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## **A Shift in the Conceptual Understanding of Grief: Using Meaning-Oriented Therapies With Bereaved Clients**

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### **Abstract**

Grief ensues when an important or meaningful attachment bond is damaged or severed in some way. Loss leaves a “hole” which must be filled over time. Meaning-oriented therapies are widely accepted as one approach to restore such holes and aide bereaved individuals in the grieving process. This paper reviews some of the dominant approaches to meaning making. Additionally, meaning making with respect to three distinct losses: loss of spouse, loss of parent, and loss of sibling, are discussed. Clinical implications and recommendations are provided.

It is important for counselors to understand how theories of grief have progressed over time in order to conceptualize and make use of the most current and appropriate theories. The field has seen a shift from more traditional stage theories of grief to more postmodern or constructivist theories (Archer, 2008; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001). The goal in stage theories is to progress through certain stages in order to reach some resolution or endpoint in the grieving process. It is assumed that the bereaved individual will return to some pre-loss level of functioning after completion of their “grief work” (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). While these traditional stage theories have provided a great deal of information to the field, much current research stems from a constructivist paradigm that emphasizes the important role of meaning making throughout the grieving process (Neimeyer, 2001). A philosophical tenet of meaning oriented therapies is that people are driven by a need to find or create a sense of purpose, or meaning, in their lives. Therefore, the distress caused by the loss of a significant other

leads bereaved individuals to begin a process of searching for meaning in the loss (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Multiple understandings of meaning making exist in the field. One common conceptualization of meaning making is rooted in attachment theory (see Bowlby, 1980). When an individual loses a significant other to death, the bereaved individual works to re-define their relationship with the deceased through a process of meaning reconstruction. Attachments formed with primary caregivers in early childhood can impact future responses to loss, such that those with insecure, avoidant, or anxious attachment styles may be more likely to struggle to make sense out of the loss of attachment figures. They may, therefore, be prone to more acute, negative grief reactions (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Another conceptualization of meaning reconstruction is rooted in cognitive, trauma, and coping theories. Traumatic events, such as the loss of a loved one, can disrupt or shatter a person's "assumptive world," or the set of beliefs that an individual holds about the world and about the self. Some losses, perhaps those that are more traumatic, will shatter a person's worldview and begin cognitive processes that leave them searching for meaning (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; see Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Finding some benefit, or something positive to come from the negative experience of loss, is seen as a key tenet for successfully creating meaning within cognitive and trauma theories (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

A third conceptualization of meaning making can be seen in Stroebe and Schut's Dual Process Model (DPM; 2001), which takes into account the impact of finding meaning related to the loss of bereaved individuals. Within this model, a bereaved individual alternates between loss-oriented coping and restoration-oriented coping. Loss-oriented coping involves dealing with many of the intense emotions that occur after separation from a lost attachment figure due to death. Restoration-oriented coping refers to the ways in which bereaved individuals attempt to re-construct and re-engage in their life without the deceased. It includes spiritual and symbolic identity changes that occur as the bereaved individual attempts to re-define themselves and their attachment with the deceased. Meaning making is seen as the task that drives these alternating forces in the DPM (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Stroebe & Schut, 2001).

Neimeyer (2001) suggested that the idea of meaning making in grief was a central construct linking these theories together, thus beginning a shift to a more constructivist framework for understanding grief and bereavement within the field (Neimeyer, 2001). The constructivist framework emphasizes how individuals construct meanings about the self and about the world through relationships and narratives. Meaning making in response to loss can be said to include the ideas of sense making (the process of finding or creating a sense of understanding regarding a loss), benefit finding (the creation of meaning structures that underscore positives resulting from a loss), and identity change (the positive or negative reconstruction of self). Cognitive and trauma theories suggest that those losses which are extremely traumatic or unpredictable may create more problems for bereaved individuals as these losses do not make sense (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Similarly, benefit finding is understood as "positive reappraisal" in cognitive and coping theories. Furthermore, individuals experiencing "posttraumatic growth" express many positive identity changes, including feeling more resilient, having

more awareness about the fragility of life, and having more empathy for others (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

