

# Talk Therapy Without the Talk



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Many kids (most?) don't like to talk about their feelings, but many grownups want them to do just that. Does talk necessarily make unhappy people feel better? Perhaps we adults need to reexamine our assumptions in this area.

Virginia L. Fry, who directs the Hospice and Palliative Care Council of Vermont, has noticed all sorts of interesting things about how people cope with distress. They avoid looking at bright-colored objects, for example, which create more stress than do neutral colors. They also avoid prolonged silences, which tend to make people nervous in our Western culture.

Some people fidget. They twirl their hair, click their ballpoint pens, or rub and stroke an object over and over again. Smokers light up just as they are about to voice strong feelings. When they inhale, they suck the pain back in. Eating may feel like gulping it down.

Although Fry's methods come from her work in the hospice, they are readily adaptable to other situations. Soothing objects—twistable pipe cleaners or a malleable piece of Sculpey modeling clay—invite people to work off anger and sadness by transforming materials in their environment. Sometimes it helps just to keep your hands busy. In bygone days, grieving women used to wring handkerchiefs and rock. (Today's wimpy tissues disintegrate in the face of strong feelings.)

People in distress often find it easier to talk when they are doing something, Fry says, but talk doesn't relieve trauma. Trauma happens in the right brain, the opposite side from that used to process language. For this reason, creative activity—venting your energy on something outside yourself—is more effective than words.

So how does she suggest handling emotional pain? Keep busy. Engage in strenuous activity while you think about your loss. Physical exertion will help you dump your feelings. Sadness and anger need a place to go.

Especially for children, memories hitch themselves to objects more than to words. Children and adults can make collages, paintings, poetry, and music to help them externalize feelings about pernicious social issues such as racism, homophobia, and other kinds of stigma as well as personal experiences. Again, the trick is to concentrate on the problem while you work.

Art, by giving feelings a form separate from the artist, makes it easier for outsiders to connect verbally with troubled people. Tears that we shed with others are chemically distinct, and more effective for healing, than tears shed alone.

Memory boxes are a good way of visiting the past and have the advantage of being portable. A child whose dad died can put into the box things that link fathers and sons—baseball cards, a Father's Day card, and so forth. When the child selects things and adds them to the box, his pain moves outside him into the environment. The collection can also help ensure, for example, that interruption of the son's relationship with the father doesn't keep the son from learning what it means to *be* a father.

In Native American cultures, dreamcatchers are small nets that shut out evil while letting sweet dreams (goodness) pass through. Homemade dreamcatchers can help ward off nightmares and memories of violence. The act of creation—lashing a grapevine into an oval and attaching intersecting threads across its diameter—encourages healing by helping the creator master the troubling experience.

Children who are angry and sad can be encouraged to sing or make music. Ask, "If you were going to sing, what would you sing, and for whom?" Then listen. In many cultures, but not in Western society, grief is loud. Other feelings can make sounds too.

A scream box, fashioned from a shoe box stuffed with crumpled paper or wadded-up plastic grocery bags with the tube from a roll of paper towel inserted at one end, muffler style, can be duct taped together and decorated to create a small, private chamber into which children and adults can scream without interference. (Every member of your family could have one!)

Damnit dolls can be made out of inexpensive tube socks, one stuffed inside the other, then filled first with two handfuls of beans or rice and afterward with soft stuffing. The end can be tied off, and indelible markers and yarn can be used to add facial features and hair. (If you'd like a fancier version, visit [www.beautyandlace.com.au/damnitdoll.htm](http://www.beautyandlace.com.au/damnitdoll.htm).) When your child is upset, just hand her a damnit doll, point the way to a clear patch of floor, and let her whack as long as she feels like it. You may enjoy the accompanying verse:

*When you want to kick the desk or  
throw the phone and shout,  
here's a little damnit doll you cannot do without.  
Just grasp it firmly by the legs,  
and find a place to slam it.  
And as you whack the stuffing out,  
yell "Damn it, damn it, damn it!"*

Anxious children and adults may find it soothing to stroke swatches of fabric (rough, silky, and soft) and objects with different textures (gather them up in a bag or box). Some people feel better after popping bubble wrap.

People who have been harmed by others may want to write the offenders' names on pieces of paper for burning. Written messages can also be stomped on or attached to helium balloons and released. Balloons can be blown up, named or labeled, and destroyed.

The society in which we live is more interested in results than in the process of reaching them and more interested in control than in acceptance. Could it be, though, that language, while helping us connect with others and feel less alone, may be less effective in providing an outlet for difficult feelings? Maybe talk is less important—at least some of the time—than engaging fully, body and soul, with our environment.

Virginia Fry speaks movingly about her work and demonstrates the scream box and damnit doll in the video *Children and Grief: Coping, Creating, and Being Comforted*, filmed at the University of Virginia in October 2001 and available for viewing at [www.virginia.edu/uvanewsmakers/archive5.html#fry](http://www.virginia.edu/uvanewsmakers/archive5.html#fry). You can also read her book, *Part of Me Died, Too: Stories of Creative Survival Among Bereaved Children and Teenagers* (Montpelier, Vt.: Phoenix Rising Press, 2005).

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