

**Lightning Moments: Recognizing and Facilitating Transformative Potential
in Individual and Group Therapy**

by

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Abstract

This capstone synthesizes research about transformative change processes, group therapy dynamics, and ritual and ceremonial elements to address how therapeutic practices may facilitate profound personal transformation rather than incremental change. Many clients seek fundamental life change but encounter approaches focused primarily on coping skills, creating a gap between client aspirations and available interventions. The research hypothesizes that integrating elements derived from traditional ceremony and ritual practices, including sacred space creation, collective witnessing, and seasonal rhythms, can enhance group therapy's capacity to support second-order change rather than incremental change. Through a literature review and analysis of traditional practices including Indigenous talking circles and cross-cultural seasonal ceremonies, key facilitating factors for profound transformation are identified and synthesized into an evidence-based framework. The study culminates in a practical program design for transformative bereavement groups at a Vancouver-based bereavement organization, demonstrating how these elements can be therapeutically integrated. This work provides practitioners with tools to recognize and optimize transformative moments, expanding therapeutic options for clients seeking profound healing while bridging ancient ceremonial wisdom with contemporary group therapy practice.

Keywords: transformative change, second-order change, group therapy, ritual, ceremony

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Chapter 1: Beyond Incremental Change, Introducing Transformative Change

Many therapeutic interventions focus on incremental change—the gradual reduction of symptoms, the development and repeated practice of coping skills over time, or the progressive modification of problematic behaviours. This approach, while valuable and effective for many clients, represents what Watzlawick et al. (1974) termed ‘first-order change’, modifications that occur within an individual’s existing psychological system without fundamentally altering how they understand themselves or their world. However, human experience occasionally involves moments of profound transformation that transcend incremental progress, fundamentally reshaping identity, worldview, and life trajectory.

Transformative change, also known as second-order change, represents a qualitatively different phenomenon in human development and therapeutic healing. Drawing from systems theory, second-order change involves alterations to the fundamental rules and structure governing how an individual operates, rather than modifications within existing patterns (Watzlawick et al., 2011). Similarly described by Lyddon (1990), second-order change is a type of change whose occurrence alters the fundamental structure of the system.

When applied to individual transformation, this means changes to core belief systems, identity structures, and meaning-making frameworks—the internal “system” of how a person sees themselves and their world. Unlike the gradual shifts typical of most counselling work, transformative change involves sudden or dramatic alterations in these core meaning-making systems, fundamental shifts in identity and profound reorientations toward life purpose and relationships (Miller & C’de Baca, 2011). These experiences often emerge following significant life disruptions, such as a loss, trauma, health crises, or major life transitions, and can result in what researchers term post-traumatic growth, where

individuals not only recover from adversity, but experience enhanced psychological functioning and deeper life satisfaction (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Despite the profound impact of transformative experiences on individual wellbeing and the growing body of research documenting their occurrence, the therapeutic field has limited frameworks for intentionally facilitating such deep change processes. This disconnect is particularly striking given that many clients entering therapy seem to intuitively sense their need for fundamental transformation. They often present with the feeling that their past is holding them back, that they are not meeting their potential for living fully, or that something fundamental needs to shift, and yet they struggle to articulate this need or don't know how to achieve it. The therapeutic field's predominant focus on symptom management and incremental skill development may inadvertently offer incremental solutions to clients who are seeking transformative experiences, potentially missing opportunities to address their deeper longing for profound healing and growth.

This gap is particularly relevant when working with individuals facing major life transitions where the disruption of familiar life structures creates both vulnerability and opportunity for fundamental transformation. These liminal spaces – the threshold periods between what was and what might be – represent crucial windows where transformative change becomes not only possible, but perhaps necessary for authentic healing.

The group therapy context presents unique opportunities for facilitating transformative change. Research has long established that group settings offer therapeutic factors unavailable in individual therapy, including universality, interpersonal learning, and the corrective recapitulation of primary family experiences (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). The collective witnessing, shared vulnerability, and communal meaning-making inherent in group processes may create optimal conditions for supporting individuals through profound transformation.

Research suggests that ritual and ceremonial elements may play crucial roles in facilitating transformative experiences (Daboo, 2015; Greenberg, 2019). Across cultures and throughout history, human communities have utilized ritual processes to support individuals through major life transitions and identity transformations (van Gennep, 2019). The structured, symbolic, and communal nature of ritual may provide essential components for safely navigating the liminal spaces where transformation occurs, yet these elements remain underutilized and poorly understood within contemporary therapeutic practice.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this capstone is to synthesize current research on transformative change processes and group therapy approaches with particular attention to the role of ritual and ceremony, and to develop an evidence-based framework for facilitating profound personal transformation in group settings. The first application of this research will be to inform the design of a transformative change program for bereaved clients seeking transformative change within a group therapy context. Afterwards, the therapist intends on designing further programs for diverse populations experiencing major life transitions.

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What distinguishes transformative change from incremental therapeutic change, and what theoretical frameworks best capture these distinctions?
2. What factors and conditions facilitate transformative change in therapeutic settings?
3. How can group therapy approaches be optimized to support transformative rather than incremental change?
4. What roles do ritual and ceremonial elements play in supporting transformative change, and how can these be therapeutically integrated?

5. What evidence-based framework can guide the design and implementation of transformative change groups for individuals experiencing major life transitions?

The intended audience for this research includes therapists and counsellors, mental health practitioners, coaches, program developers and clinical supervisors interested in transformative change and how to support it. The findings may also inform hospice and palliative care professionals, grief counsellors, researchers, and other practitioners working with individuals navigating major life transitions.

Theoretical/Conceptual Frameworks

This research is grounded in several interconnected theoretical frameworks that provide complementary lenses for understanding transformative change processes.

Systems Theory

Provides the foundational distinction between first-order and second-order change, conceptualizing transformation as shifts in the fundamental rules and structures governing individual and relational systems rather than changes within existing patterns (Bateson & Bateson, 2000; Waltzlawick et al., 2011). This framework emphasizes the qualitative differences between incremental adjustment and systematic restructuring of meaning-making processes. While originally developed for family therapy contexts, systems theory principles apply equally to individuals' transformation, where the 'system' encompasses internal belief structures, behavioural patterns, identity frameworks and meaning-making processes that govern how a person experiences and operates in the world.

Transformative Change: A Constellation of Inter-Related Theories

While no single unified theory of transformative change exists, several related theoretical frameworks address profound personal transformation phenomena. This research draws from this

constellation of approaches to understand the various pathways through which individuals experience fundamental shifts in identity, worldview, and life functioning.

Quantum Change Theory. Quantum change as defined by Miller and C’de Baca (2001) represents sudden, dramatic, and enduring positive life transformations characterized by four key elements: Vivid (clearly memorable and impactful), Surprising (unexpected and often occurring without conscious intention), Benevolent (positive in nature and outcome) and Enduring (creating lasting rather than temporary change). Importantly, quantum changes are predominantly internal shifts in perspective, values, or identity rather than responses to external circumstance changes, distinguishing them from other forms of transformation.

Post-traumatic Growth Theory. Post-traumatic growth, conceptualized by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), describes positive psychological change that can emerge following struggle with highly challenging life circumstances. Unlike quantum change, post-traumatic growth typically occurs in response to external crises or trauma and involves gradual reconstruction of meaning systems rather than sudden transformation. This growth encompasses enhanced relationships, increased personal strength, greater life appreciation, spiritual development, and recognition of new life possibilities. Like Quantum Change, many of the aspects of growth have to do with inner shifts in perspectives or could be seen as the direct result of doing so; both theories underscore a change in perspective being a significant component of the transformation.

Peak Experience Theory. Peak experiences, identified by Maslow (1962), represent moments of transcendence, unity or profound meaning that can catalyze lasting personal transformation. These experiences often involve temporary dissolution of ego boundaries and connection to something larger than oneself, providing individuals with expanded awareness of their potential and life’s possibilities.

Constructivist and Meaning-Making Theories

These offer frameworks for understanding how individuals create coherence from experience and how traumatic or disruptive events can necessitate fundamental reconstruction of personal narratives and worldviews (Neimeyer, 2001; Park, 2010). These approaches highlight the active, creative process that individuals rebuild meaning following life disruptions, emphasizing that transformation often required narrative reconstruction rather than simply cognitive restructuring.

Key therapeutic modalities that draw from constructivist principles include Narrative Therapy, which assists clients to re-author their life stories to emphasize agency and resilience rather than victimhood (White & Epston, 2023), and meaning reconstruction approaches in grief counselling, which support bereaved individuals in creating a new sense of purpose and identity following loss (Neimeyer, 2011). These interventions recognize that meaning-making systems encompass how individuals construct their identity narratives, explain causal relationships in their lives, organize their value hierarchies, and envision future possibilities.

Existential and Humanistic Frameworks

These provide understanding of peak experiences, transcendent moments, and the human capacity for growth through adversity (Frankl, 2006; Maslow & Lowry, 1998). These perspectives emphasize the inherent potential for transformation within human experience and the role of meaning, purpose, and authenticity in facilitating profound change (Frankl, 2006). These perspectives emphasize the inherent potential for transformation within human experience, particularly during periods of crisis or existential confrontation with morality, meaninglessness, or authenticity.

Group Process Theories

These offer insight into the unique therapeutic factors available in group settings and how collective experiences can facilitate individual transformation (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). This framework highlights the importance of interpersonal learning, universality, and group cohesion in supporting deep

therapeutic work. The group environment provides opportunities for transformation that are unavailable in individual therapy, including the corrective recapitulation of family dynamics, the healing power of universality, and the amplified energy of collective intention for change.

Anthropological and Ritual Theory

These subject areas provide an understanding of how structured, symbolic experiences support individuals through major life transitions and identity transformations (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960). These frameworks illuminate the role of liminality, threshold states between old and new identities, and *communitas*, the sense of equality and shared humanity that emerges during ritual processes. Ceremonial processes create containers for transformation by temporarily suspending ordinary social structures and creating space for identity reorganization.

The integration of natural cycles and seasonal metaphors within ritual traditions acknowledges transformation as part of a larger cosmic pattern of death, renewal, and rebirth. These frameworks recognise that human transformation often mirrors natural processes, where periods of dormancy and apparent death precede emergence of new life. Such understanding provides both context for the difficulty inherent in transformative processes and hope for their eventual resolution into renewed vitality and purpose.

Contribution to the Field

This research addresses a significant gap in contemporary therapeutic practice by providing an evidence-based framework for facilitating transformative change in group settings. While the therapeutic field has extensive literature on incremental therapeutic change and symptom management, there remains limited integration of research on profound personal transformation with practical group therapy applications.

The contribution of this work is threefold. First, it synthesizes disparate research streams, including transformative change theory, group therapy effectiveness, and ritual studies, into a coherent framework that can guide clinical practice. This integration addresses the current fragmentation where insights about transformative experiences remain largely theoretical rather than practically applicable.

Second, this research responds to an underserved client need. Many individuals seeking therapy present with an intuitive sense that they require fundamental life changes but encounter therapeutic approaches focused primarily on symptom reduction and skills building. By developing frameworks specifically designed to facilitate transformative rather than incremental change, this work expands the therapeutic toolkit to better match client aspirations with intervention approaches.

Third, the practical application component directly contributes to grief and bereavement care by providing a Vancouver based bereavement organization with an evidence-based program design. Given that major loss often creates ready-made conditions for transformative change, developing specialized approaches for this population has potential to enhance healing outcomes and inform similar programs in other hospice and palliative care settings.

This research also contributes to dismantling traditional power structures that position therapists as experts in incremental change while potentially overlooking clients' deeper transformational needs. By centering client experiences of profound change and developing approaches that honour these possibilities, this work challenges therapeutic paradigms that may inadvertently limit healing potential.

Reflectivity and Positionality Statement

My approach to this research is deeply informed by my personal journey of transformation and my evolving understanding of how profound change occurs. I come from a background where transformative change was not only possible but necessary – growing up in a single parent household

marked by economic hardship and mental illness, and neither parent completing high school. I have experienced firsthand how individuals can fundamentally reshape their life trajectories. My path through higher education, international work, and global travel represents a form of second-order change that expanded my understanding of what becomes possible when existing frameworks are transcended rather than simply modified.

This personal experience of transformation shapes my worldview in significant ways. I approach therapeutic work with a deep belief in the human potential for profound change, grounded in the understanding that dramatic shifts in identity, circumstances, and life direction are not only possible but can emerge from periods of disruption and challenge. My interest in transformative change is also informed by my understanding of the difference between fragile change that requires constant vigilance, and integrated change that becomes part of one's new operating system. Having experienced both the success of dramatic life shifts and the ongoing influence of early schemas, I am particularly drawn to investigating approaches that create lasting, automatic ways of being rather than therapeutic interventions that require perpetual maintenance to prevent backsliding. My extensive experience with loss, including deaths by suicide, family estrangement, and the navigation of complex grief, have taught me both the isolating nature of inadequately supported mourning and the powerful role that ritual and ceremony can play in facilitating healing. These experiences inform my conviction that therapeutic approaches should optimize for the maximum transformation that is both desired and possible in any given moment.

