“Perhaps something of beauty can grow:” experiences of care farming for grief

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Abstract

Care farming has been used to alleviate distress and increase wellbeing in various populations. This study provides an overview of how bereaved adults \((n = 115)\) experienced a grief-specific care farm through a content analysis of open-ended survey questions. The care farm’s nature spaces and interactions with animals emerged as important components of the experience, interacting with grief-related activities and experiences. Together, the spaces and species of the care farm provided a supportive context for integrating grief, processing emotions, and receiving compassionate support. Some participants also experienced changes in how they viewed their grief and improvements in interpersonal relationships.

Key words: care farming, animals, grief, nature, human-animal connection
“Perhaps Something of Beauty Can Grow:” Experiences of Care Farming for Grief

Grief is a normal response to the death of a loved one. While most people recover their previous level of functioning over time, a longer and more intense course of grief has been noted in response to some bereavements, including traumatic and sudden deaths, deaths where there is lack of preparation, deaths in relationships characterized by dependence and closeness, and the death of a spouse or child (Morris et al., 2019).

Recently, care farming has emerged as an approach for a number of difficulties. Care farming has been 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., 2008, p. 247). Care farming is part of what has been termed “green care,” which includes a broader array of nature-based approaches applied therapeutically, such as therapeutic horticulture, wilderness therapy, animal-assisted interventions, and ecotherapy (Hine et al., 2008). In practice, it typically involves inviting individuals into a working agricultural environment as part of a structured program of care, where participants help care for animals and the wider landscape.

Care farming has been used therapeutically with a variety of populations. Benefits include a sense of belonging and increased wellbeing (Ellingsen-Dalskau et al., 2016); increased self-esteem (Hine et al., 2008), life satisfaction (Hassink et al., 2010), self-care, and self-efficacy (Kogstad et al., 2014); reduced stress, anxiety, and anger (Leck et al., 2015); and improvements in depression and coping (Pedersen et al., 2012) (see Gorman & Cacciatore, 2017, for a review). However, the application of care farming, and nature-based therapies in general, for grief has not been well investigated. To our knowledge, there is only one quasi-experimental study on this topic, which found significant reductions in grief intensity for bereaved adults (Cacciatore et al., 2020). Participant interviews identified that the natural and restorative spaces, the sense of being
part of a community of griever, and interactions with the care farm’s animals were important components of the intervention.

The present study expands upon earlier work on care farming for grief and offers a broad description of how a large sample of bereaved individuals experienced care farming under more naturalistic circumstances. This care farm serves as a sanctuary for abused, neglected, and homeless animals, which are not used to provide food or other products for human consumption (the roles which animals on more conventional care farms typically serve, being embedded within a wider agricultural paradigm), enacting more mutualistic human-animal interactions (Gorman, 2019): the animals benefit via their removal from situations of abuse and/or neglect or by avoiding slaughter, while humans benefit via viewing and interactions with the animals. Accordingly, the animals’ participation is never coerced; they can choose whether or not to interact and are free to walk away. At the time of the study, there were approximately 34 animals on the care farm, including dogs, cats, horses, donkeys, goats, pigs, and sheep. There were also six staff members: four counselors (one of whom was the second author) and two people primarily charged with animal care and land management.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate how bereaved individuals experience a grief-specific care farm and the perceived effects of the visit on their lives, providing a broad overview through content analysis of responses to open-ended questions. While a more in-depth analysis could be conducted on any given item, the aim was to provide a broad overview of participants’ responses by summarizing them into categories. This approach allows for the identification of categories, or themes, that recur throughout the data (Drisko & Maschi, 2016) that can enrich our understanding of how this care farm is experienced by bereaved individuals.
This care farm is based in Northern Arizona and spans ten acres of pastures, paddocks, and grazing spaces. It is part of a program initiated in 2017 by an international non-governmental organization that supports families in their experiences with traumatic grief. The organization works mostly with bereaved parents, but also with other bereaved groups. Most often, people are referred to the care farm by members of their support groups, therapists or psychiatrists, or independently through internet searches for grief support. Those who visit may schedule grief counseling with a trained provider, spend time exploring the nature spaces, interact with and help care for animals, learn about the animals’ stories, and undertake grief-related rituals such as painting a memorial rock or creating a metal medallion to hang on the remembrance tree.

