

## **RE-COLLECTION IN EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH COUPLES AND FAMILIES DEALING WITH DEATH**

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**ABSTRACT:** Re-collection is a treatment dynamic in existential family therapy in which the client family is helped to remember and honor meanings that family members have previously actualized and deposited in the past. This "shrinks" the family meaning vacuum and those symptoms and problems that grow and flourish in a family meaning vacuum. In this article, an existential orientation to re-collection with families who are dealing with the death of a loved one is presented, described, and illustrated with case material.

**KEY WORDS:** existential marital and family therapy; art; poetry; photographs; re-collection; death.

In existential psychotherapy with couples and families, it is believed that many (not all) family symptoms and problems flourish, grow, and fill the existential meaning vacuum which occurs when marital and/or family relationship members are not able to discover and experience a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Andrews, 1974; Frankl, 1959; Lantz, 1974, 1993; Lantz & Ahern, 1994; Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988; Yalom, 1980). In existential psychotherapy

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with couples and families, the function of the therapist is to help marital and family members “notice” meaning potentials and opportunities in the future, discover “actualization” methods to be used in the here and now to make use of meaning potentials, and to remember, “re-collect” and honor meanings previously actualized and deposited in the past (Lantz, 1974, 1978, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996; Lantz & Kondrat, in press). These three basic treatment dynamics in existential psychotherapy with couples and families have been identified as “noticing,” “actualizing,” and “re-collection” (Lantz, 1974, 1995, 1996). These three existential treatment dynamics and their relationship to time are illustrated in Figure 1.

Although noticing, actualizing, and re-collection are all important treatment dynamics in existential family therapy (Lantz, 1974, 1978, 1993, 1995), the purpose of this article will be to focus upon the dynamic of re-collection in existential psychotherapy with couples and families who are dealing with the pain and suffering of the death of a loved one. It is hoped that such a focus upon “re-collection” may have some value in expanding our understanding of “reminiscence therapy” approaches to mental health intervention with couples and families dealing with death.

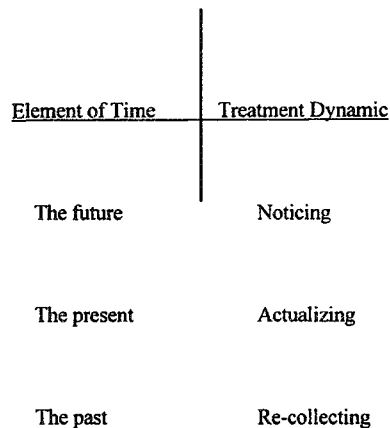


FIGURE 1

## **TIME IN EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH COUPLES AND FAMILIES**

The concept of time is an extremely important aspect of existential psychotherapy with couples and families (Lantz, 1974, 1995, 1996). In existential family therapy, emphasis is placed upon the importance of the past, which then provides an enhanced understanding of both the future and the "here and now" (Lantz, 1974, 1978, 1995). For Viktor Frankl (1959) and other existential practitioners (Lantz, 1974, 1995; Lantz & Ahern, 1994; Schwartz, 1977), the past is understood to be a "storehouse" for meanings that have been actualized and made "forever real." In this view, the past is existence that can never be destroyed (Frankl, 1959; Lantz, 1995). In existential family therapy, the future includes meaning potentials to be noticed, the present is the time to actualize and make use of such meaning potentials, and the past is the storehouse for meanings that have been actualized and made "forever real" (Frankl, 1959; Lantz, 1974, 1995; Lantz & Kondrat, in press).

### **RE-COLLECTION AND THE PAST**

In existential family therapy, the past is the storehouse for marital and family meanings that have been actualized and made "forever real" (Lantz, 1974, 1993, 1995). In existential psychotherapy with couples and families, it is understood that to "forget the past" will always also include forgetting the meanings that marital and family members have actualized and made "forever real." This creates a marital and/or family meaning vacuum in which symptoms grow and flourish (Lantz, 1974, 1993, 1994, 1995). In existential family therapy, helping a couple or family remember the meanings that have been actualized and deposited in the past is an extremely helpful way to "shrink" the marital and/or family meaning vacuum and those symptoms and problems that grow and flourish in this existential-meaning vacuum (Lantz, 1974, 1995). Helping the couple or family to recover, remember, rediscover, and honor meanings previously actualized and deposited in the past can be described as "re-collection" (Lantz, 1974, 1996). In re-collection the marital and/or family therapist uses sincere personal interest, reflection experiences, and expressive activities to help the couple or family remember, recover, and

honor the meanings deposited in the past that have been covered, clouded, repressed, denied, and/or forgotten (Frankl, 1959; Lantz, 1974, 1993, 1995). Although re-collection can be used with families or couples in a variety of situations and/or stages of family life (Lantz & Ahern, 1994), in this article re-collection will be presented as an effective and helpful tool when working with couples and families who are dealing with death. The following two clinical illustrations should provide the reader with a "taste" of how re-collection can be utilized with couples and/or families dealing with death. (Pseudonyms are used in all cases except for the Lantz family.)

