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Finding Meaning and Recovery After the Death of a Friend During College

Jessica L. Cuthbert

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FINDING MEANING AND RECOVERY AFTER THE DEATH
OF A FRIEND DURING COLLEGE

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Jessica Cuthbert

May 2012

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Jessica Cuthbert

entitled

Finding Meaning and Recovery after the Death of a Friend during College

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

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Abstract

Literature reports that death is a part of everyday life, and bereavement can be considered a normal life occurrence. It is astounding to think that something classified as normal ignites such pain and brokenness. This study brings much meaning and depth to one of the most painful experiences a college student can encounter. Six years after a tragic accident at a small liberal arts school took the life of four students, this research discloses the stories of six survivor friends who lost a close friend in the accident through phenomenological research. In their own words, six survivor friends report that losing their friend is one of the most painful experiences ever faced. Results indicate that this intense pain pushed survivor friends to find meaning. The research also looks closer at the way literature defines resilience and recovery and what best describes how a college student grieves. The essence of this research recognizes that survivor friends can find meaning and recover in a way that pushes them to live a life of purpose. It was also evident that a close community like found at the studied university has the ability to draw students in and move them along in the grieving process. This leads to healthier outlooks on life for the students and recognizes the care and support needed from the university.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Bereavement and Grief

“Grief, as we imagine it, turns light into dark and steals the joy out of everything it touches” (Bonnano, 2009, p. 2). Grief cannot be described as simple, and there are particular situations when grief can be termed complicated (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2008). Death on a college campus could be seen as one of these particular situations. Although bereavement can be considered a normal life occurrence, it has been mentioned as a “silent epidemic” on college campuses. In fact, more than 25% of college students have lost a family member or friend within the past year and 50% within the last two years (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, bereavement will be defined as the loss of a relative or friend by death, and grief as the reaction or sadness caused by the loss. Although the statistics show evidence that it is common to experience the death of a loved one, this specific study exists to understand how the loss of a close friend during college affects meaning of life and recovery from grief.

The new revision and fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* suggests that roughly ten to fifteen percent of bereaved persons can have unbearable and a long grieving process that can include long-term risks to their psychological and physical health (Ott, 2003). These risks include, but are not limited to,

anxiety, depression, and stress-related diseases. Some symptoms of grief include longing daily for the deceased for months at a time, difficulty accepting the loss, lack of purpose, inability to function in normal activities and the overall incapability to move on with life. As stated above, all grief does not have to be extreme but even mild forms of grief may include overwhelming thoughts of the friend or family member, and emotional and social challenges (Neimeyer et al., 2008).

George Bonanno (2009) is considered a leader in the field of bereavement. Over the last two decades Bonanno's research has found psychological resilience central to human grief and trauma. The word resilience relates to the capability of people to cope with the stress experienced when a loved one passes away. Balk (2008b) reports that the use of the term resilience instead of recovery is misunderstood. Balk defines resilience as recovering quickly, and for many psychologists, recovery is neither a process nor an outcome. It is a period of time when someone exhibits consistent progress that is measureable. So, Balk asks, why are so many willing to throw out the concept of recovering after bereavement as opposed to showing resilience? Therefore, it appears vital to recognize the differences and similarities between resilience and recovery when someone is experiencing the death of a loved one. This will allow for a deeper understanding and knowledge base that will eventually benefit those experiencing grief.

These findings are studied in conjunction with major theorist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. In Kubler-Ross's (1969) book, *On Death and Dying*, she points out that death can happen at epidemic proportions whether it is by disease, war or natural disaster. Although medical advances have helped in the number of deaths related to disease, death is still a part of everyday life. Whether it is an epidemic, long-term illness, or accidental,

death is frightful and fearful, and these are universal themes. It is known that the death of a loved one can lead to severe psychological problems, but recent observations and experiments support that suffering can promote growth (Joseph, Linley, & Harris, 2005).

Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) report that counselors working with the bereaved have often remarked on their clients' need to find meaning in the loss. This is particularly expressed when a loss is sudden. Finding meaning refers to people often wanting to make sense of it. Neimeyer et al. (2008) recognizes life and identity changes rank high when one experiences the death of a loved one. The individual who experiences this type of loss may find it difficult to separate from their life and struggle making sense of how it fits into their story.

College Student Development

Balk (2001) suggests college student bereavement has its own specific process due to the critical and foundational development that occurs during the traditional, four-year college experience. Erikson (1968) stated in his psychosocial theory that there are certain tasks individuals face as they develop. Differing activities and factors promote identity achievement through decision-making, meaningful achievement, freedom from excessive anxiety, time for reflection and introspection. Erikson's theory is highly descriptive and rooted in continual development throughout all life. The end goal is an established sense of congruent self and intimacy. Development is ever-changing over time but as each crisis is resolved, commitment to identity becomes stronger.

According to Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008), Chickering's psychosocial identity development of college students is built on Erickson's identity and intimacy model. This process of development is based on seven vectors that are not linear but are more like

steps or a spiral. These vectors include: developing competence (intellectual, social and interpersonal, and physical and manual), managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing integrity, and developing purpose. Vectors can be moved through at the same time or interact with each other. The college environment is influential, and growth is determined by how the individual navigates crisis, a new mindset, and cultivated skills. The ultimate goal of Chickering's model is the establishment of identity while moving along major highways in the journey towards individualization.

College students are also typically in transition. They are transitioning into college, into academic disciplines, and eventually out of college and into a career. A significant loss is an additional transition for a student. Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory is a framework that facilitates an understanding of adults in transition during any event or non-event that results in change. Schlossberg and colleagues determine success in dealing with transitions through four stages referred to as situation, self, support, and strategies. The ratio of assets to liabilities helps to explain why individuals react differently at different times. Situation factors such as timing, concurrent stressors, prior loss experiences, and role changes related to the death could determine how an individual copes with loss. A successful transition is a high ratio of assets to liabilities related to situation, self, support and strategies (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008).

Therefore, major life events like beginning college, going to graduate school, or experiencing the death of a loved one can cause students to reuse developmental themes or stages. The response students have to the death of someone close can depend on where they are in terms of the developmental phases (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008).

Bereavement and the College Student

Bereavement during the traditional, four-year college experience is likely one of the most stressful experiences and transitions known to a student. It has the ability to affect development in a negative manner or can be meaningful in a student's life by fostering personal growth (Neimeyer et al., 2008).

It is recorded that the annual rates of college student deaths ranges from four to fifteen per 10,000 students. Based on this data, the United States has 5,000 to 18,750 college students dying each year. Research shows that some bereaved students seek help at counseling centers, but the overall ratio of student enrollment to caseloads at college counseling centers indicates that seeking help is not the common choice of students (Balk, 2008a). It is also noted that emotionally close non-family losses, such as dating couples or classmates, can be just as hard on college students as the loss of a family member (Neimeyer et al., 2008).

Sklar and Hartley (1990) found a parallel in bereavement patterns between what is called a "survivor" friend and family member. There is a growing population of survivors or close friends due to the increase of single-person households, delayed marriage, and cohabitation, however, studies regarding the meaning of loss for a surviving friend are rare. Close friendships which are considered survivor friends are those defined by individuals who share intimate feelings that relate to development and offer community, communication, and emotional support.

Research Questions

In summary, bereavement is considered a normal life occurrence and theorists consider recovery, resilience, and finding meaning in the loss central to human grief.

College student bereavement has its own process due to the developmental nature of the traditional, four-year college experience. It is not uncommon for a large number of college students to experience the death of a loved one. Therefore, the need for higher education practitioners to understand how the death of a close friend can affect one's ability to find meaning and recovery has the capability to promote a greater sense of care, support, and development.