**Data Collection**

This study was assessed and approved by an Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University (#00007934). The board of the organization overseeing the care farm acted as gatekeepers to the study site and supported the researchers in accessing participants. Individuals who visited the care farm between April of 2018 and May of 2019 were invited to participate in an online survey \( n = 202 \) within one week of their visit. Participants responded within about three months. All participants provided informed consent. The survey was anonymous, required about 30 minutes to complete, and included an option to provide contact information if the participant was willing to be interviewed at a later date. Data from interviews are not included in the current study and no identifying participant information is included. The survey contained questions about participant demographics, bereavement, and ratings of various care farm activities. It also contained 12 open-ended questions, 10 of which are analyzed here. These include questions about which aspects of their visit and physical areas were perceived as most helpful and why; questions about any notable feelings, emotions, insights, or experiences during
their visit; and questions about any changes in their emotions, relationship to grief, or relationship with others since their visit. The data from two survey questions (e.g., the role of rescue animals) are being analyzed separately and are not included here to avoid redundancy. Not all participants answered all of the questions; therefore, the number of participants responding is indicated for each item.

Survey question development was guided by Creswell and Miller’s (2000) criteria for creating validity in qualitative inquiry, focusing particularly on eliciting thick and rich description from respondents. The survey was initially sent to a small group of care farm visitors to test that questions had been written in an appealing, engaging, and sensitive manner that provoked deep and rich responses, whilst remaining simple, focused, and appropriate. Questions were carefully crafted to support “analytical procedures that offer robust insights into the social phenomena being explored” (LaDonna et al., 2018, p. 348).

The first and third authors were not involved in operating the care farm and were not present during participants’ visits. The second author helped found the care farm and serves as a counselor but did not receive compensation for any part of this study or for her role managing the care farm. However, to further minimize any potential for bias, the first author, who was not involved in data collection, analyzed the data. While this researcher is part of the care farm research team, she typically serves in a volunteer capacity. However, a small stipend was provided for this study while steps (described below) to minimize bias were employed.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data were analyzed in SPSS, version 26. Open-ended responses were analyzed in Microsoft Word using content analysis, which is defined as “a family of research techniques for making systematic, credible, or valid and replicable inferences from texts and
other forms of communication” (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p. 7). This involved a close reading of participants’ qualitative responses, whilst noting and cataloging the presence of specific themes and words. Primarily, basic content analysis was used, such as attention to manifest content through counts of certain word frequencies, which can help minimize bias by providing precise counts and limiting interpretation. However, there was also consideration of latent content, or meaning that is implicit, reflecting a more qualitative content analysis approach (Drisko & Maschi, 2016), when more than simple frequencies were needed to capture the richness of the data, for example, to capture the nuance of participants’ narratives that may have escaped the flattened textual representation. However, this was done in conjunction with providing word or theme counts, staying close to the data. Initial word/theme counts and, when necessary, codes, were generated from the data by the first author and were reviewed by the other authors, following the framework set out by Elo et al. (2014) for improving trustworthiness. There were no divergent opinions concerning word counts, themes, or categorizations.

To enhance transparency, participant quotes are used to illustrate each category. Generally, only themes reflected in at least 10% of responses for each item are presented, although disconfirming evidence, in the form of responses that diverged significantly from the majority of responses, are noted, even when the frequency is below 10%. These were included to avoid presenting a biased account of participants’ care farm experiences and to draw attention to experiences that were not as positive and might warrant caution. It is also important to consider such experiences given the lack of research generally on care farming for grief.

