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Art therapy in mitigating pervasive loss and grief within correctional settings

Marissa Hart [a,1], David E. Gussak [a,*,2], Anna Schubarth [b,3]

[a] Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA
[b] Florida Department of Corrections, Tallahassee, FL, USA

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ABSTRACT

Those incarcerated often experience different types of loss. Because of where they are, such experiences often result in unresolved, unacknowledged, *disenfranchised grief*. Recognizing such vulnerability by those who are incarcerated is often difficult and, in some ways, dangerous. Not addressing such losses further exacerbates their chances of completing any respective programs established for success. Art therapy has been effective in alleviating such complications, including for those incarcerated inside correctional institutions. This article draws from the authors' experiences of providing art therapy services in a statewide program for youthful offenders–those who are 14–22 years old but in the adult institutions–to mitigate obstacles for completing their General Education Degree—and will provide an overview of the various losses that incarcerated individuals experience, their potential grief responses, and the value of art therapy in addressing such grief. The case vignettes provided underscore how, as their expressions were made visible and subsequently seen, validated and acknowledged through art therapy, the incarcerated youth were able to begin the process of moving beyond their grief and attend to their goals, allowing them to succeed in their respective programs, which may include but are not limited to; re-entry focused, substance abuse, GED prep classes, college courses and technical trade programs.

In 2020, a state-wide art therapy program was established in Florida's Correctional Institutions developed and placed into nine institutions' educational programs, from which the students may earn their Graduate Education Degree, to mitigate the behavioral, emotional, and mental health challenges for youthful offenders that have created obstacles for their ability to remain in their respective classrooms and prevent being placed in isolation and segregation (Hart et al., 2023; Soape et al., 2021). At the time of this writing, four art therapists provided these services in nine institutions throughout Florida. The program's main goals were to decrease disciplinary reports while increasing program attendance and investment in services. The first author of this manuscript, Hart–one of the art therapists assigned to two of the facilities–came to recognize a significant obstacle for many of her participants in achieving these goals; pervasive loss and its resultant grief. It became clear that many incarcerated individuals experience different types of loss, including freedom and separation from and/or the death of loved ones, compounded by their sense of lost identity, safety, future goals, loss of childhood and innocence, and autonomy. Because of where they are, such experiences often result in *disenfranchised grief*, "… a loss that cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (Doka, 1989).

Acknowledging such vulnerability while incarcerated is often difficult, and can be, in some ways, dangerous, as oftentimes, in an environment where 'survival of the fittest' is the norm, there are others who take advantage of those who exhibit weakness and vulnerability (Gussak, 2019; Warner, n.d.). While such experiences vary considerably, there are consistent responses and symptoms amongst those incarcerated (Nelson et al., 2022). Not addressing such losses through proper and acknowledged mourning could become *complicated grief,* further exacerbating students' chances of successfully completing their respective programs. Art therapy has been found to be effective in mitigating such complications (Beaumont, 2015; Seymour, in press), including for those incarcerated (Gussak, 2007, 2019; Soape et al., 2021). This article will provide an overview of the various types of loss that these

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: dgussak@fsu.edu (D.E. Gussak).
[1] 0000–0001-7687–7819
[2] 0000–0002-2836–6608
[3] 0000–0002-1620–2884

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individuals experience, their potential grief responses, and the value of art therapy in addressing and mitigating grief. Ultimately, case vignettes will illustrate how art therapy was effective with those experiencing these particular - and detrimental - issues in these institutions.

Grief in correctional settings

In its simplest form, grieving is defined as the way people work through understanding loss and make meaning for themselves and their relationships after loss is experienced (Kessler, 2019; Neimeyer et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2022); an emphasis is often placed on learning to live with such loss (Metzl & Shamai, 2021). If such loss is left unaddressed, life-long negative symptoms can develop (Siegel, 2020). Grieving the loss of privacy, relationships, jobs, possessions, mental stability, control, safety, dreams, and goals is an inherent and unavoidable byproduct for those who are incarcerated (Ferszt, 2002; Olson & McEwen, 2004). Those incarcerated are removed from their environments and placed in much more restrictive ones with limited and controlled contact to their community, with minimal autonomy. Even after they are released, as they maintain the label of *former inmates*, they may have additional difficulties obtaining employment, adequate housing, and a chance to build a supportive community. Given such societal norms and dynamics, those who experience such losses are themselves *blamed* for these losses by the dominant culture and thus their grief is often ignored or dismissed. In this way, such grief often becomes *disenfranchised* and *complicated* (Olson & McEwen, 2010).

