

# Held Hearts, Open Spaces:

Exploring Expressive Arts with Grieving Youth and Families  
while Sustaining Ourselves

Adrienne Lawlor BScOT(c)  
Occupational Therapist, Expressive Arts Facilitator

Education Day  
Vancouver Island Federation of Hospices

May 8, 2026

i carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart)  
-ee cummings

here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows  
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)

## Session Objectives

Answer “Expressive Arts: What and Why?”

Gather practical Expressive Arts activity ideas to:

- Support grieving youth and their families.
- Add to your self-care “buffet”.
- Foster community connection.

Learn how to assemble a portable “Art Cart”.

Review resources for further learning.

# Ice Breaker

Turn to someone near you, introduce yourself, take turns sharing, for about 1 minute each, responding to the question:

“If your current **MOOD** were a **COLOUR**,  
what would it be?”

Please share your colour and brief reason for your answer.

# What are the Expressive Arts?

A multimodal, creative approach to supporting expression and meaning-making through different art forms such as:

- Visual art (eg. Painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, collage, textile/fibre)
- Movement
- Music
- Writing (eg. Journaling, poetry)
- Drama
- Storytelling

Expressive arts is an approach that integrates multiple art modalities to facilitate personal expression, reflection and transformation.

- C. Malchiodi, Handbook of Expressive Arts Therapy

“Let the source of expression flow down  
from your head and into your whole body.

You can't use all of your resources when you  
stay in your head,  
disconnected from everything else.

Express yourself rhythmically, from the body,  
and let your thoughts go”

- S. McNiff

“Drawing, painting, creative movement, dramatic enactment, play, rhythmic expression and other artistic media offer ways of interacting with children that often feel safer and more natural than direct verbal discussion”

- S. McNiff

## Evidence for Expressive Arts with Grieving Youth

- “Expressive Arts Therapy with Vulnerable Youth”; Law, Pastirik and Shamputa (2021), Journal of Loss and Trauma.
- Key findings: reduced social isolation, supported emotional expression of grief, helped normalize and externalize difficult feelings, created non-verbal, safe pathways for expression.
- Takeaway: expressive arts provide a safe container for grief expression when words may be limited.

# Evidence

- “Meaning-Making in Bereaved Children”; Expressive Arts Thesis Research; Wilson (2023), Lesley University MA Thesis.
- Key findings: Supported meaning-making in grief; helped children express non-verbal grief experiences; themes included connection, emotion processing and movement toward healing; arts-based methods increased engagement and reflection.
- Takeaway: Expressive arts support meaning-making and coping in bereaved youth.