This study will be conducted to better understand how the loss of a close friend during college affects the view of the meaning of life and recovery from grief during the three to six years following college. The following questions will guide the research.

1. How did the survivor friend find meaning after the death of a close friend during college?
2. What signs of recovery and/or resilience did the survivor friend demonstrate in the three to six years following the loss of their close friend during college?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

College students are a unique demographic when studying bereavement. Theories of college student development and college campuses are helpful when looking at the ways that college students cope with death. Marcia (1966) identifies four identity stages: foreclosure, moratorium, achievement, and diffusion. This introduces how young adults experience and resolve crises. This theory highlights that the traditional-aged college undergraduate is in the midst of transition, trying to find their own identity and gain independence. They are in the midst of forming an autonomous life, developing a purpose, and making lifetime friendships. If a college student is grieving during this transformational period of life, college students may find it hard to recover which could affect their ability to gain independence and purpose (Balk, 2001; Janowiak, Mei-Tal, & Drapkin, 1995).

Specific College Student Bereavement Studies

Balk (2008a) found college administrators and faculty members understanding that many college undergraduates were experiencing bereavement, however, many responded with an uninterested reaction. They agreed with Freud regarding bereavement, which suggests grief is a normal process not requiring professional treatment (Balk, 2008a).

It is known that there are many difficulties for the traditional undergraduate student facing bereavement and that, for some, it can be complicated. Balk (2001, 2008a) suggests that bereaved college students begin to challenge their identity formation as questions surface regarding their ability and self-worth. In this transition phase, students may have difficulty recovering, which will affect their ability to gain maturity and lead a life filled with autonomy, direction and intimacy. There have been six major areas identified that affect grief: (a) the physical effects of bereavement pertaining to issues such as insomnia; (b) bereaved college students struggle with behavioral effects such as staying organized, managing their time, and meeting deadlines; (c) interpersonal effects of bereavement stem from unaffected friends not understanding the depth and length of grief causing a secondary loss; (d) the typical cognitive effects ranging from problems concentrating to studying to continuing to pursue their education; and (e) the emergence of emotional reactions and questions about goodness, purpose and meaning relating to spiritual matters.

The theory of student development is important to understand in this discussion, and Rodgers (1990) described it as “ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education” (p. 27). Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008) use student development theory to understand how college students react to death. Psychosocial theories, the observation of tasks individuals go through as they develop, have reported that students who experience the death of a loved one can cause developmental themes to be reused. Chickering and Reisser (1993) recognize the process of traditional college-aged students moving from dependence on parents to dependence on peers to independence and then recognition of

independence. Students who have not reached emotional independence may find it difficult to deal with the death because the deceased person is the one they had relied upon for emotional support or guidance. College student development research also indicates that those struggling to develop mature interpersonal relationships may experience more traumatic grief and therefore cling to others or withdraw from them altogether (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The death of a loved one can impact the cognitive functioning of a college student, which could cause a significant challenge to their recovery. Most students try to understand the death cognitively by making sense of the loss. Perry's (1968) model introduces a student's ability to understand a series of events and their consequences based on intellectual and ethical development. Students seek to establish a sense of purpose and direction. Humans are known to organize their life according to significant events to understand and gain control of these happenings. This is what Perry notes as a student's forming a sense of identity, which is created in this process when the meaning of these events allows them to figure out who they are and what they want to be. Students who think dualistically may struggle with making meaning due to their desire to find the one "right" reason of death. This ability is influenced by their ability to process cognitively (Neimeyer et al., 2008; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008).

In summary, Neimeyer et al., and Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008) have found the death of a loved one has the potential to change one's identity. This allows students the ability to integrate their loss into their worldview. Bereavement is one of the most stressful and traumatic experiences of a college student. It can cause students to challenge their identity formation, and some may find it difficult to recover, which may

affect their life direction. However, if integrated into the student's life, bereavement could have a positive impact on their growth.

Making-Meaning

An important part of grief work is processing the death and its meaning. Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) have found some researchers call this "finding meaning" while others refer to it as intellectually or cognitively accepting the death. Theorists suggest that individuals who are able to find significance in the death and make sense of life goals and purpose are able to find meaning that helps develop a broader perspective of oneself.

Neimeyer (2001) argued that making meaning out of death is the central process of grieving. Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) organized meaning-making into three major processes: sense-making, benefit-finding, and identity reconstruction. Sense-making is the attempt to understand why the death occurred. Benefit-finding is one's ability to see the value or good in the deceased person's life or themselves following the death. Identity reconstruction occurs when a new self is established after experiencing the death of a loved one as a result of the experience. It is a new sense of self, and those who seek and find meaning in death often appear to function more effectively than those who cannot find meaning (Michael & Snyder, 2005; Neimeyer et al., 2008; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008).

One study looked at sense-making as opposed to benefit-finding, processes distinguishable in terms of their focus, background, and dealings with psychological change. Benefit-finding is important in the second year of loss after sense-making has diminished. Students who did not find meaning or benefits from their loss experience the

most complicated grief. However, the most adjusted students found a high level of sense-making but were low on finding benefits from the loss. This realization, although shocking, seems to infer that it is most important for students to find meaning in the loss and to implement it into their life story (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Neimeyer et al., 2008).

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) coined the term Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) to refer to the positive change that happens after a highly stressful event. This term recognizes that cognitive processing plays a role. Researchers have found that people “ruminate” after an event until they rebuild, suggesting that if meaning is found, there is success in positive change. Those who struggle to find meaning are overtaken by painful rumination. It is apparent that a painful experience such as death causes a person to challenge their worldview. Adaptive coping is the ability to take that experience and change oneself. Rumination may deter someone from finding identity because of constant negative thoughts.

In summary, research suggests that making sense of the death within the first few months aids in one’s ability to adjust emotionally. Beyond making sense of the event, people also want to find something positive about the experience. These two processes are distinguishable psychological issues. People who lose someone close report their desire to make sense of the event and derive a benefit from it. Yet, not only bereaved people go through the meaning-making process. It is also apparent that going through the meaning-making process does not mean one has recovered from the loss. The loss of someone close ignites a process of rebuilding a sense of self, which is an ongoing process.

Resilience and Recovery

In Bonanno's (2009) book, *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us about the Life after a Loss*, he identifies four trajectories: resilience, recovery, chronic dysfunction, and delayed grief or trauma. Only resilience and recovery will be discussed in this study due to the scope of research. Those showing resilience after the loss have the ability to continue carrying out normal life with little suffering due to their bereavement. Bonanno's studies reported that the majority of bereaved persons studied returned back to their normal daily activities quickly. This indicates that resiliency is demonstrated in one's ability to return to daily life operations like work and relationships.

Bonanno (2009) reported a second group under recovery which found that they functioned with a major disturbance, but eventually returned back to who they were prior to the bereavement. There was only a small amount of people who truly struggled with complicated grieving. Bonanno (2009) also reports that this is commonly viewed as the typical response following the death of a loved one. Culture suggests that the majority of people would have physical, emotional, cognitive and interpersonal behavior, or spiritual struggles following bereavement.

These findings suggest that there is a sense of resilience immediately or eventually. Balk (2008b) identifies psychologists who are moving past recovery and into this idea of resilience. Resilience is a form of resistance to the symptoms that many people experience after a major loss. This idea could be coined with the expression "positive psychology." Researchers describe recovery following bereavement as the ability to continue with a meaningful life and still cope with the challenges of life. These

concepts include positive psychology, but it was not without the notion that recovery is a process and not just something that can be measured during a period of time.

As stated before, Bonanno (2009) would suggest that the above studies are not the majority of reactions from those who have experienced bereavement. However, Balk (2008b) recognizes that the term recovery does not accurately reflect the possibility of resilience being a part of the process after bereavement. He suggests that the term does not work across the spectrum for researchers and practitioners.

