroying all the memories they once had. Her anger is not a physical or violent reaction; instead, the photographs are showing her anger through the objects themselves.

The preparation for this image included finding stock photography that I could use to illustrate the couple. I needed to find a series of stock photographs with the same couple in it so that it would show the concept of a long-term relationship. I wrote fake letters and found old clothes, a bottle of cologne, and old jewelry to add to the box. I have a fire pit in my backyard, so that was the easiest and safest location to photograph this series. I also had a good light source to help illuminate the front of the subject, and it left the back of the image much darker, which helped with the overall aesthetic of these images. I wanted the poetry to show that this woman was hurt by the man she was once with: “Your love broke me. Your selfishness stole from me. Your words trapped me. Your hands hurt me. You never loved me, did you? This was just a game and it all went up in flames.” I chose my wording specifically because I wanted to show how his actions directly affected her.
Father

The second series for this stage of grief was one of the most personal in the entire book. It depicts a woman (me) sitting cross-legged on a bed in a disturbed state. There are photos scattered at my feet, and I am holding a letter in my hand. I have my hair in my hand, and I am gripping it tightly to show stress. I am reading the letter, and it is clear that my anger is building. In the next photograph, you see the letter in one hand and a crumbled picture in the other, as well as blood dripping down my wrist. I wanted to depict the idea of self-harm, but I knew that imagery of that nature would be far too much of a trigger for some people. I felt that this depiction of anger would convey the idea that I am hurting myself because I am so angry, but it would not be as gruesome or off-putting. The next photograph shows the letter being crumpled up and thrown in the trashcan, and the last photograph shows all of the pictures and the letter in the trashcan with drops of blood. I did not want to physically hurt myself, either, so I used special effects for blood.

The poetry was very personal to me, and I wanted to send a clear message about how I felt my father's actions affected my life: "You did everything a father shouldn't. You were everything you said you'd never be. You picked the alcohol and the drugs over me. I was your little girl. I depended on you for everything and you depended on everything else but me. You lied, you left, and now, you're dead. Maybe it's better this way." My father was an alcoholic and a drug addict, but he was also a Christian with a strong relationship with God for most of his life. I do not believe that his alcoholism or drug use necessarily made him a bad father, but ultimately, his choices to partake in those things cost him his family and, eight years later, his life. I know that my father loved me, but his vices were stronger than his love, and they consumed him. My parents divorced when I was eight years old, and after that, I only saw my father off and on, while he was in rehab or living in another state trying to get his life together. I struggled deeply with what my father did to my family, and when I was about fourteen, I wished that he was dead. Two years later, he died. The drugs and alcohol weakened his body, and his liver simply could not take it. My wish for his death still haunts me to this day, but if my father were still alive, I know that my life would look entirely different, and I might not have been afforded some of the opportunities that I have received. I miss my father greatly, but sometimes, I do think that it is better that God took him off of this earth and away from the things that so deeply hurt him.
Perfect

The last photography series in anger offers a clear depiction of physical rage. A woman is standing over an impeccably set table and has a look of rage on her face with a china plate clutched in her hands. The next photograph shows her throwing the plate on the table and it shattering into pieces. Other photographs show the perfect place settings of the table juxtaposed with the shattered china. The last photographs depict the woman in a sobbing fit of rage. Her mascara is running down her face, her jaw is clenched, and a deep hatred fills her eyes. Her body language is tense, and the viewer can see the stress that her body has taken on.

This particular series was taken in my dining room. I knew that I needed a full set of china, but I was not willing to break any that I had. I luckily found an entire set of china on Craigslist, and it worked perfectly for this narrative. Initially, I thought that china would be easy to break, but in this case, I was wrong. I ended up having to hit the plate with a hammer in order to get it to break. After the small dessert plate was broken, I arranged it carefully on top of the dinner plate, and I had the model drop it, so it looked as though the plate was breaking.