My interest in group work emerges from multiple sources. My participation in Indigenous led healing circles has shown me the co-regulatory power of collective witnessing and shared vulnerability. Additionally, my background in facilitation across diverse contexts, from strategic planning to community organizing, has demonstrated how groups can co-create value and healing in ways that

transcend what is possible in individual settings. I am drawn to the efficiency and inherent power of group processes, while recognizing that the social nature of transformation often requires community witnessing and support. Regarding ritual and ceremony, I approach this topic with both curiosity and caution. While I do not have extensive personal practice with formal ritual, I have witnessed its capacity to create containers for transformation by suspending purely logical thinking and allowing space for what might previously have seemed impossible. My learning from Indigenous teachers has emphasized that ritual creation is not culturally exclusive, yet I remain mindful of the importance of approaching ceremonial elements with utmost respect and cultural sensitivity.

I acknowledge several potential biases that may influence my interpretation of this research. My own experience of dramatic life transformation may lead me to overestimate the universal possibility for such change or to unconsciously pressure clients towards more dramatic shifts than they desire or are ready for. Additionally, having navigated significant life changes largely through individual determination and external opportunities, I may have blind spots regarding clients whose circumstances or capacity differ substantially from my own. I also recognize that my attraction to transformative change may be driven not only by my past successes but also my ongoing struggles with feeling constrained by early life schemas and patterns that continue to influence my sense of possibility and self-worth. This dual experience, both in the liberation of transformation and the persistent pull of inherited limitations, may intensify my focus on rapid, profound change as a means of transcending what in moments can feel like intractable personal constraints.

At age forty-one, as someone rebuilding a career and exploring questions of personal meaning legacy, I recognize that my interest in transformative change may be partially motivated by my own desire for rapid professional development and validation.

My expectations for this research are both practical and aspirational. I hope to develop an evidence-based framework for facilitating transformative change in groups beginning with bereaved clients in Vancouver. More broadly, I envision creating methodologies that can identify and optimize moments of transformational possibility within traditional therapeutic settings. Ultimately, I hope this research will contribute to my development of innovative approaches to transformation that may eventually extend beyond traditional therapy containers into broader well-being and community healing contexts.

I bring to this research both the vulnerability of someone who required profound change to thrive and the privilege of someone for whom such change proved possible. This dual perspective, I hope, will allow me to approach the literature and findings with both empathy for the necessity of transformation and realistic understanding of the complex factors that enable or constrain such possibilities for different individuals.

Definition of Terms

First-Order Change

Modifications that occur within existing systems or frameworks without altering fundamental structures, rules, or assumptions. In therapeutic contexts, this includes symptom reduction, skill acquisition, and behavioural modifications that maintain existing meaning-making systems.

Liminality

The threshold state of transitional period between what was and what will be, characterized by ambiguity, openness, and potential for transformation. Originally described by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (2019) in the context of rites of passage.

Post-Traumatic Growth

Positive psychology change experienced as a result of struggle with highly challenging circumstances, including enhanced relationships, increased personal strength, greater appreciation for life, spiritual development, and new life priorities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Quantum Change

Sudden, dramatic, and enduring positive life transformations that are often experienced as distinct from gradual therapeutic progress, typically involving profound shifts in identity, values, and life orientation (Miller & C'de Baca, 2011).

Ritual

Structured, symbolic activities or ceremonies that mark transitions, create meaning, and facilitate psychological and social transformation. In a therapeutic context, intentionally designed experiences that support healing and change processes.

Second-Order Change

Fundamental alterations in the rules, structure, or organizing principles of a system, resulting in qualitatively different functioning rather than modification within existing patterns. This is also referred to as transformative change.

Transformative Change

Profound, fundamental shifts in identity, worldview, meaning-making systems, or life orientation that result in qualitatively different ways of being and relating to self, others and the world.

Identity Frameworks

Cognitive-emotional frameworks through which individuals understand and define themselves, encompassing self-concept, values, and narrative coherence that guide behaviour and decision-making.

Meaning-Making Systems

Cognitive emotional frameworks through which individuals construct coherence, purpose, and significance from life experiences, particularly in response to challenging events that threaten existing beliefs about self and world.

Outline of the Capstone Project Chapters

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a comprehensive thematic analysis of current research relevant to transformative change in group therapeutic settings. The chapter begins with an examination of antecedents and facilitating factors for transformative change, exploring both the precipitating events that create conditions for transformation and the individual and therapeutic factors that support profound personal change. The review then analyzes group therapy considerations, examining how group dynamics and therapeutic factors can be optimized for transformative rather than incremental change. Finally, the role of ritual and ceremony in supporting transformative experience is investigated, with particular attention to how these elements might be therapeutically integrated in group settings, and the significance of natural cycles and seasonal metaphors in transformational processes.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Applied Practices

This chapter synthesizes the literature review findings to develop an evidence-based framework for designing and implementing transformative change groups. The discussion revisits the research questions posed in chapter one, highlighting key learnings about facilitating profound change in therapeutic contexts and identifying limitations in current approaches. The application section presents a comprehensive framework for transformative change groups, specifically designed for bereaved clients at a Vancouver-based bereavement organization but with broader applicability to other populations experiencing or seeking major change. This framework integrates insights from research on

facilitating factors, group therapy best practices, and therapeutic applications of ritual and ceremony in a practical program design that can guide clinical implementation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review examines current research relevant to facilitating transformative change in group therapeutic settings, organized into three thematic areas. The review explores antecedents and facilitating factors for transformative change, examining both precipitating events and individual characteristics that create conditions for profound shifts; group therapy considerations, investigating how group dynamics can be optimized to support transformative rather than incremental change, and the role of ritual and ceremony in supporting transformative experiences. Drawing from systems theory, transformative change literature, group process studies, and anthropological research, this synthesis aims to develop an evidence-based understanding of how practitioners can recognize and support clients' capacity and readiness for profound transformation.

Antecedents and Facilitating Factors for Transformative Change

Understanding what precipitates transformative change and which individual characteristics facilitate such profound shifts is essential for recognizing when clients may be ready for transformation rather than incremental adjustment. Research reveals that while specific triggering events vary widely, they share a common characteristic: they render existing identity frameworks or meaning-making systems untenable, creating both necessity and opportunity for fundamental reorganization of self-concept and worldview.

Common Precipitating Events

What unites diverse precipitating events for transformative change is their capacity to create situations where individuals' existing frameworks for understanding themselves and their world become inadequate or unsustainable. This incompatibility between lived experience and current meaning systems creates what researchers describe as a need for accommodation rather than assimilation, or

fundamental restructuring rather than minor adjustments of existing belief or identity. This is discussed further below.

Crisis and Major Life Changes. Crises and major life changes frequently serve as catalysts for transformative change by disrupting existing meaning-making systems and forcing individuals to reconstruct their understanding of themselves and their world. Significantly, research demonstrates that transformative events need not be negative to facilitate profound change. While traumatic experiences can catalyze post-traumatic growth (Henson et al., 2021) and most research has traditionally focused on negative life events (Joseph & Linley, 2004; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Park & Helgeson, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), studies have found that positive life events can also support growth, with no significant difference in growth outcomes between negative and positive events (Mangelsdorf et al., 2019; Roepke 2013).

Mangelsdorf and colleagues' (2019) research found a positive trend for self-esteem, positive relationships, and mastery in studies after both positive and negative events. They found no general evidence for the widespread conviction that negative life events have a stronger effect on growth than positive ones. This suggests that the transformative potential lies not in the whether an event was positive or negative but in the event's capacity to challenge existing frameworks.

Contemporary therapeutic approaches have begun to articulate this framework-disrupting function of major life changes. Psychiatrist Phil Stutz (2025) conceptualizes this process through his concept of 'The Frame,' describing how individuals typically live within constrictive psychological frameworks that limit their perception and possibilities. According to Stutz, most people exist within these frames as if in a diorama; everything outside of the frame is not possible or real to them and thus they live a very limited existence inside this frame thinking no other choices are available to them.

Stutz identifies 'death events' as experiences that shatter these limiting frameworks, noting that catastrophe breaks the frame. These death events need not involve actual mortality but can include "the loss of a job or relationship, or any other change in status that feels catastrophic" (p. 3). This framework-shattering process, while initially disorienting, creates opportunity for profound transformation.

The mechanism through which dramatic events demand worldview reconstruction rather than simple coping lies in the degree of discrepancy between the event and existing beliefs. When life experiences are so fundamentally inconsistent with current identity structures and assumptions that standard coping mechanisms prove inadequate, individuals must engage in what Piaget (1998) termed *Accommodation*, meaning the need to alter existing cognitive schemas to incorporate new information. This contrasts with *Assimilation*, that is, the fitting of new information into existing frameworks. The death of a loved one, serious illness, divorce, major promotion, job loss, parenthood, or other significant life changes can shatter or overwhelm previously held assumptions about life, identity, and future possibilities, creating what researchers describe as seismic events that challenge fundamental beliefs and require more than simple coping mechanisms.

Accumulated Stress and Breaking Points. Sometimes transformative change emerges not from a single dramatic event but from the cumulative effect of ongoing stress or dissatisfaction that reaches a breaking point. This represents a type of crisis characterized by accumulation rather than a singular event. Individuals may experience years of feeling unfulfilled, constrained by limiting beliefs, or disconnected from authentic self expression before reaching a threshold where continuation of existing patterns becomes impossible to tolerate.

These accumulated stress scenarios often involve a gradual recognition that current life structures are fundamentally incompatible with deeper needs and values. The breaking point represents

a moment when the cost of maintaining familiar patterns exceeds the fear of unknown change, rendering the existing framework untenable. This type of precipitating event may be particularly relevant for the therapeutic context, as clients often seek help precisely when they reach such a threshold of accumulated dissatisfaction with their current ways of being.

Spiritual and Peak Experiences. Abraham Maslow's research on peak experiences, moments of transcendence, unity, or profound meaning, identified another category of events that can precipitate transformative change (Maslow, 1998). These experiences, whether occurring through meditation, nature encounters, artistic expression, altered states of consciousness, or spontaneous mystical moments, can fundamentally alter individuals' understanding of reality and their place within it.

Peak experiences often involve a temporary dissolution of ego boundaries and the sense of connection to something larger than oneself, forcing reorganization of identity in relation to others and the world. Like liminal experiences, they create moments where individuals must eventually reorganize their identity and meaning systems to incorporate expanded awareness of their potential and life's possibilities. While typically brief, these moments have lasting impact on identity, values, and life priorities. The challenge lies in integrating the insights gained during peak experiences into everyday consciousness and behaviour, a process that may require supportive intervention to prevent the experience from remaining isolated or becoming merely a cherished memory without practical impact.

Liminal Experiences and Threshold Moments. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's concept of liminality, the state between what was and what will be, provides crucial insight into conditions that facilitate transformative change. Liminal experiences are characterized by ambiguity, disorientation, and the potential for new possibilities (Turner, 1969). These threshold periods often occur following major life transitions such as graduation, marriage, parenthood, retirement, or bereavement, but can also emerge during spiritual quests, therapeutic breakthroughs, or other moments of identity flux.

During a liminal state, individuals exist between stable identities, with their familiar roles, relationships, and self-concepts suspended or called into question. This creates space for fundamental reorganization of self-concept and life direction. Importantly, liminal experiences can occur in response to external crises as a natural developmental transition, suggesting they represent a distinct but related pathway to transformation.

The temporary nature of liminal space creates both opportunity and urgency for transformation. Individuals cannot remain indefinitely in threshold spaces because prolonged uncertainty and identity flux create cognitive and emotional exhaustion. The human need for stable identity anchors and coherent self narrative eventually demands resolution. This temporal pressure, combined with the dissolution of familiar structures, can facilitate the kind of rapid, comprehensive change characteristic of transformative experiences. When individuals attempt to remain in a liminal state indefinitely, they often experience increasing anxiety, depression, and functional impairment, ultimately forcing some form of identity consolidation.

Environmental and Contextual Facilitators

Beyond major life changes, research reveals that certain environmental contexts and settings can directly facilitate transformative experiences by creating conditions conducive to profound shifts in consciousness, identity, and meaning-making. These environmental facilitators operate independently of major life events, suggesting that transformative change can be catalyzed through intentional exposure to specific contexts and practices.