# Evidence

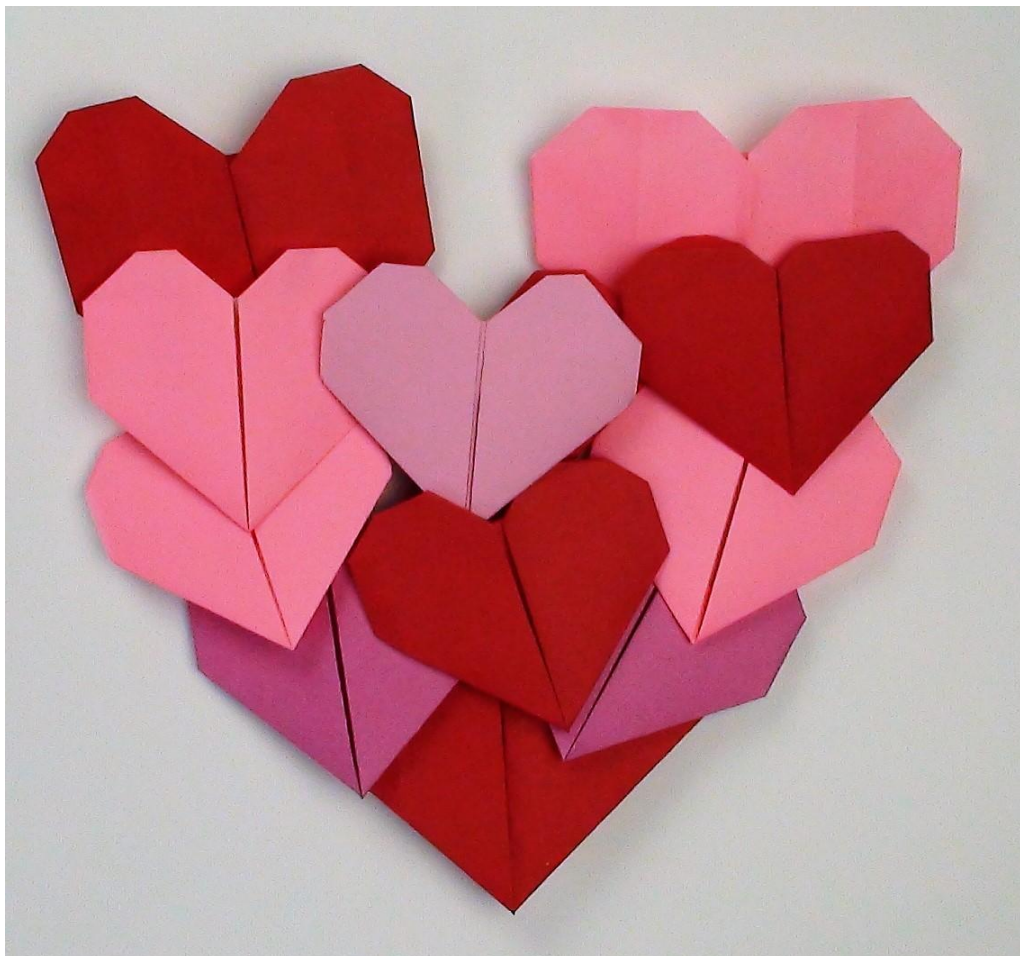
- “Nature-Based Expressive Arts for Bereaved Children”; literature review; Dalton (2019), Lesley University.
- Key Findings: Trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate approach supports emotional regulation and expression, helps children process grief holistically, promising evidence for accessibility and adaptability in community settings.
- Takeaway: Developmentally appropriate expressive arts can be adapted to support grieving children.

# Evidence

- Research from the University of Otago (Kaimal et al., Art Therapy Journal, 2017) showed that 45 minutes of art making significantly lowered cortisol and increased pleasure related neurotransmitters.
- Key findings: Art making triggers the release of dopamine and oxytocin. Dopamine fuels exploration, while oxytocin impacts feelings of trust and connection.
- Take aways: Shared creativity becomes a physiological form of co-regulation.

“We need to do more to explore the belief that creativity is a basic human need and promote universal access to the healing powers of artistic expression”.

- S. McNiff

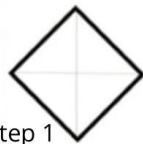


# Invitations

Before folding your Origami paper, choose one invitation:

1. Write/draw a note to yourself, responding to one of these prompts:
  - Something I want to hold onto is...
  - Right now, my heart is carrying...
  - Something I need more of is...
  - A word or message I want to remember is...
  - What my heart needs today is...
  - I am learning to carry...
2. Write/draw a note to someone you love, sharing what you appreciate about them:
  - Something I want you to know is...
  - What I carry in my heart for you is...
  - If I could say/share one more thing, it would be...

# How to Fold an Origami Heart



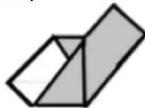
Step 1



Step 2



Step 3



Step 4

Step 5: FLIP!



Steps 6 & 7

Step 1: Fold your square in half two times, so when unfolded, the crease lines make a "T".

Step 2: With any corner facing up, fold down so the point touches the center.

Step 3: Fold the bottom corner up to reach the fold line from step two.

Step 4: Fold both sides in from the bottom to meet at the center.

Step 5: Flip your heart over.