Originally, this concept was going to have a woman in a wedding dress breaking a plate against a wall, but I felt that it would be too hard to control the environment, and I felt it would be somewhat dangerous. Instead, I directed this narrative to look as though the housewife’s husband abruptly left. The poetry reads, “I kept your house. I made your bed. I scrubbed your floors. I cooked your meals. I made your drinks. I washed your dishes. I was quiet. I was perfect. I followed the rules. I loved you. I was your slave, and you just walked away.” This could be read as though the husband cheated or that he left because his wife wasn’t “good” enough.
BARGAINING & GUILT

Bargaining and guilt occur after the anger has worn off; we are no longer mad at the person or the situation, and we turn to bargaining and guilt—an attempt to understand the situation. According to Axelrod, bargaining can also be described as regret:

This is an attempt to bargain. Secretly, we may make a deal with God or our higher power in an attempt to postpone the inevitable, and the accompanying pain. This is a weaker line of defense to protect us from the painful reality. Guilt often accompanies bargaining. We start to believe there was something we could have done differently to have helped save our loved one. (“The 5 Stages”)

Tangled

The first series of photographs for this stage shows a woman who is making calculations of bills and has photos, receipts, payments, and credit cards pinned to a cork board wall, with red tape connecting different elements. There is a photo of a couple on the top center of the cork board, and all of the red yarn connects to these two individuals in some way. This woman is trying to pinpoint where her marriage fell apart—who spent what and why they were unable to make their marriage work. She is standing back to look at all of the connections in an attempt to place guilt and define the moment that her marriage fell apart.

In preparation for this image, I needed to find bills, receipts, credit cards, and paperwork to make it look as though there is coherent information on the board. I made a concerted effort to use a shallow depth of field so that none of the personal information was visible and did not have to be photoshopped out. I connected certain expenses to the male figure in the photograph, some to the female, and others to the two of them combined. This scenario was to show that this woman knew that her marriage has financial issues, but she wanted to understand exactly what took place in order to correctly place the blame. She laid out everything that went wrong, wracking her brain to find whose fault it was. I felt that finances would be easier to depict instead of a divorce, but the way that I laid out the imagery could lend itself to that solution, as well.

The poetry reads, “Where did it all fall apart? Where did it go wrong? How did we get here? We had it all, but now it’s gone. Security was just a web we tangled, and oh, what a tangled web we weaved.” This poetry is vague enough to apply to many circumstances, and I wanted to ensure the flexibility in the meaning of this particular series.
My Fault

The second series within bargaining is a woman who is knelt down in front of a roadside memorial. The roadside memorial has a cross, a teddy bear, and flowers. This imagery is simple, but it is encapsulating the idea of guilt. In preparation for this image, I needed to find a location that would have frequent traffic so that I would be able to capture headlights. This photograph was taken around 5:00 in the evening to make sure that there was enough light for the images but also showed the sun was setting. I purchased a wooden cross and a bouquet of flowers for this image. I also paid close attention to not show the model’s face in any of these images. I wanted to ensure that people could place themselves or their own circumstances into this photograph.

The original concept was for this series to look as though the woman’s best friend got into an accident because she was texting and driving, but after speaking with my husband, who is a paramedic firefighter, about a horrible EMS call that he worked one day, I changed the concept to focus on the fact that the person at the roadside memorial was a survivor, and they were experiencing survivor’s guilt. The poetry for this series reflects that idea: “It wasn’t supposed to be you. It should have been me. You didn’t deserve to die. I did. This is my fault. I’m the reason you’re gone. I hurt you... this is my fault.” A parent, friend or loved one could be experiencing these feelings and I wanted to illustrate that point clearly with the poetry.
Take It All
The final series for bargaining depicts a woman in a church who appears to be begging with God. She approaches the altar with money and jewelry in her hands, and she throws it on the altar. The last photographs show her on the floor of the church on her hands and knees begging with God. I needed to procure a church for these photographs; otherwise, I did not believe that the context would have been as powerful. During the bargaining stage, Christians will often get angry at God or even denounce their faith, and non-Christians will suddenly believe in God or a higher power in hopes to get back to the thing they once had.