Rosenblatt (2008) analyzes Balk's (2008b) view of recovery following bereavement. While acknowledging that recovery happens in bereavement, Rosenblatt (2008) notes that if there is too much focus on recovery, it is possible to miss other pieces of grief. As discussed, recovery is often linked to illness. Therefore, when using the term recovery, we tend to think one is ill or fatigued, but grieving has its own process. In illness, one may recover, but with grieving one may return to work and friendships yet still be affected by the loss. It is important to note that an outsider may think the bereaved person has recovered, but the person struggling with the death may not feel recovered at all. So, Balk's (2008b) concept of recovery from grief may be more appropriate for the unaffected individual than the one who actually experienced the death of a loved one. Rosenblatt (2008) concluded that metaphoric analysis works for both Balk's (2008b) term recovery and for those who disagree, believing that the term does not apply in all situations.

In three studies performed by Rosenblatt (2008), it was found that in only two of 111 interviews someone mentioned the word "recovery" or "recover" when speaking about their experience related to the death of a loved one. Researchers believe this

happens because many persons experience grief but do not just “get over” the loss. Many respondents also felt that they had changed and were not the same person as they were before the death.

Rosenblatt (2008) mentions how people in various cultures do not share similar terms related to bereavement. Most researchers will agree that a bereaved person grows and changes during the grieving process, but it may be important to listen and understand what words the bereaved people are using about themselves. It is mentioned that bereaved people are on journeys, and it could be very important to study where those journeys take these individuals, which may or may not include the word recovery.

Some of the same themes in recovery, such as positive self-concept, taking advantage of resources, and maintaining a positive attitude, can also be seen in resilience literature (Paletti, 2008): “Resilience may be seen as a prerequisite to recovery; by engaging in resilient behaviors, bereaved individuals may work toward the self-transformation inherent in successful adaptation to loss” (p. 23).

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) took a deeper look at the concept of recovery and offered an opinion that differs from Balk. One of the major concerns is that the concept of recovery cannot cross the scholarly and clinical line. Since recovery is often connected to the idea of being ill and then getting over that sickness, when it is used with bereaved persons, it seems to suggest that one is unhealthy after a loved one passes away and can recover and move ahead without much thought of the one who passed away.

It is important to remember that grief is often compared to clinical depression. This may not be universal, but it is normal for a bereaved person to have memories of or longings for the loved one who has passed away. This differs from someone who

recovers from a clinical depression (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2008). Again, Bonanno (2009) uses the term “complicated grief” in these circumstances instead of using recovery because of the heavy connotations surrounding recovery.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) suggest that not all people change, but most do experience some change after living through the death of a loved one. Since the term recovery has brought about much debate, it may be useful to use more neutral concepts.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) state:

The loss of close others by death can produce multidimensional changes that include both positive and negative elements. Only a few people need to “recover” from bereavement and some people never do. But bereavement changes most people and our task would seem to be to understand the full measure of what those changes are, and how they unfold over time. No one term or concept may do the job of reflecting the diversity of experience of bereaved persons. (p. 29)

Since it is uncertain what new terms should be used, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) suggest that the most important next step would be to ask those who are experiencing bereavement how they would describe their experience. It is recommended that qualitative research would be a beneficial way to understand the grieving person and that this research could be replicated. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) do report five broad categories that bereaved persons can face: the emergence of new possibilities, changes in relationships with others, an increased sense of personal strength, a greater appreciation for life, and changes in existential and spiritual orientations.

The concepts of making sense out of a loss and determining the ability to recover after the death of a close friend are studied within college student development, but there exists the need for further understanding. It is important that college students and professionals examine these concepts in order to aid the significant college student population that experiences bereavement.

Future Research

Paletti (2008) recognizes the many debates regarding the correct terminology for studying death. However, a consistent finding in the research is the concept of self-transformation following bereavement. The grief experienced can be so strong and powerful that it changes the person dealing with the loss of a loved one. Even for those who do accept the term recovery, they recognize that bereavement can be deemed successful if one encounters personal transformation.

Paletti (2008) found in recent literature that personal transformation after experiencing extreme trauma moves beyond grief work into psychiatric rehabilitation, mental illness, and humanistic psychology. Being aware of this knowledge, it is suggested that an educational model of recovery be used to avoid the “get over it” mentality. This type of model would inform the bereaved person to design a new worldview and forces the recovery debate into semantics.

Balk (2008b) suggests studying student bereavement trajectories to observe if they match Bonanno’s (2009) three distinct patterns: resilience for most, recovery for plurality, and extended distress for a small minority. Balk (2008b) also recommends a campus-based bereavement center which would be dedicated to bereavement research, intervention and education. This could include the training of peer counselors to assist

bereaved students. It would also be important to discuss with bereaved college students what they need and ask whether colleges should play a role in meeting those needs.

Conclusion

In summary, the death of a close friend can impact the cognitive functioning of a college student, causing a significant challenge to their recovery. Most try to make sense of the loss which can lead to forming a new sense of identity in order to find purpose and direction. Although a bereaved person may have made sense of the loss, it does not mean that they have fully recovered from the loss. The debate of the terms resilience and recovery seem to bring about tension in the research, leaving researchers unsure which term best represents a person's experience with grief. The way survivor friends go about reacting, processing, and changing after experiencing the loss of a close friend should lead to what term is best. Future research recommends studying and examining those who experienced the death of a friend during their college years. Labeling the themes found in each individual as recovery or resilience will allow researchers the ability to adopt the correct terminology.

This study will be conducted to better understand how the loss of a close friend during college affects the surviving friend's view of the meaning of life and recovery from grief during the three to six years following college. This research will allow higher education professionals the ability to mentor and develop bereaved college students in a way that leads to meaningful and healthy decision-making during college and the years following.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Phenomenological

This study utilized a qualitative approach to best understand how the death of a close friend during college impacts life meaning, recovery and resilience. An empirical phenomenological methodology was used in order to understand the experience (Creswell, 2008). This type of method is a scientific study based on the appearance of what happened in the participant's consciousness. Edmund Husserl refers to the Epoche, a foundational process in phenomenological research, as "a difficult task and requires that we allow a phenomenon or experience to be just what it is and to come to know it as it presents itself" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). This approach is unique in that it will establish the opportunity for an individual to share their lived experience through this phenomenological research method (Creswell, 2008).

Background

In 2006, a university-owned van from a small, liberal arts institution in the Midwest was traveling with nine passengers and was struck by a semi truck on an interstate about ten miles from campus. Five of the passengers were killed; four full-time students (one junior and three seniors) and one employee died. It was one of the most fatal crashes the state had seen.

Participants

The participants for this research study were close friends of the four students who were killed in the automobile accident. Males and females were interviewed. These close friends were identified in the following order. First, university officials identified two close friends of the deceased students. Second, the researcher had a face-to-face conversation with these two persons explaining the research being done and asked if they would be willing to participate along with giving the names and contact information of other close friends. Once the two participants gave approval to be a part of the research and gave the researcher other names, all persons were formally contacted regarding the research via email and were asked if they would be willing to participate. A total of six close friends were interviewed due to the length and content. It was the researchers' intention to have three males and three females participate.

As a result of the above methods, the group was identified based on previous observation and recommendation of others close to the situation, but the process eventually ended in self-selection. Participants were students at the institution at the time of the accident and had graduated from the institution. The individuals identified to be interviewed were those that had a close friendship with at least one of the deceased persons. Friendship was defined as someone who spent a majority of their time together while he or she was living whether it was in class, college activities, or formal or informal social settings. This friendship included in-depth conversations, an emotional bond, and the ability to identify core characteristics of the deceased friend. There was not a restriction on the number of males or females. Gender or relationship status did not

play a role in determining who was a part of the research. Race was not included in this study.

