The authors discuss lessons from a multifaceted research program focused on how individuals find meaning in the wake of loss experiences. These lessons offer guidance to help bereaved students make sense of bereavement and move beyond grief to growth.

Lessons of Loss: Meaning-Making in Bereaved College Students

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Toward the end of the fall semester, Tom receives a call from home informing him that the car belonging to his depressed uncle has been found on a bridge near town with the keys still in the ignition. As Tom struggles to concentrate on final exams and as police dredge the river for his uncle’s body, Tom turns to trusted professors for reading materials to help him and his family make sense of this tragic death and grapple with their traumatic grief constructively.

Following the murder of a teammate, the eighteen members of a women’s athletic team accept the recommendation of their coach to attend a meeting with a male and a female counselor. The students’ responses are as diverse as their ethnicities and cultures—some eulogizing their friend, some voicing their pain and fear through tears and choking sobs, some expressing their guilt for allowing their friend to drift into “the wrong crowd,” some remaining stoic, and most expressing rage at the suspected killer. While helping students share these feelings and encouraging them to use the group to address their common concerns, the counselors answer the women’s questions regarding the nature of the death whenever possible and suggest strategies for managing their grief. They conclude by offering another meeting in one month for those who are interested.
Jill, a student in her early thirties, seeks services at the university counseling center nine months after the “horrendous” death of her mother as a consequence of lifelong alcohol abuse. Compounding her acute grief over the death is a powerful sense of guilt from her failure to respond to her mother’s attempts to draw closer as her life-threatening liver disease worsened and as Jill’s partner, Kendra, demanded that she distance herself from her “pathological family.” Jill’s mother died alone, and Jill is left feeling that much between them was left unsaid. With her grades slipping, her sense of isolation from friends and family growing, and her own reliance on alcohol increasing, Jill is desperate to break out of the cycle in which she feels trapped before she “repeats Mom’s life story.”

These scenarios represent only three of the countless ways death can enter the lives of college students of all ages, sometimes foreshadowed by grim anticipation, though often sudden. Indeed, the rates of college student bereavement indicated in our own research (Hardison, Neimeyer, and Lichstein, 2005) converges with that of others (Balk, 2001) to suggest that approximately 25 percent of college students have lost a significant family member or friend in the past year and nearly 50 percent have suffered a loss in the past two years. If only because the prevalence of such loss is matched by widespread inattention to this stressful life transition (Balk, 2001), bereavement might be regarded as a “silent epidemic” on campus, one that can have adverse consequences for how students engage the academic, social, and developmental challenges of college. In this chapter, we offer concrete suggestions, based on our extensive research on bereaved students, to support such students, with a special emphasis on students’ attempts to revise their understanding of the world now that their outlook has been shaken by tragic loss.

**When Grief Is Complicated**

Bereavement is a normal life transition and one that most survivors meet with resilience and constructive forms of coping (Bonanno, 2004). Although grief is never simple or easy, we must distinguish between the normative experience of most bereaved individuals and “complicated grief,” a specific psychological condition under consideration for inclusion in the next revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Evidence suggests that for approximately 10 to 15 percent of bereaved persons, this debilitating and prolonged form of grieving can pose severe long-term risks to their psychological and physical health through its association with generalized anxiety, depression, and stress-related diseases of the cardiovascular and immune systems (Ott, 2003; Prigerson and Maciejewski, 2006). Some of the symptoms associated with complicated bereavement or grief include yearning and pining for the deceased at least daily for months on end, difficulty accepting the death, loss of purpose, impaired functioning in life roles, and feelings of unease about moving ahead with one’s life (see Zhang, El-Jawahri, and Prigerson, 2006, for complete criteria). Even in
milder forms, grief complications, such as preoccupation with the death of a friend or family member, can disrupt the emotional, social, and academic functioning of college students, posing significant challenges to their successful negotiation of normal tasks of college life (Janowiak, Mei-Tal, and Drapkin, 1995).