Natural Environments and Wilderness Settings. Natural environments demonstrate a particularly robust capacity to facilitate transformative psychological experiences through promoting restoration, connectedness to nature, and personal growth (Hartig et al., 2014; Wyles et al., 2017). Wilderness settings offer unique physical and psychological components that contribute to profound

experiences of awe, self-efficacy, and resilience (Fetzer, 2020). The aesthetic qualities of natural environments, combined with their innate sacredness, as well as their separation from everyday pressures, create conditions particularly conducive to peak experiences (McDonald et al., 2009).

Research indicates that type and quality of natural environments significantly influence their transformative potential, with rural and coastline locations, as well as protected wilderness areas, providing greater benefits compared to urban green spaces (Wyles et al., 2017). Notably, mystical experiences occurring in natural settings are associated with both improved psychological well-being and increased environmental behaviour, whereas similar experiences in human-built environments correlate only with psychological well-being (Snell & Simmonds, 2015). This suggests natural environments offer unique transformative qualities that extend beyond general restoration effects.

Music and Creative Arts. Music emerges as a frequent catalyst for peak experiences, particularly among individuals highly engaged with musical practice or appreciation (Lowis, 2002). The research suggests that musical engagement activates both analytical and intuitive cognitive processes simultaneously. This neurological integration may facilitate the kind of holistic awareness shifts characteristic of transformative experiences.

Creative arts more broadly, including visual arts, performance, and literary engagement provide context where individuals can explore identity, meaning, and possibility in ways that catalyze profound changes (Weijers & Cox, 2025). The creative process itself, with its emphasis on exploration, expression, and integration of conscious and unconscious material, mirrors many of the psychological processes involved in transformative change.

Contemplative and Meditative Practices. Meditation practices, particularly those focused on insight development, consistently facilitate profound personal insights and transformative experiences (Goldstein, 1995). Insight meditation, rooted in Buddhist traditions, cultivates compassion, strengthens

mindfulness, and deepens understanding of self and others, often leading to states of non-duality and transpersonal experiences (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1990). Research reveals that the depths of meditation experiences correlate more strongly with the personality trait of absorption rather than with amount of practice time, and that deeper meditation experiences are associated with increased mindfulness in daily life (Holzel & Ott, 2007). This suggests that contemplative practices may be particularly effective for individuals with natural capacity for absorbed attention and present-moment awareness.

Travel and Novel Experiences. Travel experiences, particularly those involving exposure to natural environments, interpersonal connection, and opportunities for personal growth, can trigger peak transformative moments (Hoffman et al., 2020). The combination of novelty, beauty, and removal from familiar context creates conditions where existing frameworks may be challenged and expanded. Travel induced transformation often involves encounters with different ways of living and being that expand individuals' sense of possibility for their own lives.

Altered States and Consciousness-Expanding Practices. Emerging research on consciousness expanding practices, including psilocybin and other psychedelic experiences, reveals their capacity to facilitate peak experiences and transformative insights. Studies indicate that psilocybin use is associated with peak experiences and greater alterations in consciousness compared to non-users (Cummins & Lyke, 2013). Significantly, both psychedelic experiences and insight meditation facilitate similar types of mystical, psychological, and philosophical and existential insights that are associated with improved well-being (Jylkka et al., 2025).

This research highlights the importance of integration processes following profound experiences, as the insights gained during altered states require ongoing work to incorporate into daily life and identity structure. The growing body of research on psychedelic-assisted therapy emphasizes

that transformative experiences, while potentially profound, require careful preparation and integration support to realize their full therapeutic potential.

Individual Facilitating Factors

While precipitating events create conditions conducive to transformative change, individual characteristics and capacities significantly influence whether such transformation actually occurs. Research has identified several categories of personal factors that facilitate the translation of major life events or disruptions into growth and positive change.

Personality Traits and Psychological Characteristics. Research on post-traumatic growth has identified specific personality traits that predict capacity for transformation following adversity. Higher levels of extroversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness are associated with post-traumatic growth (Owens, 2016). Openness to experience, characterized by curiosity, imagination, and willingness to consider new ideas, correlates with the capacity for profound change. Individuals high in openness are more likely to view disruptions as opportunities for growth rather than threats to be resisted, and they demonstrate greater ability to integrate novel experiences into expanded self-understanding.

Psychological flexibility, which is defined by the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science as “the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behaviour when doing so serves valued ends” (The Six Core Processes of ACT, 2025). The ability to demonstrate psychological flexibility regardless of internal experiences like thoughts, feelings, or bodily sensations, emerges as a crucial factor in transformative change. Research suggests that psychological flexibility plays a fundamental role in fostering post-traumatic growth among individuals experiencing high levels of post-traumatic stress, mediating the relationship between self-compassion and growth (Misurya et al., 2021). Individuals with greater psychological flexibility are better able to tolerate the uncertainty and discomfort inherent in transformation processes, holding space for

conflicting emotions and remaining open to new possibilities even when these challenge established self-concepts.

Coping Strategies and Adaptive Responses. The specific coping strategies individuals employ significantly influence whether adversity leads to growth or maintenance of existing functioning. Research reveals that planning and positive reinterpretation predict growth and increase self-efficacy (Litman & Lunsford, 2009). Religious coping (using religious beliefs and practices to manage stress), positive appraisal, and seeking social support are moderately associated with post-traumatic growth (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009). Cognitive reappraisal and self-care emerge as important predictors of transformative outcomes (Cutuli, 2014).

Conversely, certain coping strategies predict diminished outcomes. Emotional venting, behavioural disengagement, and self-injury predict diminishment and illness (Litman & Lunsford, 2009), while acceptance coping yields the smallest effect on growth (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009). These findings suggest that active, meaning focused coping strategies facilitate transformation, while passive or avoidant approaches maintain existing patterns or lead to deterioration.

Meaning-Making Capacity. Meaning-making capacity refers to individuals' ability to construct coherent narratives from chaotic experiences, identify growth and learning within adversity, and maintain a sense of purpose despite disruption. This involves both cognitive processes, reflecting on experience, identifying patterns, constructing coherent stories about personal development, and emotional processes, tolerating difficult feelings while maintaining hope and forward momentum.

Victor Frankl's (2006) observation that humans can endure almost any suffering if they can find meaning in it, points to meaning-making capacity as essential to surviving trauma and is a marker for transformative change. Research confirms that the ability to make meaning from traumatic events is associated with lower post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom severity and higher post-

traumatic growth (Owens, 2016). The meaning-making coping framework proposes that individuals engage in processes to reconcile discrepancies between their default meaning framework and the appraised meaning of traumatic events, with this process leading to post-traumatic growth, particularly in combat veterans (Larner & Blow, 2011; Park & Ali, 2006).

By way of an example, an individual experiencing job loss might initially struggle with thoughts such as 'I am a failure' or 'my career is over.' Through meaning-making processes, this might transform to 'this loss taught me about my true values and opened doors I couldn't see before' or 'I discovered resilience I didn't know I had.' This reconstruction represents a fundamental change in identity narrative rather than simple cognitive reframing, such as 'losing my job doesn't make me a failure. Lots of good people lose jobs due to economic factors.'

Previous Experience with Change and Tolerance for Uncertainty. Individuals who have successfully navigated previous significant life changes may be better equipped to handle subsequent transformative experiences. Having developed confidence in their ability to adapt and grow through difficulty, they approach new challenges with greater resilience and fewer fixed assumptions about what is possible. This factor suggests that transformative change may be somewhat cumulative, as each successful navigation of major transition builds capacity for future transformation.

Closely related is tolerance for uncertainty, a key factor that enables individuals to maintain optimism and hope in the face of change and ambiguity. Those who can sit with not knowing, who can tolerate the discomfort of identity flux without premature closure, are more likely to allow transformation processes to unfold naturally rather than rushing to restore familiar but potentially limiting patterns.

Social and Relational Factors. Social support and attachment style significantly influence capacity for transformative change. Lower attachment avoidance contributes to post-traumatic growth

(Owens, 2016; O'Donovan & Burke, 2022), while secure attachment facilitates the kind of exploration and risk-taking required for profound change. Social support serves both as a buffer against diminishment (Litman & Lunsford, 2009) and as a facilitator of growth through providing witnessing, validation, and alternative perspectives during transformation processes.

Spiritual or Philosophical Framework. Having access to spiritual, philosophical, or cultural frameworks that normalize and support transformation facilitates positive change outcomes. Religious traditions that emphasize rebirth and renewal, such as Christianity's concept of being 'born again,' Buddhism's teachings on impermanence and liberation from suffering, Hinduism's understanding of spiritual evolution through multiple lifetimes, or Indigenous traditions honouring life transitions through ceremony, provide context and language for understanding transformative experiences as natural rather than pathological. Such frameworks offer several benefits: they normalize the disorientation and difficulty of transformation processes, provide practices and rituals for supporting change, offer a community of others who understand the journey, and supply language for articulating and integrating transformative experiences. Whether through religious traditions, philosophical systems that embrace impermanence and growth, or cultural practices that honour life transition, these frameworks create supportive containers for transformation.

Group Therapeutic Factors for Transformative Change

The group therapy context offers unique opportunities for facilitating transformative change that extend beyond what is possible in individual therapeutic settings. While basic therapeutic factors such as safety and containment remain important across all therapeutic modalities, certain group specific dynamics and processes appear particularly conducive to supporting the profound shift in identity, meaning-making, and life direction characteristic of transformative change. Understanding

these factors enables practitioners to optimize group environments for transformation rather than incremental progress.

Contemporary research reveals that transformative outcomes in group therapy depend more on common factors and group dynamics than on specific therapeutic techniques, emphasizing the importance of fostering supportive and cohesive group environments (Nahum et al., 2018). While Yalom's (2020) therapeutic factors remain foundational to group work, recent research has expanded understanding of how these factors specifically facilitate profound psychological change.

Therapeutic Alliance and Group Climate

The quality of therapeutic relationships within group settings significantly influences transformative outcomes, and research suggests that whole group cohesion and climate may be more influential than individual alliance with the therapist alone (Crowe & Grenyer, 2008). Patients' perceptions of both the therapist and the group as supportive, understanding, and committed to change, create conditions conducive to transformation (Joyce et al., 2007). This multi-layered alliance system provides multiple sources of support and validation during the vulnerable process of identity reorganization.

Group climate factors, including levels of conflict, emotional safety, and members' active participation, create the environmental conditions within which transformation becomes possible. When groups achieve an optimal climate characterized by trust, authenticity, and mutual respect, members become more willing to risk the vulnerability required for profound change. Conversely, groups with high conflict, poor boundaries, or passive participation tend to maintain existing patterns rather than facilitate transformation.

Group Cohesion as the Container for Transformation. Research consistently demonstrates that group cohesion plays a crucial role in facilitating profound psychological change by creating safe, non-

judgmental environments that enable self-reflection, social connection, and acceptance, ultimately leading to behavioural changes (Woolhouse et al., 2013). Cohesive groups function as secure containers within which individuals can explore aspects of identity and meaning that might feel too threatening to examine in isolation.

The supportive environment created by group cohesion enables individuals to challenge themselves, develop new perspectives, and maintain positive psychological changes over time (Marmarosh & Sproul, 2021). This sustainability factor appears particularly important for transformative change, which often involves ongoing integration and consolidation processes. Cohesive groups provide the relational matrix necessary for supporting members through the extended timeline typical of profound transformation.

Furthermore, responsive group leadership and cohesive group relationships can enhance attachment security among members, fostering long-term improvements in psychological functioning and relationship patterns that extend beyond the group experience itself (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). This suggests that transformative change facilitated within cohesive groups may have particularly enduring effects.

Group Common Factors Supporting Transformation. Research has identified several common factors fundamental to transformative change across various psychotherapy approaches: empathy, goal consensus, positive regard, and emotional experience (Nahum et al., 2017). In group context, these factors operate both between the therapist(s) and members and amongst members themselves, creating multiple sources of therapeutic influence.

Empathy within groups provides members with experiences of being deeply understood, while also developing their capacity for understanding others. This reciprocal empathy facilitates the kind of perspective taking and emotional flexibility associated with transformative change. Goal consensus

ensures that group energy focuses on supporting profound change rather than maintaining existing patterns, while positive regard creates the emotional safety necessary for identity exploration.

The factor of emotional experience appears particularly crucial for transformative change, as transformation often requires not just cognitive insight but embodied emotional shifts. Groups provide opportunities for emotional expression, witnessing, and regulation that may be more powerful than individual therapy contexts.

Attachment Dynamics and Security. Individual attachment characteristics, particularly attachment security, significantly predict both group climate and treatment outcomes (Kirchmann et al., 2009). Members with more secure attachment styles contribute to group environments that feel safer and more supportive, while those with insecure attachment styles may initially struggle with group intimacy but can experience profound healing through corrective group experiences.