The identity of both the deceased persons and participants was anonymous. Only information that was imperative to the results was released but has been stated in a way that keeps the information untraceable to the participants. An “X” appears in place of the deceased person’s name when a close friend mentions them specifically in an answer. All close friends interviewed were given a pseudonym.

Procedure

Once the participants were identified, each participant was interviewed. The interview was semi-structured and an audiotape was used for the purpose of transcription following the interview. The interviewer conducted each interview in the course of one to two hours and took notes during the interview. Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting via Skype, phone, or in person. Each interviewee was asked to identify themselves by stating how many years they knew their friend prior to the death and how they came to know them. They were also asked to state why they considered this person a close friend. Interviews were guided by twelve, open-ended research questions (Appendix A).

To ensure that harm was not posed on any of the participants, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) gave approval for the study to be conducted. Each participant also completed an informed consent (Appendix B) before they began the interview process. Due to the sensitive research topic of grief and bereavement, a counselor at a university was available to the participants if a need arose (Balk, 2001).

Due to the connection between the primary researcher, research site, and participants (Appendix C), the following measures were taken: (a) participants were given the interview transcriptions and the findings identified by the researcher; (b) participants confirmed the relevancy of research findings; and (c) an external reviewer provided assistance and assessment of the data analysis (Creswell, 2008).

Data Analysis

Creswell (2008) defines a qualitative research design that integrates the reviewing of literature. The data collected from the individual interviews was transcribed. The data was analyzed by hand. It went through a preliminary analysis of taking notes, organizing, and becoming familiar with the data. It then was coded and divided into segments, and eventually collapsed into broad themes. The coding included finding common phrases used by those studied, as well as similarities and differences on views of grief. Eventually, the themes that emerged were those that were unique and surprising, those mentioned often, and those that have the ability to be used or seen in similar settings or situations.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

Based on the analysis of data, results emerged in two general categories: finding meaning and signs of resilience and recovery. Under the broad category of finding meaning, two themes emerged: initial response and sense-making. Four themes emerged under the broad category signs of resilience and recovery: individual choice, shared experience, personal change, and living with purpose. Therefore, six themes emerged in the participants' responses and will be further defined in the results section under the two broad categories of finding meaning and signs of resilience and recovery.

Finding Meaning

First, finding meaning is defined as how the survivor friend made sense of their friend's death. Finding meaning refers to the purpose or reason as to why the person had to die and finding significance, if it exists at all, in the death. Based on the results, finding meaning is a stage that lasted from the close friend's time of death to six months to one year afterward. The initial response and sense-making were both evident in the finding meaning process.

Initial response: Strong external and internal emotion. It became apparent through the first question asked to participants regarding hearing the news of their close friend's death, that this news elicited the most painful and intense emotion they had ever

experienced. It evoked so much pain externally and internally. The initial response emerged immediately in conversations with survivor friends and focused on the first moment of hearing about their close friend's death. This response continued into the first few days and weeks after. Though it did not extend much beyond a month or two after the event, it was still a strong theme. All participants referenced that initial response as so intense and strong that it elicited two actions.

The first action was a physical response, both external and emotional. It was not physical in terms of a physical outlet—such as playing basketball—but physical in the sense of emotion—like crying. Survivor friends described this intense emotional response by stating, “Dropped to knees and was an emotional wreck. Not able to control my emotions” (John); “Sobbed when heard—laid on the floor and sobbed” (Sara); “Just sat and bawled” (Anne); “Shaken up and weeping” (Ben); and “Cried a lot. A lot. A lot” (Jill).

There were other statements regarding the physical response that pertained to “Horrible nightmares” (Jill) and “Nauseating to even think about” (Sara). There was a vast sense when listening to responses that this was unlike anything previously experienced: “Worst pain ever experienced in life” (Jill); “Experienced nothing that strong before” (Sara); “Devastated, uncontrollable hurt—it felt like somebody was stepping in front of me and saying I’m taking X away from you” (Ben); and “Brand new feelings—don’t ever remember crying in adult life like that before” (John).

However, it was not just an initial physical response. The second action was no less intense, but can be labeled as more of an internalized response and, in some cases, as deep, cognitive thought. Again, this was no less powerful, just internal: “Didn’t know

how to talk about it” (Anne); “Didn’t know what to do” (Chris); “Didn’t know what to do—didn’t know what to talk about” (Ben); and “Physically didn’t know what to do with myself” (Jill). One survivor friend responded, “Haze at start—it was paralyzing” (Anne). Some felt paralyzed initially and others mentioned being overwhelmed, exemplified in statements like, “If you actual think about having to live the rest of your life without somebody—it becomes overwhelming” (Jill), and being “Angry at first” (Ben, Chris).

These internal responses included a strong presence of deep thinking, mainly in immediate thoughts that questioned their relationships with their close friends. Some comments that relate to this concept include: “Wished for talking thoughts out or having a bigger conversation” (Chris); “Wrestled with not feeling like I knew him at a super deep level” (Ben); and “Mad at myself that I hadn’t spent more time, feeling guilty pretty instantly, and started to point finger at myself” (Sara).

All of the examples listed, whether externally physical or internalized through a deep cognitive level, reiterate the initial response. It is apparent that the initial response is very much a part of the story and is described as an intense and emotional experience. It can range from a physical response like sobbing to not knowing what to do with oneself to deep internal thinking. This theme occurred immediately which propelled the participants to try and make sense out of what was happening. This set in motion the need for participants to continue to find meaning and purpose in the close friend’s death.

Sense-making: Understanding the reason for death. The second theme that emerged following the initial response was sense-making. Sense-making is defined as a survivor friend trying to figure out the reason why their friend died. This process has the tendency to be quite intense and strenuous on a survivor friend. However, when survivor

friends were asked if they had made sense of their friend's death, the majority stated it still did not make sense at all. Some even said they did not ever think to make sense of their friend's death, because they knew it never would make sense.

The result based on participants' answers suggests that the sense-making found was actually the fact that their friend's death did not make sense and never would. Survivor friends accepted living with the tension of losing a friend in a tragic accident and not understanding why. Most participants attributed their acceptance with this tension to their stated Christian worldview. They did not have the desire to figure out why because they believe only God knows why it had to happen, and that was an acceptable answer for them: "Doesn't make sense but I'm okay with that. I know God loves me" (Chris); "Biggest sense that I've made out of it—is if you do not choose to learn from this, then to a watching world—X life—you know was just . . . things happen—there's a purpose—God is sovereign and has a purpose" (Ben); "I don't think I'll ever make sense of it. I think I have to just come to an understanding that I do not have the heavenly perspective that the Lord has. I realize there is a higher and greater perspective than mine" (Anne); "Never occurred to make sense because it doesn't really make a whole lot of sense if you ask me but God can do what he wants and I am fine with it" (John); and "Make sense of the death—fuck no, it doesn't make sense—none of it makes any sense—people don't just die in a car crash when they are 20 years old. It's bullshit" (Sara).

These responses of not making sense out of the tragedy, but placing it in the context of their worldview indicate that there was sense made through an understanding that there is a "purpose" and a "sovereign God." These statements however do not

eliminate the existence of pain in the loss, as the participants acknowledged: “Pain isn’t gone. Didn’t fix it. Didn’t make me understand or fix it” (Sara); “Death makes you feel like you’re going crazy. And just to have that normalized and to say that I’m okay. Even when I felt like I wasn’t. That was huge” (Jill); “You are going to hurt a lot but you’re going to be closer to God” (Ben); “Time will heal everything but it doesn’t disregard what happened and it doesn’t disregard your initial feelings about what happened” (Anne); and it even “makes it okay to feel a wide range of emotions” (Chris).