Results

Demographics
Of the 202 adults to whom the email invitation was sent, 115 completed the survey (57% response rate). Respondents visited as guests/visitors who came to the care farm but did not receive counseling (56.5%), as clients who came to the care farm and received direct counseling services (30.4%), or as volunteers who came to help with animal and/or land care (13%). The sample was predominantly female (82.6%). The modal age bracket was 36-55 years (49.6%). The modal family income bracket was $75,000-$100,000 (21.2%), with 8.8% falling under $25,000 and an additional 12.4% falling under $50,000. Most reported prior exposure to farm animals (66.1%) and had experienced the death of a child (57%). Time since the loss was 4-6 years (27.8%), 1-3 years (20.9%), over 10 years (17.4%), within the past year (13.9%), 6-8 years (13%), and 8-10 years (7%). Additional demographic data are provided in Table 1.

[Table 1]

Activities on the Care Farm

Participants were asked to indicate which activities they had engaged in and to rate how helpful each had been using a scale ranging from 0 (not helpful) to 100 (very helpful). The mean ratings are presented in Table 2. The most highly ranked activity was taking care of animals, which involved grooming, feeding, watering, bathing, and assisting with medical needs.

[Table 2]

The Physical Areas of the Care Farm

Participants were asked which physical areas they found most helpful and why. Among the 108 responses, the most frequently noted areas were those containing water (53 responses), including a pond, river, and creek. These areas were described using terms such as “peaceful,” “serene,” “calming,” “respite,” “safe,” and “healing,” with frequent mention of the soothing sounds of the river. Some responses focused on water as a metaphor, such as “staying in the flow.
of life” and “force of life, force of change.” Next, areas related to horses, including the stables and pastures, were mentioned in 29 responses with terms like “intimacy,” “compassion,” “love,” “laughter,” “healing,” “spiritual connection,” “soothing,” and “shared pain.” Some participants mentioned sensory experiences with animals, such as “being able to touch them,” “[horses’] smell, noises, and activity is enchanting,” and “I could just watch [horses] all day, it was soothing.” Other areas inhabited by animals, for instance where goats, sheep, and pigs grazed, were mentioned in 24 responses with terms like “shared connection,” “calming and reassuring,” and “coexisting.”

Twenty-three responses made general references to the care farm, such as “farm,” “land,” “property,” and “whole space” while using descriptors like “pure love,” “beauty,” and “welcoming.” Sixteen responses referred to the Quiet Place, an area under an ash tree by the creek, with related descriptors like “reflective,” “silent space of solitude,” and “calming.” Eleven responses referenced the Circle of Compassion, which consists of swings around a fire pit by the river. Related terms included “calming,” “quiet,” and “peaceful.” Trees were mentioned in 14 responses, with related terms such as “at peace,” “quiet,” “calming,” and “serene.”

Helpful Elements of the Care Farm

Participants were asked more generally what aspects of the care farm were most helpful and why. Among the 103 responses, animals were the most common response, mentioned by 66 participants. Comments reflected feeling accepted and soothed; feelings of peace, safety, and calm; and a sense of connection and resonance with animals. For example, “Interacting with the animals gave me a sense of peace and being present,” “Animals. . .have honest acceptance,” “The horses and nature helped me to feel safe and calm,” “The animals give me a commonality
in trauma and hurt. I feel [as] though I, too, am a rescue animal,” and “seeing the animals who also had grief and fear helped me realize that I can feel it and I don’t need to run away from it.”

Next, 38 responses referred to human interactions such as counseling and interactions with staff, generally reflecting a sense of meaningful connection in a safe context, for instance, “being in the presence of [counselor] who accepts you as you are and who is very authentic,” “someone heard my story and listened,” and “felt understood and held . . . just eased the pain so much.” Nature and being outdoors were reflected in 30 responses and were connected to feelings of being grounded and calm, such as “Helped me drop out of the everyday distractions and feel the earth beneath my feet. Was like a giant exhale,” and “Being in nature, because it’s soothing.”

