

**Carolyn Ng**

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# My LOG Book in the Aftermath of Loss

**In grief therapy, attending to the losses that clients experience is essential, but it is equally important to help clients find comfort, seek meaning in the transition and learn important life lessons in the midst of pain and loss. Such benefit-finding is crucial for re-establishing resilience in bereavement.**

In grief therapy, it is essential to attend to the losses that clients experience. Yet it is equally important to help clients find comfort, seek meaning in the transition and learn important life lessons in the midst of pain and loss. As research (Kim et al., 2013; Lichtenthal & Breitbart, 2015; Neimeyer, 2019) has shown, such benefit-finding is crucial for re-establishing resilience in bereavement. In addition to validating clients' loss experience and eliciting sources of comfort, research (Bellet, Jones, Neimeyer & McNally, 2018; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Hibberd, 2013) has also highlighted the importance of helping clients reconstruct their shattered assumptive world and figure out a new path ahead. Such a new path may be in the form of re-prioritizing things in life or actualizing a new self as discovered and relearned through the loss experience. As a whole, the reconstructed worldview serves as a central factor mitigating the risk for complications and enhancing the potential for post-traumatic growth.

## My LOG Book in the Aftermath of Loss

My LOG Book in the Aftermath of Loss is a tool to facilitate clients' reflection on three important aspects of their experience that bring them to therapy, represented by the word LOG. The 'LOG Book' symbolizes and documents clients' experiences after encountering a major loss event in life. Let us see how.

*Clients gradually recognize the ripple effects that may involve secondary, intangible losses.*

**1. Loss – What and/or whom they have lost?**

In this segment, clients are invited to reflect on what and/or whom they have lost and how – through death, separation, illness, relocation or redundancy. On a trifold pamphlet-like paper, clients write or draw their responses on the middle panel. Some questions that facilitate reflection:

- What or whom have you lost?
- What do you miss?
- What has been taken away, or even robbed, from you?
- What does [lost object/role] mean to you?
- Who was [the deceased] to you?

Clients gradually recognize the ripple effects that may involve secondary losses (death/divorce also resulting in loss of income or home), intangible losses (sense of security or purpose) and so on. This process may help clients claim the previously unclaimed losses, and realize the meanings possibly embedded in these losses, thereby acknowledging the loss and eventually integrating it into their broader life stories.

**2. Oasis – Possible source of comfort going through the desert-like aftermath of loss**

*Clients reflect on things that serve as their sources of comfort, appreciation and/or learning in the midst of sorrow, lament and brokenness.*

In this segment, the desert metaphor may be used to describe the aftermath of loss and introduce the image of an oasis that can be sought or found in this inhospitable terrain. This is to invite clients to reflect on things that serve as their sources of comfort, appreciation and/or learning in the midst of sorrow, lament and brokenness. They may write or draw their responses on the right panel in their trifold LOG Book, folded over as the layer of comfort cushioning the painful losses underneath. Some questions that facilitate reflection:

- Despite the pain of loss, what has been comforting to you?
- Looking back, what one thing are you thankful about?
- Through this loss experience, what do you come to appreciate?
- Even in your loss, what still remains that you value?

*This process helps clients regain a sense of control, reconstruct their sense of self and life outlook.*

- What important life lessons may be embedded in this loss?

The therapists should take an even slower pace because this reflection requires clients to switch lens from loss to possible 'silver-linings', helping them discover different perspectives and construct a broader frame.

### 3. Goals / Growth – *What can be the direction and purpose for life ahead?*

Finally, the clients are invited to visualize the path of life ahead, as they acknowledge their 'Losses' and yet realize the possible 'Oases' as well. Folding the left panel over like the cover page, they draw their visualization. Giving this image a name to act as motto or reminder, they may consider the path of life ahead and what they want to keep in mind. Some questions that facilitate reflection:

- As you look at your life ahead, what kind of picture do you want to see?
- If there is something important that you want to safeguard as you move forward, what is it?
- Suppose there were an area for growth in the days ahead, what would that be?
- How would you like to see yourself to be as you continue to march forth in this life?
- Should you give a title to this picture, how would you like to name it?

Having had their losses acknowledged and validated, and made the choice to 'flip the coin' and see the other side of their loss experience, clients are better placed to re-look at their future as a whole. While rebuilding shattered lives after major loss is a difficult experience, this process helps clients regain a sense of control, reconstruct their sense of self and life outlook and feel empowered to chart the life-course ahead.

