

Meaning in Bereavement

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Abstract

Viewing suffering following the death of a loved one from a meaning systems perspective, this chapter reviews research that links secular and spiritual struggles to find meaning in loss to prolonged and preoccupying grief, and successful sense making and benefit finding to human resilience. Across a range of bereaved groups (e.g., young adults, older adults, parents, African American survivors of a loved one's homicide), complicated grief has been associated with or prospectively predicted by an inability to find meaning in the loss and in one's life in its aftermath. The chapter goes on to review quantitative and qualitative measures of integration of the loss into one's meaning system and coding procedures for identifying specific meanings made of this unwelcome life transition. The intent of such work is to pave the way for more nuanced research on the global suffering engendered by bereavement and on the effectiveness of interventions to ameliorate it.

Keywords

Bereavement
Grief
Meaning making
Sense making
Benefit finding
Spiritual struggle

9.1. Introduction

If suffering is universal, so too is one of its most profound causes: death and loss as an ineluctable reality of the human condition. When we pause to think of it—as we rarely choose to do—we recognize that every person, every project, every place, and every possession we hold dear will one day be lost to us (at least in an earthly sense). Indeed, most readers of this volume, whatever their culture or geography, will already have already lost many and much. How we live with this intimate knowledge of impermanence shapes who we become, as individuals, families, communities, and nations.

Working as a psychologist engaged with loss and transition in both research and applied contexts, my interest in this phenomenon is one part theoretical, one part practical. In both domains I have found that viewing human suffering through the lens of the *meaning systems* people use to orient to loss is clarifying. This is true whether I am focused on the molar secular and religious discourses with which different cultures and traditions shroud the human encounter with death or concentrated on the more molecular meanings individuals place on the intimate losses of family members.

In a similar vein, discussing the psychology **and of** spirituality, Paloutzian and Park write:

religion should be conceived in terms of religious meaning systems, that is, as a subset of meaning systems in general. Meaning systems, as we understand them psychologically, comprise mental processes that function together to enable a person... to live consciously and nonconsciously with a sense of relative continuity, evaluate incoming information relative to his or her guidelines, and regulate beliefs, affects and actions accordingly. (2013: 6–7)

Nowhere are such meaning systems—whether secular or spiritual—more relevant than in conferring significance **in** the end of life and offering perspective, understanding, and consolation to survivors.

Working within the specific field of bereavement studies, my colleagues **and I** find this perspective both congenial and comprehensive, comfortably conjoining with the constructivist conceptualization (Kelly 1955; Neimeyer 2009) that undergirds our research. In the present chapter, I hope to illustrate the utility of a meaning systems perspective in addressing the effort to (re)establish meaning in the wake of the loss of a loved one, with special attention to the significant struggles that arise for some mourners. Briefly reviewing our longstanding program of research on the quest for meaning in loss, I hope to illustrate its relevance to understanding and even ameliorating human suffering, touching not only on our chief findings to date, but also on several new methods we hope will prove useful to other researchers.

9.2. Loss and the Quest for Meaning

Framing our study of secular and spiritual sense making in the wake of loss is a *meaning reconstruction* model of bereavement (Neimeyer 2001, 2006). In this perspective, a central feature of grieving is *the attempt to reaffirm or reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss* (Neimeyer 2002). In distinction from highly “cognitive” theories in psychology, such meanings are understood here in terms of the sometimes explicit but often implicit ways that we human beings seek “replicative themes” (Kelly 1955), discerning and imposing regularity and significance on the unfolding patterns of our lives (Neimeyer 2000). When these lives are relatively unproblematic, the prereflective meaning and coherence of experience go largely unnoticed; this forms a tacit ground for an orderly perception of the world and our actions within it (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

But there are times when the conscious need to find meaning in experience stubbornly or even agonizingly asserts itself. Deeply unwelcome life transitions such as the death of a beloved other, especially under tragic circumstances, are among these moments when the taken-for-granted coherence of life is disrupted. The simplest routines of daily living require painful review and revision, as when we no longer need to wake to nurse a baby that has died, or in our widowhood, go to bed alone. These and a hundred other violations of the “micro-narratives” of our lives can ultimately vitiate our capacity to make sense of the larger “macro-narrative” of loss and our existence in its wake. The disjuncture launches a search for meaning that may find few simple answers (Neimeyer 2004, 2011).

In summarizing our research program on grief and the quest for meaning, I should acknowledge at the outset that I will adopt primarily a clinical psychological approach in view of my active concern with the lives of those challenged and changed by tragic transition. I recognize—and indeed demonstrate—that many mourners negotiate their losses with surprising resilience, such that even in their bereavement, the meaning of life (and death) remains secure and unproblematic (Bonanno 2004; Bonanno et al. 2004). When it does not, however, grief can be complicated by a profound struggle to integrate loss in both secular and spiritual terms, sometimes to a point that professional assistance is warranted (Neimeyer 2012). This focus on life vitiating losses of a sort that often leads people to seek psychotherapy situates our work at a mid-level of Paloutzian and Park’s (2013) multi-level model of meaning systems (MS). It is concerned primarily with the personal

resources (and vulnerabilities) that individuals bring to bereavement, though these of course both presuppose basic neurological processes (Gundel et al. 2003) and are in turn nested within broader family interactions (Hooghe and Neimeyer 2012) and social/cultural structures (Neimeyer et al. 2013) involved in processing and integrating the loss.