### **RE-COLLECTION WITH THE HAGERTY FAMILY**

Mr. Hagerty and his family were referred for family therapy and "re-collection" by the social worker at the hospice agency that was helping Mr. Hagerty and his family face his terminal cancer. Mr. Hagerty was receiving pain medications, social service assistance, and nursing services to help him, his wife, his children, and his grandchildren face his cancer and approaching death with dignity in their own home. Mr. Hagerty had been "worrying" his helpers, children, and wife with his constant desire to talk about his experiences during World War II as a South Pacific combat infantryman. The hospice staff did not understand "why this stuff is so important to Mr. Hagerty."

Re-collection techniques were used by the family therapist to help Mr. Hagerty reflect, remember, and talk about his World War II combat experiences with his family. The therapist used questions, Socratic reflection, and sincere personal interest to help Mr. Hagerty re-collect, honor, and tell his loved ones about the meanings that he and his soldier friends had actualized and made "forever" real during the war. Mr. Hagerty was especially grateful to get to tell his "soldier stories" to his wife, his two adult sons, and to his eldest granddaughter during two conjoint family treatment sessions that were held during the week of Mr. Hagerty's death. Mr. Hagerty reported that he was no longer "afraid of death" because he would soon be joining "soldier friends in heaven" whom he had known when he was a young adult. His wife, sons, and granddaughter appreciated getting to hear Mr. Hagerty's World War II stories as "they made us closer before he died." Mr. Hagerty and his family expressed gratitude to the family

therapist for helping the family to take Mr. Hagerty's past "seriously" and "honoring" his life.

### **RE-COLLECTION WITH THE HENDERSON FAMILY**

Mrs. Henderson served as an Army emergency surgery nurse in South Vietnam during 1969 and 1970. In this occupation she worked extremely long hours to save the lives of severely wounded American and South Vietnamese soldiers. Mrs. Henderson requested psychotherapy in 1985 after her breast surgery and chemotherapy for cancer were unsuccessful and after learning that her prognosis was terminal. Mrs. Henderson reported that since her surgery, she had been having flashbacks where she saw dying soldiers she had worked on in South Vietnam.

Mrs. Henderson reported that she had had no difficulty adjusting to civilian life after returning home from Vietnam. She reported that she had never talked about Vietnam when she came home because "nobody wanted to listen." Mrs. Henderson had walled off her Vietnam past. Mr. Henderson reported that he had tried to talk to his wife about Vietnam, but that his wife had not wanted to bring it up again. Mr. Henderson admitted that he did not try "real hard" to talk about this subject with his wife because he was not sure it was a good idea to "stir things up."

In this family situation, a 33-year-old ex-Army nurse who had been exposed to the terrible death and gore associated with Vietnam combat wounds was unable to talk about her experiences when she came home from South Vietnam. Fifteen years later, facing death from cancer, she started to get in touch with her Vietnam past. For Mrs. Henderson, her flashbacks served the function of making her think about Vietnam before she died. Family treatment with the Henderson family focused upon the use of re-collection experiences to help Mrs. Henderson talk out her Vietnam experiences with her family, to help her grieve the young men she lost in Vietnam, and, in her eldest daughter's words, "to help us honor Mom for the job she did in Vietnam." The family therapist helped the Henderson family realize that "sharing Mom's Vietnam past" could be a meaningful way of helping Mrs. Henderson's two daughters remember their mother with pride as they faced the difficulties of adolescence without a mother.

### **DEDUCTIVE AND INDUCTIVE ASPECTS OF FAMILY RE-COLLECTION**

For Viktor Frankl (1959) and other existential psychotherapists (Lantz, 1993; Lantz & Ahern, 1994), existential family therapy is often helpful because it helps the couple or family facing and dealing with death to remember, re-collect, and honor marital and family meanings previously actualized and deposited in the past. Such re-collection often reduces symptoms because it helps the couple or family "shrink" the existential family meaning vacuum in which many symptoms develop, grow and flourish (Lantz, 1974, 1993, 1996). Figure 2 is an attempt to illustrate the process of re-collection in existential psychotherapy with couples and families who are dealing with death.

The process of re-collection in existential psychotherapy with couples and families dealing with death is both an inductive and a deductive process. It is a deductive, theory-based process in the sense that the process is squarely based upon an existential understanding of time (Frankl, 1959; Marcel, 1948; Schwartz, 1977). In such theory-based deductive interventions, it is accepted and assumed that the process of re-collection will help the couple or family dealing with death to decrease alienation, the existential-meaning vacuum, and those family symptoms that develop in an atmosphere of alienation and the family meaning vacuum (Lantz, 1974, 1995).