### **Specific Meaning-Oriented Approaches**

Based on these multiple understandings of meaning making, there is much inconsistency in the field regarding how meaning making is defined, conceptualized, and measured (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001). Many researchers, in an attempt to create more consistency in meaning oriented approaches, have created meaning making models or theories for working with bereaved individuals. Three such meaning oriented approaches include Park's (2008) general meaning making model, Neimeyer's (2001)/Neimeyer, Burke, Mackay, and van Dyke Stringer's (2010) meaning reconstruction theory, and Armour's (2006) meaning making grounded in action approach.

Within the general meaning making model proposed by Park (2008), the general beliefs through which individuals view and interpret their world are known as global beliefs. When an event happens, such as the death of a loved one, an individual assigns some meaning to that event (appraised meaning). Based on worldview theory, individuals are said to hold certain assumptions or beliefs about the world that give them a sense of meaning or purpose in their lives (global beliefs). The loss of a loved one can challenge some of these core assumptions and lead bereaved individuals to experience distress, which occurs to the extent that the appraised meaning differs from the individual's global meaning. This can challenge an individual's worldview or personal narrative, which is said to initiate meaning making efforts, as individuals attempt to bring their global and situational meanings into alignment. Meaning making involves "making sense" of or coming to understand the situation in a different way, finding benefit or positives that come from the situation, and changes in identity (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park, 2008). Often, situational meanings must be reconstructed so they fit into an individual's global meaning system (assimilation), and sometimes global meaning systems are changed to account for a situational meaning (accommodation), and other times both occur. Meaning making is said to be adaptive when an individual successfully constructs or re-constructs meanings that reduce the discrepancies between situational and global meaning (Park, 2008).

Neimeyer (2001) proposed a constructivist model of grief therapy which is rooted in contemporary constructivist approaches in psychology that emphasize an individual's desire to create meaning in their life experiences. Humans create a narrative that includes their underlying assumptions and beliefs both about the world and about themselves. The death of a loved one challenges some of these assumptions and beliefs and disrupts an individual's self narrative, moving them to either assimilate the loss experience into their previously held assumptions and beliefs or accommodate to the loss by reconstructing, creating, or expanding their assumptions and beliefs about the world and about themselves in order to incorporate their loss experience into their self narrative (Neimeyer et al., 2010). The process of searching for significance or meaning involves constructing or re-constructing a new orientation in the world, both practically and existentially (Neimeyer, 2001). Failure to integrate the loss into one's self narrative can lead to difficulties in the grieving process, leaving these individuals feeling a sense of

meaninglessness, confusion, and feeling lost as their self narrative no longer makes sense (Neimeyer et al., 2010).

Within this framework, grief is seen as a process, wherein the loss changes the bereaved individual permanently as they begin a search to make sense out of the death. Context, culture, and relationships are taken into account as bereaved individuals attempt to face an often overwhelming sense of meaninglessness that results from the loss of a loved one. Some of the core goals of Neimeyer's (2001) meaning reconstruction theory include: (a) helping the bereaved find or create meaning both in the death of their loved one and in their current life, (b) exploring ongoing emotional attachment or relationship with the deceased and how this connection can serve as positive and healing, (c) attending to explicit meanings discussed by clients as well as implicit meanings observed, (d) encouraging the construction of meaning, along with integration of meaning into a newly constructed life narrative, (e) facilitating the construction of meaning on both a personal and interpersonal level, (f) discussing meaning in terms of individual contexts, as well as broader cultural contexts, and (g) using the narrative approach as a guiding concept to facilitate re-authoring of an individual's story of life after loss.

Armour (2006) proposed a model of meaning reconstruction grounded in action for survivors of traumatic bereavement. In this model, the central tenet of meaning making is the pursuit of what matters now, which is expressed by bereaved individuals through action. Meaning making tasks are often cited as more difficult for survivors of traumatic bereavement because the trauma or violence surrounding the death does not fit in with most people's basic assumptions about the way in which the world operates (Armour, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001).

