

# My House After Loss

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## **CLIENTS FOR WHOM THE TECHNIQUE IS APPROPRIATE**

This exercise is appropriate for adults and youngsters who would benefit from a reflection on how their identity and interaction with others has changed after the loss of a loved one. Some ability to reflect with some distance is needed. Therefore, it might be less suitable shortly after a loss, or for clients who find it hard to think in a metaphorical way. This reflection on self can be used in individual therapy (spread over multiple sessions), as well as in group therapy.

## **DESCRIPTION**

After the death of a loved one or other major losses (e.g., illness, injury, separation, redundancy), most mourners describe that they have fundamentally changed. The person before the loss is no longer the same as who they become after the loss. The way mourners are in relation to others could also change profoundly. In this reflective exercise, clients are asked to represent themselves metaphorically as a house since the loss of their loved one. The inside of the house symbolizes what they keep at home (furniture, etc.) and what 'rooms' (aspects of the self) they include within them. Loss usually requires a redevelopment and reconstruction, changing the organization and arrangement of the 'rooms'. The outside of the house shows how they relate themselves to their environment. This exercise comprises 3 phases, as follows.

### *1. Guided reflection*

The therapist invites the client to focus his or her attention inward, to close the eyes and listen to what the therapist has to say. A brief meditation exercise, poem or song can precede this. The therapist tells the client that since the loss, he or she might have changed as a person, both in terms of what is inside (emotions, thoughts, priorities, sensitivities, etc.) as well as outside, what other people notice (one's appearance, self-presentation, etc.): "Imagine that you would be a house, with an inside and an outside, what would this house look like?" Sometimes it is important to emphasize to clients that it is not about the house of their dreams, or the house they live in now, but rather that the house is a metaphor to represent themselves as a person.

"Let's start with the outside: you as a person, symbolized as a house, in relation to your outside world." Calmly and slowly, the therapist gives some examples: "Maybe you experience yourself as a chalet, an igloo, or a castle, a farm, a glass house, a mansion, or a tree-house". After some silent time, the therapist elaborates on four major aspects of the house (location, size, style and accessibility), with a number of questions or examples: "Do you experience yourself, for example, as a house standing by itself, or rather as an apartment or as a rowhouse? Does your home stand in a quiet area, in the countryside, perhaps in a dead end street, or in a forest? Or in the hustle and bustle of a city?" In between, the therapist repeats that the intent is to represent themselves, as a person, as a house, and that the image does not have to be realistic: "It can also be a house on stilts in the center of the city, or a glass house on the water." Then the therapist focuses on the size of the house: "Is your home a small house, or maybe a little attic room, or a big chic villa or apartment building?" The therapist leaves time for reflection, and then goes on: "Possibly there are images coming to your mind, or you might already have a detailed

picture about yourself as a house. Now take some time to sit still with the style of your house. Does your house have a classic look or is it modern architecture? Is your house round or rather square or made in different blocks? Maybe there is a difference between the front of the house and the back? Perhaps your house also has a garden house that is separate from it? Perhaps your house has a garden, with flowers, trees or bushes? Are there striking details on the outside of your house?" Finally, the therapist focuses on the accessibility of the house: "Is your home close to the street or rather remote? Is there a fence around your house or maybe a secured door with a code? Is there a driveway to your house? Does your house have many or few windows that allow others to look inside? Are there several doors? Do you have a bell at the door, or a knocker, or is the door always open?"

After a longer silence, the therapist switches to the inside of the house. "Is your house one big room (a loft or large room) or does it have different rooms? Are there different floors, maybe even an attic or basement? Are there any rooms or places in your home where you receive guests, or where do you retreat or unwind? Are there any rooms in your house that you prefer not to be, or that are forbidden for others to access?" Next, the decor of the house is being discussed: "See how your house is designed on the inside. What style does your house have? Are there many colors or is there a dominant color? Is it rather minimalistic, or with a lot of wood, or rather a rough or metal surface? Is it cozy in your house? Maybe there is a fireplace? Is your home orderly and tidy, or rather a mess or clutter? Are there any plants or flowers in your house? Are there any pictures, paintings or mirrors? Are there any rooms that need to be redecorated or remodeled or perhaps empty?" Then the therapist focuses on the light intensity. "Is there a lot of light

in your house or is it rather dark? Is your home illuminated with fluorescent lamps or a rather warmer light?" Finally, the therapist focuses on other sensations, such as the smells that may be in the house: "the smell of food, or fresh flowers, or a stench that comes from somewhere," and on possible sounds in the house: "music that sounds in the house or in certain rooms, or a silence... maybe a soft or rather a loud silence".

### *2. Drawing the house*

In a next phase, the client is invited to draw the house that has just been visualized. The therapist prepares several large sheets of paper and all kinds of drawing material (crayons, paints, crayons and pens). Usually, the client chooses to create a separate drawing for the outside and the inside. Often the image is enriched with all sorts of details during the process of drawing.