The initial response and sense-making within the category of finding meaning seems to propel survivor friends into demonstrating signs of resilience and recovery. This was articulated by one survivor friend who stated,

You’re just like fuck it you know—you just don’t even care anymore to a certain extent—you’re just like what is the point—of even getting close to people if all they are going to do is die. You know. It just doesn’t seem to matter anymore and in some very, very dark—you know selfish moment—you start to think like that. And you can’t let yourself stay in those moments but you find yourself in them every once in a while—and that’s normal. (Sara)

Sara recognizes that initial emotions and inability to understand a friend’s death have the potential to keep someone in a paralyzed state, while demonstrating that something propels a survivor friend to recognize that they cannot stay in that state. They have to move on.

Signs of Resilience and Recovery

The second category, signs of resilience and recovery, was defined as signs that showed evidence of resilience relating to the ability of people to cope with the stress

experienced when a loved one passes away, and recovery as neither a process nor an outcome, but a period of time when someone exhibits consistent progress that is measureable.

Some signs of resilience and recovery were individualistic and indicated self-awareness, and other signs were based on their deceased friend's attributes and surrounding community. Based on the results, these signs of resilience and recovery were found six months or so after the close friend's death up to the present time, which is five and a half years after the accident. Individual choice, shared experience, personal change, and enhanced perspective were all indicators of signs of resilience and recovery.

Individual choice: A personal decision to move on. All survivor friends articulated that they came to a point of decision and made a choice to move forward with life. It was not immediate, but eventually they felt they could not remain in such an emotional, painful state. It became almost numbing to sit in the pain, so everyone indicated the need to choose to move forward. The theme is labeled individual choice because it was a cognitive, personal decision not influenced by another which each survivor friend made. This cognitive, conscious decision was often phrased as a "choice" by the participants: "Cognitively knew I had to move on—even though emotionally it was difficult. Connecting these two takes time" (Jill); "Choose to keep going" (Chris); "Didn't want to hurt anymore so needed to make a choice to lay these down at the foot of the cross and move forward and that was when I was actually going to grow" (Ben); and "Choose to work through it because best example of who you are is what you do in crisis . . . when you push forward and move forward, I know I found growth" (Ben). Anne provided a longer description of this choice from her perspective:

Crossroads moment—you can either be completely devastated or you can try to live worthy of the legacy that was left. Forces you to think about, well, how can I continue to love this person even if they are not there—and it wouldn't be—a very loving thing to just disregard your whole life—your whole purpose—while you're still here—when you know that is the complete opposite of what they would be doing if they were still here too.

It became clear to each survivor friend that the pain would lessen eventually and they could only live so long in an emotional state: “Time moves on” (John) and “There is only so long you can focus on something like that before you just stop and realize—you can't live your life with that kind of an attitude—eventually you have to stop and wonder how the Lord wants you to live your life” (Sara). Jill wrestled with the tension of the loss and moving forward:

Moving forward doesn't mean forgetting. I think that is scary and I think most people have to come to grips with that. There's that tension of if I move on—that means I'm letting go and it is scary to let go. And yet to be healthy we have to let go. Figure out a way to remember them and live that out. (Jill)

One survivor friend even stated:

I wanted to move on because this is the paradox of community and we are capable of incredible hurt and tragedy and disgusting brutality but then on the other side—we are capable of incredible things. Like we are capable of like incredible showings of love and I just felt like you know what, I'm not—gonna think—I'm not gonna be that person that just was blown away—blown away by the wind—

I'm actually going to put roots down and it may go back and forth for a while but I'm going to pull forward—move forward and be a leader. (Ben)

Shared experience: Gravitation toward people who understand the experience. The second theme survivor friends mentioned as a sign of resilience and recovery was the influence of a shared experience. This was articulated in response to a question asked pertaining to who and what was influential in the grieving process. A shared experience is defined as finding someone who understands the situation because they also experienced the same thing. It does not necessarily mean that they lost the same friend. It means that the person has lost a close friend and can empathize and understand the situation. For instance, since the researcher was a student at the time of the accident, it was mentioned by participants that they felt more comfortable sharing because the researcher understood the situation; it was a shared experience.

However, answers to this question also indicated that survivor friends did find the most comfort and support from their closest friends who understood the situation. A community was created based on a gravitation toward people who knew the experience versus people to whom they had to explain the situation: “Healthiest things were a group of friends and reflection” (Chris); “Being able to talk to someone who knows the experience and knows what happened—easier—you can bring them into more of what happened” (Ben); “Certain level of details shared when people know the story (so) people to talk to who actually got it—knew what you were experiencing” (Ben); “Shared experience helps” (Anne); “Group of friends and best friend—just talking about it—common group of friends is influential” (John); and “Friends going through the same thing” (Jill). Jill and Ben both mentioned the difficulty of explaining their experience

with family: it was “difficult for parents because they were so removed” (Jill) and “home was a struggle—hard to communicate to parents because they don’t understand” (Ben).

Not only was the shared experience influential in healing, but the communication that occurred in these moments was beneficial to personal healing as well. The dialogue between the survivor friend and others in their community proved to be helpful. It was not something that came naturally, but participants spoke of forcing themselves to talk because they saw such a difference when they did: “Making myself talk—not shove it under a carpet” (Ben); “Acknowledge it. Say it is hard. Choose to talk about it. Think about it” (Chris); and “Talking and sharing stories” (Sara). Ben and Chris articulated the need for intentional and challenging questions from close friends who understood the experience by stating, “Letting other people in to see so much of my life . . . being asked good questions that we don’t want to talk about” (Chris), and “Intentional questions—hard conversations are healthy to help process” (Ben). Both continued, stating the importance of shared experience when saying, “So many scars when you only seek out one person—need to heal in community” (Ben), and “Forced friends to become closer making identity effected” (Chris).

Personal change: Deepened convictions and understanding of purpose. The third theme in the category of signs of resilience and recovery is personal change. Personal change indicates that survivor friends did change from the experience of losing a close friend; however, it was not identity reconstruction—meaning, a new self or total reconstruction. Rather, through their deceased friend’s character and influence, survivor friends were propelled to personally change by living their life with more meaning and

purpose. Therefore, their personality, values and goals remained the same; they just lived them out with more conviction and focus. Chris articulated this by stating

To say I wasn't changed means I am completely not self-aware. I really like who I am and I think everything in my life, every part of my life, has made me into who I am. And so when I look at the accident—would I choose to do that—have that happen again—but at the same time when I say that I'm like oh man—a big part of who I am is because of the accident. A big—you know—like a big part of my story involves that. I think it's hard for me to say “oh this specific thing about me is a result of this.” Because I think these last five, six years so much of the accident has impacted the way I think and the way I act and what I do—that it is not like I can say these specific things—but it's like this has impacted me.

Ben continued this idea, saying:

Definitely a different person—if I had not been changed then I believe I would still be wrestling with the same thoughts that I had shortly after hearing about X's death. You observe what happens and then you apply something. X didn't do things like other people did them so I think the striving to not be anyone but himself was very much communicated in him. If I am Ben like I am not anybody else and you know that is something that I can use that—to drive myself you know as a husband, as a soon to be father, you know and also a pastor.

Sara articulated similar feelings, as well:

I see myself being a better person because of her. You know—in the decisions I make every day—little things that I say when I stop myself from being snappy or impatient—just have to stop and think—how is thing going to enrich myself—

how is this going to enrich somebody else—how is this going to improve somebody's quality of life.

