

How Tattoos Contribute to Connection and Healing

Susan Cadell¹ , Stephanie Levac¹ , Taitum MacAulay¹ , Melissa Reid Lambert² , Mary Ellen Macdonald³

1. School of Social work, Renison University, College, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, Canada; 2. Calming Tree Counselling, Kitchener, ON, Canada; 3. J & W Murphy Foundation Endowed Chair in Palliative Care, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada

Background

Tattoos are becoming increasingly common. Healing tattoos are defined as those that people obtain to celebrate, challenge, disrupt and/or (re)claim an aspect of themselves and/or of social phenomena. Memorial tattoos are those that honor someone who has died.²

Objectives

Our research program has explored healing and memorial tattoos, asking why people get tattoos and the meaning in the process, their design, and bodily placement.

Design

This narrative inquiry with individuals with tattoos included semi-structured interviews and photographs.

Methods

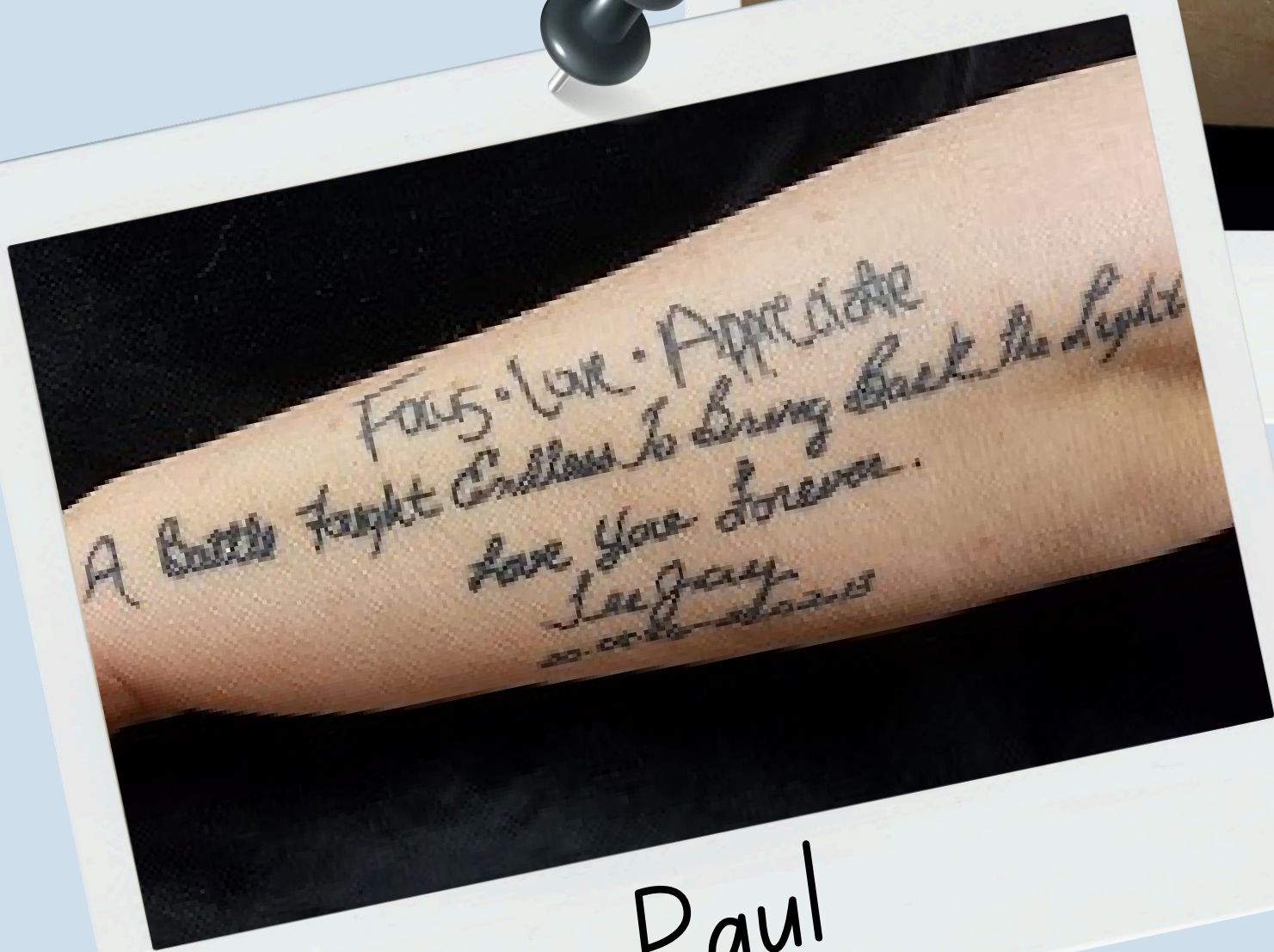
Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically using continuing bonds⁴ posttraumatic growth³, and grief literacy¹ as theoretical frameworks.

