

Activity: Herbs Goal: Cognitive/Intellectual Populations: Bereaved

TH Activity Plan – Holiday Herbal Wreath – Bereaved

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Photo by B. Guise, Holokahome.com, Creekside Farms, & Mother Earth Living



Materials

Greenery

Herbs & spices (rosemary, cinnamon sticks, lavender, bay leaves, fresh or dried cranberries, crab apples)

Wreath form, scissors, pruning shears, floral wire or twine, U-shaped picks, ribbon

Wipes

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will make a small herbal wreath for their kitchen to memorialize a loved one & learn about herb meanings.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Use mindful reflective processing of grief; identify & remember human traits of loved one

Physical: Identify & address physical symptoms of grief, sadness, depression; strengthen fine motor skills

Psychological/Emotional: Reflect on loss; deal with grief in a positive manner; choose personal ways to show strength, courage & devotion; deal with happiness guilt during grieving

Sensory: Use sensory inputs of herbs that provide joy & beauty; recognize interoception internal signals related to loss (sadness, bewilderment, aching); practice positive responses

Social: Share experiences of loss with other participants; gift wreath to someone; practice gratitude

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Harvest herbs & gather materials. Determine size of wreaths & appropriate amount of herbs. Set up a display of herbs with their meanings.
2. Facilitator begins session by explaining that making a wreath can memorialize & honor a loved one by appreciating nature's gifts. Brief discussion of herbs' meanings are offered (rosemary – remembrance).
3. Facilitator demonstrates how to attach greenery to the form, using wire, twine, or picks.
4. Participants select items they want to use, practice laying them on wreath, & then secure them to the form as demonstrated.
5. Participants make a wire loop threaded through the back of the wreath for hanging. Adding ribbon or bows is optional.
6. Each person tells the group what items were chosen for their wreath & why they chose them, reflecting on their loss & loved one.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: This TH session for people who have lost loved ones includes the study of herbs and their meanings, as well as making a small herb wreath for the kitchen. This can be for themselves or for a gift. Choosing a variety of culinary herbs that signify remembrance (rosemary), strength and courage (thyme), and/or devotion (lavender) integrates personal meaning. Other herbs have meanings that may be appropriate. Participants can select herbs that represent the traits their loved one had and/or qualities they want to emulate. Sharing their choices and talking about the person who they lost is an important component of the session. Psychological goals for this activity can include reflecting on loss, dealing with grief in a positive manner, and practicing gratitude. The book *The Complete Language of Herbs*, a resource with scientific names, culinary

designations, symbolic meanings, folklore and facts can provide horticultural information along with meanings and symbolism of herbs important for this session.

Doing something for themselves while remembering their loved one can be healing and hopeful. This can include making a creative wreath with sensory components of fragrance, taste and texture. [Experiencing joy and pleasure for many is difficult during grieving](#). Making an herbal wreath can work towards dealing with ‘happiness guilt’ and at the same time, provide opportunities for showing gratitude to others. Research has determined that gratitude like gifting items (herbal wreath for example) positively impacts biological functioning including the brain and nervous system ([Zahn et al., 2007](#)). Acts of gratitude can release toxic emotions, reduce pain, improve sleep quality, reduce anxiety and depression, and aid in regulating stress (Wong et al., 2018; [Emmons & McCullough, 2003](#); McCraty & Childre, 2004). All of these are typical during grieving.

An herbal wreath activity can be used throughout the year as well as at holiday time. The [December holidays can be particularly challenging while grieving](#). A holiday inspired herbal wreath can include spices (cinnamon sticks, etc.), a string of fresh or dried cranberries, or small crab apples for color, eucalyptus, pine cones or other non-toxic items with the same focus of remembrance, courage and strength of their loved ones.

An added element that may be appropriate for some groups is discussing horticultural facts about culinary herbs along with tips on growing, storing and of course using herbs. Tying in beneficial health and nutritional facts of the herbs, and making a recipe like [herb butter](#) can provide a multi-dimensional session with sensory stimulation.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Some herbs are poisonous though not the ones typically growing in home gardens. Herbs listed as poisonous: nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), and foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*). If participants will be eating or sampling items, check for allergies, swallowing issues or contraindications with medication.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Herbs used for wreath making need some suppleness so that they can be bent to the shape of a wreath. Recommended herbs include sage, rosemary, oregano, lavender and thyme. Other greenery can be added in. The herbs can be the backbone or accent in the wreath. Using a pre-made wreath frame may be helpful; for smaller wreaths this may not be necessary. For people with limited dexterity, the forms can be covered with greenery before the activity.



REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Benson Kontz, J. (2024). [4 tips to deal with ‘Happiness guilt’](#). Hospice Red River Valley.
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- Dietz, ST. (2022). *The complete language of herbs*. Quarto Publishing Group.
- Divine, M. (2017). *It’s ok not to be ok: Meeting grief and loss in a culture that doesn’t understand*. Sounds True Inc.
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- McCraty, R., & Childre, D. (2004). The grateful heart: The psychophysiology of appreciation. In RA. Emmons & ME. McCullough (Eds.), *Series of affective science. The psychology of gratitude*. Oxford University Press.

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