Disenfranchised grief

Disenfranchised grief is a type of "…grief that is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, and publicly observed…although the individual grieves, others do not acknowledge that the individual has a right to grieve" (Doka, 2002, p.5–6). For this reason, disenfranchised grief often goes unresolved. This is certainly common for those who are incarcerated, who often experience a type of unacknowledged *social death* (Read & Santatzoglou, 2018); fundamentally, the incarcerated are often viewed as deserving their losses. It is perceived by the dominant culture that their grief emerges from the loss of freedom perpetrated by their own activities—whether true or not, and therefore is considered justified (Seymour, in press; Wilson, Johnston & Walker, 2022).

Complicated grief

Unresolved grief may often, in turn, evolve into *complicated grief*. This is when grieving becomes well-embedded and chronic, significantly impacting a person's mental, emotional and physical well-being, limiting their ability to function in their daily lives (Mason et al., 2020). This is further marked by an increase in anxiety, difficulty concentrating, loneliness, longing, desperation, and guilt (Beaumont, 2015). Those who develop complicated grief more often experience sleep disturbances, undifferentiated pain, heart complications and autoimmune diseases (Zisook & Shear, 2009). To stave off such reactions, such a person may further engage in self-destructive thoughts and behaviors, including violent impulses and suicide (Harner & Evangelista, 2011).

As already indicated, this is more likely to emerge for those who are incarcerated. In addition to grief being seen as a natural and deserved by-product of their actions that landed them inside, their ability to address such loss and admit to grieving is further complicated by the environment itself (Read & Santatzoglou, 2018; Wilson, Johnston & Walker, 2022). To avoid being seen as weak or vulnerable, they may refrain from admitting or acknowledging their loss or resultant responses (Gussak, 2004, 2015, 2019), forcing them to grieve alone (Olson & McEwen, 2010). In addition to avoiding such vulnerabilities, many of the youthful offenders lack the social and communication skills necessary to engage in positive outlets that allow them to express themselves in a healthy way (Ferszt, 2002).

Throughout many different grief models there is one common understanding; turning aside the grief-driven social isolation and creating an environment that allows for a safer, healthier grief exploration requires tools that facilitate connection and emotional support (Turner & Stauffer, 2024). Art therapy is just such a tool, providing those inside an opportunity to process their losses while not exposing their vulnerability.

Addressing loss and grief through art therapy for the incarcerated

It is increasingly important to help create a space of acceptance and inclusiveness for individual beliefs and dynamics, all with the aim of avoiding complicated grief (Olsen & McEwen, 2010). Thus, each approach in addressing grief needs to consider the individual, their resources, the context of their relationship with their loss and their own personal circumstances (Beaumont, 2015). Engaging in art therapy can help clients feel empowered and develop a sense of self-worth and can be self-validating in how they perceive their own artistic process and products, and how such works are accepted by others inside *and* outside (Nelson et al., 2022). Art therapy can further provide the impetus for support, social inclusion, and empathy when an external connection can be established through public or private sharing of the art (Law et al., 2021).

Those inside often avoid communicating vulnerabilities for fear of being seen as weak (Fox, 1997; Gussak, 2007, 2019). Lower literacy, high neurological challenges, and avoidance of expressing challenges have negative impacts on the mental, emotional, and physiological wellness of those inside. Art therapy has been instrumental in mitigating issues for those inside, offering a non-verbal intervention, relying on the art materials to encourage inmates to explore their challenges, yet not leave them emotionally and physically vulnerable (Gussak, 2019). This may even be accomplished without discussing what is created, avoiding them having to disclose more than they intended. In many cases, art making can alleviate symptoms that emerge from disregarded grief and loss; this includes improving frustration tolerance, problem solving skills and socialization while alleviating depression, anxiety and anger, that may be the by-products of unresolved, complicated grief (Beck, 1999; Breiner et al., 2011; Hass-Cohen &Carr, King, 2008, 2016; Olson & McEwen, 2004; Seymour, in press). Simply put, art therapy can help those incarcerated express and contain complex emotions that often emerge from unexpressed grief and help create connections, provide emotional support and opportunities for positive peer connection.

