

Surviving Bereavement

The experience of adapting following exposure
to difficult bereavement

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Counselling (Hons)
of the University of New England.

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September 2007

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree of qualification.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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2007

Abstract

A minor, yet substantial proportion of people exposed to the death of a significant other, experience marked distress which does not abate over time, constituting a risk to emotional and physical health. Most research examining adaptation to bereavement has utilised quantitative research designs that measure levels of distress over time. Little is known about how those who do suffer a difficult grief response begin to adapt to bereavement. Less is known about how they experience their continuing life, including how their relationship with the person who has died changes as the bereaved adapt and accommodate the loss. Additionally most research on adaptation to bereavement has been limited to conjugal bereavement.

This project explores and examines the experiences of people who have been exposed to the death of a significant other. A qualitative approach, utilising narrative methods in the collection and analysis of the data obtained from in-depth interviews, has been used. Purposive sampling has been used to target those who had suffered a difficult response to the loss, but who then improved following grief counselling. Eight participants who had sustained the loss of a spouse, a parent or child, were interviewed, using in-depth interviews where the participants were invited to tell their story.

Findings from the study suggest that the need to maintain or distance the connections between the deceased and bereaved are linked to the qualities and place of the relationship in the bereaved's life prior to the death. Other findings include the central place of loneliness in the bereaved's experience of life following the death of the other and the influential nature of social connections in the bereaved's experiencing of

“difficult grief” and adaptation to bereavement. Loneliness has emerged as a pervasive theme in this study and has the potential to complicate the bereaved’s adaptation to bereavement.

The study shows that adapting to bereavement involves processing ties to self, the deceased and significant others in the bereaved’s ongoing life. Beneficial counselling experiences are those that support the bereaved in (re)processing ties in these three areas of relationship which included a) the self, b) the deceased and c) significant others in the bereaved’s interpersonal context.

Successful counselling interventions also provide bereaved survivors opportunities to express their grief/pain authentically, whilst exploring their complex meanings around the loss. Implications for therapeutic practice with the bereaved include the need for therapists to be able to identify and facilitate the bereaved’s issues of “self” and “identity” that were challenged through exposure to bereavement. In this respect, therapists need to be open to variations around the relinquishing or maintaining of ties with the deceased. This study also confirms that the therapeutic relationship is crucial to a positive outcome. In counselling the therapist temporarily joins the bereaved’s interpersonal context forming a support which compensates for empathic failure in other relationships.

Acknowledgments

In the acknowledgment section of a thesis it is fitting for the candidate to kindly thank their supervisors for their support, valuable feedback and assistance along the research journey. Sometimes the task of thanking one's supervisors is left until the latter part of the acknowledgment section. However, I would like to especially thank my supervisors: Associate Professor Rafat Hussain and Dr Frances Mackay for their seemingly unending patience along a precarious journey that has taken me through stretches of ill-health, several near-bereavement experiences involving significant others in my own interpersonal world and disruptions through work place emergencies etc. I will always be grateful for their unfailing encouragement, support and guidance along the trajectory of this research project. I would also like to thank Professor Margot Schofield for her supervision and encouragement during the earlier parts of this research journey. I have been grateful for the expertise offered by each supervisor and their contribution to my development.

I would like to thank each of the participants for their generous gift of becoming involved in this research project. Each gave something of themselves through telling their story, allowing access to their private world following exposure to bereavement. Without their contribution there would be no project. My heartfelt thanks and gratitude to all of them.

I would like to thank my family and friends for their kind support. Mum, you have encouraged and believed in me, helping me with the practical tasks of ensuring I was not too disheveled as I left the house. I have also appreciated the support I have received from Tonya, Mandy and Jenny and Annalisa for their patience when phone calls were not promptly returned and their unfailing encouragement. Thank you also to my wonderful son Connor, who has been generous, kind and understanding, I look forward to spending more “quantity” time with you, in the pursuit of fun, karate and the savoring of good food.

Finally, I would like to thank my clinical mentor, friend, teacher and father, Murray Davis who has spent innumerable hours listening to my ideas, complaints and celebrations as he accompanied me through my journey into research.

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