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## Illness, dying, death and mourning

Children and young people are also confronted with these life issues and have to cope with the resulting manifold inner and outer changes. In order for them to be able to deal with what they have experienced in the best possible way, to integrate it into their biography and to adapt to the new circumstances of life, they need not only a lot of factual information (reactions to grief, illness, dying, death, burial ...) but also people who can accompany them honestly and openly in accordance with their emotional and cognitive development. They need someone they can trust, whom they can ask their questions and who can bear their suffering. Well-intentioned protection can cause mistrust and a loss of trust.

If children have no opportunities to come to terms with their losses, they are denied essential developmental opportunities. Pathological

disorders can develop. Children need sensitive, individual support that includes many aspects, precisely because mourning processes can be complex and complicated. It is essential to prevent mental illness and to maintain or regain physical and mental health.

The focus of support and therapy should therefore be on psychological hygiene, stabilisation, strengthening of inner and outer resources, development of coping strategies and, above all, dealing with the tasks of the mourning process. In addition, the psychosocial situation of the family system should be taken into account.

### Who can work with the memo cards?

- ▶ The memo cards on the topics of dying, death and mourning are intended for use in psychotherapeutic practice, grief counselling, counselling, education and coaching work with children, young people and their families.
- ▶ They are suitable for all areas of professional outpatient therapy and counselling as well as in inpatient facilities and hospices.
- ▶ The cards can be used in individual, group and family therapy settings.
- ▶ In addition, day-care centres, schools, parents and caregivers can use the cards preventively or in acute situations, and they can also be used in further education and training.

### Aims and uses of the memo cards

The memo game can be used as therapy material to help build relationships with clients. Therapists and counsellors can use the memo cards to work with their clients on the topics of dying, death and mourning in a child-friendly, playful and resource-oriented way.

The realistic drawings are intended to convey basic factual knowledge about the complex of topics through a colourful, life-affirming design of the motifs. Ideas and images about illness, dying, death and mourning shape feelings, thinking and behaviour. Therefore, it is essential to eliminate false and stressful images and ideas. Especially children who experience serious illnesses, dying and death in the family need factual explanations and should be stimulated in their self-efficacy through creative activity.

Therapeutic work should be oriented towards the individual abilities, needs and concerns of the individual client(s), while promoting and working on the grief tasks at hand:

- ▶ understanding and accepting the loss as reality
  - ▶ express feelings and thoughts in the context of the loss
  - ▶ adapt to the changed circumstances of life
  - ▶ assign a new place to the deceased person
  - ▶ integrating the experience in a healing way
- The cards offer the possibility to prepare clients and reference systems for an impending death and / or the funeral service. The therapist or counsellor has the opportunity to find out what thoughts and feelings are on the client's mind through playful exchange. In addition, what the client has already experienced can be explored and reflected upon. Targeted questions in the context of the game can, for example, provide orientation on how the client experienced learning about the life-shortening diagnosis, the death news or the circumstances of death. Such information enables targeted and individual support of the grieving process and encourages clients to ask questions themselves. In the playful discussion, internal and external changes resulting from the loss can be brought into view and reflected upon. The age-appropriate clarification of grief reactions (physical, psychological, behavioural and social reactions) can strengthen clients in their self-understanding and self-confidence as well as create more understanding for each other in reference systems. Together with the client, new, comforting perspectives can be found and a healing integration of what has been experienced can be promoted. Difficult, complicated or pathological mourning processes can be uncovered and helpfully supported.



## Functions of the memo cards

- ▶ Bringing illness, dying, death and mourning out of the taboo zone
- ▶ Conveying knowledge about illness, dying, death and mourning
- ▶ Establishing open communication about experiences of loss
- ▶ Exploration and reflection of the experience
- ▶ Identification and expression of feelings and thoughts
- ▶ Dissolving stressful, traumatic images and ideas
- ▶ Clarification of open questions Providing impulses for the individual mourning process
- ▶ Discussion in the sense of mourning tasks
- ▶ Stimulation of creative processes - self-efficacy
- ▶ Memory and biography work
- ▶ Uncovering and activating resources
- ▶ Triggering processes of change and adaptation
- ▶ Overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers
- ▶ Bringing humour and lightness into the process
- ▶ Supporting diagnoses and treatment: trauma, adjustment disorder, persistent grief disorder ...
- ▶ Strengthening social competences of the individual as well as in families, day-care centres, schools and institutions.