Loss experiences such as those of the students described at the start of the chapter can challenge seriously each of the domains of students’ psychosocial development (Chickering and Reisser, 1997). Bereaved students, regardless of age, seek cognitive understanding of sometimes senseless losses, struggle with the powerful emotions death engenders, confront the grief responses of others to the same loss, and seek to reestablish a sense of purpose and direction as they integrate the loss into their ongoing lives (see Chapter Two). Although most bereaved individuals surmount these hurdles (Bonanno, 2004), some will not. Therefore, college counselors, residential life staff, coaches, faculty, and administrators should be alert to symptoms of complicated grief that show little reduction across time (see Prigerson and Maciejewski, 2006).

In our research on bereaved students, we have studied a broad spectrum of concerns stemming from loss, ranging from worrisome behavioral patterns to subtle concerns about the meaning of life and spiritual issues. In one study, Hardison and her colleagues (2005) concentrated on sleep and grief-related symptoms in a cohort of more than five hundred bereaved college students. The bereaved students were more likely to meet criteria for insomnia diagnosis than a sample of three hundred nongrieving peers, a diagnosis to which those who were bereaved by the violent deaths of loved ones were particularly prone. The students who suffered violent loss were also at greater risk for complicated grief symptoms than those whose loved ones died from natural causes. Furthermore, closeness to the deceased (as assessed by the level of reported intimacy in the relationship) was associated with more symptoms of complicated grief, whereas whether or not the deceased was a family member was not. Therefore, emotionally close nonfamily losses (as of dating partners or classmates) can be as distressing to college students as the loss of kin and deserve attention by college counseling services. In addition, insomniacs in the bereaved group reported more complicated grief symptoms than the noninsomniacs, which may indicate that insomnia and complicated grief can become mutually reinforcing. Moreover, students with complicated grief symptoms and insomnia reported troubling behavior patterns, including impaired daytime functioning and reliance on alcohol and medication to induce sleep.

Because of the link between insomnia and problematic grief responses, counselors working with bereaved students should assess each client’s sleep patterns. From a practical standpoint, both pharmacological and behavioral sleep interventions with bereaved students could mitigate the intensity of grief symptoms following a loss or prevent a course of normal grief from becoming protracted and complicated. In addition to using such familiar methods as relaxation training to help troubled students prepare for bedtime, a host of techniques focused on sleep enhancement—such as using
bedtime only for sleep and avoiding daytime napping (Lichstein, 1994)—could prove useful in breaking the cycle of recurring processing of the loss and sleeplessness. When combined with counseling and educational strategies to address grief, such sleep-restorative interventions can help students regain control of disrupted behavioral routines and take initial steps toward healthy adaptation to bereavement.

**Finding Meaning Following Loss**

A central theme in most of our studies of bereaved students concerns the processes by which students reassess and revise their sense of how the world works after their worldviews have been challenged by loss (Neimeyer, 2002). This approach to the life transition occasioned by the death of a loved one reflects a broader constructivist perspective in psychology (Kelly, 1955; Neimeyer and Mahoney, 1995) that views people as beings who seek to find meaning in all experiences. According to this perspective, humans strive to organize life events according to personally significant ideas so that they can understand, anticipate, and to some extent control their world. Viewed in this light, human beings’ sense of self emerges from an ongoing effort to determine the meaning of life experiences in a way that is consistent with their ideas about who they were in the past and who they will be in the future. Anything that disrupts the coherence of one’s self-narrative can challenge and erode not only the script by which one lives but also one’s very sense of self.

The death of a loved one ranks high on the list of potentially life- and identity-changing events. Bereaved individuals, including college students, often regard the story of their lives as being demarcated by their death loss experience. Consider the comments of a college student regarding death of her mother a few years before: “[My mother’s] death is the defining moment in my life. That is what defines me. . . . I am the girl whose mom died; that is me. I’d have to say that was the defining moment in all aspects. That’s what changed my life. . . . It just splits your life in half from before and then after” (Schultz, 2007, p. 25).