As indicated above, the Florida State University/Florida Department of Corrections Art Therapy program was implemented to mitigate the obstacles facing youthful offenders, particularly those that made it difficult for them to complete their education (Soape et al., 2021; Hart et al., 2023). This program, funded through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was originally designed to work with youthful offenders receiving Special Education services while completing adult sentences, but it has since expanded to include those in other programs. Success is demonstrated through decrease in the participants' disciplinary referrals, a reduction of time spent in confinement and an improvement in overall attendance to academic services. However, Hart has come to recognize that oftentimes loss–resulting in disenfranchised, often complicated grief–creates additional, and seemingly insurmountable obstacles in meeting the needs of the incarcerated and ultimately interferes with the intended goals. Prior unaddressed negative experiences affected their attendance in their respective educational programs, and increased their likelihood for disciplinary reports, resulting in decreased time spent accomplishing academic or vocational goals. This further exacerbated their mental, emotional, and physiological well-being (Wilson, Johnston & Walker, 2022) creating a vicious cycle. To address these challenges, Hart created prompts and interventions to facilitate the symptoms that emerged from the unresolved

grief and loss.

In each of the following vignettes a specific prompt was offered that was found to be effective in initiating the exploration of their respective grief experiences, in which participants were simply asked to create an image representing their experience with loss. Sometimes seen as a vague term, participants would often ask what *loss* actually meant. In such cases, they would be provided with examples that reflected loss of safety and security, identity, and of course, friends and loved ones through death –unexpected or otherwise. They were given markers, crayons, pencils, and various sizes of paper to choose from. Oftentimes, this process would be offered after the participants expressed or referred to a loss or a potential grief experience in a prior session.

It should be noted that the three vignettes chosen below are of participants who attended art therapy sessions with Hart for considerably long periods of time prior to the individual sessions being presented. We feel a need to underscore that to be successful, to address such vulnerabilities with those inside, patience was essential to build the trust that was so instrumental to success. As indicated above, trust is hard to come by within these institutions given the propensity of others taking advantage of their vulnerabilities. In addition, perpetuated grief compounds attachment and relational wounds as well as previous vulnerabilities further putting the individual at risk. In other words, we offer this caveat: these processes cannot happen immediately or early in the therapeutic dynamic. What these vignettes reveal is how invaluable and important such exploration is in order to move beyond the systemic and social restraints placed on - or adopted by - the incarcerated.

Daniel: "time heals all wounds but can leave the nastiest scars"

Dan was a 23-year-old man who received a 10-year sentence when he was 17 years old for robbery with a deadly weapon and theft of a controlled substance. He had attended forty-four group and individual sessions over 23 months. He had been initially referred to art therapy by his special education teacher to diminish the struggles he had in school. He eventually aged out of special education services but chose to continue attending school and the requisite services, including art therapy.

Dan had become involved in gangs prior to being incarcerated; he indicated he did so after his best friend was shot and killed by a particular gang. He joined a rival one, ostensibly for revenge; however, he also said that, from his perspective, they provided a sense of community. He continued to be involved in gangs once imprisoned, but he admitted growing frustration and animosity towards his fellow gang members and was working towards leaving it without getting hurt.

After Daniel briefly reflected upon how the loss of his best friend led him to an aggressive and violent lifestyle while in an individual art therapy session, the art therapist suggested that he consider what loss meant to him. He asked to create a drawing about it (Fig. 1).

