



# Transforming Traumatic Grief

Six Steps to Move from Grief to Peace  
After the Sudden or Violent Death of a Loved One

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as you like with this process. Self-expression through pictures, music, and other modes is powerful because it taps into the right side of your brain, where most of your nonverbal feelings, memories, and insights are stored. So instead of writing, but still using the prompts you could:

- Make a collage or a scrapbook with photos and other memorabilia
- Write a poem or song that captures your feelings
- Record your thoughts or stories into a digital recorder
  - Videotape your thoughts or stories
  - Interview other family members regarding their experiences with the person
  - Create a painting, drawing, or any other work of art that reflects your experiences with the person
  - Create a blog where you and others can share their thoughts or memories

### **Prescriptive Artists**

Specialized artists and musicians will collaborate with bereaved individuals to custom-create art or music commemorating deceased loved ones. For example, Nancy Gershman, who coined the term “prescriptive artist,” is a digital artist who repurposes a griever’s life-affirming photos, memories, and stories of the deceased into a fine art photomontage (a “Healing Dreamscape”) to counter loss and regrets. When I interviewed Nancy, she explained that prescriptive art is “custom-created artwork which re-contextualizes memory, shifting the griever’s perspective of the deceased from absent supporter to supportive presence. It also provides the griever with a tangible object that reinforces this shift.”

For example the photo below depicts a photomontage Nancy created for Hope after her son Ishmael was fatally shot. Through a review of photos and stories that Hope shared with Nancy about Ishmael, Nancy was able to illuminate the sensory qualities that Hope loved about her son, such as the way he looked as a baby and the way he loved to grill hot dogs on cold, windy days in Chicago. Nancy also included colors and meaningful objects that Hope found peaceful, integrating the imagery in a way that symbolized for Hope that she and Ishmael were forever connected arm and arm in spirit.

In an article, Nancy Gershman and Jenna Baddeley wrote for the *American Psychotherapy Association's Annals Fall 2010*, Hope commented that the *Dreamscape* Nancy made for her created a turning point in her healing. The authors quote Hope as saying, "When I saw what we made, I just got caught up in the moment...It seemed as if Ishmael was here, alive. Because it's physically here [as Hope's screen saver] where I see it every day...He's here and in my heart."



"The Bright Lightness of Koot H."  
Photo courtesy of Nancy Gershman

To contact Nancy about creating a prescriptive photomontage, visit her website at [www.artforyoursake.com](http://www.artforyoursake.com). Another site, [www.bereavementartists.com](http://www.bereavementartists.com) features an entire directory of specialized artists who custom create works of art in a variety of media (including quilts, portraits, urns, and jewelry) to honor a loved one's story and legacy.

In sum, there are many ways to capture the essence of your loved by recalling and creating stories. Through this process, the goal is reflect on the experiences and influences you acquired by knowing the person, and realize those can never be lost.