Signs inscribed with grief-focused poetry and quotes intended to prompt reflections on meaning in grief, also known as logotherapy (Frankl, 1967), were mentioned in 13 responses. These were connected to feeling part of a community and seemed to serve as prompts for reflection. For instance, “the logotherapy stations resonated so deeply with me. A beautiful reminder that I have not been forgotten in my grief” and “The signs provided me with insight and also ideas to take home and continue reflecting on.” Finally, ritual and remembrance were mentioned in 13 responses and were viewed as a chance to honor and connect with a deceased loved one through concrete acts of remembrance and as situating experiences in the broader context of life and loss, for instance, “It was a sacred feeling in participating in ritual where other parents honored their kids” and “I enjoyed hammering my son’s name into the copper plate and hanging it up on the tree. It is comforting to know that he is there and he is remembered.” In some cases, participants described experiences around ritual and remembrance for people they had not met, such as “The day we helped decorate [another child’s] tree with the chimes that his
classmates created in his memory left an imprint on my heart that I will forever be grateful for. . .

. To be able to remember a little boy I never met expanded my heart.”

**Emotional Content**

Participants were asked how they felt at the care farm. The vast majority of the 113 responses included what are generally considered pleasant feelings, with the most frequently used terms being “at peace” or “peaceful” (32 times), “safe” (32 times), “calm” (20 times), “loved” (14 times), and “connected” (13 times). Nineteen participants referenced painful or unpleasant emotional experiences, such as sadness and grief, but almost always situated them within a more positive context, for instance, “I felt safe to process all of the things that I felt, from sadness to joy to deep reflection and calm” and “I could remember my son so I felt many emotions but I wasn’t afraid of them for the first time.” Some participants specified that the ability to express grief was important to them: “my grief was given attention and welcomed – what usually is tucked away in my day to day life was given space to breathe,” “it was ok to express my pain, sadness, and grief without judgment,” and “I could honor my broken heart.” Only one respondent described a uniformly unpleasant emotional experience, writing “somewhat uncomfortable” without elaboration.

**Notable Experiences**

Participants were asked about any striking, moving, disturbing, or powerful emotions, sensations, memories, or thoughts during their care farm visit, yielding 107 responses. Fifty responses reflected emotional experiences, 26 reflected thoughts and insights, and 23 reflected specific memory recall. Across categories, experiences of grief were predominant, with 32 responses related to acceptance of grief and related emotions, such as, “Grief and pain were not the enemy. It was acceptable to be where I was in my journey” and “I felt the grief in my body
and was able to somatically work through some of it.” Experiences with animals were also present across categories and mentioned by 25 participants, for instance, “Witnessing the animals and their ability to trust after such pain and abuse is both inspiring and grounding” and “animal interaction was powerful and nurturing.” Memories frequently involved the deceased loved one, such as “I remembered details from my child’s death and birth that I haven’t thought about in almost 8 years,” “I felt safe enough to stop avoiding memories I had related to her death,” and “I remembered my son and his vibrant and contagious laugh.” Experiences of feeling connected to a deceased loved one, a wider community of grievers, animals, or nature were also expressed, such as “Mostly I just felt immense love for my girls. I felt their presence,” and “A deep sense of connection to the earth, to animals and to my child who died.” Finally, experiences with nature also bridged the categories, such as “[it] opened my eyes to how much I rely on nature to be my nurturer,” and were often associated with sensory experiences like “the sound of birds and the smell.”

A number of terms reflecting pleasant states were used throughout, such as “peaceful,” “safe,” and “loved.” However, seven responses identified more distressing experiences, for instance, “Felt really sad/disturbed about all the abused animals” and “I had some powerful emotions when I had to leave one of the horses. It triggered the same emotions I had when I had to leave my stillborn daughter at the hospital.”