This dynamic has important implications for transformative change, as transformation often involves restructuring fundamental patterns of relating to self and others. Groups can provide corrective attachment experiences that facilitate shifts from insecure to more secure relational patterns, representing the form of transformative change that extends far beyond symptom reduction.

Interpersonal Learning and Identity Reformation. Building on Yalom's (2020) concept of interpersonal learning, recent research revealed how group processes specifically support identity transformation through community participation, emotional support, and opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth (Reddin & Sonn, 2003). Groups provide laboratories for experimenting with new ways of being, receiving feedback about these experiments and gradually integrating new aspects of identity.

The witnessing function of groups appears particularly important for identity transformation. When group members witness and validate someone's emergence of new aspects of self, this external

confirmation can accelerate and solidify identity changes that might otherwise remain tentative or private. The social confirmation of transformation helps bridge the gap between internal shifts and external manifestation.

Universality and Shared Meaning-Making. The discovery that others have faced similar struggles with identity, meaning, and life direction provides profound relief that reduces the isolation often experienced during transformative processes. This universality factor takes on special significance for transformative change because it normalizes the disorientation and difficulty inherent in profound change processes.

Groups also provide opportunities for collective meaning-making, where members can explore together what their experiences mean and how they might construct new life narratives. This shared exploration often yields richer and more nuanced meaning-making than individual reflection alone, as different perspectives and insight emerge through group dialogue.

Group Formats and Participant Selection for Transformative Change

The structure and composition of groups significantly influence their capacity to facilitate transformative change. Different group formats offer varying advantages for supporting profound transformation, while participant selection and timing considerations affect group dynamics and outcomes.

Process-Oriented Versus Psychoeducational Approaches. Traditional distinctions between process-oriented and psychoeducational groups may be less relevant for transformative change work, as effective transformation often requires both emotional processing and new learning. Groups that blend these approaches may be optimally suited for facilitating profound change, offering both the deeper personal exploration characteristic of process groups and the skill building and knowledge acquisition typical of psychoeducational formats.

Process-oriented elements provide opportunities for emotional expression, interpersonal feedback, and the kind of here-and-now experiencing that facilitates identity shifts. Psychoeducational components can offer frameworks for understanding transformation, tools for managing the challenges of change, and practices for integrating new ways of being. The combination addresses both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of transformative change.

Open Versus Closed Group Structures. Closed groups, where membership remains stable throughout the group's duration may offer particular advantages for transformative change work. The consistency of membership allows for deeper trust development, more intimate sharing, and the kind of sustained witnessing that supports identity transformation over time. Members can track each other's changes and provide ongoing validation and support for emerging aspects of identity.

However, open groups, where membership can change over time, offer different advantages such as fresh perspectives, opportunities to practice new ways of being with different people, and modeling effects where newer members can witness the transformation journey of longer-term members. The choice between formats may depend on the specific population and the nature of the transformative work being undertaken.

Participant Readiness and Selection Criteria. Effective participant selection for transformative change groups requires assessment of readiness that extends beyond the traditional mental health screening. Individuals may be primed for transformative change through various pathways, not limited to crisis or loss experiences.

Life-stage transitions provide natural windows for transformation, including retirement, marriage, divorce, parenthood, emptiness transitions, career changes, and geographic relocation. These transitions create the kind of identity flux and meaning-making challenges that can precipitate

transformative change. Participants entering such transitions may be particularly motivated and capable of engaging in profound change work.

Beyond life transitions individuals may demonstrate readiness through accumulated stress or 'breaking point' experiences where existing life patterns have become untenable. Signs include repetitive relationship patterns they wish to change, values-behaviour misalignment where individuals recognize disconnection between their stated values and actual living, identity questioning where people feel disconnected from authentic self-expression, and spiritual or existential seeking where individuals actively pursue deeper meaning and purpose.

Assessment for readiness might include evaluating individuals' capacity to tolerate uncertainty, willingness to question fundamental assumptions about self and life, ability to sit with emotional discomfort, openness to feedback and new perspectives, and motivation for deep rather than superficial change.

Timing and Developmental Considerations. The timing of group participation can significantly influence transformation outcomes. Individuals may need different types of support at different stages of their transformation journey. Pre-transformation phases might require psychoeducational support and preparation for change, active transformation phases might benefit from intensive process work and peer support, while post transformation phases may focus on integration and consolidation of change.

Groups can be designed to serve different phases of transformation, or groups can be structured to accommodate members at various stages. Mixed stage groups may offer particular benefits, as members at different phases can learn from and support each other in ways that facilitate movement through the transformation process. Logistically speaking, mixed stage groups may be more difficult to

manage for the therapist facilitating the group, and careful consideration of benefits and challenges must be weighed.

Facilitator Considerations for Deep Change Work

Leading groups focused on transformative change requires specialized knowledge, skills, and awareness that extend beyond traditional group therapy competencies. Facilitators must understand the unique dynamics of transformation processes and be prepared to support members through the challenges and opportunities inherent in profound change.

Holding Multiple Perspectives Simultaneously. Facilitators of transformative change groups must maintain awareness of multiple levels of processes simultaneously: individual member dynamics, interpersonal relationships within the group, whole group development and climate, and the larger transformation processes occurring for each member. This requires sophisticated clinical skills and the ability to track complex interconnected processes over time.

In addition, facilitators must balance supporting current functioning and stability with facilitating deeper change and growth. This dual awareness requires clinical judgment about when to encourage exploration and when to provide stabilization, when to challenge existing patterns and when to offer support for current coping mechanisms.

Managing Intensity and Emotional Regulation. Transformative change work often involves intense emotional experiences as members explore identity, meaning, and fundamental life patterns. Facilitators must be comfortable with and skilled at managing high levels of emotional intensity while maintaining group safety and containment. This includes recognizing when emotional expression is therapeutic versus when it becomes overwhelming or re-traumatizing.

Facilitators also serve important emotional regulation functions, helping members stay present with difficult emotions without becoming overwhelmed, teaching skills for managing emotional

intensity, and modeling emotional acceptance and tolerance. The facilitators own emotional regulation and comfort with intensity significantly influences group members' capacity to engage deeply with transformation processes.

Supporting Integration and Consolidation. Perhaps most importantly, facilitators must understand that transformative experiences, while profound, require ongoing support for integration and consolidation. Research distinguishes between the often rapid or sudden nature of transformative insights and the extended process of integrating these changes into daily life (Miller & C'de Baca, 2011). This involves helping members identify concrete ways to embody their transformation in daily life, addressing resistance from family or social systems that may pressure return to familiar patterns, and providing ongoing space to process the implications of profound change. The meaning-making coping framework suggests that individuals must actively work to reconcile new insights with existing worldviews, a process that can extend well beyond the initial transformative moment (Park & Ali, 2006).

Integration support might include helping members develop practices for maintaining new ways of being, creating accountability structures for continued growth, addressing practical challenges that arise from Identity or life changes, and facilitating connections between group members that can provide ongoing support beyond the formal group experience. Social support and attachment style significantly influence this integration process, with secure attachment patterns facilitating more effective consolidation of transformative experiences (O'Donovan & Burke, 2022).

Research on group processes suggests that ongoing peer connections established during group work can serve as vital resources for sustaining identity transformation through continued community participation and emotional support (Reddin & Sonn, 2003). Furthermore, responsive group leadership and cohesive relationships developed during treatment can enhance members' capacity for long-term

psychological change that extends well beyond the formal therapeutic experience (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017).

Personal Preparation and Self-Awareness. Facilitators of transformative change groups must engage in their own transformative work and maintain ongoing self-awareness about their relationship to change and transformation. Personal experience with transformative processes, while not essential, can provide valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities members face. Equally important is awareness of personal limitations, biases, and triggers that might interfere with effective facilitation.

Ongoing supervision, consultation, and personal therapy can support facilitators and maintain the kind of emotional availability and professional competence required for this intensive work. The facilitators own growth and transformation modeling can provide powerful examples for group members while maintaining appropriate boundaries and professional role clarity.

Ritual, Ceremony, and Transformative Processes

The integration of ritual and ceremonial elements within the therapeutic context represents a powerful yet underutilized approach to facilitating transformative change. Traditional ceremonies and rituals have long demonstrated the power to facilitate transformative change, and through research into these practices, scholars have identified multiple common elements within rituals and ceremonies that support such transformation. This section presents two complementary case studies that demonstrate different elements of ceremonial transformation. The first case study: Talking Circles of the Seven Sisters Healthy Heart Project, exemplifies anthropological and psychological functions of ritual within healthcare contexts. The second case study: Seasonal Ceremonies from Around the World, offers cross-cultural illustrations of how natural cycles and seasonal metaphors function as transformative frameworks. These case studies serve as practical exemplars for understanding two major thematic areas derived from research: Anthropological and Psychological Functions of Ritual, and Natural Cycles

and Seasonal Metaphors in Transformation. Each thematic section concludes with analysis of how its research-identified elements can be observed operating within the ceremonial practices presented in these case studies.

Before exploring these practices and case studies, it is essential to acknowledge that ritual and ceremony are not innovations of Western psychology or therapy. These practices are foundational knowledge systems from Indigenous communities and cultures worldwide, developed through millennia of cultural wisdom, oral tradition and lived experience that far predates contemporary therapeutic approaches.

Acknowledging Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Addressing Historical Appropriation

Indigenous communities across the globe have maintained a sophisticated understanding of how structured, symbolic experiences support individuals through major life transitions, identity transformations, and profound shifts in meaning-making. These knowledge systems, primarily transmitted through oral tradition, are often absent from academic literature that privileges written sources, creating a significant gap in recognition and attribution (Battiste, 2000, 2005; Markides, 2019). Battiste emphasizes that healing and rebuilding requires restoring Indigenous ecologies, consciousness, and languages while creating bridges between Indigenous and Eurocentric knowledge systems.

The field of psychology and therapy has a troubling history of epistemological appropriation, the repackaging of Indigenous wisdom without proper acknowledgment or understanding. Carl Jung, often celebrated as a foundational figure in analytical psychology, incorporated elements from Taoist internal alchemy techniques and other non-Western traditions into concepts like active imagination and synchronicity (Chen, 2025). While Jung's work led to valuable therapeutic developments, it also exemplifies how Indigenous and traditional knowledge has been repackaged within Western frameworks without adequate recognition of its origins. Similarly, scholars have accused Joseph

Campbell of appropriating and misrepresenting Indigenous and other non-Western mythologies (Lefkowitz, 1990).

This pattern of appropriation extends beyond individual theorists to broader therapeutic movements. The controversy surrounding presentations of Sacred Crow Indian traditions at psychology conferences illustrates how Indigenous spiritual practices can be misrepresented or commodified within an academic setting (Gone, 2022). Similarly, the interpretation of Hindu deity statues as union archetypes rather than divine manifestations demonstrates how Western psychological frameworks can colonize and misinterpret sacred traditions (Thomases, 2021).

The destruction of Indigenous ritual practices represents a profound loss caused by colonization processes that systematically dismantle traditional knowledge systems, spiritual practices, and community structures. Jinkerson-Brass (2022) reflects:

I feel we are in a fall season because the death of many of the elements and connections that held our culture together prior to contact are challenged by ongoing settler encroachment in all aspects of our world. In the process of colonization, many cultural practices have changed, as have our traditional foods, housing, landscapes, and communities. (p. 647-648)

This destruction extends beyond individual practices to encompass entire world views and ways of being that supported community healing and transformation for countless generations. Indigenous scholars like Moreton-Robinson, Sefa Dei, and Makere Steward-Harawira have long argued Indigenous scholarship raises fundamental questions about colonial relations and the role of mainstream social science in broader decolonization processes. They find that Indigenous research, when conducted on Indigenous terms, can be a powerful tool for resistance, resurgence, and self-determination (Coburn et al., 2013).

The contemporary culture shift from spirituality toward consumerism has further eroded ritualized approaches to transformation and meaning-making. Whereas traditional communities once provided structured support for navigating life transitions through ceremony and collective witnessing, modern societies often offer only consumer-based solutions for addressing life's fundamental challenges. This cultural shift has created spiritual and ceremonial voids that leave many individuals without access to adequate support for profound transformation processes.

Understanding these historical and cultural contexts is essential for ethical integration of ritual elements within therapeutic practice. This requires moving beyond appropriation towards what scholars describe as cultural appreciation, involving respectful acknowledgment, proper attribution, and collaborative approaches that honour the wisdom of Indigenous knowledge keepers while serving therapeutic goals (Jones & Childs, 2021).

Anthropological and Psychological Functions of Ritual

Case Study: Talking Circles of the Seven Sisters Healthy Heart Project. The Seven Sisters Healthy Heart Project brought together Indigenous key workers and non-Indigenous practitioners to deliver culturally sensitive health care within Indigenous communities used in a healthcare context. As part of that collaboration the team engaged in the practice of a talking circle, and that ritual/ceremony is described herein.