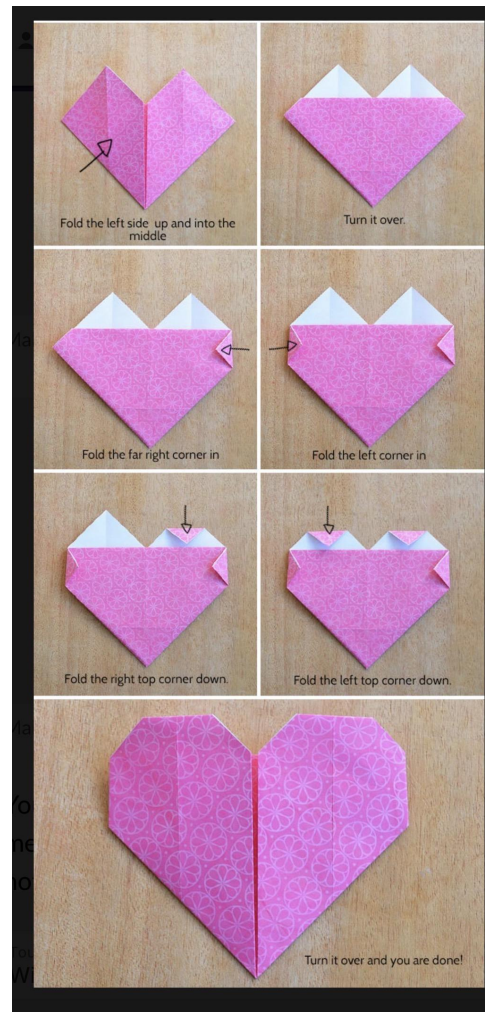
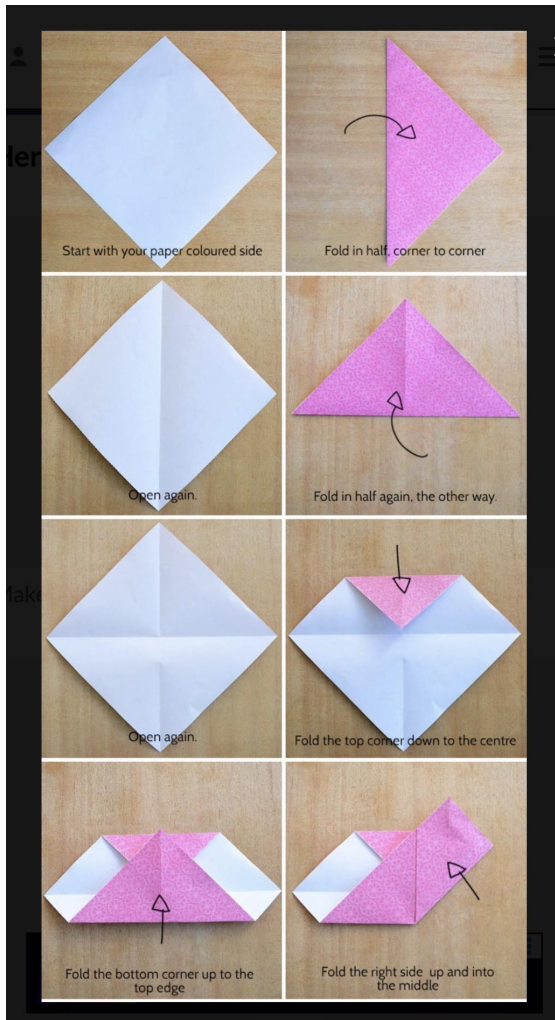
Step 6: Fold the two top points down at the half-way mark and tuck them in.

Step 7: Fold the points on both sides in. That's it! You're done!



Scan to watch video instructions.