Jill adds:

Not thankful I lost friends or for the pain . . . but I am thankful for the event because I feel like it completely changed me. It gave me a kick to get healthy. It changed my relationship with my parents and with my brothers. Changed work and empathy towards people. Learned to trust people more. Because this is an event you can't just do on your own—you just can't no matter how much you want to.

Anne also experienced these feelings of personal change:

Feel like—we had to grow up—now I have a better sense of what I am here for. Enjoying what I am doing. Actually moving forward in relationship with Christ. Have a clear direction. Wanted to rebel against being an adult—the accident—you know just kind of like pulling back a curtain—well you have moved into a new phase—how are you going to deal—how are you going to handle that—you can either completely lose it or get through it—take something away from it and keep going.

These responses of personal change due to the death of a friend came in conjunction with thoughts regarding living a life of purpose, the next theme developing out of the interviews.

Living with purpose: Seeing the world in a completely new light. The last theme became evident through in short statements that revealed a bigger picture, open-minded perspective or, what has been defined simply as, living with purpose.

Throughout the interviews, survivor friends would make comments revealing a new and vast understanding of life and finding purpose due to losing a close friend at such a young age. Survivor friends saw the world and their life in a completely new light and within a much bigger picture and did not want to waste one second. So, they intentionally decided to take what they were learning and live a life of purpose.

This understanding was mainly seen in comments like “Life is short” (Chris); “Life is really short” (Sara); “Every day is extremely important” (Ben); “To live and remember little tiny things. Excitement about life” (Anne); “Live intentionally and value relationships more” (Chris); “Invest a lot more in people. Want to live as fully and deeply as possible” (Jill); “Go for things—powerful lesson” (Sara); “Ways to live life not in a boring way” (Chris); “More balanced life” (Jill); and “Have grace with people or acknowledge the crap that happens” (Chris).

It is obvious that a survivor friend realizes life is short when losing a close friend during college. Although it was reported in an earlier theme that an initial response can be paralyzing, it was later seen that a survivor friend finds the death of a close friend motivating within this concept of intentional living. The motivation comes from the influence of the deceased friend. The attributes and characteristic of the close friend, along with the realization that a survivor friend could lose their life at any moment, was sobering and thus motivating. As a result, survivor friends expressed that they wanted to live a life of purpose. Ben acknowledged this by stating

We are driven towards negativity because it is what we—that is what we do—it is something that is easier to get angry—and want to punch a hole through

something rather than sit back and—or not even sit back—but just to drive past it and you know what—I'm gonna use this to motivate me to live.

Anne contributed, “How possible to just you know have something happen at any time—it makes you more aware. And it is motivating. It is incredibly motivating,” while Jill explained:

Motivated to live because of realizing that you could lose your life at any moment—so I wanted to make it count cause I realize there was a chance—you know we live our lives thinking we are going to do good things once we get into our career—I didn't realize that there's a chance I would never get to be in this career.

Jill also stated, “I realized it was okay to let go—not fully let go—cause I don't think we ever fully let go of it. I like thinking about it because it is one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.”

Summary

The participants' responses indicated that the death of a close friend was the most painful experience ever faced in their lives up to that point. The desire to find meaning within the initial response and sense-making themes eventually led to signs of recovery and resilience. Participants showed an ability to cope with a tragic death, but not in a way that a specific outcome was met. Rather, it was through measurable signs such as individual choice and shared experience that each brought about personal change and began to live with purpose.

It was apparent that losing a close friend in such a tragic accident will forever be a part of each survivor friend's story. Survivor friends often articulated these thoughts by

using phrases such as, “Super sad still and painful but the day takes on a whole new meaning now” (Chris); “Rather they were still here—leaving a mark on me in just that short period of time—that is a gift” (Anne); “Still stings but not as overwhelming that you begin to disregard the positive” (Ben); and “Wish to have friend back desperately—but glad that there has been so much good” (Jill).

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

The results of this study are discussed in the context of the literature reviewed and the implications of practice, as well as how they can guide future research. The research questions will be addressed and answered, with the limitations of the study also being discussed.

Connecting the Findings to Literature

The study's findings support Erikson's (1968) and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theories concerning the main concept of psychosocial theory development. This concept recognizes development as ever changing. Within that concept, as each crisis is resolved, such as the death of a close friend, commitment to identity becomes stronger. The concept of identity establishment during crisis on a journey towards individualization emerged in this study from the six themes defined under the two larger categories of finding meaning and signs of recovery and resilience. These themes overlapped and connected to literature in interesting ways. Both themes under finding meaning (initial response and sense-making) correlated to literature so well that they began to overlap and link to the themes under signs of resilience and recovering (individual choice, shared experience, personal change, and living with purpose). Therefore, the themes and literature will be reviewed through their connections in the following manner: initial

response connected to individual choice and shared experience, and sense-making connected to personal change and living with purpose. The debate of resilience versus recovery will also be discussed. There are two additional pieces to note in light of the literature and results, which pertain to the lack of rumination found in the participants' diverse bereavement journeys and furthering the discussion to gain more input with regard to the connection of themes.

Initial response connected to individual choice and shared experience. Balk (2001, 2008a) recognizes that there are six major areas that affect grief. The physical effects and emotional reactions were seen in the initial responses of survivor friends and eventually propelled students into a cognitive realm, which was themed as individual choice. In addition, the interpersonal effects that Balk describes were also noticed in the shared experience theme. Survivor friends sought out friends who understood because unaffected friends did not grasp the depth and length of grief. This action brought about more meaning and purpose in conversations with those who had a shared experience.

It is important to remember Chickering and Reisser's (1993) observation that college students move from dependence on parents to peers and eventually to independence. It is mentioned that students who have not reached emotional independence cannot deal with the death. However, it seems that emotional independence was reached through the initial response that eventually elicited a recognition of adulthood and the need to grow up. This was seen in participants' individual choices to move on with life even after such an emotional, painful experience.

Balk (2001) indicated that a college student grieving during such a transformational period of life may find it hard to recover, which would affect their

independence and purpose. However, this was not the case for the survivor friends interviewed. It was apparent that all made a cognitive choice to move out of the initial intense emotional state and drive toward finding meaning and purpose.

Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson (1998) recognize that those who accept the death intellectually or cognitively have the ability to find significance in the death and make sense of life goals and purpose. They are able to find meaning that helps develop a broader perspective of oneself. Survivor friends in this study made the individual choice and mention the benefits of a shared experience, both of which led to a life of purpose, which directly connects to the literature.

Sense-making connected to personal change and living with purpose. Perry (1968) recognizes that most students try to understand the death internally and make sense of the loss. The student's ability to understand events is based on intellectual and ethical development. This allows a survivor friend the ability to establish a sense of purpose and direction. Even though survivor friends interviewed in this study reported that they had not made sense of the loss, it seems that they did make sense by placing it in their Christian worldview and deciding that a tragic death to such a young person could never be understood. Their responses stated that only God knew the purpose, and they were satisfied leaving it within their Christian worldview. There was not a struggle to find the "right" reason of death. When asked if they were able to make sense of their friend's death, they simply responded that it would never make sense, but their belief in a sovereign God whose ways they could never understand was enough. It was assimilated into their worldview, yet pushed them further in their personal convictions and identity.

This indicates that survivor friends never truly had a desire to make sense of it or even begin to think they would ever be able to make sense of it. It can seem shallow to state that the only sense made was that it could not make sense. They were okay stating that only God would understand. The other side to this thought is that the survivor friends had such a deep understanding of their Christian worldview that it was something they knew could not be grasped cognitively.