Results

Sixty-six people participated in interviews. The act of getting a tattoo was experienced as therapeutic: memorial tattoos made people feel connected to the person who had died²; healing tattoos assisted in posttraumatic growth by providing an intentional process by which an individual could process stressful events³. Both kinds of tattoos challenged social stigmas. Some participants chose their own pseudonyms, other pseudonyms were assigned by the researchers.



Lea



Paul

"I put it here [on the outside of my arm] because I want people to ask me about it. I want people to see it, I want them to be able to read it... because that keeps his memory alive, it keeps people thinking about him."

"It's a conversation starter, for all the reasons that [my wife] just said, plus that, it's indelible. And it's served its purpose. People ask about it all the time."

-Lea and Paul, TJ's Parents



Ryan

"Being someone who is an artist and vocal and heavily tattooed, it's kind of nice to speak to someone softly and say, Oh, I got this [tattoo] because of therapy, and then be vulnerable. But I experienced what I went through and just recommended [therapy] so it's kind of a conversation starter."

- Ryan, on using his tattoo to advocate for more young men to attend therapy



Natasha

"There is comfort in honouring someone your own way. I don't know that the pain is necessarily the same, but I feel that there's like a meditation that I at least end up... going through that pain, right to just really absorb it and try and be in that moment. There is definitely a connection... these [were] for my own healing, it kind of comforted me and helped me get through some of that stuff [the grief]." - Natasha



Sally

"It's a physical representation of someone's impact on my life. And that I will love him forever. Like, our marriage didn't end because we fell out of love. Our marriage ended because he died. So I'll always love him, but now I can love other people..."

I don't wear my wedding rings anymore. That was a change that I felt was right to do. And I think I partially felt ok with that because I have this." - Sally



Superwomyn

I knew that going into it [getting the tattoo], I wanted it to be visible to me, but to others, too. And so, I think there was a part of the design and the placement of it that was about, like, somehow honouring something that I was afraid was going to disappear... I really wanted something to like, latch on to that felt concrete because the experience of having [my daughter] felt almost like it didn't happen... And, I mean, I felt like our child had died... she was gone. And she wasn't ours anymore. - Superwomyn, on the grief she experienced after surrendering her adopted daughter



Mae

"I think that the tattoo was the final way for me to get rid of the shame that I kept in. I sort of forgave myself for using that [self harm] as a coping mechanism. A long time ago... There's just a really heavy amount of shame that you feel about yourself... I didn't want anybody to see them [my scars]... And now that I have the tattoo there, I feel much more confident in my body." - Mae, sharing how she's used her tattoo to overcome internal shame after struggling with self harm

Conclusions

This program of research on tattoos contributes to expanding upon our understanding of continuing bonds⁴, grief literacy¹, and how to challenge social stigma. Tattoos provide opportunities for health care practitioners to open conversations about clients' health and social history, and wellbeing.

References