### *3. Discussion of the process and the drawing*

In dialogue with the therapist or with other group members, the client is invited to tell something about this self-exploration process. "How was it for you to start this exercise? Did a picture come straight away or did it take a while? Were you happy with the images that came? Were there things that surprised you?" The focus then shifts to the process of putting the visualization into a drawing. "How was it to draw this? Were there any changes or updates during drawing?" An important part of this exercise is that the therapists (and fellow clients) also share their impressions about the drawing with the client. For example, in this way the therapist can indicate what surprised him or her when seeing the drawing and link that to themes that had already been discussed in previous sessions. The added value of the exercise in a group context is especially visible in this phase, with reflections of others coming in the form of recognizing similar aspects in the

client's description and their own (e.g., the change in accessibility of the house to the environment, or the need for intimate rooms, or the importance of home security). Finally the recognition of resilient elements in the drawing, or possible differences in perceptions of how someone is in a group and how this same person designed the outside of his or her house, seem to be important therapeutic ingredients.

### **CASE ILLUSTRATION**

Nils lost his 16 year old daughter Charlotte seven years ago. Since her death, he has been through a process of intense self-reflection, part of which took place in a professionally led support group for bereaved parents with whom he completed the My House exercise. In the discussion of his drawing, he focused on how he has changed in the past years in relation to his environment. There was a changed access to his house, which can only be visited by people with authentic interests and time. In response to this contribution, we asked him to write a short text appropriate to his drawing.

#### *Becoming me*

*It was a long search. Seeking the criteria this spot had to meet. A place at the water--the house will reflect beautifully in it--the everlasting rippling will bring the sound of peace without monotony. The sun will bewitch it with stars. The spot is at a distance, but not too far away. Far enough from the confusing overloaded human world and at the same time close enough to pay a visit without too much effort. Via a path, a dead-end side road. This exit off the main road leads to a unique combination of nature's beauty. Warmth, colours and relief will surprise the visitors who want to explore purposefully. The path is only viable for those who want to take the time and want to discover what the promenade can offer.*

*The house is standing along this path. The house reflecting 'me'. Build on an open spot bounded on the water side. A hundred years old oak tree spreads its branches protectively over the house. Only this tree interrupts the view over the water and the landscape surrounding the house. An extensive thatched roof offers protection against too much sun or rain. Enjoyable to take shelter in when necessary. The rectangle roof is supported by four tree-trunks. Their age and strength emit safety and security. The house only has one wall, the other three sides are open. No windows or doors, attractive to visit. Looking in and looking out are in no way blocked. Under the roof is standing a big, long table, on high table legs, surrounded with many stools. The table invites visitors to eat together, to talk, to laugh, to drink, to meet each other. Seats around the open fire are waiting for readers or thinkers, staring at the flickering flames. The only wall is furnished with small frames in diverse materials and measures. The frames both invite memory and serve as inspiration. They show all significant quotes and mental images of guests to this house.*

*It is a house where each time renewal, surprising moments and new encounters take place. Those people passing by can discover the side path, and enrich the building of the house. The oak offers relaxation and awareness.*

About his experience with this exercise, for himself, and in conversation with the other bereaved parents, Nils related the following:

*To my surprise, my image came on its own, spontaneous without much thought. As a result, the drawing exercise represents the power of the image, an image that lasts for a long time. An image is a thousand words. The interaction with the other parents was*

*all the more impactful because they also call for imagination and thus create dialogue through another approach.*

*I carry the image with me, every day. It makes me more conscious about how I am in life. Open but selective towards other people, more conscious of what makes sense and is useful. A stark contrast to the former house, classical, as society wanted; House, garden, baby, ... Thank you, Charlotte, for removing the walls and finding a better fit. You would find it a lot more fun ....*

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

In working with the bereaved, we have experienced that My House can be a very powerful and profound reflective exercise. Through images, drawing and dialogue one can form and give words to how one has changed since the loss, both in relation to oneself and in relation to the environment. The three different phases of the exercise appear to be important. The slow process of visualisation gives clients time to reflect on themselves and their interaction with the outside world. For many clients, the transition to the drawing makes it more detailed and tangible. The dialogue with the therapist or other bereaved helps to anchor and deepen the self exploration process, and often is what is needed to share these experiences with others, like family members and friends.

As a extension of this exercise, the therapist can invite cliënts to reflect on how they want to change, rebuild, reshape or redecorate their house, on the inside or outside. For example: “How would you like your house to look in five years? How would you like to make it stronger (again), or how would you like your access gate to be different, to have more control over your interaction with your family and friends?” The resulting

metaphors often recur throughout therapy, giving clients a vocabulary for discussing their ongoing reconstruction of their lives following loss.

## **REFERENCES**

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