The connection between sense-making and personal change was seen in the work of theorists Neimeyer et al. and Taub & Servaty-Seib (2008). Identity change which allows students to integrate their loss into their worldview causes a positive impact on their growth. It is suggested that survivor friends in this study really did not make sense of the death, since literature would report that they did not find the one reason the death occurred. Therefore, this could be the reason that a “change” of identity was not experienced. The identity reconstruction or new self was not reported by participants, meaning the loss of a close friend did not change their personality or career path. However, personal change was reported and the literature seems to suggest that if sense-making would have been more decisive, identity could have been reconstructed, which was not the case for the interviewed survivor friends.

It is important to note that this idea of commitment to identity and journey toward individualization is what occurred for the survivor friends studied. It was a personal impact or change, which brought about a deeper sense of meaning that led to a desire to live with purpose.

Neimeyer (2001) argued that making meaning out of death is the central process of grieving. Cognitively it seems that benefits were found and eventually that identity,

although not completely changed, was enriched and triggered further growth with an intentional desire that motivated survivor friends to live with purpose.

Recovery and resilience. In reviewing the literature, the debate between resiliency and recovery in grief became evident. Bonanno (2009) said resilient grievers differ from other grievers because they have the ability to continue carrying out normal life with little suffering due to their bereavement. Balk (2008b), on the other hand, described recovery following bereavement as the ability to continue with a meaningful life and still cope with the challenges of life. Balk (2008b) mentioned that recovery was neither a process nor an outcome, but rather a period of time when someone exhibits consistent progress that is measurable.

According to the findings, survivor friends in this study did not experience or report little suffering due to their loss. They also did not return quickly to their daily routines. Many mentioned the emotionally painful months early on, and how it took time for them to get to a point to choose to move on. Participants also mentioned that they did not perceive their grieving as having an end.

Those interviewed did show signs that were measurable indicating that recovery was occurring: the ability to cognitively choose to move forward amidst the pain, being able to share the experience with those who understood, and grasping a bigger perspective in order to live with more purpose.

The researcher therefore believes that Balk's definition of recovery seems to fit this group of survivor friends. Cognitively, the majority of survivor friends in this study were able to cope with the challenges of life. This is not an outcome, rather it is a time when someone is showing progress that is measurable. However, the term recovery is

not one that is used or understood in this type of situation. It was not once mentioned in any of the interviews. So even though Balk's use of the word recovery fits according to the definition, the researcher agrees with Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) who suggest the use of a neutral term instead of recovery. Because it is important to define terms in order to appropriately communicate meaning, this study aligns with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2008) assessment that it was necessary to ask those experiencing bereavement how they would describe their experience in order to discover terms with the most meaning.

Lack of rumination within diverse bereavement journeys. Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2008) posttraumatic growth (PTG) recognizes that cognitive processing plays a role, and those who struggled to find meaning would be overtaken by painful rumination. Rumination was not a theme found in this study. Again this suggests that the survivor friends were able to grow from the experience. Although there was no painful, deep rumination, survivor friends still recognized the pain of the experience, missing their friends, and wanting to share with them.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) also suggested that not all people change, though most experience some change. This study recognized that there is diversity in bereavement journeys, but an emotional response and the individual choice to move on and share the experience eventually brought about a personal change and purpose for the participants.

Benefit of close community is personal change. The shared experience link to personal change and purpose seems strongest in Jill, Chris and Ben. The change articulated by these three survivor friends suggests that they were surrounded by friends who shared the experience and chose to talk through difficult and challenging questions.

This suggests that the more community you have the healthier your perspective and personal change. It is suggested then that the more community and conversation is incorporated initially, the healthier you become at processing life meaning and purpose. However, Anne and Sara both showed signs of impact and personal change, which were based upon the close friend's influence and input. Or, it could be suggested that these survivor friends (Jill, Chris, and Ben) felt like it was shared not only because of a common experience but also due to a strong connection to their Christian worldview. With the strong connection seen between shared experience and personal change, it is important to highlight that a close community could move members along in the grieving process and ultimately enable them to be healthier.

Implications for Practice

After reviewing the literature, there are implications for practice that should be taken into consideration when working with students who lose a close friend during college. One of the first apparent pieces is that whether it is one loss or an unforeseen group of students, everyone's story is different; their personality and their relationship with the close friend who passed away are unique. Therefore, each manifestation of grief will be different. Higher education practitioners need to recognize that every death on their campus will be expressed differently and, although there are certain steps in crisis management, other pieces will need to be based on who died, how they died, and how to communicate the death to close friends, the campus, and general public. It is important to identify and gather as much information about the deceased person(s) and the close friends or those who will be more impacted by the death in order to give those closest to

the deceased the physical space to have an initial, emotional response and to surround them with others who share the experience.

Even though broad themes were established from the study and could be true for others who grieve the loss of a close friend, it does not mean that a student's story does not include its own personal twist or direction. It is important to remember that while this experience can be transformational and meaningful for survivor friends, it does not have to define the rest of their lives. This does not mean life is over or life is tragic. It is just a bad chapter in their story and not the whole book. It is important to remember that close friends will need to tell their individual story to others who understand the situation and can challenge them or can ask intentional questions that lead to growth. It is obvious from the initial response comments that those grieving need to process with those who share the experience.

It is also clear that attempting academic work after the death of a close friend can be questionable. Even if a survivor friend quickly returns school, it may be an escape mechanism so they do not have to think through and process what has happened. Academics are very serious at the college level and can also determine career goals such as getting into medical school, graduate school, passing certifications/boards, etc. Therefore, practitioners need to take this into consideration when asking for academic work to be accomplished by a survivor friend who is not ready and not clearly processing how this could affect their future.

One very important message to consider is the fact that, for a survivor friend, the college experience becomes a deeper part of their identity. The college location, environment, residence hall, classroom, dining commons, whatever it may be, will

forever be etched in their memory as the place where they knew that close friend, lived life together, and probably had their last encounter and conversation. This brings up the point that eventually it could be healthy for the survivor friend to graduate and leave college. It can bring about a new sense of healing without taking away from the fact that these survivor friends will always have a deeper connection to the institution. This impact should be realized and considered in future communication from the institution, specifically when thinking about reunions, alumni functions, and even graduation. It is suggested that future communication with the deceased student's family and relatives be taken into consideration and appropriate language used to ensure a positive relationship between them and the institution.

It is obvious that growth and personal change can occur even in the midst of a painful experience. The survivor friends decision and recognition that staying the same would not do anything for them was very influential and something practitioners should note. Survivor friends need to recognize that a personal decision and cognitive decision to move on is important. Practitioners need to provide the resources, communication and space for survivor friends to recognize this importance. Survivor friends do not need to be told this directly, but do need to be sensitively counseled in such a manner.

Another important factor in survivor friend growth is the recognition by university personnel that they may have difficulty making new friends or sharing with friends who do not understand the experience or who did not know the close friend who passed away. It is important for practitioners to remember that each year is different and survivor friends grow, learn, and experience more of life which gives them a new

perspective. Therefore, grieving and growing with the student is important, and recognizing their progress can be transformational.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should include studying college students who experience a different type of loss during college, such as a parent, grandparent, or sibling, to observe if any of the themes found in this study hold true for these situations. It would also be beneficial to look specifically at the act of leaving college (i.e., graduation) and if that creates or aids in a survivor friend being able to experience growth and find purpose.

There was also mention of disconnecting at certain times to get through the experience. This cognitive piece had to take over because the emotional state was too painful to continue living in. It would be interesting to look more closely at the cognitive state or the emotional disconnect. Are there certain times or places this is seen in one's journey? Does this link to the idea of resilience?

Another major element observed in this study, which was not necessarily anticipated, was the emphasis on a Christian worldview when a survivor friend is finding meaning. Students often stated that they did not wrestle with finding meaning because of their strong faith and belief in a God who was in control. It is recommended that research from faith-based and non-faith based institutions be studied to find if there is a link between spirituality and sense-making which could also inform researchers of a connection between spirituality and identity reconstruction.