He started by drawing the dark green boxes, counting them repeatedly to make sure he arrived at the number of years he would have "lost" by the end of his sentence. Despite his careful attempts, he muttered to himself, "I don't even have enough squares, it will be alright. s!!t". He drew blue squiggles, and the Earth with arrows indicating the direction it rotated. He added a road with black lines and a central yellow stripe, small green alligators surrounded by blue, outlined blobs, and a blue outlined stingray. He added a radiating yellow shape, with a red center in the middle of the road, surrounded by green and brown grass. He announced he was finished after he added brown logs.

He remained energetic and expansive throughout the drawing process. When asked to explain his piece, Daniel indicated:

> *[I] lost my life at a young age. Not physically but you know what I mean. I tend to forget things about myself, confidence, feeling lost, quick decisions, the worlds still going on, I just gotta learn how to deal with loss. Already had it, I need to prevent more loss. It makes me feel trapped, weak sometimes, sometimes I might enjoy being lost. It could be an adventure for me. What side of the world, whose beneficial, who I meet. I can't explain it, good and bad. The degrees that come with being lost, past mistakes I have made.*

Fig. 1. : Daniel-"Time Heals all wounds but can leave one of the nastiest scares".

As his focus in the previous session had been on how he lost his best friend, the art therapist asked him why this wasn't the focus of the drawing. He explained, "I can't focus on them all the time. Eventually it consumes you if that's all you focus on." When challenged to what strategies he engaged in to address such loss, he admitted that he often ignored these experiences and the resultant emotions, recognizing that doing so has not been helpful.

> *I don't think nothing heals, just gets old, can't put a lot of energy and effort into it. I need to put energy and effort into something else instead of dwelling on the things I can't change. It's not doing anything for me, it's wasting my time, really.*

He indicated that the logs and the creatures in his drawing represented a swamp, a nasty environment that symbolized his sense of being physically lost. When asked to include a message to himself that he could reflect on a year later, he added on the back, "Time Heals all wounds but can leave one of the nastiest scares."

This vignette serves as an example of disenfranchised grief, compounded by what later became a *social death*, "in which the person is alive but is treated as if dead" (Doka, 2002, p.11). Again, this is common amongst those incarcerated as they are often deemed by society as deserving such loss and punishment, a justifiable result of their actions (Seymour, in press; Wilson, Johnston & Walker, 2022).

While incarcerated, where one has learned not to expose personal feelings–either for being seen as weak or recognizing that such grief will remain unacknowledged and invalidated- such loss may be turned into acts of vengeance and become precursors to self-sabotage. In Daniel's case, this culminated into his - later regrettable - action of joining a gang. After the death of his friend, Daniel felt that he was not given the space to adequately mourn the loss as it was simply not acknowledged or socially supported. His complex response to unacknowledged and disallowed grief emerged as violent acts, resulting in arrest and incarceration. Ultimately, what became most pervasive for him was no longer the loss of his friend, but rather the loss of self. Not only was his friend dead, but figuratively, he was as well. However, when given an opportunity to explore his losses, he began by drawing what was – in essence – a map of the figurative swamp, a metaphor of the nasty environment in which he had found himself. Metaphors are often used by prisoners to express themselves as a language of safety (Tucker & Luetz, 2022).

Prior to this session, Daniel was reluctant to talk, and often refused to leave his cell or return any of the workbooks given while he was in restrictive housing. However, following this session, he accepted more opportunities to attend art therapy sessions and was overall less guarded and defensive. Within this therapeutic dynamic, he felt acknowledged, seen, and as a result, began to 'learn how to deal with loss.' Over time, as he found new ways to visually represent the turmoil that he could not otherwise express, time – and the art – began to heal his wounds.

Mark: "I just can't cry"

Mark was a 20-year-old man who received a 13-year sentence for manslaughter and assault with a deadly weapon. He began group art therapy sessions when he was a youthful offender, referred by his special education teacher to address his behavior and seeming lack of investment in the program. He had attended twenty-six art therapy sessions for 10 months, was transferred to another setting for 3 months, and then, upon his return, attended thirteen more sessions during the following 8 months.