In the immediate aftermath of the death of a friend, mentor, or family member, bereaved students often draw on spiritual or philosophic beliefs, as well as familiar relationships and routines, to find a modicum of meaning and stability in a world that has been shaken (Balk, 1997). Those who succeed in integrating the loss into their existing structures may be characterized as resilient, bouncing back relatively quickly to resume their preloss patterns and to recover their familiar sense of self (Neimeyer, 2006). But for others, such losses can overturn their taken-for-granted assumptions that the world is predictable, that the universe is benign, that important attachment relationships can be counted on, and that they are competent to face life’s demands (Edmonds and Hooker, 1992). The consequence of the disruption of these assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) can be far-reaching, disorganizing not only one’s routines and relationships in the present but
also calling into question one’s long-term plans and commitments. Under favorable circumstances, this shaking up of a stable sense of self can lead to significant growth (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2006) as the bereaved person deepens his or her perspective on life; reviews and revises basic priorities; and grows in maturity, competence, and compassion (Neimeyer, 2004). When attempts at making sense of the loss, finding some form of silver lining in the dark cloud of bereavement, and rebuilding a sense of self without the loved one fail, however, exacerbation of distress and coping attempts marked by rigid and recurrent cycles of thought can result (Gillies and Neimeyer, 2006).

In the following sections, we discuss our research on bereaved college students with an emphasis on the practical implications of each study. We conclude with remarks on student diversity and bereavement and points to remember for counselors and other campus professionals

**Violent Versus Natural Death.** Even the natural and anticipated death of a significant person can be fraught with difficulty for students, who return home in midsemester for the funeral of a beloved grandmother, witness a mother’s slow demise from metastatic breast cancer, or learn of an uncle’s death from emphysema. But when the loss is sudden and grotesque, as through mutilating automobile accidents, suicide, or homicide, the challenge to the student’s capacity to make meaning of the tragic event can be even greater. After we established the general tendency of violent death to be associated with more intense and disorganizing grief for survivors (Currier, Holland, Coleman, and Neimeyer, 2006), we turned to testing whether a student’s ability or inability to make sense of the death was related to the cause of death or to common reactions associated with certain causes of death. Establishing such an association could assist individuals working with bereaved college students. If making sense of the death is a particularly salient issue for those grieving violent death losses, encouraging grieving students in their efforts to make some sort of sense of the experience could be a first step in helping them integrate the tragedy and move forward with their lives.

More than one thousand bereaved college students, nearly three hundred of whom had lost loved ones to violent forms of dying, completed a measure of complicated grief symptoms and reported how much sense they had been able to make of the loss, in whatever terms mattered to them (spiritual, philosophical, practical, and so on) (Currier, Holland, and Neimeyer, 2006). These data were analyzed to see if the more intense and debilitating grief symptoms of the members of the violent bereavement group could be explained by their failure to find meaning in the loss. This was precisely what emerged: the more problematic grief of students whose loved ones died of suicide, homicide, or accidents was nearly perfectly accounted for by the failure of their search for meaning to lead to any sustaining answers for a senseless loss. Indeed, sense-making continued to account for the uniquely complicated adjustment of this group even when compared with sudden natural death causes, as through heart attack.
These results indicate that individuals working with college students who are grieving violent deaths must consider how they can assist these students in searching for significance and meaning in the loss. For example, we have found it helpful to begin by exploring the circumstances surrounding the death, encouraging students to relate the story of the loss and others’ reactions to it, in greater detail than they do in other contexts, perhaps closing their eyes to give them privacy in reliving its intensity. Such revisiting of the death, sometimes repeated across sessions, has been effective in working with students grieving traumatic deaths (Shear, Frank, Houch, and Reynolds, 2005). In addition to revisiting the experience, we recommend exploring students’ processes of finding meaning by prompting them with open-ended questions:

- How did you make sense of the death or loss at the time?
- How do you interpret the loss now?
- What philosophical or spiritual beliefs contributed to your adjustment to this loss? How were they affected by it?
- Are there ways in which this loss disrupted the continuity of your life story?
- How, over time, have you dealt with this?