### Scientific background

The development of the cards is based on findings from grief research, such as aspects of the Dual Process Model (DPM) by Stroebe et al. (2001), the Grief Task Model by J. W. Worden (2018), as well as developmental psychology and psychotherapy.

In grief counselling and therapeutic work with the cards, the »grief tasks« defined by Worden and supplemented by other grief researchers (understanding and accepting the loss as reality, expressing feelings and thoughts of grief, uncovering and activating resources, adapting to the new living environment, giving the

deceased a new place) can be taken up, individually supported and worked on. The factors influencing »mediators« on mourning processes as well as the client's coping strategies and attachment styles should also be included. Furthermore, the cards are designed in such a way that the three dimensions of children's understanding of death (Wittkowski, 1990) can be worked on with the diverse possibilities of the memo cards:

- ▶ Irreversibility - death cannot be reversed.
- ▶ Causality - death has a cause.
- ▶ Universality - all living beings must die.



## Game instructions classic memo

**Players:** 1-8 from 4 years

**Objective:** The objective of the game is to find two cards with identical motifs and then collect as many pairs of cards with identical motifs as possible.

**Preparation:** The cards are shuffled and laid out on a table or other playing surface with the motif side down so that the motifs are covered. The cards should not lie on top of each other.

**Start of the game:** The first player (the youngest or oldest) begins by looking for the same motif cards. On his turn, he uncovers any two cards without moving their position. If there are different motifs, the two cards remain face up for a short time for all players to see. Each player should try to remember the motifs and their position on the board. Then the two cards are turned back in the same place with the motif facing down. Clockwise, it is the next player's turn and she may turn over two cards. Whenever a player has found two cards with the

same motif, they may keep them and it is their turn again. If two unequal cards are turned over, no further card may be turned over. Then it is the next player's turn.

**End of the game:** The game ends when there are no more cards left on the board to turn over.

**Winner:** The game is won by the player with the most pairs of cards. If several players have the same number of pairs of cards, there are several winners or an additional new round of play.

**Easier variant:** One of the two face-up cards may be left face-up, so pairs of cards can be found more easily.

**Shorter game duration:** Fewer pairs of cards can be used, so the game is easier and finished more quickly.

### **Variations of the classic memo game**

Further diverse application possibilities of the memo cards in individual or group settings enable a flexible, needs-oriented and varied use in the therapeutic-counselling process, which can also be designed on one's own initiative and creatively:

- ▶ **Pre-sorted variant:** Only a certain selection of cards comes into play. The therapist pre-sorts cards on topics that are to be addressed in the setting or the group and can prepare specific questions according to the individual situation.
- ▶ **Tell personal story:** The client can determine an individual selection of cards from the revealed cards to which she can relate her own experiences. Another variation: The therapist / counsellor gives a selection of cards.
- ▶ **Choose question cards:** The client may choose from the revealed cards those themes about which he/she has questions. In this way, unclear topics or stressful experiences can be brought into focus.

- ▶ **Work out a chronology:** With the help of the therapist/counsellor, the client can use the revealed cards to establish a chronological order of personal history, e.g.: Illness, dying, finding out about the death, cause of death, delivering the death notice, funeral director, choosing a coffin... In this way, the experience can be placed in the client's own biography.
- ▶ **Explanatory memo:** The therapist / counsellor uses the cards to impart factual knowledge in order to answer open questions or to clear up misconceptions that can be stumbling blocks in the grieving process. In addition, preventive information can be provided on the topic or a funeral service can be prepared and followed up.
- ▶ **Designing cards yourself:** The client can draw their own ideas, conceptions or questions on small cards. The self-designed cards can be used to work on additional topics and shape the process.
- ▶ **Collecting questions:** Using the open motif cards, questions can be collected in individual or group work and discussed in the plenary.
- ▶ **Impulse and reminder:** The therapist gives the client one or more cards as a copy to take home. The copies of the cards can serve as an impulse to reflect on a topic, as a reminder for the client or as a stimulus for discussions in the frame of reference.
- ▶ **Drawing cards:** The client draws any card from the face-down cards and may ask, tell or draw something about it. The therapist can also work with pre-sorted motifs to guide the process.