Mark revealed very little information about himself during his sessions; he had grown up in a small town and had been involved with gangs. It was also discovered that he had a small child, but again, he never really talked about it. During one particular group session, he was asked to create a container in which he could "place thoughts and feelings in to protect or hide them from others", he made a coffin. He refused to indicate what the container represented. While the art therapist did not prompt him further at that time, she decided to further explore what loss meant to him in a later individual session by offering the directive used with Daniel, "what is your experience with loss."

Unlike the other cases presented here, Mark had spent the previous 8 months in a restrictive housing unit, isolated from the rest of the correctional population, as he was considered a high security risk. As a result, he wore special manacles when in session – cuffs on his wrist attached to a waist chain, which were, in turn, attached to his feet, making mobility challenging. The device provided enough slack in the chain for him to draw, and stand. He intermittently stood and sat while drawing Fig. 2.

It is of a simply drawn house-like structure that dominates the middle of the page and a developmentally simple smiling figure standing below it. Three square-like shapes are drawn around the edges of the page; on each he wrote RIP and a separate name. The entire drawing is outlined with a single blue color. He added two written statements on the drawing: One in blue indicated "This is a funeral that my two homeboys & stepdad are at. 2 on the same side of the funeral and 1 on the other side". He added one in red that indicated "after the funeral I was mad cause I lost all 3 of the people I care for most in life so I was thinking a lot, but I could not cry but I was mad and wanted to take it out on everybody cause I didn't know who did it." When asked at the end of session if he felt his drawing was complete, he added an orange and yellow sun in the top left corner.

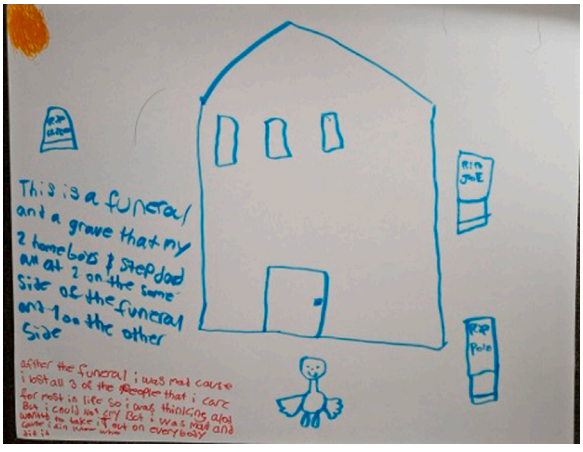

Fig. 2. :Mark- Three Funerals.

While he was generally quiet as he drew, he spoke about the three gravestones he included, and that the building was the church in which the funerals were held. When he was done, he began to speak. At first, he focused on what the drawing included, indicating "I could have drawn more people attending but I didn't really like them." He then specified that all the funerals of his most impactful losses were conducted at the same church included in the drawing, all on different days. He began telling their stories.

As a child, Mark was close to his stepfather until the man was arrested and imprisoned "for a long time." Once released, his stepfather shared his plans to 'change his ways.' However, about two to three months after his release he was shot and killed. Mark had come home from school to find his whole family there; he knew then that it must have been something big that had happened, but he had not been expecting to hear about the death of the man he thought of as his father. He became upset at the funeral when he recognized some of the attendees were people who had "f@ !# ed with him." However, although Mark was describing a difficult and painful memory, he began to laugh; after he stopped, he admitted that he laughed so as not to confess how upset he really was. He then continued with his narrative.

Eight months later a close friend of his was killed, someone who he had been with earlier in the day but not when it happened; he only heard that his friend had died when he arrived at the hospital. Seeing how angry he was, his friend's family who were at the hospital begged Mark "…not to do something stupid, but I didn't want to hear it…People got mad about me not crying. I just can't cry. It made me mad, so I walked away. I've lost too many people." He admitted to becoming upset when the people believed he didn't care because he couldn't cry; he claimed that they simply didn't understand that after so many losses he had lost the ability to do so.

The third tombstone belonged to yet another close friend, killed about a year and a half after his stepfather, from.