## How to make an ORIGAMI heart:

<https://youtube.com/shorts/-7b21al5YqA?si=ZGXxT7cX5gXGjao->

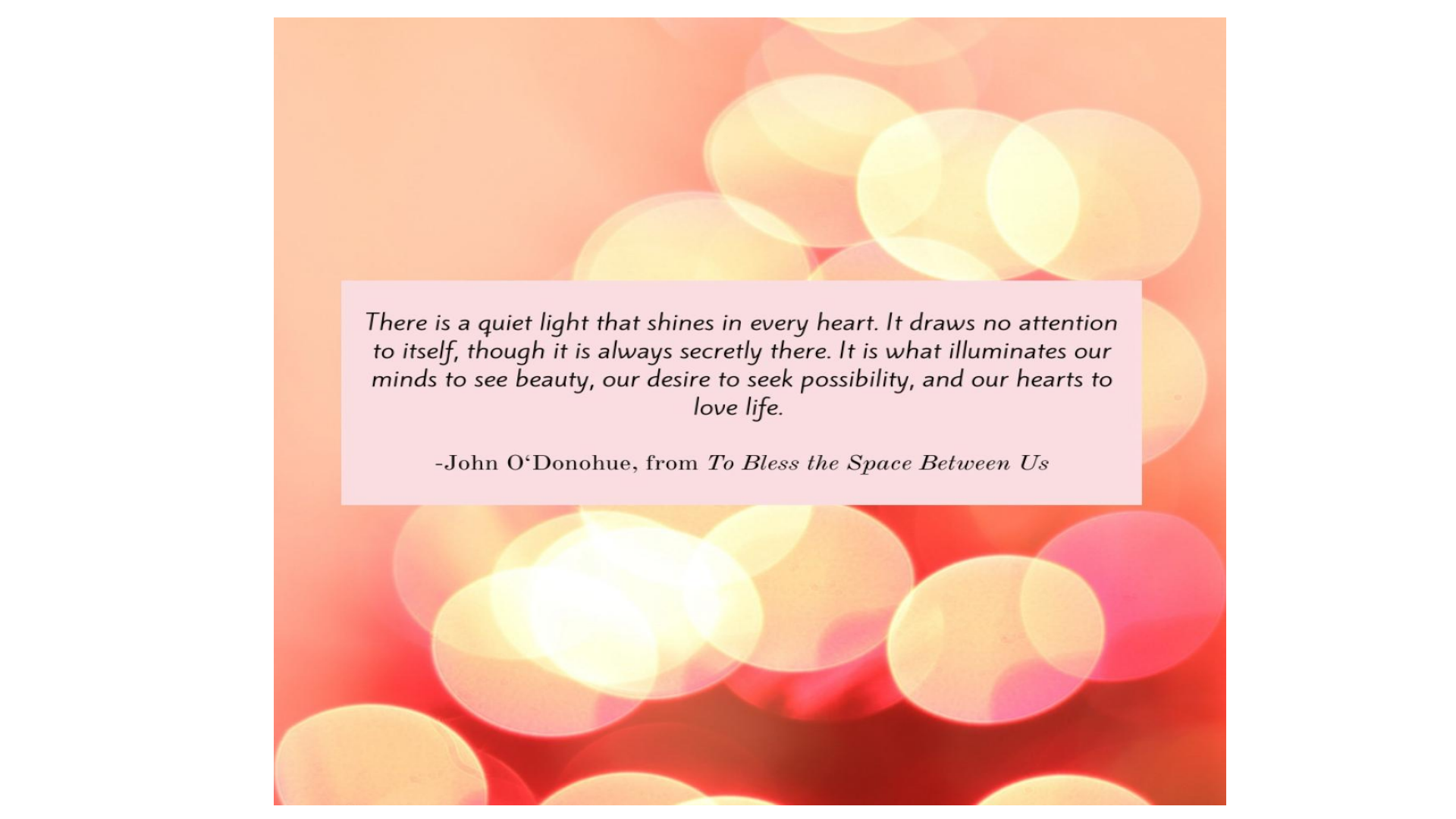
# Multi-Modal Approach

- String your origami hearts together = The Invisible String Book.
- “What is in your heart?”; Within a heart shape:
  - Paint your feelings using colours within a heart shape.
  - Draw/write what do you hold dear to you?
- Sculpt a piece from clay that represents your heart; place small notes capturing memories, lessons learned, gifts related to your loved one.
- Choose a song that resonates with you; move in a way to express what is in your heart.
- Write a letter or song to your heart.
- Create a collage representing feelings in your heart.
- Build a mask with two sides; outside of mask = what you show to the world; inside of mask = what you are feeling/thinking that no one sees.