Another question asked participants to elaborate on any profound insights or remarkable experiences during their visit, with 71 responses. Three categories, experiences with grief (26 responses), animals (25 responses), and nature (nine responses), were similar to what is described in the previous question. Additionally, 17 responses reflected interpersonal interactions, such as “Being with [staff member] was profound, just feeling her presence and
being immediately covered by a blanket of understanding” and “with [staff member’s] guidance, I felt I would recover from a trauma that has profoundly impacted my body and sense of safety.” Ten responses reflected commonality with others, for instance, “other people have gone through what I have gone through and have lived through it” and “I used to feel I was the only one but even animals experience this kind of pain.” Such responses were often accompanied by a wish to help others, such as “a desire to give back to those who have also lost loved ones.” Finally, eight responses reflected experiences of finding inspiration, for example, “there may be more than only this grief, this shock, this loss. . . perhaps something of beauty can grow alongside the heartbreak and pain” and “realizing that the emotions will come and go for the rest of my life and that I could cope with them.” In addition, a number of terms were used to describe experiences of subjective wellbeing, such as “calm,” “less anxious,” “at peace,” “opened,” “safe,” “healing,” “thankful,” “at home,” and “relaxing.”

**Relationship to Grief**

Participants were asked if their visit changed their relationship to grief and, if so, in what ways. Of the 98 responses, 78 affirmed such changes. First, 38 participants described how their visit resulted in being able to more fully feel and accommodate grief, for example, “I don’t run away from grief anymore,” “It’s helped me continue to integrate my grief into my life,” and “I can talk about her now. . . . I can have rituals now in honor of [her].” Second, 17 participants described gaining a better understanding of grief, for instance, “I now understand that no matter how bad I feel the grief will not consume me” and “I learned so much about the scientific/biological process of grief.” Third, 13 participants identified feeling closer to their deceased loved one as a result, such as “reminded me that even though my mother is gone that
she is a part of me,” “making a memorial garden at my house helped me understand he’s with me all the time,” and “I felt closer to my son at the care farm than I have in a long time.”

Changes in Attitudes Toward Nature and Animals

Participants were asked whether their visit changed any aspect of their emotional experiences in the world or toward nature or animals. Of the 97 responses, 83 provided examples, most frequently in the orientation toward animals (50 responses). Sometimes this was expressed as appreciation of the benefits of animals such as, “I find comfort now in connecting with any animal I meet” and, in other cases, as a greater awareness of animal lives, for example, “More aware of all animals as fellow sentient beings” and “I am struggling with the dairy industry after reflection on the sameness of bereaved parents and the calves ripped from their mothers for milking.” The other predominant category was orientation toward nature (35 responses), expressed as recognition of the benefits of nature, such as “I realized that nature is grounding,” or of the need to take care of the natural world, for instance, “I notice myself feeling a greater sense of responsibility for the well-being of animals and of nature.” Relatedly, 10 responses expressed a greater respect for life, for example, “I’m more mindful of all living things. I now relocate spiders and other unwanted critters in my home” and “my respect and love for life and nature continues to grow every day.” Finally, 12 responses expressed more compassion for others, for example, “I see suffering differently and I am able to see all suffering and not just my own” and “I have become much more compassionate toward all beings.”

Changes in Interpersonal Relationships

Participants were asked whether their visit changed their relationships with others in any way. Of the 86 responses, 66 indicated such changes. Twenty-nine responses named a specific person to whom their relationship had changed, such as a spouse or child. In seven of these cases
participants identified that their relationship with themselves had changed, often citing a more gentle approach toward themselves, such as “I’m trying to be more kind to myself and grief.” Better quality relationships were noted in 46 responses. Among these, 27 responses reflected being more accepting, compassionate, and open, for instance, “less judgment, more kindness” and “I am becoming a more compassionate person.” Sixteen responses reflected feeling more socially connected, such as “My relationship with my mom is WAY stronger now” and “more relaxed and open and less fearful.” Additionally, eight responses reflected improved communication, for example, “My boys feel more comfortable expressing their feelings to me” and “we opened the lines of communication and understand more about each other.”

