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FROM GRIEF TO GROWTH: BEREAVEMENT AND ABSORPTION IN THE PSYCHOMANTEUM

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Background: Bereavement is a common occurrence for people experiencing loss of loved ones. An innovative approach to transforming grief involves a sensory deprivation procedure known as the psychomanteum, in which participants may have experiences of their departed loved ones based on guided suggestions. Previous research suggests that the psychomanteum is useful for people recovering from grief and that the level of absorption enhances the experience. This has been explored in a physical chamber involving gazing into a reflective surface with intention. This study extended previous research by introducing Virtual Reality, which enhances absorption and veridical experiences. A Continuing Bonds theory offers support for the value of encouraging a felt sense of connection to loved ones for those experiencing loss.

Aims: (1) Evaluate impact of psychomanteum on grief; (2) Examine correlations between absorption on grief; (3) Measure difference in Aims 1 and 2 by comparing the physical chamber and VR on grief and absorption.

Method: Utilize sensory deprivation procedure to evoke experiences of departed loved ones and compare physical chamber and VR by using psychometrics (Tellegen Absorption Scale and Likert Bereavement Scale) and a qualitative thematic analysis of language use before and after the procedure.

Results: Ninety-two participants completed pre and post evaluations. Aim 1 was tested using a paired samples t- test for pre and post measures of grief and found a significant effect ($p < .001$, 2-t). Supporting this, a Persons r was performed to analyze Aim 2; this showed a significant correlation on grief and while absorption was held constant ($p = .019$). For Aim 3, no significant effect was seen between the physical chamber and the VR experiences. This suggests that the experiences are isomorphic and supports the interchangeability of the approaches. Language analysis found that the experiences were profound and transformative for most participants. Results supported the Continuing Bonds Theory. Many people expressed a wish that the session had been longer and that they might come again.

Conclusions: This study offers a highly innovative approach to bereavement and the application of the psychomanteum to health and healing. The transpersonal experiences reported can be transformative and may have powerful potentials for aiding people in their times of suffering. Rather than finding a need to get over the loss, the Continuing Bonds Theory has been shown to be therapeutic. Future research will focus on examining absorption and repeated exposure to the VR experience.

Keywords: Grief, Virtual reality, Consciousness, Psychomanteum, Absorption

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