The poetry for this series conveys the willingness of the woman to offer anything she can to regain what was lost: “YOU. You did this. Take everything. All that I have. Take it all. I need him back. Give me another chance. What do I have to do? What do I have to give? Take everything. All that I have. Take it all.” This poem was important because I needed to ensure that it related to a higher power or deity to show that this person knows that her “fate” is out of her hands. She is begging with and angry at God, and she knows that He is the only one that can give her back what she hopes for. I did not want this book to have an overly biblical tone because all people experience grief regardless of their religious standing, but this particular stage of grief often involves a spiritual aspect of some sort.
Depression is something that I believe a lot of people are aware of or at least understand some things about, but people’s understandings of depression also come with a lot of clichés. I wanted to ensure that I showcased what depression really felt like but did not sugar coat the subject. Axelrod discusses the details of depression in depth:

Two types of depression are associated with mourning. The first one is a reaction to practical implications relating to the loss. Sadness and regret predominate this type of depression. We worry about the costs and burial. We worry that, in our grief, we have spent less time with others that depend on us. This phase may be eased by simple clarification and reassurance. We may need a bit of helpful cooperation and a few kind words. The second type of depression is more subtle and, in a sense, perhaps more private. It is our quiet preparation to separate and to bid our loved one farewell. (“The 5 Stages”)

The first photography series in this stage involves a man sitting up against a wall with bottles of liquor strewn around him. He is staring off into the distance with a sober expression. The next photograph has this same man standing in the frame of a doorway. He is back-lit, so all the viewer can see is his silhouette. In the last image, he is sitting on a staircase looking directly into the camera through the railing. I made sure not to photograph this model in just one location because even though depression can hinder daily activities, it does not mean that the person is not trying to make movement.

In preparation for this image, I needed to secure a location that added to the desolate feelings associated with depression. I was granted access to a property that had just been purchased, which the owners were going to begin restorations on. This was the perfect location because there were many different types and styles of architecture, and some of the rooms had chipping paint and stains on the walls. I highly debated the use of alcohol in this imagery, but I felt it was necessary. Self-destruction is often associated with grief because it serves as a way to dull the pain. Self-destructive behavior will not always display itself in the form of alcoholism, but for this concept, I felt that it was appropriate. For this section, the poetry reads, “They lied. This won’t get better. There’s no end to this. It will always hurt. I won’t get past this. There’s no end to this. I want out. But there’s no end to this.” During grief, people will often say that it will get better, but in the face of depression, that is not always the case. The man in this photograph feels that he will never be able to rid himself of his depression.
**Drowning**

The second series depicts a man who has a brick tied to his ankle, and it is drowning him. He is being pulled under the water and is struggling to stay afloat. The brick that is tied to his ankle is certainly not heavy enough to drown him, but he is tired and is ready to give up. He has given in to the fact that his depression has taken over him, and he has decided to give up.

These photographs were taken in two locations. For the image of the man drowning (with his hands above the water), I needed a vast ocean. I knew that I would not be able to achieve that same aesthetic in a pool because there had to be open space to convey feelings of isolation. My husband and I went on a cruise with his family over Christmas, so this is one of the first images that I took for this publication. The photos were taken in the beautiful waters of Puerto Rico. Because I did not have access to an underwater camera at the time, I had to take the pictures of the brick in a pool because it was safer to have a controlled environment. The original pictures were very blue, so I spent a significant amount of time altering the coloration so that they appeared to be taken at the same time as the others. The poetry for this section reads, “Something is holding me down, I know I can escape, but it won’t let me go. They keep telling me to swim, I know how, but I can’t. I simply can’t.” This man knows how to swim, but he is unable to. He does not see a way out.
Smoke Show

The final series in the depression stage depicts a man sitting in a dilapidated house. He is seated on the floor amidst broken floorboards and debris. His face is calm, and he is sitting still. Smoke pours in from an open hole in the structure and fills the room. Later in the series, his hands are bound with chains and locked; smoke completely consumes him.

The preparation for this image included finding a building that this could be done in. I wanted to be sure that I found a remote location because the black smoke bombs could very easily make it look as though the structure is on fire. I purchased three black smoke bombs. They lasted for around three minutes each, so I had to work quickly to get the shots that I wanted. We did three different compositions, and two out of those three made it into the book because they were more powerful. I placed my model and myself where I thought would be best, and a third person held the smoke bomb in his hand and moved it according to the where the window was blowing. The direction of the wind drastically affected some of the images, and because I had limited time, I needed it to move quickly.