One of the ways in which traumatically bereaved individuals find meaning is through a process of "letting go," which involves focusing on something that transcends their pain. For some individuals this is done through religion, spirituality, or faith which can lead to an increased sense of control. Another important way in which traumatically bereaved individuals find meaning is by accepting that some of their questions will never be answered. Then, they can begin to accept new realities including a reconstructed view of the self and reconstructed beliefs or assumptions about the world and how it operates. Meanings made regarding basic assumptions about the world may include the idea that death can happen at any time and the world is unpredictable. Individuals will attempt to reintegrate changed understandings of themselves and their worlds in order to create a "new normal." The pursuit of what matters now is an important way in which traumatically bereaved individuals make meaning out of their loss. This method of meaning making is more performance based and involves engaging in their current life through acts that have symbolic meaning, in order to increase their sense of control and power. It is understood that meaning in these cases is often created as a by-product of focusing on what is significant in their life now, perhaps by helping discover resilience, benefits in the loss, and opportunities for self-development. Through these actions, individuals can begin to reconstruct a more coherent self-narrative and a new reality of meaning (Armour, 2006).

## **Meaning Making with Respect to Distinct Loss Experiences**

The emphasis in the constructivist framework is on the *process* of making meaning, yet there are few studies that examine what these complicated processes might look like or how they might change over time for different bereaved populations. Based on this assumption, three bereaved populations: bereaved spouses, bereaved parents, and bereaved siblings, will be examined. The notion of meaning making with respect to each of these distinct losses will be discussed.

### **Loss of Spouse**

While there appears to be support for the idea that many individuals engage in a search for meaning after the death of a spouse, much of the research conducted in this area measures outcomes of ability to make positive meaning after the loss, rather than the complicated processes thought to be involved in meaning making activities. Meaning or meaning making with regard to loss is also a difficult concept that is tricky to operationalize. Thus, it is often defined differently by various researchers. There is some support that the ability to find some meaning (as defined by making sense of the loss), can be a positive coping strategy used by older bereaved spouses which can help reduce feelings of anger after a loss. Additionally, social supports after the loss of a spouse have been found to facilitate the meaning making process (Kim, 2009). Fry (2001) also found that existential factors (defined as finding meaning, religion, or spirituality), were strong predictors of well-being following spousal loss in later life.

Danforth and Glass (2001) conducted a qualitative study of middle aged bereaved widows in an attempt to examine their meaning making processes. Rather than simply asking, “What sense have you made from your loss?” these authors realized that meaning construction is something done on both an intra- and inter- personal level, including through dialogue with the interviewer. Interview questions were guided by a reflective process and the authors attempted to explore assumptions widows held that shaped their view of the death, how these assumptions changed during and after the loss, and new insights of the bereaved which may be reflected in behaviors, attitudes, or feelings. The authors concluded that the loss of a spouse triggered a desire to make meaning of the experience.

The authors identified meaning making themes of bereaved spouses, including emotional dissonance, which was often used by bereaved widows early in the loss experience to avoid the reality of the death. It was characterized by feeling intensely emotional, detached, and disorienting. These feelings of instability led to a continued need to make sense of everything and re-gain some control. Thus began exploration of assumptions about themselves and their world, and feeling as if their hopes and plans for their future could no longer be a reality. By reflecting more on their current life circumstances, bereaved widows were able to begin challenging some of their previously held assumptions. Identifying themselves as survivors was seen as a “turning point” that included accepting the reality of the death and examining some of the ways in which they have been able to go on living. Changes in self understanding led to meaning making reflected in meaningful decision making. It appeared that modes of meaning making that occurred over time eventually became internalized and the widows reported having meaningful changes in perspective. Meaning making was a process of rebuilding a life

without their spouse and finding ways to make the most out of their present life. New perspectives allowed the widows to view experiences through a lens of new meaning. Not all of the women in the study were able to immediately articulate a new perspective. Rather, it was through reflective processes and dialogue that the women discovered a process of meaning making (Danforth & Glass, 2001).