The process of re-collection with a couple or family dealing with death is also an inductive process (Lantz, 1995). It is an inductive process of reflection in the sense that the family therapist does not know what the couple or family dealing with death will remember and does not know the kinds of meanings that the couple or family will uncover, remember and honor during the process of re-collection. In existential family therapy, it is extremely important to remember that every couple or family is called by life to actualize and make use of unique meaning potentials in their life (Frankl, 1959; Lantz, 1993; Marcel, 1948). For both Viktor Frankl (1959) and Gabriel Marcel (1948), every family is responsible to answer the call of such unique meaning potentials that exist in their life. As a result, it is impossible to understand deductively the unique meanings that have been actualized and deposited in the past by the couple or family that is dealing with death which are available for re-collection during the practice and process of family treatment (Lantz, 1974, 1995). Frankl (1955) points out that whenever we feel and believe that we "know"

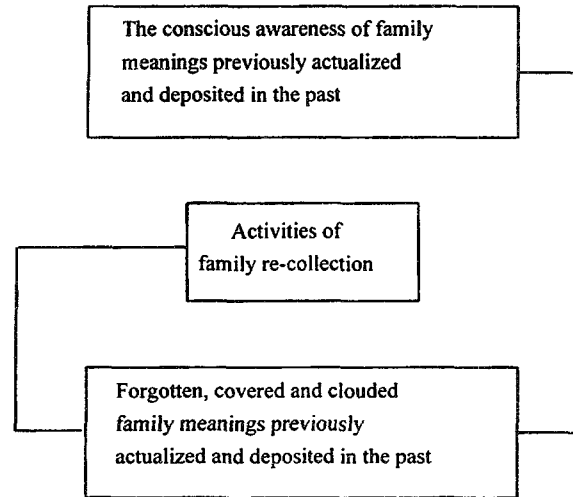


FIGURE 2

the meanings in another person's life, we become blind to the "real" meanings in the other's life. Such knowledge can only be "really" discovered through inductive dialogue and reflection. For the existential family therapist, inductive dialogue re-collection with couples and families dealing with death can often be facilitated through the use of art, poetry, and photographs.

#### **ART AS RECOLLECTION IN MARITAL THERAPY AFTER THE DEATH OF A SPOUSE**

Mrs. Griffin was a 68-year-old woman admitted to an assisted living residential center for help in activities of daily living soon after the death of her husband. Mrs. and Mr. Griffin had been married for 45 years. Mrs. Griffin initially avoided contact with the other residents whenever possible, used isolation strategies to minimize contact with peers, and reported that she felt empty and alone and was having problems seeing meaning in her life. Mrs. Griffin was referred to the first author for "grief therapy" by the social worker at the hospice agency that had helped her and Mr. Griffin while Mr. Griffin was dying from untreatable cancer.

A major change occurred in Mrs. Griffin's mood and functioning patterns after she and the therapist engaged in some art reflection activities. He initially asked Mrs. Griffin to draw the "most beautiful sunset you have ever seen in your life." Mrs. Griffin used paper and colored felt tip pens to produce a drawing of herself, her husband, and her daughter watching a sunset in the Smoky Mountains. Mrs. Griffin reported that the sunset she had produced had been observed on a family vacation and was one of the many wonderful sunsets "we saw in the Smokies." Mrs. Griffin's drawing triggered the memory and re-collection of many beautiful experiences she had had in her life with her husband and daughter. The art reflection activities used with Mrs. Griffin to remember and re-collect many of the family meanings she had forgotten and "lost" in the past helped her to grieve the loss of her husband, yet remember that "he is alive in my heart forever." At the end of treatment, Mrs. Griffin was surprised to report that she felt "very married" and more "intimate" with her family than she had felt in years. From an existential point of view (Frankl, 1959; Lantz, 1993; Marcel, 1948, 1963), re-collection helped Mrs. Griffin realize that her "family life" was "alive" in the forever of the past.

### **POETRY AS RE-COLLECTION WITH COUPLES AND FAMILIES DEALING WITH DEATH**

In existential psychotherapy with couples and families dealing with death, poetry can often be a useful way of helping the couple or family uncover and re-collect memories and meanings that have been covered, clouded, and lost in the past (Lantz, 1974, 1978, 1993). At times couples and families who are facing and dealing with death can be given selected poetry to read to stir the re-collection of forgotten meanings that have been deposited yet lost in the past. At times encouraging family members to write their own poem or poems about their current family situation or past family and/or marital experiences is an effective way to facilitate re-collection. For some couples and families dealing with the death of a loved one, it is useful for the family therapist to write a poem about the couple or family and to give it to them to facilitate the process of re-collection. The authors of this article have found all three methods of using poetry to be helpful in stimulating re-collection with couples and families who are dealing with death.