The poetry for this series directly connects to the subject matter of the photographs: “Smoke billows. The fumes consume me. I can’t breathe. I’m screaming for help, but no one can hear me. I see a way out, but I can’t find the strength. This is all a smoke show. It’s almost over. Right?” This follows the concept that there is a way out of the man’s depression, but he does not feel that he has the strength to get out. The poetry also alludes to the fact that he is hoping it is almost over and that he believes there is still a way out of it.
CHAPTER 03

The final stage of grief is acceptance. It is the stage when a person is finally able to see hope and light after what they have gone through. Axelrod explains that although this stage is still difficult, it should be cherished, as many do not have the privilege of reaching it: “This stage of grieving is a gift not afforded to everyone. Death may be sudden and unexpected, or we may never see beyond our anger or denial. It is not necessarily a mark of bravery to resist the inevitable and to deny ourselves the opportunity to make our peace. This phase is marked by withdrawal and calm. This is not a period of happiness and must be distinguished from depression.” (“The 5 Stages”) Just because someone has come to terms with their situation does not mean that there will not be pain.

Fresh

The first series shows a woman gathering flowers. She begins trimming the stems and placing them carefully into a vase. She gathers the trimmings and cleans up the table. The last photographs are of a clean, beautiful, and brightly-lit scene. My concept behind this series was to show that someone was making an active decision to be okay with her situation and is willing to start fresh.

The preparation for this image involved purchasing flowers. I purposely went with bright white and pink spray roses and greenery to add a cheerful tone. I wanted to find a white room to depict freshness, the idea of becoming clean. I was able to use the same building that I did for the images of depression. This worked well because the room had perfectly white walls and no furniture, so I was able to bring all my own pieces in to set up the scene.

The poetry for this scene needed to articulate that even though this person was trying to be okay, it did not mean that they were not still going to hurt. The woman will still cry when she remembers what happened, but her grief cannot hold onto her anymore. She has to try to accept her situation. The pain did not get better; it just became less painful. The poetry reflects this internal process: “They all told me it would get better. It didn’t get better, it just became okay. A part of me will always hurt. I will always cry at the thought of what happened. But the pain has dulled. It’s bearable. I can finally breathe again.”
Moving On

The second series of photographs for acceptance depicts a man moving out of a house. He is taping up the boxes, cleaning up his last things, and locking the door behind him. This scene could depict a divorce, a break-up, moving to a new house, moving to a new city or state, or even a death. His acceptance has forced him to no longer hold onto his pain, and he needs to move on.

The preparation for this image was fairly simple. I needed an empty location so that the viewer could not see furniture or belongings in the background and moving boxes. Again, I was able to use the building that I mentioned earlier because there were no belongings inside, and the front porch offered interesting architectural elements.

The poetry reflects the man’s thoughts:
“The boxes are packed. The floors are swept. The truck is loaded. My feet are tired. My hands are sore. My head is full. But my heart... it’s okay. It’s finally time to move on.” Again, I did not want this poetry to depict a particular event; I wanted it to be open to interpretation to allow for the best connection. It has a sense of finality and an overall tone of acceptance.
Okay

The final series in the book is a room with the curtains drawn shut. They are blocking the light from coming in and illuminating the room. The second photograph shows the curtains open and light pouring onto two objects sitting on a small table. The focus of this series was to show the purposeful decision to let the light in. I also get progressively closer to the table to show what is on it. It is a ring dish with a small diamond ring placed on the top and an old black-and-white photo in a delicate frame.

The preparation for this image included moving the objects and furniture from in front of the window. I chose this particular window because the curtains were soft and ethereal in nature. In an effort to capture more of the light that was pouring into the window, I was going to fill the room with a small amount of smoke so that it would catch the light rays. This did not quite go as planned because as I was walking into my office with a pan of hot oil, I accidentally spilled it onto my legs. The hot oil left burns, so I decided to forgo the smoke and continue photographing the scene. I used a ring dish that I had, which had my grandmother’s diamond on it. The photograph on the table was an old portrait of my grandparents.