Overall, it seems that counselors working with bereaved spouses should explore the important existential idea of meaning. It appears that the loss of a spouse spurs many bereaved individuals to begin a search to try and make sense of the loss event. Widows and widowers think more about meaning and purpose in life after their loss, and the ability to find some new meaning appears to be beneficial to bereaved spouses with regard to reducing anger, increasing well-being, and leading to more meaningful changes in perspective that allow focus on their current life. It seems that ability to find some positive meaning to come from the loss has the potential to enhance well-being of bereaved spouses and aid in coping with such a tragic loss. Connecting bereaved spouses through bereavement support groups might be an effective way to increase social support following loss and therefore help in the meaning making process (Danforth & Glass, 2001; Fry, 2001; Kim, 2009).

### **Loss of Child**

Searching for meaning appears to be a central issue in parental bereavement. The tragic and untimely loss of a child is thought to create an inability for bereaved parents to fit the death experience into their pre-existing worldview. This often leads to an intense search to understand the loss and also larger existential issues such as the purpose of life and death. Inability to find meaning and, therefore, effectively integrate the loss into one's view of the world is said to lead to more intense and lasting symptoms of grief for bereaved parents or more symptoms of complicated grief. Complicated grief is a state of grieving in which grief reactions are intense, enduring, and interfere with the ability to function in daily life. It involves lasting feelings of separation distress, a sense of meaninglessness, difficulty accepting the loss, and difficulties moving on in life (Keesee, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2008; Lichtenthal, Currier, Neimeyer, Keesee, 2010).

In exploring the role of meaning making among bereaved parents, the study done by Lichtenthal et al. (2010) supports the idea that ability to make meaning (as defined by sense making and benefit finding) is related to experiencing less intense symptoms of grief and less symptoms of complicated grief. Lichtenthal et al. conducted a mixed methods study with bereaved parents in order to identify the role of meaning making as it relates to symptoms of complicated grief. While a majority of bereaved parents in this study (44.9%) expressed that they were not able to make any sense out of the loss of their child, the remaining bereaved parents identified at least one way in which they made meaning out of the loss.

Based on the study of bereaved parents, some of the common ways bereaved parents made meaning after the death of a child were through explanations that involve God, religion, or spirituality, feeling there is an afterlife and having a sense they will ultimately be reunited with deceased child, and realizing that life is short and death is inevitable (Lichtenthal et al., 2010). When asked about finding some benefit to come from the loss, many bereaved parents (20.5%) again stated they found no benefits to come from the death. The remaining parents were able to identify at least one positive to

come from the loss. Some of the most commonly identified benefits include helping others who have experienced loss, a sense of increased compassion or empathy, and a greater appreciation of life. Overall, the findings showed that bereaved parents who explicitly stated they were not able to make any meaning out of the loss were four times more likely than those who were able to make some meaning to meet criteria for complicated grief (Lichtenthal et al., 2010).

Keese et al. (2008) also conducted a study on the ability of bereaved parents to find meaning after the loss of a child. Meaning making ability in this study was defined as sense making (understanding the loss) and benefit finding (finding some positive to stem from the loss). Based on previous literature, the authors understood that certain variables contributed more to symptoms of complicated grief, including relationship to deceased, violence or trauma involved in death, and the length of time since loss. The authors found that even when these variables were controlled for, inability or failure to make sense of the loss predicted increased grief severity in bereaved parents, whereas those who reported they were able to make some sense out of the loss reported less symptoms of complicated grief. Bereaved parents who attempted or struggled to make meaning after the loss of their child, but failed to do so, seemed to be particularly at risk for experiencing symptoms that met criteria for complicated grief.

These findings support the idea that ability to make meaning after the loss can be beneficial for bereaved parents; perhaps helping bereaved individuals cope through meaning making will help them experience less intense and lasting symptoms of grief. Additionally, these studies highlight the need to assess for risk factors of complicated grief reactions and aid bereaved individuals in a search for meaning (Keese et al., 2008; Lichtenthal et al., 2010). However, a better understanding of the processes that underlie meaning making in bereaved parents would be helpful.