## Activity Ideas

- The Invisible String; string art, friendship bracelets.
- Pendant “wish” flags with messages to put up in room.
- Memory box: Decorate a box and fill with items that remind them of person who has passed away (eg. Photos, drawings, objects).
- “Worry or wish” release: write/draw worries, unanswered questions or wishes then release them by blowing, floating, tearing or placing in water.
- Soundtrack of feelings: choose songs (or use instruments) to represent different emotions connected to their grief, then draw or move to music. Extension: create a “playlist of my heart” with songs for different emotions (eg. Sadness, anger, love, fear).



*There is a quiet light that shines in every heart. It draws no attention to itself, though it is always secretly there. It is what illuminates our minds to see beauty, our desire to seek possibility, and our hearts to love life.*

*-John O'Donohue, from *To Bless the Space Between Us**





# Self-Care Options

- Dancing/movement to release and express energy/emotion.
- Poetry eg. haiku structure = 5-7-5
  - I notice/I feel/I see (a moment or image)
  - It reminds me of/It feels like/I am carrying (feeling, detail or action)
  - So I/I hope/I breathe (reflection or closing image)
- Journaling; drawing and/or words.
- Songwriting; playing music.
- Nature Altars

can we speak in flowers.  
It will be easier for me  
to understand.

—Nayyirah Waheed





“She loved the ocean;  
we would often visit it  
together.

Connecting with  
nature this way is so  
healing.

It brings my family  
and me beauty  
and joy”





# RUNDLEVIEW ROCKS!

Building  
Neighbourhoods  
Builds Communities  
2.0



Please join us:

- FREE ART MAKING WORKSHOPS at 115 Rundle Pointe on Friday, September 24, 2021 2-5 pm and Saturday, September 25, 2021 12-4 pm. All supplies and instructions provided.

- COMMUNITY BBQ and party at the Rundleview Parkette, Friday October 1, 2021 5:30-8 pm. Free food, collaborative art-making, campfire and live music!

\* COVID safety measures in place.  
More Info: Call Adrienne at 403-688-0534.

Stay up to date with all Rundleview events and connect with your neighbours by joining our Facebook Group: "Rundleview Rocks"

All Welcome!









# Building an “Art Cart”



## “Top Ten” Art Cart Materials

- Pencil crayons, markers (regular, gel, fabric), wax crayons, pencils, pens.
- Small sketchbooks and blank journals.
- Variety of paper eg. Origami, watercolour, letter writing.
- Paint and brushes eg. Watercolour and acrylic.
- Collage materials eg. Magazines, tissue paper.
- Musical instruments eg. Xylophone, shakers, drums, rhythm sticks, scarves.
- Mask-making supplies eg. Cardboard, scissors, glue.
- Fibre/textiles eg. Yarn, felt, ribbon, embroidery thread, fabric scraps, old sheets.
- Clay or air-dry modelling material.
- Small found objects eg. Shells, buttons, stones.

# Resources

## Children's Books:

- I Carry Your Heart With Me by Mati McDonough.
- The Invisible String (+ Workbook) by Patrice Karst.
- The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst.
- The Memory Box by Joanna Rowland.
- Everywhere, Still by M.H. Clark.
- Why Do I Feel So Sad? A Grief Book For Children by Tracy Lambert.
- The Heart and the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers.

## Reference Books

- Art Heals: How Creativity Cures the Soul by Shaun McNiff.
- Handbook of Expressive Arts Therapy by Cathy Malchiodi.
- An Expressive Arts Approach To Healing Loss and Grief by Irene Renzenbrink.
- Grief and the Expressive Arts: Practices for Creating Meaning by Barbara Thompson.
- The Art of Grief: The Use of Expressive Arts in a Grief Support Group by J. Earl Rogers.
- When I Am Gone: Poems for Times of Loss and Grief by Becky Hemsley.
- Morning Altars: A 7 Step Practice to Nourish Your Spirit Through Nature, Art, and Ritual by Day Schildret.

# Closure

1. Questions or comments?
2. Final invitation: collaborative expressive art-making as an opportunity for shared meaning-making and connection.
3. Prompt: “Something which helps me carry this is...”