## Case study

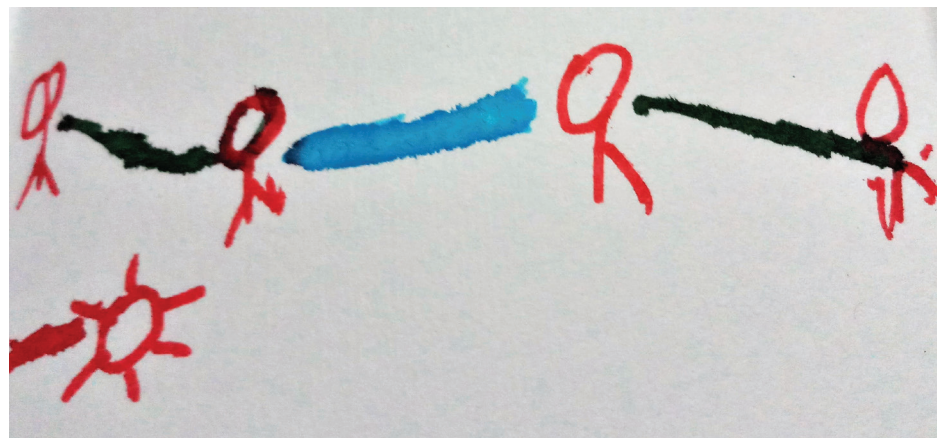
Sixty-five-year-old Elaine lost her elder brother, Eric, aged 80, to complications resulting from a major stroke. They came from a Chinese-Singaporean family. As they had lived together for more than three decades and had a very close sibling bond, Elaine found herself stuck in unrelenting grief as the months passed, while

her two other siblings seemed to have moved on with their lives. In view of her brother's age and medical conditions, she cognitively knew that death might have released Eric from suffering and that she should focus on other things in life now. However, she could not understand why she remained so much in grief, yearning for her brother's presence and feeling very lonely, given that it was not a spousal loss nor child loss, which she deemed as more grief-provoking and difficult forms of bereavement. The author invited her to explore her grief with the *My LOG Book* tool, the gist of which is described below.

**1. Loss** – Elaine was invited to slowly reflect on the following questions:

- Who was Eric to you?
- What have you been missing ever since Eric left?
- What have you actually lost?

Figure 1: Elaine depicted the sibling bonds as a line joining the four of them, with the thick blue cord linking her and Eric



In Figure 1, Elaine depicted the sibling bonds as a line joining the four of them, with the thick blue cord linking her and Eric, demonstrating their unique closeness and strong connection. Elaine realized that Eric had been her constant companion over the years. Though she was his caregiver, she recognized him as her guardian angel in many ways, as symbolized by the sun underneath the sibling bonds in Figure 1. In fact, she had unknowingly developed a sense of security through Eric's presence that was shaken by his departure. Given their age gap and her early loss of father, she also discovered that she had regarded Eric as her father figure, and taking care of him gave her a sense of fulfilling her filial responsibilities as a daughter in accordance with her family's Confucian values. Through this process, Elaine came to make sense of her strong and ongoing grief reactions to Eric's death.

*Though she was his caregiver, she recognized him as her guardian angel in many ways.*

**2. Oasis** – Looking back at the entire life journey with Eric, Elaine was invited to ponder the following questions:

- As you look back at life you both shared, what are some aspects or episodes that bring comfort to you?
- What do you appreciate most about having such a brother?
- Through Eric's life and taking care of him over the years, what learning did you have that has been helpful, especially in this phase of your life?

In Figure 2, Elaine drew several sheep protected by a fence, representing their family gatherings, and shared that Eric was a “family man”, who valued family time. She recalled many episodes in which she intentionally brought her other siblings, nieces and nephews together to spend more time with him, especially during his last few years. Seeing his big smile on those occasions brought her lot of comfort. She was thankful that Eric enjoyed their travels very much. She felt that was the best way to express her gratitude and repay his labour for the family following their father's death. As she reviewed what she had done with and for him, and knowing Eric's easy-going and appreciative character, she was reassured that she had given her best to him, and that he in turn also knew that she loved him very much.

Figure 2: Elaine drew several sheep protected by a fence, representing their family gatherings



- 3. Goals / Growth** – Having understood her grief and identified sources of comfort, Elaine was invited to relook at her present life and respond to the following questions:
- How would you like your path going forward to be?
  - What do you want to safeguard in the days to come?
  - How do you think Eric may still play a role in your life ahead?





Figure 3: Elaine drew a dancing girl, revealing that she was actually very jovial by nature, so she wanted to preserve that trait in herself

In Figure 3, Elaine drew a dancing girl, revealing that she was actually very jovial by nature, so she wanted to preserve that trait in herself. She believed her brother would not want her to lose it either. Despite her brother's death, she felt like continuing to be the "coordinator of family events," as she recognized the importance of strengthening family bonds, like the flowers blooming along the path in Figure 3, and seizing the opportunities to do so to avoid unnecessary regret in the future. Being a retiree, she intended to utilize her time and skills learnt from caregiving by volunteering in a nursing home. She thought of a new sense of purpose in life, symbolized in Figure 3 by the bright sunshine.

### Conclusion

After experiencing a major loss in life, grievors may feel like they are being sucked into a whirlpool of emotions without even knowing its source. It is important for therapists to first help clients examine what they have lost layer by layer, so as to elicit and validate possible intangible and unclaimed losses underneath, followed by helping the clients gradually search for comfort, be it from the loss's "event story", or the "back story" of the griever-deceased relationship (Neimeyer, 2019). As clients embrace both their losses and comfort, they become better prepared to relook at and live the life ahead.

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[Back to Table of Contents](#)