When my parents divorced, my brother, my mom and I moved in with my Granny. She was a second mother to me. She was a strong southern woman who would do anything for anyone. She was an angel on earth, and I looked up to her in every way. When I was 19, she was diagnosed with lung cancer, and our hearts were broken. She was receiving treatment and getting better, but suddenly late one night, she had a stroke. Her treatments seemed to be working, so we thought we had more time with her, but the stroke changed that. About eight days after her stroke, she passed away. I held her hand, and I told her how much I loved her. That pain won’t ever go away, but I want to live my best life to honor her and all that she did for our family.

The poetry for this series reads, “Losing you wasn’t easy. It never will be. You were truly an angel. Heaven-sent. Watch out for us down here. We’ll be okay.” For this particular series, I related it specifically to death and the death of a person that someone thought the world of. Showing that even though they will always be missed, the person experiencing grief will be okay and needs to accept that they are gone.
BOOK DESIGN

Layout
Due to the fact that there is a lack of visual representation for the stages of grief, I felt the most comprehensive way to combine these photographic series in a coherent way would be to compile them in a book. This book could be used as a tool in therapy sessions to prompt conversations or connect clients to their feelings so that they could, in turn, create their own art. If these series did not all appear in one location, they would lose their power. They are meant to play off of each other and complement one another to tell the entire story of grief.

The overall strategy behind this book was simple but combining everything in a beautiful and connected manner was a challenge. Because each series was so different in color and context, I needed a way to connect them that still allowed the photographs to remain the focal point. These photographs were meant to tell a story, and the design and typography had to be implemented to make it applicable for this thesis and to aid in a visual connection between the photographs and the poetry.

To expand my horizons, I sought to push myself out of my comfort zone and attempt a design style that was outside of my typical aesthetic. My work is typically very classic, utilizes softer colors and has a strong, clean alignment. Because my style has a clean aesthetic, I was tempted to place the images in a centered or album-like arrangement with rows and columns. Even though I enjoy when photographs are simply placed on the page, it was not working with this subject matter. Placing the images statically on the page did not lend itself to a story, it felt separated, weak and lacked overall connection. I began to overlap images and text in a “non-design” style, and I thought that it was starting to take shape. In the beginning, it was very chaotic and felt cluttered. To add order to the chaos, I added a grid system to my document, because even though many of the page layouts were different, it still had structure and aided in focal points and helped establish visual flow.

I overlapped images in different size and orientations (which helped add variety and establish hierarchy) and added specific lines from the poetry in areas that helped bridge the visual gaps, offering connections within the design. The images were placed in a variety of ratios because depending on their placement, some ratios worked better than others. As I was photographing the series, I made a concerted effort to take both horizontal and vertical images so that I would have a variety to select from when placing them within the publication. As the images are overlapped, I also placed text on top of those elements to further bridge any visual gaps.

I incorporated a simple line throughout the publication to show that there is a process, but the line does not connect anywhere. It is meant to lead, but there is no particular direction, and there does not appear to be a clear starting and ending point. Grief is a journey that needs to be taken, but there is no particular path.

I attempted to add color to this publication, but the addition of color proved to be unsuccessful because it clashed with the color within the photographs. If the images were in black and white, I believe that it would have been much easier to implement color, but I am happy with the stark black and white of the typography. It allows the images to stand out and command attention.
flames

[Image of a box with a photo inside on a table, and a person sitting on a bed with a letter]

You led, you lost
and now you’re dead

[Image of a person holding a letter and another with a photo]

Squash rage fury throw hatred
resentment violence blood flame
wrath hurt
cracked er
blaze light

[Image of a person with a letter and a photo, and a person holding a photo]
Typography

Because grief is such a personal topic, I wanted to make sure to incorporate that with the poetry and typography because even though it can be hard to express feelings during the grieving process, words play a large part in the healing process. I chose three typefaces for this document.