Wheeler (2001) conducted a study using qualitative methodologies to attempt to get a better understanding about parental meaning making after the death of a child. In this study, meaning making was defined as a “search for cognitive mastery,” which includes a search for understanding, sense-making, and coherence, and a “search for renewed purpose,” which includes finding a new sense of purpose in current life and new life goals/plans after the loss (p. 52). The search for cognitive mastery stems from the cognitive perspective for coping with traumatic life events. It involves a search to attempt to answer the “how” and “why” questions. The authors found that this search often leads bereaved parents to want details surrounding the death, including an understanding of the sequence of events leading to the death. Attempting to answer “why” questions can be more difficult and often leads to a deeper philosophical or spiritual search about the meaning of life and death. The search for renewed purpose stems from an existential perspective for coping with traumatic life events where a sense of purpose and plans for the future are shattered after the death. This search often involves attempting to answer the “what now” questions. It leads bereaved parents to focus on how they can live their life after the loss of their child.

Some authors believe that the death of a child always involves traumatic bereavement, and therefore they highlight the importance for counselors to assess trauma symptoms that are present after the loss. Some suggest addressing trauma work (if necessary) before working on grief and loss issues (Wheeler, 2001). Wheeler (2001) suggested that a search for new meaning after an existential crisis such as death makes

sense, but proposed that a feature of this search unique to bereaved parents lies in the meaning made in the life and death of the child. Finding meaning through the child's life and/or death helps bereaved parents find a renewed purpose for their own life. This meaning assists bereaved parents in integrating the child's story into their ongoing life.

Overall, it appears that meaning making is an important, if not integral, process for bereaved parents in coping with the loss of a child. Meaning making with bereaved parents involves a process of understanding the loss and accepting the death. Meaning making also involves finding meaning in current life. Often, this involves integrating the child's story into their current life in positive ways that allow bereaved parents to reinvest in life. Thus, interventions that allow bereaved parents to tell their stories, gain a better understanding and acceptance of the loss, and reconstruct their own life narratives to better integrate the loss into their lives may be the most beneficial in aiding in the meaning making process (Keesee et al., 2008; Litchenthal et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2001).

### **Loss of Sibling**

Less research has been done regarding meaning making processes within the bereaved sibling population. Bereaved siblings are often called "forgotten mourners" in research conducted on this population. Sibling loss can be especially difficult as some individuals do not acknowledge the significance of the loss for surviving siblings. Also, many times, surviving siblings are overwhelmed by their parents' intense grief and may hide their own grief or avoid any mention of the deceased in an attempt to protect their parents. However, research has been done that supports the idea that bereaved siblings' ability to make meaning after the loss of a brother or sister can be beneficial in coping with this difficult loss (Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Charles & Charles, 2006; Forward & Garlie, 2003; Packman, Horsley, Davies, & Kramer, 2006).

Packman et al. (2006) discussed the importance of maintaining a continuing bond, or continued emotional relationship with the deceased sibling. These authors argued that an ongoing relationship (though changed) can help bereaved siblings with the process of accepting their brother or sister's death and finding a sense of meaning in their loss. By forming a new relationship with the deceased siblings, siblings can begin the process of redefining their life after loss or finding a new sense of purpose in their life.

A study done by Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) further suggested that the cognitive capacity during the adolescent stage of development serves a unique function and perhaps expands the ability of these bereaved siblings to challenge previously held beliefs and assumptions and begin a search for new meaning after the death of their sibling. Meaning in this study is labeled spirituality, which is defined as "the human quest to understand life's meaning" (p. 530). These authors argued that clinicians must seek to understand grief in the context of normative developmental stages. They argued that while younger kids ask more concrete questions and view death as an event, adolescents begin to ask more abstract questions and view death as more of a process. As bereaved adolescent siblings begin to think more abstractly, they are able to think more about ideas and thus consider the meaning of life and death. Losing a sibling at this age of egocentric thinking can also challenge an adolescent's view that death is something that happens to others, not them, thus leading them to reconsider their views on death and think more about their own mortality.