Apprehensions and Challenging Elements

Because care farming may be unfamiliar to many people, participants were asked whether they had any apprehensions about visiting. Of the 105 responses, 67 reported no. The majority of apprehensions related to discomfort at trying something new or not knowing what to expect (22 responses), for instance, “I’ve never had counseling before” and “I was only worried that it wouldn’t help.” Fourteen responses anticipated difficult experiences, such as “I was worried I might ‘fall apart.’” Four responses indicated apprehensions related to animals, for instance, “I love horses but was unsure how to act and how to keep myself safe with them.”

Participants were also asked whether there were any care farm elements they found challenging or uncomfortable. Of the 97 responses, 73 responses reported no. Among those who reported yes, the following categories were each mentioned in six responses: being present with emotions or uncertainty, such as “Not really understanding what was expected or what was going to happen;” natural elements, for instance, “The bugs, ants, flies, and wet grass was challenging because I have allergies” and “it was a very hot day and I don’t always deal well with heat;” and
experiences related to access, for example, “It was expensive for me to stay in a hotel... and find transportation.” Five responses mentioned experiences related to animals, for example, “Eva [sheep] is not pleasant to be around,” “I needed a little time to settle into [animals’] environment,” and “I wished I had alone time with the animals.” Specific activities were noted four times, but without elaboration, such as “kayaking with my son was challenging.”

**Discussion**

This study sought to describe bereaved individuals’ care farm-related experiences using content analysis. Survey responses highlight which care farm activities were perceived as helpful, what types of experiences were evoked, and the perceived changes that occurred.

**Nature and Animals**

Care farms involve an innate connection to the land where they are located. As in other studies (e.g., Hassink et al., 2010) the care farm’s physical spaces emerged as key components in participants’ narratives. The specific category of “engaging with nature” was highly ranked as a care farm activity. In particular, the care farm’s “blue spaces,” or those involving water, were the most frequently cited helpful physical areas. Blue space has been defined as “health-enabling places and spaces, where water is at the centre of a range of environments with identifiable potential for the promotion of human wellbeing” (Foley & Kistemann, 2015, p. 157). The restorative qualities of water were reflected in the current study, as water was experienced as soothing and as providing pleasant sensory experiences. The appeal of blue spaces for grief was a surprising finding, as most research to date has focused on terrestrial spaces. The benefits and utility of incorporating such watery spaces into bereavement support could be explored further.

Animals also emerged as key actors in participant narratives. “Taking care of animals” received the highest overall ranking of any care farm activity, while “interacting with animals”
was also highly rated. This aligns with previous findings on animal interactions on care farms (e.g., Hine et al., 2008; Kogstad et al., 2014), though it is encouraging to see the applicability within this specific context. Animals were cited as providing unconditional emotional support and rich sensory experiences, as calming, and as offering moments of laughter, joy, or relief from the weight of grief. What was perhaps novel was how participants also found inspiration for coping with their own losses from hearing stories of the abuse and neglect the animals had endured previously and from observing the animals now thriving on the care farm.

Connections with animals may be very healing for bereaved individuals, who often feel lonely and isolated after a loss. For instance, people with dogs or cats reported fewer physical symptoms three months into bereavement (McNicholas & Collis, 2006). Recent research found that animals were rated as being the most effective providers of social support in bereavement (Cacciatore, Thieleman, et al., 2021) and provided comfort in ways humans could not (Cacciatore, Gorman, et al., under review). The present results confirm that interactions with animals, or even simply viewing them, was perceived as beneficial by many participants.

**Intentional Focus on Grief**

Together, the animals, nature spaces, and staff of the care farm helped create a space where participants could tap into their grief, process their emotions, and receive nonjudgmental, unconditional support. Such spaces may be sought out by bereaved individuals, who often live in communities that lack grief literacy and are perceived as unsupportive (Breen et al., 2020). Indeed, participant ratings placed a high value on grief-related activities, such as grief counseling, remembrance rituals, and logotherapy, while participant narratives reflect the centrality of grief-focused experiences in the care farm visit.
Previous care farm studies have emphasized the value of the social community (e.g., Elings & Hassink, 2008; Iancu et al., 2014), but exploring it in the context of bereavement was novel. Interwoven throughout responses were examples of feeling supported in grief through interactions with care farm staff members, characterized as providing meaningful human connection in a safe and compassionate space. The data also reflect feeling intimately connected with the care farm’s animals, who were viewed as providing a kind of mirroring of participants’ own experiences. However, the sense of connection extended beyond the staff and animals of the care farm to include a wider community of grievers who were not physically present but could be sensed, such as through visible acts of memorialization throughout the care farm landscape.