Another question to ask regarding the connection of faith and grief, comes from the concept of a student who is thriving verses a struggling student. Since the deceased students of this study were described in exceptional ways, meaning mature, student

leaders on campus and academically high achieving, it seems there was less to reconcile. Faculty, staff, and students did not struggle with thoughts of “this student had so many more ways to learn and grow.” Researchers could consider studying the differences of reactions based on the type of student (exceptional or struggling) who dies. A secondary part to this study could question if the Christian worldview remains constant in the grieving process no matter what type of student death occurs.

It is suggested that future research continue to look at the idea of secondary loss. College students grieving one loss could trigger feelings and emotions based on past losses, whether by death or another form. In the college setting, it is also important to look at group trauma. Does shared experience link to group trauma? Is group trauma positive or negative within the grieving processes?

This study did not look at specifically at the grief cycle so it is vital to recognize the grief process and how this plays out in the college setting. It is also important to consider the age of the student dealing with the grief. Is there a difference developmentally to students dealing with the loss of their close friend during college? All the implications stated recognize the broad scope of grief related to college students and suggest the next steps with regard to future research.

Limitations

The main limitation to this study is that, since it was a phenomenological study, it focused on one specific accident and group of students as opposed to college students who experience the death of a loved one, in general.

The institution studied has a low enrollment and is known for its tight-knit community. Findings could differ at a significantly larger institution. Also, the students

killed in the accident were identified as student leaders and high achievers. The findings could change if differing types of students were studied.

The study was conducted at a faith-based institution known for its deep evangelical roots and required Christian worldview and Bible courses. This limits the study in terms of studying grief in the context of other religious beliefs and worldviews. It is safe to assume that the institutional type can inform responses, and this study does not include the full scope of college student grief after the death of a friend.

Conclusion

Literature reports that death is a part of everyday life, and bereavement can be considered a normal life occurrence. It is astounding to think that something classified as normal uncovers such pain and brokenness, because nothing about those feelings seems normal. Hearing six survivor friends share their stories of their close friends' deaths through phenomenological research brought much meaning and depth to one of the most painful experiences a college student can encounter.

All six survivor friends reported that losing their friend was one of the most painful experiences ever faced in their life, and no one denied the fact that it was a large part of their personal story. This intense pain pushed survivor friends to find meaning, which they all found by cognitively choosing to move on and live a life of purpose, indicating recovery. The essence of this research recognizes that survivor friends can find meaning and recover in a way that pushes them to live a life of purpose.

It was also evident that a close community, which is found at this university, has the ability to draw students in and move with them along in the grieving process. This

leads to healthier outlooks on life for the students and recognizes the care and support needed from the university.

Although death can be a depressing and painful topic, one piece survivor friends recognized was that even in the midst of something so awful and misunderstood, their friend's life was a gift. Even though it is not easily noted or recognized in the midst of the grieving process, life is sacred. It is a treasure. It is something to cherish. It is what makes grief painful; but it is what makes life meaningful.

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Appendix A

Protocol Questions

1. Please describe your relationship with the friend you lost, and how you knew them.
2. What types of emotions were you experiencing or what were you experiencing, in general, at that time of losing your friend?
3. Please give a detailed description of how you were handling the death of your friend then compared to where you are at today. Do those emotions still exist today?
4. What attributes of your friend did you admire? Of those attributes, what have you incorporated into your life, if any?
5. Did you feel paralyzed by their death or motivated to live?
6. Do you feel that you have been able to make sense of the death?
7. What or who has been most influence in your healing? Have you found anything positive in this experience?
8. At the time of the death of your friend, did you have a strong sense of identity? Can you describe the values and goals you possessed at that time? Did those change in the three to six years following the death of your friend? If so, how and why?
9. Did you ever struggle with rumination following the death of your friend? Do you have memories or longings for your friend?
10. Can you describe the first few months after the death of your friend? What decisions did you make? Did you take any risks?
11. Can you describe past experiences that you relived due to their similarity to the feelings/emotions of losing your friend?

12. Were you changed? For the good or bad? In what ways? Are you a different person today?

Appendix B

Research Participant Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research project. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Study Title: College Student Bereavement

Researcher and Title: Jessica Cuthbert, Campbell Hall Director

Department and Institution: Student Development Residence Life, Taylor University

Address and Contact Information: 236 W. Reade Ave., Upland, IN 46989,

jscuthbert@taylor.edu

1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

- a) You are being asked to participate in a research study of college student bereavement which will look at the loss of a close friend and how it affects identity development and recovery.
- b) You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you lost a close friend during your senior year of college. Your name was recommended by someone who is also participating in this study and considers your opinions valuable and helpful to the study.
- c) From this study, the researcher hopes to learn how the loss of a close friend during college affects one's view of the meaning of life and recovery from grief during the three to six years following college. This research will allow higher education professionals the ability to mentor and develop bereaved college students in a way that leads to meaningful and healthy decision making during college and the years following.
- d) In the entire study, 6 people are being asked to participate.
- e) The interview will most likely take one hour but no more than two hours.

2. WHAT YOU WILL DO

- a) Participants must do the following:
 - i. Agree to being a part of the study by reviewing this document and signing the consent form.
 - ii. Decide on a two hour time block to be interviewed by the researcher, preferably in October during Homecoming 2012 at Taylor University.

- iii. If a time during Taylor University's Homecoming does not work, decide on a time that works.
- iv. Answer all questions honestly and in as much detail as possible.
- v. All answers will be kept confidential as well as identity of the participants.
- vi. This research will be used for educational purposes.
- vii. All findings will be presented and reviewed by you, the participant.

3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

- a) The potential benefits to you for taking part in this study are a better understanding of how the death of a close friend transformed your life positively and brought meaning.
- b) Your participation in this study may contribute to the understanding of higher education professionals and their mentoring and developing of other students experiencing the death of a loved one.

4. POTENTIAL RISKS

- a) The potential risks of participating in this study are:
 - i. Sensitive questions that may cause distress or discomfort
 - ii. Recalling a painful and emotional experience
- b) There are no foreseeable risks like physical, illegal, social, economic, or employment associated with this study.
- c) Counseling services will be available to all participants if further help is needed.

5. PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

- a) The data for this project will be kept anonymous by using a code name for each participant.
- b) The participant's privacy will be maintained throughout the project by using the code name on all materials.
- c) Information will be released if the researcher recognizes there is a danger to yourself or others.
- d) The interview will be audiotaped which is a required part of the project. The researcher will also take notes throughout the interview.
- e) The audiotape and notes will be kept in the researcher's locked office. All audiotapes and notes will be destroyed upon completion of the research.
- f) The following will have access to the data:
 - i. Researchers, Transcriber, and Researcher's supervisor
 - ii. Institutional Review Board (IRB).
- g) The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

6. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

- a) Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no.

- b) You may change your mind at any time and withdraw.
- c) There are no possible consequences of withdrawal or incomplete participation.
- d) You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.
- e) Choosing not to participate or withdrawing from this study will not make any difference in the quality of any services you may receive.
- f) You will be told of any significant findings that develop during the course of the study that may influence your willingness to continue to participate in the research.

7. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

- a) You will not receive money or any other form of compensation for participating in this study.

8. CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact:

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If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Taylor University at 800.882.3456, or e-mail irb@taylor.edu or regular mail at 236 W. Reade Ave., Upland, IN 46989.

9. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature

Date

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

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Appendix C

Researcher Bias

In 2006, the primary researcher was an undergraduate at the institution studied. The primary researcher was a close friend and roommate to one of the students who died in the accident. Of the participants questioned, none were friends of the researcher, although three were acquaintances. Therefore, there is potential for researcher bias.