Findings from the qualitative study based on interviews with bereaved adolescent siblings suggested that surviving siblings used multiple meaning making strategies in their grieving process in an attempt to understand the meaning of life (Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999). Some of the meaning making strategies utilized by bereaved siblings included a changed perspective of self. Many siblings described feeling more mature after the loss and experiencing different ways of thinking about things. Bereaved siblings also attempted to make meaning after the loss through a changed perspective of others and a changed perspective of the sibling relationship. Bereaved siblings reported increased valuing of important others and a realization of the fragility of life. Additionally, there was the idea that although the deceased sibling was gone physically, they were still “present” and felt an ongoing bond. Bereaved siblings also attempted to make sense after the loss by renegotiating perspectives of a higher power. While some were angry at God and turned away from spirituality or religion, others reported a stronger faith in God. Bereaved siblings also reported new ways of thinking about and understanding life and death. There was a realization that much seems trivial compared to death and many reported attempts to not take things for granted. Bereaved siblings reported that they were often forced to think about death in ways they never had before. They began thinking more about their own mortality and the mortality of others, and they began to think more about life after death.

Forward and Garlie (2003) conducted a qualitative, grounded theory study based on multiple interviews with six siblings who lost a brother suddenly during adolescence in an attempt to better understand the meaning making processes of bereaved siblings. They proposed a basic model of meaning making in sibling loss that is fluid and cyclical. Their research sheds light on the idea that bereaved siblings may employ differential methods of meaning making unique to the sibling population. Findings support a guiding desire for adolescents to search for meaning after the death of their sibling.

The model proposed by Forward and Garlie (2003) is characterized by stages that bereaved siblings progress through in a cyclical way. Finding out about the death marked the beginning of the search for meaning. During this stage, adolescents described feeling sadness, shock, disbelief, and loneliness. The next stage was avoiding reality, where bereaved siblings described feeling numb as if they were in a fog. Others avoided reality by keeping busy with school or other routine activities. Facing reality is the next stage and is described as “the essence of their grief and the focal point in their search for new meaning” (Forward & Garlie, 2003, p. 35). During this stage, siblings worked through their pain by talking to others who understood (peers who had experienced loss), protecting their parents from their pain, or methods of escape, such as drugs. Siblings reported that while pain occurred less often over time, it was still as intense.

Bereaved siblings reported feeling an overwhelming sense of loneliness. They felt as if no one could understand their unique grief and the intensity of their pain. One method of meaning making used often by siblings in this phase is maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased and describing the loss in terms of spiritual beliefs. This stage was also characterized by feelings of being different and concerns about not fitting in. Bereaved siblings experienced a paradox whereby they felt changed as a result of losing their sibling, but they also had a desire to be and appear “normal.” Stage four involves a turning point for the siblings. For some this was a specific moment in time and for others it was just a general feeling of having more good days than bad. For most,

these were not identified as turning points until retrospectively reflecting on their process. The turning point phase led to one of two paths for the siblings: ending the search for meaning or finding new meaning. Two siblings discussed ending the search and “giving up.” These siblings had strong suicidal thoughts and wished to die in order to end their intense pain and suffering (these siblings did receive additional help). The meaning for the siblings often included the idea that the loss and the pain were not less significant, but rather “they had found how to continue living within the loss” (Forward & Garlie, 2003, p. 41). New meaning in this stage was characterized by accepting the reality of the loss, maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased to keep their memory alive, and redefining self based on experiences and meaning making since the loss. Bereaved siblings were often able to redefine themselves in positive ways, such as feeling more mature, living each day to the fullest, and appreciating life and family more.

Overall, it appears that the death of a sibling can serve as a catalyst to begin a search for meaning making, sense making, or understanding. Bereaved siblings feel a need to redefine themselves after a brother or sister dies. They must redefine not only their roles, but also their identities which are often so intertwined with being a brother or sister. It appears that making meaning after the death of a brother or sister is an important process whereby bereaved siblings can begin to accept the reality of the loss, renegotiate their perspective of the sibling relationship, and redefine themselves. This often leads bereaved siblings to have a new perspective about the meaning of life and death (Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Forward & Garlie, 2003; Packman et al., 2006).