Similar to those who erect roadside memorials (Gibson, 2011), many care farm visitors create memorials to a deceased loved one, such as hammering their name into a medallion and hanging it on a tree sculpture or painting their name on a rock and placing it near an altar. In this way, the care farm serves as a site that contains both an abundance of life (e.g., animals, trees and plants, people) and reminders of death. Communities tend to relegate death and reminders of death such as memorials to designated spaces, and this kind of “cross-contamination between death and living spaces” can create anxiety for some (Gibson, 2011, p. 151). However, in this study, those whose lives had been touched by death seemed to appreciate how reminders of death existed side by side with the signs of life on the care farm. The care farm exists as an evolving therapeutic landscape, a place that is a “living” memorial, a site where natural, built, social, and symbolic elements come together to create a place for people to process trauma and grief through material and metaphorical caring engagements with living things (McMillen et al. 2017).

**Planting Seeds of Change**
Willis (2009) pointed out the drawbacks of research on therapeutic places that considers only experiences that occur in places deemed to be special and health-giving. However, she also noted that “experiences in one place can seed the construction of new stories to live by in other places” (Willis, 2009, p. 87), an apt analogy for a nature-based approach. In the current study, participants identified changes in their lives that occurred after their care farm visit. Regarding bereavement, specifically, the majority of participants indicated that their care farm visit had changed how they related to their grief, commonly through helping them more fully experience and integrate grief into their lives, through a deeper understanding of grief, and through feeling closer to their deceased loved one. These themes are similar to previous findings of the perceived benefits of a mindfulness-based intervention on grief (Thieleman & Cacciatore, 2020).

Interpersonal relationships can become difficult to navigate in the aftermath of loss (Cacciatore, Thieleman, et al., 2021). Improvements in social relationships, including feeling more socially connected, higher quality communication with family members, and greater compassion for self and others, were all reported in this sample. Additionally, some participants reported a changed orientation toward animals and nature, in the direction of feeling more grounded and supported by the natural world, increased connection with animals, and a greater respect for life in all its forms. Overall, the trend was toward seeing oneself as part of a larger whole, which has been conceptualized as a component of self-compassion and reduces the sense of isolation (Neff, 2003), which may be especially important when dealing with loss and trauma.

Limitations

While this study adds to our understanding of care farming for grief, it has its limitations. It relied on a self-selected sample, and those who had positive experiences may have been more likely to participate; thus, the data may not reflect the experiences of other visitors. Additionally,
this sample was predominantly female, potentially because women feel a greater need for emotional expression (Stroebe et al., 2001). However, almost 18% of this sample was male, which is higher than in many studies on grief. It is possible that care farming, with its opportunities to engage in physical activities, is more acceptable to men than more traditional mental health settings, although more research is needed to explore this. Further, data on ethnic and cultural background were not collected; there may be differences regarding the acceptability of care farming and associated experiences. There may also be differences based on socioeconomic variables. For instance, those in lower socioeconomic strata may not have the leisure time and resources to visit a care farm located away from a major city. However, about 9% of the sample reported annual incomes under $25,000 (US) and an additional 12% had incomes below $50,000, suggesting that this care farm may be relatively accessible.