Central to this approach was the talking circle, which an Indigenous matriarch and academic Jinkerson-Brass (2022) describes:

The Anishinaabe people have always known the power of the number zero, because it is both zero and infinity. Most of our rituals emulate this infinite symbol of life. Our rain dances, sweat lodges, feasts, and community gatherings are all held in a circle. When we gather Elders insist on

everyone maintaining a circle formation because a mystical, unseen force is invoked when we sit in a circle. The circle has no beginning or end, and it goes on forever. (p. 650)

When people are in a talking circle, the practice is that you can share until you feel complete and there will be no interruption. Thus, people get the rare experience of sharing at length without a back and forth or competing for time to speak. The style of communication demonstrates Indigenous values of equality, respect, and humility (Prodan-Bhalla et al., 2016). The circle follows a specific structure: participants begin by sharing their name and which Nation they belong to, acknowledging that they are currently the rendition of people who have walked on the earth for countless generations. Next, each person shares a summary of our journey to where we are today. Sequential sharing circles support trust, build rapport between researchers and participants, nurture a sense of community, and facilitate healing and empowerment.

According to Elder Jinkerson-Brass, as cited in Prodan-Bhalla et al. (2016), the process of a talking circle “weaves a deep connection and is the DNA of trust. It is all about being equal humans and one with all” (p.46) The practice Jinkerson-Brass calls the “DNA of trust” is created through mutual vulnerability and witnessing, establishing a foundational connection that supports both individual healing and collective transformation.

The circle’s structure balances individual recognition with community unity, honouring each person’s unique journey while creating a shared experience of equality and belonging. This balance demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how authentic transformation occurs through relationship rather than isolation.

Creating Sacred Space and Temporal Boundaries. Ritual functions by creating what anthropologists describe as ‘sacred space and sacred time’, distinct from ordinary consciousness and daily experiences (Elaide, 1959). This separation from mundane reality allows participants to suspend

normal psychological defenses and social roles, creating openness to experiences and perspectives that might otherwise be rejected or avoided. The bounded nature of ritual space provides safety for exploration and experimentation with new ways of being well maintaining connection to supportive communities.

The temporal boundaries created by rituals serve important psychological functions for transformation. Clear beginnings, structured processes, and definitive ending help participants navigate the disorientation often accompanying identity shifts. The ritualized sequence provides predictable structure within which unpredictable transformation can safely occur, offering both containment and permission for profound change.

Facilitating Liminality and Identity Transition. Building on Van Gennep's (2019) three-stage model of separation, transition, and incorporation, ritual creates structured pathways for navigating the liminal spaces where transformation occurs. The separation phase involves leaving behind familiar roles and identities, often through symbolic actions that represent release or death of old ways of being. The transitional phase provides structured space for exploring new possibilities and experiencing alternative states of consciousness or identity. The incorporation phase supports integration of transformative insights and new identities into ongoing life.

This ritualized approach to liminality addresses a fundamental challenge in transformative change: how to navigate the disorienting threshold spaces between old and new ways of being without becoming overwhelmed or prematurely foreclosing on emerging possibilities. The concept of premature foreclosure represents a significant barrier to transformative change, where individuals may prematurely close off identity exploration to avoid uncertainty, limiting their potential for growth and adaptation (Bohlmeijer et al., 2014).

Collective Witnessing and Social Validation. Collective witnessing, where community members observe and validate an individual's experience, serves multiple purposes: it provides external confirmation of internal changes, creates accountability for maintaining new ways of being, offers modeling and inspiration for other participants, and generates collective energy that can amplify individual transformation processes.

The power of witnessed transformation extends beyond individual benefit to strengthen group cohesion and shared meaning-making. When group members observe each other's profound changes, it expands the group's collective understanding of what is possible and creates cultural permission for continued transformation. This witnessing function may be particularly important for changes that challenge social norms or family systems that might otherwise pressure return to familiar patterns.

Symbolic Communication and Meaning-Making. Ritual employs symbolic communication that engages multiple levels of consciousness simultaneously, accessing emotional, somatic, and unconscious processes that purely cognitive approaches may miss. Symbols, metaphors, and embodied actions can communicate meanings that transcend verbal language, facilitating integration of transformative experiences that otherwise remain intellectualized or incomplete.

The multilayered nature of symbolic communication allows participants to derive personally relevant meanings from shared ritual experiences. Symbolic elements within ritual can simultaneously represent multiple meanings, create space for individual transformation within collective experiencing while building shared understanding and connection.

Case Study Analysis. The Seven Sisters Talking Circle demonstrates all four anthropological and psychological functions of ritual through its carefully structured approach. The circle creates a sacred space through its opening protocol of sharing name and Nation/lineage, immediately distinguishing the interaction from ordinary social communication by invoking ancestral presence and the connection to

countless generations. This establishes an opportunity for participants to connect to something larger than individual experience.

The practice facilitates liminality through its invitation to share their journeys to where we are today, creates structured opportunities for participants to examine their life narratives, and potentially discover new ways of understanding and conveying their experiences. The circles' emphasis on equality and inclusion suspends the usual social hierarchies, creating transitional space where authentic self-expression becomes possible. The "DNA of Trust" (Prodan-Bhalla et al., 2016. P.46) that develops provides a foundation for incorporating insights gained through circle participation into ongoing relationship and identity development.

Collective witnessing occurs through the circle's fundamental structure of shared storytelling and deep listening, where each person's journey is received with respect and humility. This witnessing without judgment allows participants to be seen and accepted in their authentic complexity, creating validation that can be profoundly healing and transformative.

The circle employs rich symbolic communication through its circular formation (equality, inclusion, continuity) and the powerful metaphor of "DNA of Trust" which describes the fundamental, cellular-level connection that develops through authentic sharing and witnessing. These symbolic elements operate beyond literal meaning to create a deep connection and shared understanding among participants.

Natural Cycles and Seasonal Metaphors in Transformation

In this section each of the four seasons has an associated mini case study from around the world.

Winter - Rauh Nächte: The following mini case study synthesizes information from diverse sources examining the German Rauh Nächte tradition, incorporating findings from folklore studies (Stihler & Simek, 2023) and Germanic cultural research (Dow, 2006; Pohl, 2016).

Rauhnächte represents a Germanic traditional observance of twelve sacred nights between Christmas and Epiphany (January 6th, when Jesus was revealed to the three kings or three wise men who bestowed on him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh). Rooted in pre-Christian seasonal customs, this festival acknowledges the liminal period between the years and beginning. These nights are considered particularly significant for divination, reflection, and spiritual transformation, with folklore suggesting that the veil between the physical world and the spirit realm becomes thinner during this threshold time, allowing for enhanced communication with deceased ancestors and greater access to prophetic dreams and spiritual insights. Contemporary research in folklore has documented how these traditions, while evolving over centuries, maintain core elements including smudging rituals to cleanse the home with frankincense, dream journaling and interpretation, and the belief in heightened spiritual accessibility during Winter's darkest period. Modern celebrations include lead pouring (Bleigiessen) for fortune-telling, the burning of wishes on written paper, and the practice of leaving food offerings for wandering spirits. Modern adaptations involve daily meditation and intention setting rituals on each night representing the coming year's months. The practice demonstrates how seasonal transition points can serve as catalysts for personal transformation and meaning-making within structured cultural frameworks.

Spring, Qingming Festival: The following mini case study synthesizes information from diverse sources examining Qingming Festival, incorporating findings from folk studies (Xu & Wang, 2020) and anthropological and cultural research (Liu, 2021; Pan et al., 2011).

Observed on the 15th day after the spring equinox, Qingming represents a Chinese tradition spanning over 2,500 years that combines ancestor veneration with seasonal celebration of spring renewal. Families engage in Tomb squeaking activities, cleaning debris from ancestor's graves, removing weeds and performing maintenance followed by burning incense, spirit money, and paper replicas of

valuable goods while leaving food offerings that are believed to nourish the deceased relatives in the afterlife. Research documents how Qingming poetry historically captured the emotional complexity of mourning within springtime regeneration, creating productive tension within the season of life. The festival exemplifies how cultural practices can integrate death awareness with seasonal renewal, facilitating both grief processing and life affirmation within a single ceremonial framework.

Summer, Anishinaabe seasonal rounds: The following mini case study synthesizes information from diverse sources examining Indigenous seasonal ceremonies, incorporating findings from various Indigenous writers (Frost, 2022; Geniusz, 2023) and academic experts on Indigenous culture (Borrows, 2023; Chiblow, 2024)

Anishinaabe seasonal rounds represent sophisticated knowledge systems that organize annual cycles around ecological relationships and resource availability, demonstrating Indigenous understanding of transformation through seasonal attunement. In monthly ceremonies including events like Ode'miin Giizis (Strawberry Moon) and Datkaagmiin Giizis (Blackberry Moon), band members gather to perform communal harvests and associated ceremonies. Communities were traditionally structured around natural rhythms while ensuring diverse subsistence patterns that supported resilience even during resource scarcity. Contemporary transdisciplinary research recognizes seasonal rounds as participatory methodologies that combine Indigenous ecological knowledge with community practice, offering frameworks for anticipating and adapting to environmental change while maintaining cultural continuity. These systems demonstrate how seasonal awareness can facilitate both individual and collective transformation through deep ecological relationships.

Fall, Samhain: The following mini case study synthesizes information from a variety of sources examining Samhain, incorporating findings from folklore studies (Clancy & Santino, 1998; Hutton, 2011; Santino, 1983).

Celebrated at the midpoint between autumn equinox and winter solstice, Samhain is a Celtic festival marking transition from the harvest season to winter's darker half of the year. Traditional practices include lighting protective bonfires where participants and livestock pass between two fires as purification rituals, preparing ancestor altars adorned with photographs and food offerings, and engaging in divination activities such as apple peeling to reveal future partner's initials and fire rituals for communicating with spirits. Contemporary mythological analysis reveals Samhain as fundamentally concerned with transformation rather than merely death, with fire serving as an agent of transformation that eliminates old patterns while creating space for renewal. The festival's emphasis on liminal time and permeable boundaries between worlds provide a cultural framework for navigating major life transitions and identity transformation.

Death and Rebirth Cycles in Nature. Indigenous scholars have long recognized the profound connections between natural cycles and human transformation processes, offering sophisticated frameworks for understanding change renewal and healing that predate and inform contemporary therapeutic approaches. These understandings recognize natural cycles not as mere analogies but as fundamental principles governing all natural processes, including humans, where transformation involves necessary endings that create space for new beginnings.

The concept of death and rebirth cycles in nature exists in contemporary Western culture and is exemplified in film. Miller and C'de Baca (2011) introduce the idea of quantum change by recounting two characters from famous films; George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life* and Ebenezer Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol*. In each film the main character undergoes a transformative change and the authors make the connection that, in both cases, these profound changes are

linked to a season of Christmas, just after winter solstice, when the darkest days of the year are past and there is just a glimmer of new light on the horizon. Their stories seem to rekindle hope

in us, even hope against hope - the vision that new life is possible even and especially when it seems most impossible. Entrenched greed turns into generosity. Exuberant joy ignites from the ashes of ruin (Miller & C'de Baca, 2011, p. 4)

Seasonal Rituals and Transformation Support. Indigenous communities worldwide have developed seasonal rituals that support individuals and communities through natural transition points, offering models for therapeutic applications that honour both individual and transformation and collective well-being. These seasonal approaches recognize that different phases of transformation require different types of support, with natural rhythms providing guidance for when to plant, tend, harvest, and rest. Research on Indigenous seasonal practices reveals how these rituals support community resilience and cultural continuity while addressing individual psychological and spiritual needs (Shaw et al., 2023).

Grief, Loss, and Renewal in Natural Processes. The constant presence of death and renewal in natural systems provides essential context for understanding how loss and grief function within transformative processes, offering perspectives that can fundamentally shift how individuals understand change and endings in their own lives. Natural cycles demonstrate that death is not a failure or ending but rather transformation that enables new life and growth.

This ecological perspective can profoundly shift how individuals understand loss and change in their own lives. Rather than viewing endings as problems to overcome or failures to fix they might be understood as essential phases in larger cycles for growth and transformation. This understanding can reduce resistance to letting go of familiar patterns while increasing openness to unknown possibilities that follow symbolic deaths.

Summary and Synthesis

This literature review demonstrates that transformative change in therapeutic settings can be facilitated from a convergence of specific individual and contextual factors, intentionally structured group processes, and the strategic incorporation of ritual and ceremonial elements that collectively create opportunities for profound rather than incremental change. The synthesis reveals that therapeutic transformation is not merely a product of individual insight but can be supported and optimized by carefully orchestrated conditions that challenge existing frameworks while providing sufficient support for integration.