### **Clinical Implications**

The search for meaning after the death of a loved one seems to be a natural process in which many bereaved individuals engage as they attempt to understand and somehow make sense out of the tragic loss. There is evidence that many bereaved individuals engage in the process of meaning making as they ask and attempt to answer various questions, including the “why’s,” “how’s,” and “what’s” related to the death. Often, these questions lead bereaved individuals into a deeper search about the meaning of life and death. Evidence supports the idea that the ability to make meaning after a loss is a positive coping strategy that can reduce symptoms of anger, lead to increased well-being, and lead to less symptoms of complicated grief. Based on this evidence, counselors and other mental health practitioners would benefit from a better understanding of how to work most effectively with bereaved individuals and how to aid them in meaning making after loss.

In their work with bereaved clients, counselors can utilize previous meaning making theories presented in this paper. Meaning oriented approaches that focus on how bereaved individuals must either work to fit the loss into a pre-existing worldview or change their worldview, including some beliefs, values, and assumptions, in order to integrate the loss experience into their life. Interventions that allow bereaved individuals to tell their stories and adjust and reconstruct their life narrative may be most beneficial.

More specifically, counselors can assist clients in accepting the reality of the death of their loved one. Counselors can emphasize a changed relationship with the deceased and aid bereaved clients in exploring how an ongoing emotional or spiritual relationship with the deceased can be positive and healing. Counselors can also help

bereaved individuals explore meaning in the deceased person's life. This can be done by creating a place wherein the bereaved individual can share the story of their loved one, the gifts their loved one has given to them and others, and the legacy left behind by their loved one.

Counselors can help bereaved clients find meaning in the loss, but also in finding meaning in their current life. One way to do this is by exploring what matters now to the bereaved individual. It is important to explore what gives significance and meaning in their current life, while honoring how the loss of their loved one has impacted their life story. It is important for counselors to listen to meaning stated by clients, but it is also beneficial for counselors to share impressions and observations of implicit meanings throughout work with the client.

Counselors should explore grief and how meaning is constructed individually by the client. However, counselors must also explore how meaning is constructed and reconstructed on an interpersonal level with family, friends, other bereaved individuals, etc. Culture and context must be taken into account as they impact the meaning making processes of bereaved clients. Counselors must work with bereaved clients in order to find ways to integrate new meanings and changed perspectives into their life narrative.

### **Conclusions**

In general, there are several studies that support meaning making theories but there are not many studies that highlight meaning making processes and show how these might differ depending on who the bereaved individual lost. Based on previous literature in the field, the type and closeness of the relationship between the bereaved and deceased is said to greatly impact the grieving process (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). In order to develop effective meaning making interventions geared toward certain bereaved populations it is important for us to explore and understand which aspects of the meaning making process are unique to/most important for certain groups and are most helpful in moving them toward experiencing less acute, intense symptoms of grief and more ability to engage in their current life in meaningful ways. In order to do this, we must continue to explore the meaning making processes used in different bereaved populations (bereaved spouses, bereaved parents, bereaved siblings, etc.). Qualitative research methods appear to have relevance to this type of work as more in-depth studies can contribute to the field by illuminating how meaning making occurs for certain bereaved groups.

In addition, if the goal of meaning making measures is to reduce symptoms of complicated grief or intense distress, it would be most useful to further examine the role of meaning making processes with those populations that are considered more "at risk," which would include those who have experienced traumatic bereavement (sudden, unexpected, or traumatic death), individuals with a history of negative attachment style, untimeliness of the death, and individuals who lose an "identity defining relationship" (Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000). Perhaps it is these distinctions that are more indicative of the usefulness of meaning oriented approaches versus usefulness based on type of loss. Much research also supports the idea that it is these individuals who will have the most trouble making meaning out of the loss and would therefore benefit most from therapeutic interventions aimed at assisting clients in their search for meaning.

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*Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: [http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS\\_Home.htm](http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm)*