Patricia, for example, recounted her father’s death by heart attack when he was helping her move into her college residence hall, focusing on his background of suspicious cardiac symptoms and the dramatic but futile attempts of the paramedics to revive him. Reflecting on the question concerning spirituality a year following his death, she noted:

At the time of his death, I think I was much more aware of how my spiritual beliefs impacted the experience. It seemed as if my dad’s body was no longer him, and in a way, it seemed like his spirit had left. Maybe the sense I had of this made it easier to deal with the burial and his no longer physical presence. My spiritual beliefs grew stronger as a result of the experience, because I was affected greatly by seeing the moment when he no longer was alive or conscious. I have less fear of death now, because my father has gone before me.

College campuses are challenged to consider institutionally based strategies for facilitating sense-making when violent deaths affect the entire campus. Memorial services, tangible markers of remembrance (such as tree plantings), and opportunities to share stories regarding those who have died may be necessary when deaths are violent. Such community-based activities may allow members in the community to establish a shared sense of meaning. Deaths, particularly when they attract considerable media atten-

When we quote students directly, we have disguised the speakers to ensure their anonymity, and the material is used with their permission.

More detailed instructions for conducting such meaning reconstruction interviews are provided elsewhere (Neimeyer, 2002), along with additional methods (such as metaphorical stories and biographical writing) to foster sense-making in the face of apparently senseless losses.
tion (as the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech did), challenge the campus community’s sense of its collective identity as well as individuals’ sense of self.

**Sense-Making Versus Benefit-Finding.** As important as sense-making seems to be in bereavement adaptation, it is only one possible form of finding meaning in the wake of loss. Another is benefit-finding, in which bereaved people seek to grasp some positive implications of the loss. Consider, for example, the quest for some benefit in bereavement pursued by Kevin, a student whose uncle wasted away with cancer:

> It took me by surprise, his death. I have to learn to accept it though. Finding out someone close to me [died] was hard for me to accept, but I am sure it was even harder for him to know he was going to die. . . . But I still have other good times in my future. I don’t think he would have wanted me to be as upset and depressed as I am. He would have wanted me to celebrate his life, not his death. . . . I just don’t think I understood why he had to die. Everyone grieves in their own way.

> In a way, I [am] glad I realized this, so maybe I will not take life for granted all the time. It’s pretty bad someone has to die to make me realize that, but I think Terry would understand. He had cancer, and he couldn’t change that. The doctors couldn’t. . . . It was his time, and if he accepts it, why shouldn’t I? [Neimeyer and Anderson, 2002, p. 59].

This search for affirmative insights for his own life was difficult, articulated only after intensive and emotional journaling about the death some months after the loss. These insights also seemed to emerge against the backdrop of an ongoing attempt to make sense of the death and accept its finality.

Some investigators have found that benefit-finding plays a different—though complementary—role in bereavement adaptation than sense-making. Benefit-finding may in fact serve as a better predictor of adjustment in the second year of loss, when the role of sense-making has begun to diminish (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson, 1998). To investigate this possibility, we conducted a survey of a large number of bereaved students, aged eighteen to fifty-three, in the first two years of their grief. This project included an assessment of their ability not only to make sense of the loss but also to find some benefit in it for themselves (such as becoming a stronger person) or for others (such as ending their loved one’s suffering) (Holland, Currier, and Neimeyer, 2006). Results provided only partial support for the findings of Davis and his colleagues. Students who found neither meaning nor compensatory benefit in the loss experienced the most complicated grief symptoms. Students who were able to identify some benefit, in the presence or absence of sense-making, fared better than those who did not identify some benefit. However, the best adjustment was reported by students who reported high degrees of sense-making but only low benefits in the loss. Although this result was unexpected, it might suggest that being able to integrate the death into one’s life story in a way that makes it somehow understandable is more crucial than
finding some benefit in the experience, which might be viewed as selfish by some students. If this result is replicated by further research, it could imply a secondary role for benefit-finding in softening the impact of loss when a deeper meaning for the loss cannot be found.