The research converges on several common critical factors and contextual considerations that can facilitate transformative change within a therapeutic context. Firstly, personal timing is crucial. While an individual may yearn for transformative change, the desire for significant change alone is not likely to lead to transformative change. Major life events, crises, accumulated stress, peak or spiritual experiences, are the precipitating experiences that can precede transformative change. Following these experiences, individuals experience a challenge to their existing identity structure or may question their current understanding of reality and their relationship to it. This shift in perspective opens a liminal experience or threshold moment, or a window of opportunity whereby a preexisting way of being is no longer viable and a new way of being is possible. This insight underscores the importance of therapeutic interventions to be aligned with personal timing and that therapists might look for the window of opportunity where a client, following a significant event, may be ready to undergo transformative change.

Additionally, research revealed that various environmental and contextual factors encourage a different context or way of being, and that mirroring of difference from the norm can be a facilitating factor in transformative change. A different external environment, particularly within the inherent sacredness of nature, or through travel or novel experiences shakes up the mundanity of the regular day

to day experience, priming a person for change. Additionally, engaging with ways of being different through creative expression, through art, dance, performance or engaging in music can also support an individual toward openness to a different way of being. Finally, internal shifts through meditation or altered states or consciousness expanding practices allow for the shift in experience that can open the doorway to transformative change.

The evidence clearly identified individual characteristics and abilities that were more conducive to transformative change. Many, if not all traits discovered, are not static, but flexible and can be changed or expanded over time. With this information in hand, individuals who are more likely to successfully undergo transformative change can be identified, as well as individuals who may require targeted support to grow certain traits that will enable them to experience transformative change.

Analysis across group therapy studies reveals the key elements of group process that can support transformative change. While these elements are not unique to transformative change, the research does point out elements of group therapy that are key for success, as well as aspects of group process that are likely to particularly support transformative change. Additionally, considerations of group format and participant selection were identified and considerations for facilitator fit for leading transformative change groups were identified.

The evidence consistently demonstrates that ritual and ceremonial elements act as supportive catalysts for transformative change. The need to approach the use of ceremony and ritual with cultural consideration and care was identified, especially ensuring that therapists err on the side of cultural appreciation ensuring that any rituals they use are not culturally appropriated but are used with permission or are broadly shared and contextually understood with their origins honoured. The ability of ritual to employ symbolic communication that simultaneously engages multiple levels of consciousness rather than purely cognitive processes was highlighted. Interestingly, many of the other functional

elements of ritual that could support transformative change were also present in the other two earlier research sections on antecedents, facilitating factors and group therapeutic factors; this demonstrates that rituals and ceremonies can serve to enrich and enhance the process of facilitating transformative change in group contexts.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Application

Discussion

The purpose of this capstone was to synthesize current research on transformative change processes and group therapy approaches with particular attention to the role of ritual and ceremony, and to develop an evidence-based framework for facilitating profound personal transformation in group settings. However, several important limitations strain both the current literature and the research synthesis. The field's fragmentation into separate theoretical domains: quantum change, post-traumatic growth, and peak experiences, create artificial divisions that obscure the common mechanisms underlying transformative change. Additionally, current mental health systems favour brief, symptom-focused interventions that may inadvertently limit therapeutic possibilities by prioritizing incremental over transformative approaches, while economic and institutional barriers restrict access to intensive group work that transformative change may require.

This research also reflects significant gaps in whose knowledge is represented is valued. Indigenous communities worldwide have maintained sophisticated understandings of transformation through ceremony and ritual for millennia, yet this wisdom remains largely absent from academic literature that privileges what written sources, creating systemic underrepresentation of traditional knowledge systems. Furthermore, this research focused primarily on naturally occurring catalysts for transformation rather than examining therapeutic methods for directly facilitating change, notably excluding the growing body of research on psychedelic assisted therapy where transformation can be more actively induced. The scope was also limited to western therapeutic contexts and may miss other cultural approaches to facilitating profound change. These limitations highlight the need for more integrated frameworks that bridge theoretical divides while expanding therapeutic options beyond traditional incremental models.

A summary of the findings for each of the research questions 1-4 follows, along with learnings unique to each research question. Research question 5, addressing evidence-based frameworks for implementation, is answered in the application section through a comprehensive program design framework based on the synthesized research findings. Following this capstone's completion, the researcher will be providing a six-week transformative change program for the specific audience of bereaved clients who have recently experienced loss.

Question 1: What distinguishes transformative change from incremental therapeutic change, and what theoretical frameworks best capture these distinctions?

Findings. Transformative change is distinguished from incremental change by its fundamental alteration of identity structures, meaning-making systems, and worldview rather than modifications within existing patterns (Watzlawick et al., 2011). Multiple theoretical frameworks capture this distinction: system theory's second-order change involves alterations to fundamental system rules rather than changes within existing patterns; quantum change theory describes sudden, vivid, surprising, benevolent, and enduring transformations that are predominantly internal shifts in perspective (Miller & C'de Baca, 2011); post-traumatic growth encompasses enhanced relationships, increased personal strength, and spiritual development following adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004); and peak experience theory identifies transcendent moments that catalyze lasting personal transformation (Maslow, 1962). Research reveals that transformative events need not be negative, with positive life events facilitating growth outcomes equivalent to negative events, suggesting the transformative potential lies in the event's capacity to challenge existing frameworks (Mangelsdorf et al., 2019).

Learnings. The literature reveals that transformative change represents fundamentally different therapeutic targets than incremental change, requiring distinct approaches to client selection and

intervention timing. Most significantly, transformative change appears to be primarily a responsive rather than generative therapeutic process; meaning it typically requires a preceding major life disruption that challenges existing identity frameworks, whether positive or negative in nature.

This finding has profound implications for practice, suggesting that client selection for transformative change should focus on individuals who have recently experienced or are anticipating significant life transitions (divorce, retirement, empty nesting, career changes) rather than attempting to create transformative conditions from stable baseline functioning. The research also challenges the assumption that trauma is necessary for growth, revealing that any framework disrupting event can catalyze transformation.

Perhaps most importantly for clinical practice, while transformative insights may occur suddenly, the integration and stabilization of these changes require extended therapeutic support, blurring the distinction initially conceptualized between transformative change being swift and incremental change as lengthy; indeed, transformative change groups require careful attention to meaning-making and consolidation phases that may extend well beyond the initial breakthrough moments. Ultimately, the process of transformative change plus the stabilization needed to maintain it, may be longer and more akin to the timeline of incremental change than initially presumed.

Question 2: What factors and conditions facilitate transformative change in therapeutic settings?

Findings. Research identifies multiple categories of facilitating factors for transformative change. Precipitating events include major life disruptions, accumulated stress reaching breaking points, spiritual and peak experiences, and liminal threshold moments (Maslow 1998; Turner, 1969).

Environmental facilitators encompass natural settings, particularly wilderness and coastline locations (Wyles et al., 2017), creative arts and musical engagement (Lowis, 2002), contemplative practices with deeper experiences correlating with absorption capacity rather than practice duration (Holzel & Ott,

2007), and consciousness expanding practices including travel and altered states (Hoffman et al., 2020). Individual facilitating factors include personality traits such as openness to experience and psychological flexibility (Misurya et al., 2021; Owens, 2016), adaptive coping strategies including planning, positive reinterpretation, and meaning-making capacity (Frankl, 2006; Litman & Lunsford, 2009), and the social factors including secure attachment and support systems (O'Donovan & Burke, 2022).

Learnings. The facilitating factors research reveals significant opportunities for enhancing individuals' capacity for transformative change through both environmental design and skill development. Many identified factors, including psychological flexibility, openness, meaning-making capacity, and coping strategies are modifiable rather than fixed traits, suggesting that preparatory work could enhance client's readiness for transformation when life disruptions occur.

The evidence for environmental facilitators points towards creative and experiential approaches that may prime openness to change through embodied rather than purely cognitive pathways. Engaging clients in different ways of being, through creative expression, musical engagement, novel environments, or altered context can facilitate internal shift toward transformation by accessing emotional, somatic, and unconscious processes that traditional talk therapy may miss.

The research on natural environments and novel travel demonstrates the transformative potential of removing individuals from familiar contexts and immersing them in settings that naturally evoke awe, beauty, and an expanded perspective. This research indicates that transformative change programs may be well positioned in retreat contexts. Findings also support incorporating arts-based interventions and nature-based elements as powerful pathways to transformation, while recognizing that intensive retreat experiences, though costly, represent particularly potent environmental facilitators for those with access.

Question 3: How can group therapy approaches be optimized to support transformative rather than incremental change?

Findings. Group therapy research demonstrates that transformative outcomes depend more on common factors and group dynamics than specific techniques, emphasizing the importance of supportive and cohesive group environments (Nahum et al., 2018). Therapeutic alliance operates at multiple levels, with whole group cohesion and climate being more influential than individual therapist alliance alone (Crowe & Grenyer, 2008). Group cohesion creates secure containers enabling self-reflection, social connection, and acceptance that lead to sustained behavioural changes (Marmarosh & Sproul, 2021; Woolhouse et al., 2013). Common factors supporting transformation include empathy, goal consensus, positive regard, and emotional experience operating both between therapist and members and among members themselves (Nahum et al., 2017). Interpersonal learning through community participation, emotional support, and witnessing functions facilitates identity transformation, with social confirmation accelerating and solidifying identity changes (Reddin & Sonn, 2003). Group formats that blend process-oriented and psychoeducational approaches may optimize transformation by addressing both emotional processing and skill-building dimensions of change.

Learnings. The group therapy research underscores that relational dynamics and group climate are crucial factors in facilitating transformative change, warranting equal attention to specific content or techniques. This finding serves as an important reminder to balance focus on session activities with the overall quality of relationships being cultivated. This learning emphasizes the facilitator's presence, co-regulation capacity, and relationship building skills as fundamental to group success.

The evidence strongly supports facilitating lasting connections between group members, as community participation and social confirmation appear crucial for sustaining identity transformations beyond the formal group experience. This aligns with Indigenous wisdom about the collective nature of

healing and suggests that successful transformation groups should explicitly focus on building lasting community rather than treating peer connections as a secondary benefit. The witnessing function of groups provides external validation of internal changes while creating accountability structures that support ongoing transformation.

Question 4: What roles do ritual and ceremonial elements play in supporting transformative change, and how can these be therapeutically integrated?

Findings. Ritual and ceremonial elements facilitate transformative change through four primary anthropological and psychological functions. They create sacred space and temporal boundaries that suspend ordinary consciousness and social roles, enabling openness to new perspectives while providing safety for exploration (Eliade, 1959). Rituals facilitate liminality through structured pathways for navigating threshold spaces, following van Gennep's (2019) three stage model of separation, transition, and incorporation. Collective witnessing provides external confirmation of internal changes, creates accountability, and generates collective energy that amplifies individual transformation (Jinkerson-Brass, 2022). Symbolic communication engages multiple levels of consciousness simultaneously, accessing emotional, somatic, and unconscious processes, going beyond purely cognitive approaches. Natural cycles and seasonal metaphors provide frameworks for understanding transformation as part of larger patterns of death, renewal, and rebirth, with Indigenous seasonal practices demonstrating sophisticated integration of ecological relationships within community healing processes (Shaw et al., 2023).

Learnings. The ritual and ceremony research revealed the sophisticated integration of multiple transformative elements within traditional practices, demonstrating how ceremonial approaches naturally combine environmental, relational, and symbolic factors identified in the other research domains. This integration suggests that ritual elements represent comprehensive transformative technologies developed through millennia of cultural wisdom rather than supplementary editions to

therapeutic practice.

The research on seasonal cycles in natural rhythms offers particularly valuable insights for creating culturally respectful ritual elements. While the use of specific traditional ceremonies requires careful consideration regarding appropriation, the universal human connection to seasonal changes in natural cycles provides a foundation for creating new rituals that honour the changing landscape without infringing upon sacred practices.

Application

Individual Assessment and Readiness Identification

Phase 1: Initial Contact Form Pre-Assessment Screening. A short application-based pre-screening (see Appendix A) will assess the nature, timing, and impact of the major life disruption, as well as screen for stability to evaluate the current psychological functioning and capacity for intensive group work. From the pre-assessment screening, the group facilitator will identify any red flags (such as a recent crisis, unrealistic expectations, or no precipitating event). The results of this phase will allow potential participants to be categorized into three categories:

1. Aligned - proceed to full assessment; clear precipitating event if results show stable functioning, group-appropriate goals.
2. Borderline – proceed to full assessment to gather more information if results show vague precipitating event, minor stability concerns, unclear motivation.
3. Misalignment – redirect elsewhere if results show no precipitating event, active crisis, or unrealistic expectations about groups format.

