



Review Essay

## Cultivating our humanity: A systematic review of care farming & traumatic grief ☆

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### Abstract

Traumatic grief is a complex biopsychosocial experience, frequently (and contentiously) medicalized in the Western world. Care farming is an increasingly popular place-based intervention utilizing agricultural settings to care for vulnerable groups. We sought to establish the extent of care farming in relation to traumatic grief and query the potential of care farming as an intervention for this specific population. A systematic review highlights that whilst understudied, the success of care farming as an intervention for other populations experiencing psychological distress demonstrates the huge potential for care farming as a means to therapeutically engage with individuals experiencing traumatic grief.

### Introduction

Traumatic grief is a complex biopsychosocial experience which potentially affects millions of people around the world every year (Jacobs, 1999). Although frequently pathologized and treated through the mobilization of psychiatric medication, there is a growing interest in the use of non-medicalized approaches in caring for individuals experiencing traumatic grief (Thieleman and Cacciatore, 2014, Thieleman et al., 2014). This article serves to examine traumatic grief in relationship to the growing body of evidence on the potential health benefits resulting from an individual's involvement within 'care farming' programs – 'the use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes as a base for promoting mental and physical health through normal farming activity' (Hine et al., 2008a). Here, we are specifically interested in the application of 'care

farming' as a means of helping individuals cope with traumatic grief, questioning to what extent this particular style of intervention has potential in alleviating its associated psychiatric sequelae. Particularly, we seek to attend to Hemingway et al.'s (2016) calls for more evaluations of care farming, which they argue are needed in order to further validate care farming as a form of healthcare intervention and create a space for care farming in relation to health policy.

We begin by introducing and contextualizing traumatic grief in detail, discussing how recent literature is beginning to call attention to the problematic nature of an over medicalized approach to traumatic grief. We turn our focus to the concept of care farming, and discuss the evolution of this particular form of healthcare intervention, and the means by which participation in a care farming program can be therapeutic. We then discuss the methods of this systematic review of the literature on care farming and how it relates to traumatic grief, through the use of a specific research question, inclusion and exclusion criteria, an explicit search strategy, systematic data extraction procedure, and analysis of the studies (Pai et al., 2003). We highlight that whilst understudied as a means for engaging with individuals experiencing traumatic grief, given the success of care farming as an intervention for other populations experiencing psychological distress, there is tremendous potential for utilizing care farming as a novel and non-medicalized approach for traumatic grief care.

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## Section snippets

### Traumatic grief

In the United States alone, during the year 2012, more than 2.5 million people died (Hoyert and Xu, 2012). While the death of a much-loved person is an inevitability facing every living person on the planet today, and throughout history, certain types of deaths are known to evoke more enduring and distressing psychological suffering. Specifically, traumatic deaths such as infant/child mortality, homicides, and suicides incite what is known as traumatic grief (Jacobs, 1999, Cacciatore et al.,...

### Care farming

Care farming is defined as 'the use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes as a base for promoting mental and physical health through normal farming activity' (Hine et al., 2008a). It involves utilizing an agricultural setting to promote and maintain health, and care for different groups of people in what Hassink et al. (2010) describe as part of the wider shift from institutional to socialized and community care. There are often strong links made between agrarian and therapeutic...

### Methods

The formal synthesis of both qualitative and quantitative forms of research is essential to address uncertainties in many areas of health care (Dixon-Woods et al., 2001). Drawing on this, we sought to establish to what extent care farming is currently being applied to individuals experiencing traumatic grief,

as well as query the potential of care farming as an intervention for this specific population, via a systematic review of peer reviewed literature relating to care farming and its...

## Results

The eight studies are summarized in Table 2 according to their study populations, research methods, intervention, measures, and major findings. Owing to the heterogeneity of the selected studies, we did not conduct a meta-analysis of the data.

Within the 8 studies constituting this review, participation in a care farming program was shown to have a wide variety of benefits on service users, leading to improvements and increases in social interaction and interpersonal functioning (Iancu et al.,...

## Discussion

Research suggests that care farming as an intervention can have a range of beneficial effects on vulnerable populations. However, this is the first article attempting to specifically connect care farming with traumatic grief. We found that, to date, no empirical studies have included, considered, or examined traumatic grief in relationship to care farming. However, we must also recognize that some care farms may be taking in clients experiencing grief and trauma, as part of complex mixed client ...

## Conclusion

This is the first systematic review of the literature on care farming and how it relates to traumatic grief. Whilst we found no studies that engaged with grief specifically, we did find evidence that care farming can benefit many other populations experiencing high levels of psychological distress. This suggests that there is huge potential for care farming to develop as a novel and non-medicalized approach for the care of individuals experiencing traumatic grief.

More research on care farming...

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H. Kamioka *et al.*

## Effectiveness of animal-assisted therapy: a systematic review of randomized controlled trials

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### Evaluating care farming as a means to care for those in trauma and grief

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Health & Place, Volume 66, 2020, Article 102448

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☆ *“When it is understood that one loses joy and happiness in the attempt to possess them, the essence of natural farming will be realized. The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings.” -Masanobu Fukuoka, The One Straw Revolution.*

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