## Additional variations in group or family settings

### ► Sharing and reflecting on experiences:

Using the cards in groups and families can promote communication, sharing and reflection of experiences on the theme complex.

► **Educational work:** The cards can be used preventively or due to a current occasion in day-care centres, schools, bereavement groups, hospices and institutions. The motifs on the cards can be used for lectures, exchanges or games to provide factual information on the complex of topics in accordance with cognitive understanding. Previously selected motifs or all motifs can be used. In addition, the cards can be used as a stimulus in parent and family work. Preventive work on the topic can make it easier to deal with acute situations.

► **Discussion rounds** can be opened with the cards. Each participant chooses a card from the openly laid out cards and reports why this card was chosen. The question can be further specified by having the selection include, for example, a personal question or experience about the motif.

► **Create a quiz:** One card from each pair of motifs is laid out. The easier version (motif visible) or the harder version (motif hidden) can be chosen. Each participant draws a card. The first person to correctly explain the motif of the card wins one point. If all cards have been used, the one with the most points wins.

## Overview of the card motifs and impulses

For the use of the memo cards, the following suggestions and key words can be helpful for all game variants.



**Dead bird:** understanding of death »universality« - all living beings, plants, animals and humans have to die, characteristics of death, causes of death, »Have you ever seen a dead animal? If so, what did you do?«



**Man in hospital:** illness, hospital, medical equipment, not all illnesses lead to death, sick people often look different or smell unpleasant, no need to be ashamed, »Why do people die?« - Saying goodbye, clarifying understanding of death »causality«. Children's frequent concern that other caregivers or they themselves may die can be addressed.



**Delivering the news of death:** »Who told you about the death?« Caregivers, emergency chaplain, police, own reactions, reactions of caregivers, open questions ...



**Doctor examines deceased man:** characteristics of death: no breathing, no heartbeat, no movement, issue death certificate, »Why did NN die?«, »Was someone to blame for his death?«. Shame? Taboo way of death? Understanding of death: Irreversibility: Death cannot be reversed. Tip: Have a pulse taken, listen to the heart with a stethoscope.



**Undertaker's car, undertaker's vehicle with coffin:** How does the deceased get from the hospital or to the cemetery? Characteristics of the death





**Obituary:** What is a death notice? What does it say? Knowing that you yourself are mentioned as a relative can be comforting. What is a funeral card? What would you write about the deceased?



**Family chooses coffin:** Clarify profession and duties of funeral director, give info on coffins, burial and funeral service, attend funeral service, participate in funeral service design, »Would you paint the coffin and if so, how?«



**Child makes candle for grandpa:** memories of deceased, rituals and looking for ways to be active themselves.

Tip: create a candle / picture with the client



**Casket from inside:** Lining, no empty wooden box, last resting bed, coffin handles, being allowed to give something, being able to choose clothes for the dead, painting coffin, »What would you give the deceased?«, »What clothes would he have liked to wear?«, »What would you want to wear in the coffin?«



**Urn, photo and flower decorations:** technical knowledge of urn burial, urn grave and urn wall (columbarium), burial of urn in the sea (burial at sea)



**Urn with sink cords and ash capsule:** Burial forms, ashes, ash capsule, what are ashes? Function of the cords

Tip: make ashes with the client from a self-painted picture (also with secret messages)



**Urns:** different forms, self-design possible as with the coffin, funeral rituals: »What rituals do you know?«, »What would you like to do?«, »What are you afraid of?«



**Saying goodbye at the open coffin:** characteristics of death, the dead person is not immediately a skeleton, not a ghost, dead people may be touched, care for dead people, give something, say goodbye, say last words, take fingerprints



**Grave digging:** for burial dig grave with small excavator, cemetery gardener, clarify cemetery, »Have you ever been to the cemetery?«, »How did you feel?«



**Crematorium:** cremation, people are not burnt at the stake or naked, dead people have no pain, the oven is not a baking oven, the coffin is burnt too



**Funeral service:** farewell, funeral service, mourning rituals, mourning in different cultures, different feelings, clothing



**Lowering the coffin:** Carriers lower the coffin into the earth pit by hand with ropes - alternatively: by machine with a coffin lowering device.