Techniques for fostering benefit-finding in the wake of loss include questioning and journaling methods (Neimeyer, 2002). Counselors working with bereaved students can use these methods to assist their clients in identifying positive impacts of their losses. Counselors also can counter client's perceptions that such a search is selfish or inappropriate, perhaps by drawing attention to their greater capacity to reach out to others.

**Continuing Connections.** One of the more revolutionary changes in theories of grief during the past decade has been a widespread critique of the classical Freudian assumption that grieving involves a process of letting go of the one who had died to invest energy and commitment in new relationships (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, 1996). Rather than breaking the bond with the deceased, the goal of grieving is viewed as redefining the relationship so that it can be sustained symbolically, spiritually, or in memory, through shared storytelling with family and friends, and in a host of ways that permit attachment to the deceased to remain a vital part of one’s life (Attig, 1996; Hektke and Winslade, 2003).

To examine the concept of continuing connections for bereaved college students, we conducted a study to see if bonds with the dead interacted with meaning-making to predict levels of complicated grief symptoms (Neimeyer, Baldwin, and Gillies, 2006). More than five hundred bereaved college students, ranging in age from young adulthood to midlife, completed the measure of complicated grief, reported on their level of success in making sense of their loss, and indicated the extent to which their sense of identity had changed since the loss. They also indicated if this change in identity had been for the better (for example, by becoming more compassionate or reordering life priorities) or worse (becoming more fearful or more reluctant to get close to others for fear of losing them). They also completed a measure of their continuing connection with the deceased, rating the degree to which they sought the loved one’s belongings or things that reminded them of the person, had inner conversations with the individual, and so on. As one might expect, symptoms of complicated grief were greater for losses of family than nonfamily members, for those to whom students felt closer, and for students whose identity was most shaken and changed by the death. In contrast, both sense-making and benefit-finding were associated with more positive grief outcomes. Students who continued to feel attached strongly to their loved one but for whom the death made little sense experienced their loss as anguishing and intense. In contrast, even high levels of continuing connection could be managed more easily when the death could be understood within some broader framework.

Counselors seeking to explore the nature of the continuing connection with the dead loved one might make use of questions about the continuing
relationship, coupled with questions about practical coping methods, sense-making, and benefit-finding. Additional techniques for exploring or strengthening a meaningful and comforting bond with the deceased include the “life imprint” method and memory books (Neimeyer, 2002).

In much the same way, educators who advise student organizations, direct living units, or work with teams in which a member has died can help grieving survivors maintain a bond with their lost colleague. Creating a memory book together, for example, could be beneficial. Students might also create a meaningful legacy or memorial for their friend, such as posting messages on the Facebook and MySpace pages of the deceased.

**A Note on Diversity.** We should note that nearly all research on bereavement is conducted on Caucasian populations. To help rectify this imbalance in the literature, Rosenblatt and Wallace (2005) conducted a qualitative study with a small sample of African Americans, yielding some fascinating insights about unique dimensions of their responses to bereavement as a function of a history of racism, different family structures, a strong sense of connection to the deceased, and the impact of violent death on the community. To extend these promising preliminary understandings, we assembled what we believe is the largest database of bereaved African American students yet assembled and examined distinctive features of their grief (Laurie and Neimeyer, forthcoming).

More than 1,600 bereaved college students, nearly 650 of whom were African American, participated in the study. Respondents completed the meaning-oriented and continuing-connections measures described earlier, as well as questions regarding the circumstances surrounding their losses. Results indicated that African American students experienced more frequent bereavement by homicide (11 percent) than their white peers (2 percent) but lower levels of suicide and accidents. African American participants—in contrast to their white peers—also described higher levels of grief, stronger continuing connections with the deceased, greater distress over the loss of kin beyond the immediate family, and a stronger sense of support in their grief, although they were less likely to talk with others about the loss or seek professional support for it.