## **PHOTOGRAPHS AS RE-COLLECTION WITH COUPLES AND FAMILIES DEALING WITH DEATH**

Mr. and Mrs. Riccio were referred for marital and family therapy by their social worker at a hospice agency in Central Ohio. Mr. Riccio had discovered that he had terminal cancer, and he and his wife were using hospice services for support, social service assistance, and pain management. Mr. Riccio had a particularly rapid and vicious form of cancer, and he realized that "I don't have long to live." Mr. and Mrs. Riccio reported that they wanted help saying goodbye to each other, and Mr. Riccio wanted help "telling my family how much I love them all." The hospice social worker had recommended family therapy to Mr. and Mrs. Riccio to help them in this process of saying good-bye.

The Riccio family was seen in conjoint treatment in their home on five occasions during the three weeks before Mr. Riccio's death. The family therapist asked family members to pick out a sample of 70 family photographs and to bring the photographs with them to each conjoint family treatment session.

Each of the seven family members who participated in family treatment (Mr. and Mrs. Riccio, their son and daughter-in-law, their two grandchildren, and their unmarried daughter) was asked to pick out 10 family photographs that were personally meaningful and to discuss these meanings in the family treatment sessions. All of the members of the family were able to use the photographs and their own telling of what was of meaning in each photograph to facilitate the process of family re-collection. After Mr. Riccio died, Mrs. Riccio reported that the family photo discussions had helped "everyone" to honor Mr. Riccio and to remember all the joy "we have had with each other." Mrs. Riccio and the Riccio family believed that using the photographs with them had been a "tremendous help."

### **THE LANTZ FAMILY**

In the final clinical illustration of re-collection with families who are dealing with death, the first author (JL) was a member of the family receiving help. In early 1995 my mother fell and broke her hip. A metal plate was put into her hip, and when the plate popped out of place, she was forced to have a total hip replacement surgery. Because of complications, her bad health and my father's bad health, my

mother was placed in a nursing home for care, physical therapy, and rehabilitation.

Soon after my mother's hip replacement surgery, my father started having periods of disorientation. Initially, it was believed that such episodic disorientation was reactive to his heart disease and respiratory problems. After extensive testing, it was discovered that my father had renal failure. After additional medical evaluation, my father was told that his condition was "terminal" and that after release from the hospital, he would need care in a nursing home. I was able to hustle and manipulate to get him into the same nursing home as my mother, and within a week my parents were living together in the same room. My parents both realized that my father was dying and that he probably had only three to six weeks to live. My parents were very pleased to be in the same room so they could spend time together and talk until (in my mother's words), "George presses on."

The head nurse on the floor in the nursing home where my father and mother were living was an experienced and crusty woman who had seen many deaths and understood about the importance of families and family re-collection. She informed me that she would be doing some family work with my father, my mother, with me, with my wife and with my son, Max, who was the love of his grandfather's and grandmother's life. Over the next six weeks (until my father's death), Betty (the head nurse) made sure that she "dropped in" whenever anyone from our family was visiting my parents. She also frequently "dropped in" when my parents were alone to see how things were going and to offer care and support.

My parents eventually gave Betty the affectionate nickname of the "nosy nurse" because whenever Betty visited their room, she would ask questions about my parents' past, their lives together, their achievements, their joys, the difficulties they had overcome and their hopes for their grandson. Betty had a way of getting my parents to share their pride in the achievements they had accomplished together and to remember all the fun they had enjoyed in their marital life. Betty gave me the task of bringing in all of the family photo albums that mom and dad had kept, and she spent considerable time with all of us looking at the photos and asking questions about "what they mean." After my father died, my mother told Betty that she and my father had had some of their best times together "ever" in the final weeks of his life. This wonderful nurse also helped my father and me to remember and talk out some of our past conflicts, and she did a good job of helping my son to get used to all of the medical equipment

so he would not be afraid to visit his grandfather and grandmother. To put it simply, the “nosy nurse” did an excellent job of facilitating “family re-collection” in the final weeks of my father’s death. I will be forever grateful.

## CONCLUSIONS

The process of re-collection during existential psychotherapy with couples and families who are dealing with death can be an effective way for the couple and/or family to shrink a meaning vacuum and those symptoms and problems that fill this family meaning vacuum which often develops around the time of a family member’s death. In this article, family re-collection activities such as art, photo, and poetry reflection have been described and illustrated with clinical material. Such re-collection activities can help the couple or family dealing with death to remember, find, discover, confirm, and honor meanings that have been actualized and deposited into the forever of the past.

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