Phase 2: Individual Facilitating Factors Assessment. Prospective shortlisted potential participants will be emailed the following four measures to assess psychological flexibility, openness to experience, meaning-making capacity, and coping strategies using validated instruments.

1. Acceptance & Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II): This measure assesses psychological flexibility
2. Big Five Aspect Scales (BFAS) – Openness Subscale
3. Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)
4. Brief Resilience Scale (BRS)

Once measures are completed, the facilitator will analyze results and identify any individual characteristics that may need to be expanded. However, if potential participants are low across all measures, that may be an indication that one-on-one therapy to work on expanding characteristics would be valuable before taking part in the group. The composition of the group overall will also be assessed, identifying strengths, challenges and potential opportunities.

Phase 3: Individual Assessment Interview. Shortlisted potential participants will be invited to participate in a 90-minute semi-structured interview (see Appendix B) to connect the facilitator and potential participant, for the participant to learn more about the group, and for both sides to assess the fit. The interview will be conducted in a supportive, inclusive way, priming the potential participant for the sense of safety and encouragement of participation. For clients who may have scored low on any of the measures, the end of the interview could be the opportunity to provide enhancing exercises, psychoeducation or homework.

Phase 4. Clinical Decision Framework. Following the comprehensive assessment, clinicians must integrate multiple data sources to determine inappropriateness for transformative change group work. This decision-making process balances individual readiness factors identified through research with safety considerations and group composition needs. The framework (see Appendix C) provides structured criteria while maintaining clinical judgment flexibility for complex cases. Potential participants will either be coded as ready or as contraindicated, either not being ready for the group at

all or potentially needing one-on-one therapy to become ready for group. Decision making should be collaborative when possible, helping potential participants understand the rationale and exploring alternative options if group work is not currently appropriate.

Optimal group composition balances individual readiness with group dynamic considerations. Groups benefit from variety in precipitating events rather than all participants experiencing the same type of disruption, as different perspectives enhance collective meaning-making and reduce the echo chamber effect. A mix of timing is important since events ranging from three months to two years post event would provide balance between those actively in disruption and those beginning integration, allowing members to learn from different stages of the transformation process. Similarly, balancing psychological flexibility levels ensures that highly flexible members can model openness while those developing flexibility receive support and encouragement. Including participants with varying change experience backgrounds creates opportunities for peer mentoring and reduces performance pressure on those new to intensive personal work. When possible, demographic diversity in age, cultural background, and life circumstances enriches group dialogue while avoiding tokenism. The ideal group size of 8 to 12 participants provides sufficient diversity in energy while maintaining intimacy necessary for vulnerable sharing and deep witnessing that the research identified as crucial for transformative change.

Phase 5. Assessment Feedback and Preparation. The assessment conclusion phase serves multiple critical functions beyond simply communicating decisions. For appropriate candidates, this phase begins the therapeutic relationship and group preparation process, establishing realistic expectations while building confidence in the transformative change framework. For individuals not currently suitable for group work, this phase provides compassionate feedback that validates their experience while offering alternative pathways for support. Regardless of the decision outcome, this

phase should leave participants feeling heard, understood, and appropriately directed toward resources that match their current needs and readiness level.

Transformative Group Frameworks: Structure and Phases

The core transformative framework follows van Gennepe's (2019) three-stage ritual process while incorporating research findings on group therapeutic factors, environmental facilitators, and ceremonial elements. The framework is designed as a flexible structure that can accommodate different intensities (workshop intensive versus weekly sessions) while maintaining the essential arc of transformation through separation, liminality, and incorporation.

Universal Session Architecture. Each session follows a consistent structure that creates safety and predictability while allowing for phase specific content variation. Ideal session lengths are between two to two and a half hours in length, allowing enough time for participants to ease into vulnerability, fully engage with difficult material, and then process and integrate before transitioning back to their regular lives. Longer sessions of three or more hours can lead to fatigue and overwhelm, while also creating scheduling barriers for working participants. The ideal course would be for a total of nine weeks, with three sessions per phase.

- ***Opening Ritual (15 minutes).***

Land acknowledgement and welcoming. Sessions begin with acknowledgement of the traditional territories where participants gather, recognizing the Indigenous peoples whose knowledge systems inform ceremonial approaches to transformation. This opening establishes connection to place and honours the cultural origins of ritual healing practices.

Grounding exercise. Each session introduces a different grounding technique, building participants' toolkits for managing intensity through the transformation process. Grounding practices

draw from somatic, mindfulness, and Indigenous traditions including breathwork, body scanning, earth connection visualizations, and present moment awareness techniques.

- **Circle Check-In (20 minutes).** Following talking circle principles identified in the research, participants share their current emotional state and respond either to a session-specific prompt or share any insights or challenges since last session, and their intention for the current gathering. The facilitator models deep listening and establishes the session's emotional climate while reinforcing group safety and connection.

Core Activities (75 – 90 minutes).

- **Primary Activity (45-60 minutes).** Phase-specific interventions designed to facilitate the particular transformation work of separation, liminality, or incorporation. Activities integrate multiple modalities such as creative expression, somatic experiencing, symbolic work, and reflective dialogue to engage cognitive, emotional, and embody dimensions of change.

- **Break (15 minutes).** A short break with beverages and snacks is provided to allow participants a chance to reset and connect with one another in an unstructured way. The facilitator will be around to answer any questions and support group cohesion.

- **Secondary Activity (30 minutes).** Complementary intervention that deepens, integrates, or builds upon the primary activity. May involve partner sharing, creative response, movement, or meaning-making exercises that help participants process and anchor their experience.

Deep Sharing Circle (20-25 minutes). Structured opportunity for participants to share insights, emotional responses, or emerging awareness from the session's activities. Following Indigenous circle principles, participants speak without interruption while others practice deep witnessing. This phase strengthens group cohesion while providing external validation of internal transformation processes.

Closing and Integration (10-15 minutes). Brief evaluation through sharing one word or phrase that captures the participant's experience, commitment to integration practices until the next session, and ceremonial closing that honours the sacred nature of the work accomplished.

Phase 1: Separation/Death (Sessions 1-3). Conscious release of outdated identities, belief systems, and life patterns that no longer serve post-disruption functioning. This phase honours what was while creating space for what might emerge.

Phase 1: Separation/Death Activities.

- **Identity States:** Participants engage in an embodied exploration of identity reviewing life domains (relational, family role, social, work/purpose, spiritual, and self-care/lifestyle) that have been affected following a life disruption. The participants move between three stations representing identity stability: 'Still Solid' (unchanged aspects), 'In Questioning' (uncertain areas), and 'Ready to Release' (outdated aspects). Using life domains as prompts, participants physically move through stations to identify which aspects of identity require conscious release. The activity concludes with group sharing about insights and surprises discovered through the embodied exploration process.
- **Identity Honouring and Release Ritual:** Participants share meaningful objects representing identity aspects, followed by writing letters of gratitude as acknowledgment to identity elements ready for release. The session concludes with a candle lighting and extinguishing ritual that honours past identity aspects while symbolically creating space for new possibilities. This ceremonial approach facilitates conscious separation from outdated identity patterns while maintaining respect and gratitude for their previous function.

This progression moves from identification through honouring to symbolic release, embodying the separation phase goals while incorporating ritual elements that engage multiple levels of consciousness beyond cognitive processing alone.

Key Process Elements.

- Grief work for loss of former self and life structures
- Identification and conscious release of limiting beliefs
- Recognition of patterns and relationships requiring change
- Development of tolerance for uncertainty and identity flux

Ceremonial Elements.

- Symbolic letting go rituals using natural elements
- Creation of memorial or gratitude practices for past identity
- Use of seasonal metaphors (autumn/winter) for natural endings

Phase 2: Liminality/Renewal (Sessions 4-6). Exploration of new possibilities, values clarification, and experimentation with emerging identity expression. This threshold phase embraces uncertainty while actively engaging with transformation potential.

Phase 2: Liminality/Renewal Activities.

- **Values Clarification and Life Direction Mapping.** Participants engaged in systematic values exploration using a comprehensive inventory, narrowing from 50 + values to their essential top five values through physical manipulation of values cards and an embodied selection process. Following values identification participants create a visual representation using colours and symbols, then engage in a creative visualization to explore living in alignment with these emerging priorities. The exercise concludes with artistic expression of their visioning experience through drawing, collage, or a written reflection, followed by partner sharing that provides witnessing and validation of insights discovered through the exploration process.
- **Creative Guided Visualization and Future Self Integration.** Participants engage in an extended guided visualization journey that begins with grounding techniques and progressive relaxation, then

moves through imagined exploration of their life domains, which had been identified as in flux during phase one. The visualization guide participants to encounter a future version of themselves who has successfully navigated their transformation, allowing for dialogue about values, life direction, and ways of being that feel authentic post-disruption. Following the visualization, participants create artistic representations of their experience through their choice of drawing, collage, movement, or written expression, focusing on capturing the felt sense of their emerging identity rather than specific goals or outcomes. The session concludes with small group sharing of insights and images that emerged, providing collective witnessing that validates and deepens the integration of visionary material into conscious awareness.

Key Process Elements.

- Values clarification and life visioning exercises
- Creative exploration of emerging identity possibilities
- Experimentation with new ways of being and relating
- Meaning-making from the disruption experience
- Integration of shadow or previously rejected aspects of self

Ceremonial Elements.

- Vision questing and dream work practices
- Creative expression through multiple modalities
- Use of seasonal metaphors (spring) for emergence and growth

Phase 3: Incorporation/Rebirth (Sessions 7-9). Integration of transformation insights into sustainable life practices, relationships patterns, and ongoing identity expression. This phase grounds visionary insights into practical reality.

This phase will culminate with helping participants establish daily or weekly routines that reinforce their transformation: meditation practices, journaling, creative expression, or other activities that keep them connected to their new identity and values. Without these anchoring practices, people often drift back into familiar patterns when life stress increases when the group support ends. With the aim of community building in mind consenting participants will be invited to share their contact details with one another to stay in relationship following the formal closure of the group. Additionally, participants will solidify existing relationships and potentially new connections that align with their transformed identity. This may involve:

- Communicating changes to family/friends who knew their 'old' self
- Finding communities that support their new values and interests
- Potentially distancing from relationships that reinforce outdated patterns
- Building connections with others who share their growth orientation

Phase 3: Incorporation/Rebirth Activities.

- Future Self Dialogue and Commitment Ritual. Participants begin with a guided visualization to connect with their transformed future self, then engage in a letter writing exercise from their future self offering practical guidance for integration challenges. Following the writing exercise, participants create physical symbols representing their new identity using available materials (clay, fabric, natural objects, written statements). The session culminates in individual commitment strategies shared with the group, where participants articulate specific ways, they intend to embody their transformation period. Group members serve as witnesses, offering affirmations and accountability support. This ritual creates both internal integration through dialogue and external validation through community witnessing, solidifying the transformation through ceremonial commitment.

- Paired Relationship Renegotiation Practice. Participants work in pairs to practice communicating their transformation to important people in their lives through structured role play exercises. One partner represents the transformed individual while the other plays family members, friends, or colleagues who may resist or question the changes. The exercise includes scripted scenarios for setting new boundaries, requesting different support, and responding to pushback from systems invested in their previous identity. Partners switch roles to ensure practicing difficult conversations. The activity concludes with a debriefing about insights, emotional responses, and refinement of the communication strategies. This embodied practice builds confidence for real world relationship renegotiation while allowing experimentation in a safe environment.

- Life Integration Mapping. Participants create a comprehensive visual map showing how transformation insights translate into concrete daily, weekly, and monthly practices that support their new identity. The mapping process begins with identifying specific behavioural changes needed across life domains (work, relationships, self-care, spiritual practice, creative expression), then developing realistic implementation timelines and accountability structures. Maps include obstacle anticipation with specific strategies for maintaining changes when facing resistance, stress, or old pattern triggers. Participants also design support system activation plans, identifying who to contact for different types of assistance and how to maintain motivation during difficult periods. The visual format allows for creative expression while ensuring practical applicability with maps serving as ongoing reference tools for sustained integration beyond the group experience.

Key Process Elements.

- Development of concrete practices supporting new ways of being
- Relationship renegotiation and boundary establishment
- Creation of accountability structures and support systems

- Planning for ongoing growth and continued transformation
- Preparation for re-entry into ordinary life with their transformed perspective

Ceremonial Elements.