Playfair Display Bold Italic is a modern typeface which helps add sophistication and is used as a decorative element. Playfair was used in the headings and as the vertical text behind the poetry. It’s dramatic and bold qualities made it, not only a great, legible heading font but also a bold design element. I used The Styled Edit as my handwritten portion; it made the book feel more introspective and delicate. This typeface is used in areas that were not necessarily pertinent information but could still be read. It was meant to be decorative, its handwritten aesthetic adds to the idea that grief is personal. The thin, pen-like style paired nicely with the thick, bold style of Playfair Display and added a level of delicacy to the design. Lastly, I chose Baskerville Old Face for its timeless quality and used it in the body copy portions and the poetry. Baskerville Old Face is transitional typefaces that have both old style and modern characteristics which makes it very easy to read at small type sizes. Fonts like Baskerville Old Face is what is used in novels because of its legibility and simplicity.

Impact Label was chosen to act as a bold design element that added depth to the design. Grief will become a memory, and this typeface reminded me of the labels that we put on boxes of old memories and keepsakes. Impact Label was also used so that I could use a 3/8 inch black label and adhere it over the type in the book to add a tactile element. This physical element helps add visual interest to the pages, and people enjoy feeling something interesting within the design.

Cover & Title

The title Maze: Visualization of Grief fits the subject matter of this publication perfectly. Grief is personal, painful and there is no right way to do it. Everyone’s journey will look different, and there might be some backtracking in the healing process; hence “maze.” I did not want to use the term “journey” because I felt it was somewhat cliché and didn’t lend itself to a strong visual solution. “Maze” is applicable because you might get caught up in the maze, but you will find your way out, and it will change you. To create the cover image of a “topiary” maze, I used floral foam and a sheet of floral moss. The original image was not ideal and required a significant amount of patching in Photoshop, but the result is intriguing and communicated the idea that everyone’s journey is different, organic and will grow you as a person. I connected the line with the maze imagery to help tie the design elements inside the book to the cover design as an introduction to what you would see.

The book design had many versions, but the final is a powerful representation of the stages of grief and shows a mixture of scenarios and emotions in each of the five stages of grief.
The topic of grief is not necessarily an easy one to tackle. It’s a heavy subject that has deeply personal aspects, but I am happy that I decided to address it. It removed me from my comfort zone and stretched me as a photographer. My own experiences with grief helped me create this body of work in more ways than I imagined. I had to tap back into some of the painful recesses of my memory but reflecting on how my grief changed me deeply informed my visual solution and made my solutions even more powerful. I learned so much more about grief than I ever thought was possible. Grief is a beautiful and transformative journey, and I am honored to have studied it from the perspective of art and in turn, create a striking representation of grief that can be used to help others.

Initially, I approached a poet to write poetry based on the images that I provided. When the time came, the poet did not respond, and I was left to either find another poet or write the poetry myself. I was not initially inclined to writing it myself, but I am glad that I did. I feel that my photography and my words made the overall message more powerful. What I wasn’t able to capture with images, I was able to articulate with words.

Overall, I would say that I am pleased with the result of my thesis and my deliverables. I was able to create a document that would be used as a therapy tool for grief therapy. I have shown the finished product to many people, and the reactions to the different series vary drastically on what each person has experienced. My goal was to create something that aided in conversation and served as a place of solace in the dark time that is grief. No two people will experience grief the same way, and that was also my hope for this book; that it would personal connection to things that are special to each person and their own story.

My research illuminated that there was a gap in the photographic resources available on the subject of grief and I believe my photography and publication have begun to fill that gap in a compelling, articulate and dynamic way. In the future, I would love to expand this project to include many different reasons and show even more feelings associated with grief to tell an even more significant story. But I do feel this is an excellent start and could pave the way for using photography as a way to help encourage conversation and connection within grief therapy.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

For more information on this thesis and to see more photographs from each series, please visit: www.audrarygh.com

Please remember that this thesis document and "Maze: Visualization of Grief" is not to serve as a replacement for professional therapy or counseling.

If you are struggling with grief or would like more information on the subject, please visit: www.grief.com

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