

Activity: Nature Goal: Sensory Populations: Bereaved

TH Activity Plan – Scents of Nature at Christmas - Bereaved

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Photo by Garden Therapy



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will make a small arrangement using fragrant pine & other greens at holiday time.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Follow sequential steps

Physical: Develop strategies for alleviating exhaustion, sleep disruptions, anguish, loneliness, guilt, regret

Psychological/Emotional: Develop coping mechanisms; use strategies for rebuilding confidence; address grief related confusion, decision-making, focus & memory

Sensory: Engage sense of smell; acknowledge pleasurable engagement from senses including sense of smell

Social: Engage in activities that are joyful & pleasant; share activities with others in a group setting

Materials

Small containers, variety of greenery with fragrance, pinecones

Ribbon, berries, flowers

Wipes

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials. Set up room.
2. Facilitator begins session by showing small fragrant arrangement & greenery that will be used by participants.
3. Facilitator talks about & passes around each type of greenery noting its sensory qualities, horticulture facts & encouraging participants to consider what greenery they prefer. They then select several items.
4. Small glass or plastic vases are distributed, water added & designing the arrangement begins. Facilitator shares a few tips for arranging live plants like: removing greenery below water line, [holding items in hand & cutting stems so they sit in vase as desired](#), using contrasting or multiple colors, & scents for variety & visual interest.
5. Decorative items like ribbon, pinecones & flowers can be added.
6. Discussion of how to best preserve can encourage group to share their floral experience arrangement (temperature & no direct sunlight, fresh water daily, replace spent items with fresh). Sharing thoughts on the scents of the arrangement can lead to reflection on grief, & how holidays/ Christmas can be a nostalgic, family-oriented time which can be triggering for those in grief. Creating something beautiful in someone's memory can be a hopeful, healing & restorative activity.
7. Taking the arrangement home can be a comforting & uplifting memento of someone special who has died.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: Therapeutic horticulture sessions working with bereaved people can address physical, emotional and social symptoms of loss. These can include psychological challenges related to

grief, sadness, shock and rollercoasters of emotions (Zisook & Shear, 2009). Therapeutic goals related to these can involve coping mechanisms, strategies for rebuilding confidence, and perhaps clinical diagnoses and formal treatment plans. The [Inventory of Complicated Grief](#) is used as a self-report psychometric tool for evaluating grief, particularly complicated grief. This is not often used in TH sessions but familiarity with it can be informative for practitioners.

Therapeutic goals in the physical domain can focus on coping with exhaustion and poor sleep patterns, often a result of loss. Acknowledgement of the role physical activity can play to improve these can be incorporated into the session or after-session lifestyle. Gathering live plants, evergreen branches or holly outdoors can increase physical activity, melatonin production, and breathing fresh air that would otherwise not have happened.

Medical and therapeutic professionals recognize different types of grief (complicated grief, ambiguous loss, absent grief, traumatic grief ([Cleveland Clinic, 2025](#)). Grief has varying degrees of grief-related symptoms, including for some, depression, some of which may require psychiatric interventions, particularly in cases where bereaved individuals may have suicidal risk, or extremely disruptive and consuming loss (Zisook & Shear, 2009).

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts.

Note that berries and other natural items should not be poisonous or used with people who may put items into mouths. Holly and pinecones can be sharp. [Floral foam](#) is not recommended – many consider it inconsistent with sustainable floral practices.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Strategies for coping with grief are individualized. However, using creative activities that may improve mood, enjoyment, or social interactions with others can be effective, recognizing that individual experiences will vary by days, time of day and environment. Triggers for loss can be unknown, unforeseen and really difficult for people experiencing loss, and difficult for those around them. Engaging in pleasant activities can support mood shifts from unpleasant to pleasant, provide beauty, sense of renewal, adapting to loss, and permission to feel positive emotions. Creating small fragrant live plant arrangements is one such activity that can also stimulate senses in a joyful manner, particularly if this is at Christmas time using intentional olfactory stimulation and scents of Christmas. Smell and memory are closely linked, with scientific evidence confirming “odor/fragrance can overtly or subliminally modulate mood and emotion” ([Kontaris, 2020](#)).

Focusing on “scents of nature” that are reminders of Christmas can include a variety of arrangements, [small evergreen doorknob decorations](#), [herbal wreaths](#), or [tussie mussies](#) - small handheld bouquets. Making a table top arrangement or a miniature for window sills using pine, cedar, [balsam fir](#), Sweet box also known as [saracocca](#) (*Sarococca ruscifolia*), [eucalyptus](#) and other greens, can stimulate sense of smell and memories of loved ones, and time spent with them. Cinnamon sticks and pieces of ginger attached to skewers, small branches of berries, flowers for color (red or white carnations), or pine cones add other decorative elements. Note that berries should not be poisonous or used with people who may put items into mouths. This activity is a NON-edible creation but one with a powerhouse of fragrance. To draw out the fragrances, [condition greenery before using](#), mist evergreens with water regularly, and gently squeeze needles.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Cleveland Clinic. (2025). [What is the difference between grief and mourning?](#) my.clevelandclinic.org.
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Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2025.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.