> *"a fight [that] broke out…. I was on my way but it had broke out before I got there. When the police called [my friend's] mom, she called me and asked if I had talked to him. I told her I didn't but I told her that 'he was good. About 4 hrs later, his mom was called to identify the body.*

Mark admitted "one tear came down my face that time;" still, he responded violently towards this death, forever threatening that "somebody going to die." He began smoking and drinking heavily. Mark admitted that his mother was worried he would do something bad.

At his friend's funeral, he began laughing; people around him thought "I was crazy, but I just said 'Naw.'" Although another fight occurred at the funeral, he simply stood by and watched even though he "was packing." He said he was upset that people were fighting at the funeral, disrespecting his friend in such a manner. However, when he later found out that the fight involved someone who had made a joke about his friend's death, he went to that person's house and threatened him.

While Mark experienced a great many deaths of people in his life, these were the three that affected him the most. As a rule, when such events occurred, he tended to keep to himself rather than talking with others for fear that someone would say the wrong thing to him and that he would "snap." Mark indicated that although he believed that he and the "universe" were even, he probably needed to focus more on his losses when they came up in sessions, particularly around the anniversary of the losses as they were particularly triggering. However, it was difficult for him to work through his losses because he was arrested; "I said I would change for them but got caught up." Mark indicated that getting an opportunity to do art therapy inside had been helpful, particularly in addressing these losses, as he is "not sure how to say until I'm asked about it." The sessions provided him the opportunity to examine his memories and find new ways to communicate the depth of his loss.

This case provides an example of ongoing, disenfranchised grief that has, by going unchecked, evolved into complicated grief. As indicated above, grief becomes complicated when obstacles impede its healthy expression. As grief continues unexpressed, it becomes chronic, disrupting healthy social functioning and the ability to complete simple daily activities. Quite frankly, in many cases, the person no longer knows *how* to release their grief. They internalize their emotions. Oftentimes, with no healthy outlet or opportunity for expression, the grief may emerge as secondary emotions such as anger, helplessness, and fear, which is then expressed through aggressive and violent actions (Beck, 1999; Harner, & Evangelista, 2011).

Mark had little opportunity to express just what such loss did to him. In each case, Mark responded in a manner he thought was suitable for his circumstances and situations. He laughed when describing the death of his stepfather, believing that if he did not, he would display the grief in a manner unacceptable to those around him. Eventually, when it became clear to him that he was indeed expected to cry, he felt he could not; his loss was so pervasive that he lost the ability to mourn in a healthier manner. Instead, his grief and loss manifested into self-sabotage and aggressive acting out. Once inside, it became even more difficult without community support and with limited resources. It wasn't until he was offered a new method of expression, one that did not require him to find the words that he no longer had available for describing the depths of his losses, that he was able to excavate his memories and make them available for reflection and examination. While complicated grief is difficult to reconcile and overcome, this method of expression is the first step in sublimating the grief and aggression in a manner that is much more productive (Gussak, 2019; Nelson et al., 2022; Turner & Stauffer, 2024).

Juan: "I just want to break things"

Juan is a 20-year-old man, who was incarcerated for many crimes, including attempted first-degree murder, for which he received 12 years. At the time of this writing, he had received thirty group and individual art therapy sessions during the previous 11 months. Although he completed his education, he was referred to art therapy by his teacher to continue addressing the many challenges that often resulted in aggressive and impulsive actions. During his numerous sessions, he often alluded to many losses in his life, but was reluctant to explain them; he essentially omitted as much information as possible as trust had to be earned.

As a rule, he was initially reluctant to even explore these experiences through his artwork. When encouraged to do so during one individual session, he became quite volatile, threatening to break a chair. "I feel uncomfortable doing something like this, I want to break things when I bring stuff up like this." It was only when he was encouraged to knead some clay that was on the table that he was able to be redirected. After he paced and worked the clay for approximately 10 min, he was able to calmly sit down; he then explained, "I lost a lot of things [including my] temper. The only thing I haven't lost is my mind. So, we are doing okay." Still, he refrained from expressing his feelings, indicating "we have to filter [these feelings in his art] because we don't know who could see this." However, after much encouragement he eventually completed Fig. 3.