**Funeral service:** mourning coffee or regret meal, remembering, saying goodbye, sharing, not being alone, »How would you arrange the mourning coffee of someone who has died?«



**Urn burial:** lowering cords, hole in the ground, no pit, be active yourself: Decorate urn, carry, lower, gravestone: name, meaning of numbers, no new phone number but day of birth and death.



**Memory corner:** reflection of the new place: creating a new, comforting place at home, elsewhere, attachment through memories: Jumper, photos, piece of music, favourite food  
Tip: create memory chest together.



**Grave care:** remembering, doing something for the deceased, the cemetery is not always the place of comfort, it's okay if children don't want to go to the cemetery



**Embrace:** reflection: »Who / what is good for you when you are sad?«, »What do you wish for?«, »Who can you talk to about your questions and feelings?«



**Feelings:** grief reactions: »Which feelings do you know?«, »Which feelings and thoughts have you experienced?«, »Which feelings and thoughts are particularly difficult, which are easy?« All feelings have their place: Anger, envy, laughter, sadness, missing, joy and fear are also allowed.



**Playing children:** Playing and being happy are allowed, even if someone has died. Resource work: »You should take good care of yourself as it suits you«, »Do you play with friends?«, »Do other children know what happened to you?«



**Lifebuoy:** »What helps you not to sink, to get through the difficult situation?«, »What is good for you?«



**Question mark card:** »What else do you want to know?«, »What questions are you interested in?«, »What do you think the others are thinking about?«, »What do you wish you had known?«, »What was good?«, »What did you experience as particularly difficult?«



**Child with memory bubbles of the deceased:** »What experiences were particularly nice?«, »What was not so nice?«, »What else would you have liked to have said - done with the deceased?« Sunny and dark sides of the deceased are allowed to be - possibility to process guilt



**Tree burial:** burial in nature, cemetery forest or forest of rest, often no possibility to leave something for the deceased, note: burial at sea, other cultures



**Afterlife ideas:** »Where do you think the deceased will be after death?«, »Is the deceased well?«, »What would he like?«, »Draw your own afterlife idea.«



**Causes of death:** Car accident, burning house, suicide, death in old age / illness, Understanding death: clarifying causality, Causes of death: Why do people die? Accident, old age, illnesses: physical and mental, catastrophes, crime, clarify circumstances of death, enquire

### Important notes:

- ▶ Please watch out for signs of suicidal tendencies. In this case, call in specialist help, child and adolescent psychiatrists or a child and adolescent psychiatric emergency clinic.
- ▶ Please note that it is important to reflect on your own experiences of loss and grief in order to be able to provide helpful support.
- ▶ Please note that as a counsellor and therapist you cannot know everything about the last questions of life and death and that, for example, ideas about the afterlife express personal beliefs.



### The author

**Stephanie Witt-Loers** is a bereavement counsellor, therapist and author. She specialises in loss and mourning processes and

has been supporting children, young people and their families in dying and mourning situations for years. She is the author of many specialist books and articles and heads the Dellanima Institute as well as the cooperation project »Living with death - accompanying grieving families«. As a lecturer for seminars and lectures, she travels throughout Germany and abroad. With her many years of experience, she works in outpatient grief therapy on behalf of various youth welfare offices, children's homes and institutions for people with disabilities. She also advises and accompanies daycare centres, schools and institutions in acute crisis situations or preventively. The idea for the development of the cards came from her work with seriously ill, dying children and their families in Cordoba /Argentina.



### The illustrator

**Sylvain Mérot** is an independent illustrator and artist. After studying industrial design, he worked as a graphic designer in

Paris and Lisbon. He mainly illustrates children's books and psychological textbooks. In addition, as Monsieur Sylvain, he has illustrated numerous books with his comic-like figures, made videos and staged installations. Sylvain Mérot's art is characterised by his sense of whimsical stories, wit and black humour. A special feature of his art is the use of discarded objects. In terms of content, Sylvain Mérot plays with the most diverse genres of art history and brings them into new contexts through the representational reference to the everyday world.

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