- Commitment rituals and public witnessing of transformation
- Creation of symbols or objects representing new identity
- Use of seasonal metaphors (summer) for manifestation and harvest

Phase 4: Integration Support and Community Maintenance (Optional, ongoing). This optional phase recognizes that transformative change requires extended support for sustainable integration beyond the formal group experience. Individual integration support is available through on-going one-on-one sessions with the facilitating therapist, providing personalized assistance for navigating specific challenges that arise during real world application of transformation insights. These individual sessions address obstacles such as family system resistance to changes, workplace integration of new boundaries or priorities, or internal struggles with maintaining new patterns under stress. The individual support component allows for customized intervention while maintaining continuity with the group work already completed.

Community re-connection occurs through a lightly structured reunion gathering three to six months post group completion, designed to provide accountability, mutual support, and celebration of sustained changes. The reunion format includes informal sharing about integration successes and ongoing challenges, problem solving support for current obstacles, and witnessing of continued growth and development.

To support ongoing peer connections, group members who consent during phase three closing have contact information shared, enabling natural community formation and mutual support between formal sessions. The peer relationships that exist outside the therapeutic framework and are the

responsibility of individual participants to maintain or discontinue as they choose. The facilitating therapist has no ongoing involvement or responsibility for these post-group peer connections, though individual therapy remains available for processing any relationship challenges that may arise. This combination of professional and peer support acknowledges that transformation maintenance often requires multiple resources while maintaining clear ethical boundaries around therapeutic versus personal relationships.

Safety and Containment. A predictable session structure provides containment for unpredictable transformation content, clear boundaries around the time and process support participants in managing intensity, and consistent facilitator presence and group witnessing create multiple sources of regulation and support. Ideally, a secondary facilitator or volunteer would be present within the group and available to step away with any participant that may feel overwhelmed.

Outcome Integration.

Process Tracking. Each session includes structured evaluation components that monitor both individual progress and group development through observable indicators rather than formal assessment instruments. Individual tracking focuses on three key areas: emotional regulation capacity (ability to stay present during intense activities without overwhelm or dissociation), engagement patterns (active participation versus withdrawal or resistance), and phase-appropriate progress (successful letting go in separation, active exploration in liminality, concrete planning in incorporation, and reinforcing in integration). Group development tracking monitors cohesion indicators such as mutual support and authentic sharing, safety levels evidenced by vulnerability and risk taking, and collective energy patterns including enthusiasm, resistance, or stagnation.

The facilitator uses multiple data sources for real time assessment: participant responses during check-ins reveal emotional states and readiness levels, behavioural observations during activities

indicate engagement and overwhelm, group interaction patterns show developing trust and safety, and closing evaluations provide direct feedback about session impact and participant needs. When tracking indicates necessary adaptations, the facilitator can modify intensity through shorter activities or additional grounding, adjust spacing by revisiting previous elements or slowing progression, differentiate activities to meet varying readiness levels within the group, or enhance safety through increased structure or individual attention. This responsive approach ensures the frameworks serve participants rather than forcing participants to meet rigid program demands.

Transformation Indicators. The framework includes specific markers for successful navigation of each phase. Completion of the separation phase involves increased tolerance for uncertainty and conscious release of limiting patterns; successful liminality includes active engagement with new possibilities and decreased attachment to familiar identity structures; effective incorporation demonstrates integration of insight into sustainable practice is a renewed sense of purpose and direction; finally, integration provides the opportunity for celebration and renewed commitment to emerging identities and ways of being.

Sustainability Planning. The incorporation and integration phases specifically address long-term maintenance of transformation through development of ongoing practices, identification of supportive relationships and communities, and creation of accountability structures that support continued growth beyond the formal group experience.

Conclusions

This capstone project synthesized research on transformative change processes, group therapy dynamics, and ritual elements to develop an evidence-based framework for facilitating profound personal transformation in group settings. The work addressed a significant gap between client

aspirations for fundamental life change and the therapeutic fields that predominantly focus on incremental adjustment and symptom management.

The project's primary contribution lies in its structured three phase framework that provides practitioners with a systemic approach to supporting clients through transformative change processes. By adapting van Gennep's (2019) ritual structure of separation, liminality, and incorporation to contemporary group therapy practice, the framework offers a clear progression through the disorientation and identity reconstruction that characterizes profound transformation. This structure provides both facilitators and participants with predictable phases while allowing for the unpredictable nature of deep personal change.

A key insight emerging from this research involves the sophisticated integration of transformative elements within traditional ritual practices. The analysis revealed that ceremonial approaches naturally incorporate many of the therapeutic factors identified as crucial for both group therapy's effectiveness and individual transformation: collective witnessing, symbolic communication, structured liminality, community support, and environmental facilitating factors. This convergence suggests that ritual elements represent comprehensive transformative technologies rather than supplementary additions to therapeutic practice, offering accessible ways to enhance group therapy's capacity for supporting profound change.

The practical application component demonstrates how existing therapeutic interventions and ritual practices can be systematically organized to serve client's desires for transformative rather than incremental change. While individual elements of the framework exist within current therapeutic practice, their integration into a cohesive program specifically designed for transformation represents a novel contribution. The comprehensive assessment framework ensures appropriate client selection

while the stage specific activities provide structured pathways through the challenges of identity reconstruction.

Implementation challenges remain significant, particularly regarding accurate assessment of client readiness for intensive transformation work and effective communication about program goals to potential participants. The question of whether shared precipitating events or shared transformation motivation provides stronger group cohesion requires further investigation through practical application. Additionally, the framework's success depends heavily on facilitator competency in managing both group dynamics and individual transformation processes simultaneously.

This work provides practitioners with tools to recognize and optimize transformative moments while expanding therapeutic options for clients seeking profound healing by bridging traditional ceremony with contemporary group therapy practice. The framework offers a structured yet flexible approach to supporting the fundamental life changes that many clients seek but few therapeutic programs explicitly address. The integration of assessment, intervention, and follow-up components creates a comprehensive model that honours both the complexity of transformative change and the practical requirements of therapeutic implementation.

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Appendix A: Initial Contact Form

Question	Assessment
Precipitating Event Information	
1. Describe the major life event(s)/ disruption that occurred:	<p>There should be a clearly identifiable life event that occurred to bring about the desire for transformative change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis or major life changes • Accumulated stress and breaking points • Spiritual and peak experiences • Liminal experiences and threshold moments
2. When did this event occur?	<p>The individual has moved from acute crisis to initial stabilization. This is person/event specific; however, a guide would be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very recent (0-6 weeks) May indicate crisis phase. • Recent past (2 months – 2 years) Often optimal for transformation work. • Distant past (3+ years) May have already adapted/closed the change window.
3. How has this event affected your sense of who you are or what your life means?	<p>There should be internal shifts indicating the kind of framework disruption necessary for transformative change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify/values shift • Struggling/trying to make sense of a new way of being <p>Responses indicating transformative change might sound like: <i>“I’m questioning my assumptions about what life is supposed to be”</i> <i>“Everything I thought mattered feels meaningless after losing my job”</i> <i>“I feel like I’m becoming a completely different person”</i> <i>“Nothing makes sense the way it used to”</i></p> <p>Types of responses that may indicate desire for incremental change only (not a match): <i>“I’m sad, but I’m basically the same person”</i> <i>“I just need better coping strategies for the stress”</i> <i>“Life is harder, but my values have not changed”</i> <i>“I know who I am, I just need to adjust to new circumstances”</i></p>
4. What feels different about your life since this event?	<p>This question identifies external manifestations and practical impacts of the disruption. Responses indicating transformative potential may sound like: <i>“I can’t sleep in our bed anymore – our home feels foreign”</i> <i>“I’ve stopped doing activities I once loved, they feel pointless now”</i> <i>“I’m drawn to completely different people and conversations”</i> <i>“My daily routines have fallen apart; I can’t seem to rebuild them”</i></p>

	<i>"I notice beauty in ways that I had not before"</i>
Current Functioning	
5. Rate your current emotional stability from 1 to 10; 1 is feeling very unstable/unable to manage daily functioning, 10 being feeling highly stable, able to cope with distress and regulate yourself and function.	<p>This is a basic safety screening tool, typically we would want to see participants in the 5-10 range.</p> <p>The key is selecting participants who can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend to others' needs in addition to their own • Tolerate emotional intensity without decompensating • Participate consistently without crisis interruptions <p>Scores of 4 and below requires an immediate safety assessment</p>
6. Are you currently receiving mental health treatment?	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychiatric medications might affect group participation or indicate diagnosis requiring special consideration. • Treatment readiness – someone actively engaged in therapy may be more prepared for group work. • Capacity concerns – multiple simultaneous treatments might overwhelm someone or indicate they're not ready for intensive group work. <p>Red flags would be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent psychiatric hospitalization • Multiple concurrent intensive treatments • Medication non-compliance
7. Do you have any current crisis concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suicidal thoughts • Self-harm • Substance abuse 	<p>The presence of any of these factors would indicate that the person is in crisis and therefore not a candidate for the further destabilization that transformative change is likely to bring.</p>
Group Readiness	
8. Have you had any previous group therapy experience?	<p>This is not a requirement but helpful experience to have.</p>
9. What is your comfort level sharing personal information in groups 1-10, 1 being very uncomfortable with sharing and 10 being totally comfortable?	<p>This is a basic group readiness screening question, typically we would want to see participants in the 5-10 range.</p>

10. What are you hoping to achieve through this group?	Alliance with group program requirements
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Appendix B: Semi Structured Interview

Interview structure: 60-90 minutes

Opening (10 minutes)

- Build Rapport and explain the assessment purpose

“Hello _____. My name is Liz Vossen, I’m a therapist and I lead our Transformative Change groups at Resilience Collective Therapy.

This conversation helps us understand if this group is the right fit for where you are right now and helps you decide if it feels like the right approach for you.

This conversation might take between 1 hour to an hour and a half, depending on how much you have to say. If there’s any adjustments you need to make for this process to be more comfortable, please go ahead and take them now (water, tea, quick bio break?)

Do you have any questions before we begin?”

Precipitating event exploration (20-25 minutes)

1. Tell me about the event that brought you here. Take your time, what happened?
2. How has this experience changed how you see yourself or your life?
3. What feels most challenging about this change? What feels most hopeful?
4. Have you noticed any shifts in what matters to you or in how you relate to others?

Assessment focus:

- *The degree of identity/framework disruption*
- *Natural meaning-making attempts*
- *Integration of experience versus avoidance*
- *Capacity for reflection without overwhelming distress*

Change history and capacity (15-20 minutes)

5. Think about other significant changes in your life. How have you typically handled major transitions?
6. What helps when you're feeling uncertain or confused about your direction?
7. How comfortable are you with not knowing what comes next?
8. What does growth or healing mean to you?

Assessment focus:

- *Previous successful change navigation*
- *Tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity*
- *Coping strategies and support utilization*
- *Intrinsic motivation for deep versus surface change*

Group readiness and expectations (15-20 minutes)

9. What draws you to doing this work in a group rather than individually?
10. How do you typically respond when others share vulnerable or emotional experiences?
11. What concerns, if any, do you have about group participation?
12. What would meaningful change look like for you? How would you know if this group had been helpful?

Assessment focus:

- capacity for witnessing others' pain without overwhelm
- empathy without over-involvement
- realistic versus magical thinking about group process
- commitment level and availability

Safety and support assessment (10-15 minutes)

13. Who are your key sources of support in life?
14. How do you typically take care of yourself when things feel intense?
15. Any concerns about your safety or ability to care for yourself?
16. What would you need from me or the group to feel safe exploring difficult territory?

Assessment focus:

- *External support network adequacy*
- *Self-care capacity and strategies*
- *Crisis risk factors*
- *Boundary and safety needs*

Appendix C: Clinical Decision Framework

Readiness Indicators	
Strong indicators	Moderate indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear precipitating event with identity/meeting framework disruption • Active meaning-making attempts without avoidance • Psychological flexibility score above average (AAQ-II < 28) • Open this to experience score in upper ranges • Stable current functioning despite recent disruption. Intrinsic motivation for deep change versus symptom relief. • Previous successful navigation of major life changes. Adequate support network and self-care capacity • Comfort with group vulnerability and witnessing others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent event with some framework disruption • Psychological flexibility in average range • Some avoidance patterns but willingness to explore • Some avoidance patterns limited. Previous change experience but high motivation • Adequate stability with minor concerns • Some social support available
Contraindications	
Absolute contraindications	Relative contraindications (consider individual therapy first)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active suicidality or serious self-harm risk • Current psychotic episodes or severe disassociation • Active addiction requiring immediate treatment • Severe personality disorder with poor impulse control • Recent hospitalization for psychiatric crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Event occurred less than six weeks ago, may need stabilization • Severe depression or anxiety requiring symptom stabilization • Major trauma without any processing or support for psychological flexibility (AAQ-II >40). Without motivation for change • Preference for symptom management over transformative work • Inability to tolerate others' emotional expression • No external support network