It is a simple composition relying primarily of words; the word "Lost" is written boldly in the top center, under which are fifteen lines that gradually get shorter, surrounded by nine words: these include 'Reason', 'timper'[temper] and control on the left, 'emotions', 'hope', 'thoughts', 'energy', 'people' and 'personality' on the right. When asked, he admitted that completing this composition was indeed better than talking about what pained him, but that he was "unable" to fully express his grief because he was afraid it looked too much like depression, which would make him appear weak.

He admitted that if something becomes too difficult for him that he would become lazy; this included working through his losses. Yet, he

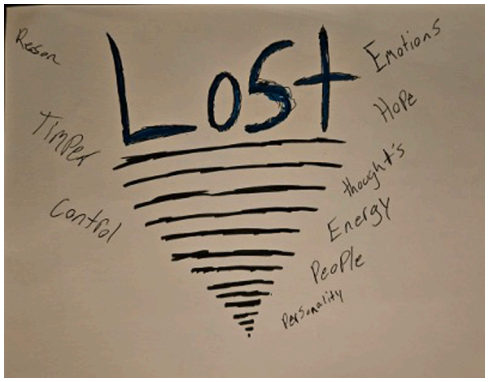

Fig. 3. :Juan – "Lost".

recognized "but if not now, when?" As he considered whether there were more words he could add on each side of the page in front of him, he indicated that in order to "heal, he had to dig deeper. Might as well do it now, while I got the help. And talking about it is worse, because [with] art [it] is just me and the paper. It's allowing myself to feel." Still, he contradicted himself; he chose to write words instead of drawing a picture as he.

> *…didn't want to go into that space. I feel like it would look kind of like depression. Waiting until there is no choice to deal with it but it's not good to get to that place. You got to make the time.*

Addressing loss inside becomes a seemingly insurmountable challenge, even for those who recognize a need to address it to move forward. While initially reluctant to address his grief, wanting instead to respond with an impulsive, violent act – similar to Mark above – Juan engaged with the materials provided to refocus and feel engaged. Creating the piece and fulfilling the process eventually provided the space for him to begin expressing what loss looked like for him. Granted, the "drawing" Juan created still revealed resistance and defensiveness, as he relied on words, worried that imagery may appear depressed and leave him appearing too vulnerable. Still, the process provided him a means of tapping into his vulnerabilities while not leaving them exposed, offering the initial steps toward resolution. While he may not have trusted the system, the teachers, staff and even the therapists, he trusted the art.

Summary

There are approximately 80,000 inmates incarcerated in the Florida Department of Corrections. Daniel, Mark, and Juan were just three of them, chosen to highlight that despite different experiences, they all have experienced some form of loss and grief. Yet, notwithstanding its pervasiveness, given the accepted and expected social mores, their experiences had no opportunity to be resolved given 'the life they've chosen.' This resulted in the common tendency to repress such emotive responses so as not to appear vulnerable and weak to those around them as is common in the prison milieu. Dan reflected on how he couldn't focus too much on his losses as they became overwhelming and easily consumed him. Mark often felt misunderstood; friends and family could not accept why he was unable to cry, often challenging him on how he must care so little for those he lost. Juan, while admittedly distraught, preferred to destroy things rather than discuss his grief. This, in turn, resulted in anger and resentment. As such, disenfranchised grief ran rampant, running the risk of becoming complicated grief.

Yet, despite their seemingly insurmountable obstacles, each expressed surprise and gratitude on how the art provided a catalyst for describing and expressing their losses. The art provided the opportunity for healthy and relatively anonymous expression, facilitating a more trusting dynamic with the therapist and with the environment. While the

initial focus was on a singular loss, this led to exploring several experiences, in a sense opening the proverbial can of worms. As their expressions were made visible and subsequently seen, validated, and acknowledged, they could begin the process of moving beyond their grief, remove the perceived obstacles, and once again attend to the goals established by the program, allowing them to succeed with their respective educational goals while demonstrating an overall decrease in disciplinary reports and seclusion.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anna Schubarth: Writing – original draft. **Marissa Hart:** Writing – original draft. **David E. Gussak:** Writing – original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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