Further, although most participants viewed their care farm experience positively, negative experiences were reported. For instance, when asked, about 25% of the sample reported challenging or uncomfortable elements during their visit, including unpleasant interactions with animals or insects and discomfort related to the weather or the terrain. Additionally, other difficult experiences were reported, such as interactions with animals bringing back traumatic memories. Phobias and past negative experiences with animals may result in different experiences, and there is a need to recognize varying levels of comfort and familiarity with nature and animals and ensure people are not pressured into engaging. Additionally, awareness is needed as to who may be excluded by involving animals in therapeutic interventions. For example, Every et al. (2017) have posed questions around “culturally appropriate animal therapy,” noting, for instance, that “people from Islamic countries would not normally have dogs in their homes, and may find dogs (and possibly cats) an unwelcome presence in a therapeutic environment.”
setting” (p. 7). Given the specific context of grief, we must also ask how the death of care farm animals may impact people’s experiences, particularly if they have formed relationships with specific animals. This is not something which happened during this study but warrants future reflection and investigation, as it is a concern which is under-reported and under-theorized in much of the literature relating to care farming.

In addition, there may be ethical concerns related to the use of non-human animals. Animals used for therapeutic purposes may feel stressed or experience harm from their human counterparts (Evans & Gray, 2012) and require a safe place to retreat from human contact (Fejsakova et al., 2009). Critical perspectives on care farming, and animal-assisted therapies more broadly, are often limited, as research tends to focus on ensuring and evaluating the benefits experienced by human participants. Human-animal relationships on care farms generally range from being parasitic, in which animals are simply objects to promote human wellbeing, to being commensal, in which human needs are prioritized but animals neither benefit nor are harmed, to being mutualistic, in which human and non-human animals both benefit (Gorman, 2019). Animals at this care farm enter all encounters with visitors of their own volition and are free to leave at any time, eliminating demands for animals to perform or be available to meet human needs. At the same time, animals benefit from the care and consensual contact, enacting more mutualistic interspecies relationships.

Lastly, there is often a chance of potential bias in data interpretation. In this case, this was minimized through having a researcher who was not involved in operating the care farm or in participants’ visits analyze the data, consulting with the third author (also not involved in operating the care farm or present during visits), the use of word counts and verbatim quotes to
enhance transparency of findings, and attention to disconfirming evidence to provide a balanced view of participants’ experiences, ensuring that difficult and adverse experiences were discussed.

Conclusion

This study extends work on care farming, particularly the potential it holds for bereavement. Similar to prior studies, care farm experiences were largely viewed as positive and beneficial. In particular, the species and spaces of the care farm provided a setting for getting in touch with and integrating grief more fully. Many participants also perceived the care farm visit as leading to lasting changes in their lives, including the relationship to self, others, and grief. Although care farming will not appeal to all individuals, these findings provide support for the use of care farming for promoting wellbeing after bereavement.
References


Table 1

Demographic and Loss-Related Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Percent (n = 115)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-35</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-55</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56+</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of loss</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse/partner</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other relative</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close friend</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudden/unexpected death</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause of death</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perinatal/stillbirth</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Care Farm Activities and Ratings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage (n)</th>
<th>Mean Ranking (SD) (out of 100)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking care of animals</td>
<td>30.4% (n = 35)</td>
<td>96.5 (6.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a volunteer/helping</td>
<td>27% (n = 31)</td>
<td>94.8 (8.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing mindfulness</td>
<td>49.6% (n = 57)</td>
<td>93.5 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work around grief</td>
<td>8.7% (n = 10)</td>
<td>93.0 (8.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging with nature</td>
<td>74.8% (n = 86)</td>
<td>92.6 (13.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief counseling</td>
<td>37.4% (n = 43)</td>
<td>92.6 (21.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembrance rituals</td>
<td>48.7% (n = 56)</td>
<td>91.8 (11.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacting with animals</td>
<td>93% (n = 107)</td>
<td>90.1 (18.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logotherapy stations</td>
<td>45.2% (n = 52)</td>
<td>87.9 (16.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscape maintenance</td>
<td>15.7% (n = 18)</td>
<td>79.4 (21.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening</td>
<td>6.1% (n = 7)</td>
<td>73.9 (38.1)</td>
</tr>
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