Among the implications of these results for bereavement support for African American students are that educators and counselors should perhaps expect that grief may be more acute for these students than they assert; in other words, a norm of “being strong through suffering” could lead some bereaved blacks to minimize their distress. A second factor to consider is the tendency of African American students to experience more grief for the loss of extended relationships beyond the nuclear family as a function of the supportive system of kinship that reaches beyond parents and siblings to include relationships with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and members of the church community. From the standpoint of intervention, this implies not only that educators and counselors should respect the emotional significance of losses of seemingly “distant” kin, but they also
might seek to use such expanded systems in supporting bereaved students. They might, for example, conduct grief support within the campus religious community, black student groups, and other relevant organizations. The more frequent occurrence of homicide bereavement among African American students suggests the importance of tailoring interventions for this population, such as by drawing on the narrative and support group structures now being developed for groups affected by this tragic form of loss (Rynearson, 2006). As this research suggests, more attention should be given to the distinctive needs and resources of communities defined not only by ethnicity but also by sex, sex-role orientation, and other relevant dimensions.

**Practical Points to Remember and Apply**

Bereavement may be a silent epidemic on campuses. Although most students cope with death losses effectively, others experience protracted and debilitating symptoms. Campus professionals must be sensitive to the prevalence of grief on campuses and consider the implications as they interact with students, develop programs, and determine policy.

Many students troubled by grief may present counselors, academic advisors, faculty members, or other campus professionals with problems that are secondary to the loss, such as impaired ability to concentrate on their studies and reliance on alcohol or drugs. Insomnia, especially the kind that worsens over the first few months following loss, can be an important marker of complication and a focus for intervention. Campus professionals must be attuned to the behaviors that can indicate an internal struggle with bereavement and assess and intervene appropriately (including referring the student for mental health–related services).

Although all deaths can be challenging for bereaved students to integrate into their life stories, those arising from violent circumstances may be the hardest. Joining students in a quest to make sense of such losses is important, although counselors and educators should avoid offering easy answers to difficult questions. Efforts can be designed to assist students in the face of violent death losses; depending on the campus context, these efforts could be individual or institutionwide.

Finding some silver lining in the dark cloud of loss, such as affirming movement toward greater compassion, growth, and maturity, can be helpful to bereaved students. Counselors and others should not push students toward insights for which they are not ready, nor should anyone imply that they should let go of their pain and “look on the bright side.” When meeting with bereaved students on an individual basis, educators should be open to comments about benefit-finding while avoiding minimizing the student’s experience of loss.

For many students, maintaining a connection with their loved one beyond death (through such means as cultivating memories, recording or sharing stories, or continuing the person’s legacy in the student’s own life)
can be a constructive response to loss. Counselors should be aware, however, that a close connection in the absence of a sense of meaning in the loss can be associated with more, rather than less, distress. Therefore, counselors should be attuned to bereaved students who display evidence of connection while also being able to find little or no meaning in the loss. Students grieve differently as a function of who they are; there is no single “normal” way to adapt to the loss of a significant person in one’s life. Cultural and ethnic differences in experiences of death and practices related to death should be understood and respected and should be reflected in responses to the bereaved. Colleges and universities must therefore attend to both the unique needs and unique strengths of various groups in the services they provide and the outreach they offer.

Conclusion

Bereavement is among the most stressful life experiences and transitions experienced by college students, not only because of its prevalence but also because it can negatively affect developmental tasks associated with traditional-age students. Nevertheless, if integrated meaningfully into a student’s life story, loss can foster personal growth. Consider the following words from Patricia, the student whose father had a heart attack while helping her move into her residence hall, expressed as she was about to graduate:

> Overall, I try to live life fully now, and I am less ruled by fear. I think I take more risks in relationships and try to keep from just hiding behind my accomplishments. I do not want necessarily to be remembered for what I did but more for who I am.

> I have a greater understanding of the humanness of all people. I think that before, I might have not really understood how there is no “superhuman” person who can move through life forever. We are all affected by our human condition. Everyone has loss, and everyone dies. I think that awareness brings me into a more open stance with getting to know and connect with others . . . . Maybe my father taught me that love does not have to be an action. Love is a presence, a knowing, and a way of being.

We hope that our research makes a small contribution to such life-affirming outcomes, pointing not only to the possible pitfalls of bereavement but also to possibilities for growth as students negotiate the transition from mourning to meaning.

References


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