One of the clearest and best researched implications of the MS model concerns just interface where abiding meanings meet with apparent challenge and invalidation. As Park notes:

[W]hen individuals encounter potentially stressful or traumatic events, they assign a meaning to them... and trauma is thought to occur when appraised meanings “shatter” or violate aspects of one’s global meaning system. (2013: 360)

The death of a loved one certainly ranks high on the list of potentially traumatic events, and can carry serious consequences for survivors at the levels of both symptomatology and life significance. The struggles that can attend bereavement are painfully apparent in our research on African Americans who have lost a loved one to homicide. Studying a group of 54 survivors on average less than 2 years from the death, we discovered that more than half struggled with intensely complicated grief marked by preoccupation with the death, the sense that a part of *themselves* had died, and an inability to function in the spheres of family, work, and the social world. Nearly as many suffered clinically significant depression, and almost  20% met criteria for a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), whether or not they were present when their loved one was killed. Importantly, the majority contended with more than one of these syndromes; nearly all of those with PTSD, for example, also tested positive for depression and complicated grief. However, it is worth noting that even in the wake of this horrific loss, a resilient 37% somehow emerged with none of these diagnoses (McDevitt-Murphy et al. 2012).

What role does the search for meaning play in accommodation to such horrific loss? Evidence from our research on general meaning making suggests that the answer is “a great deal.” For example, one study of over 1,000 ethnically diverse young adults confirmed the significantly greater complication that followed the shattering impact of violent death (by homicide, suicide, or fatal accident) than of natural death losses, even when the latter were sudden and unanticipated. Consistent with our rationale, however, meaning making emerged as an explanatory mechanism for the difference in outcome following these forms of loss, as an inability to make sense of the loss functioned as a nearly perfect mediator of this relationship (Currier et al. 2006). Even in the case of the loss of a partner to natural causes in late life, an anguished search for meaning that extended 6 or more months prospectively predicted exacerbated grief and depression several months or years later (Coleman and Neimeyer 2010).

Fortunately, whether in the context of formal psychotherapy or simply in the course of living, most survivors ultimately accommodate the unwelcome transitions introduced by many kinds of losses (Currier et al. 2008; Neimeyer and Currier 2009). Here too, current research from a meaning-based perspective is beginning to illuminate some of the underlying processes in accommodation. For example, a study of bereaved parents demonstrates that the ability to make sense of the loss is a potent predictor of grief symptomatology, accounting for five times the variance in normative grief symptoms (e.g., missing the loved one, crying) and 15 times the variance in complicated grief responses (e.g., feeling that the future is bleached of purpose, being unable to function in one’s work) as other factors, such as the passage of time or whether the death was violent or natural (Keese et al. 2008).

Particular patterns of meaning making triggered by different causes of death (e.g., violent vs. natural) also have been reported (Lichtenthal et al. 2013). The salutary effect of sense making is further supported in longitudinal research on older widows and widowers; those who are better able to find significance in the loss by 6 months report higher levels of positive emotion and wellbeing as much as 4 years into the future (Coleman and Neimeyer 2010). These and several other studies by our group (see Neimeyer and Sands

2011 , for review) comport with Park's argument that

the meaning making process helps people reduce their sense of discrepancy between appraised and global meanings and restore a sense that the world is comprehensible and that their lives are worthwhile. (2013 : 360)

9.3. Religion and Meaning Making in the Context of Loss

In many communities and cultures, as Park (2013) also recognizes, meaning making in the wake of loss naturally involves recourse to religious and spiritual beliefs. These provide a sense of divine purpose in or consolation for the death of a loved one. This was certainly the case in our sample of ~~American~~ parents struggling with the death of a child. Beyond the general relation between sense making~~99~~ and improved adjustment, our systematic coding of parents' narrative responses suggested patterns of meaning that were especially associated with better outcomes, including viewing the death as congruent with God's will, endorsing the prospect for reunion in an afterlife, and the (potentially more secular) belief that the child was no longer suffering. Likewise, better accommodation of the loss was reported by parents who found unsought spiritual benefits in the tragedy (e.g., deepened faith, the prospect of reunion in an afterlife), who realigned life priorities, or who dedicated themselves to needed lifestyle changes (Lichtenthal et al. 2010).

When such meaning making proves elusive, evidence suggests the impact can be severe in terms of survivors' spiritual and psychological wellbeing. For a substantial subset of the predominantly Christian, African American homicide survivors we studied, the murder of their loved one not only ushered in depression, PTSD, and complicated grief, but it also gave rise to *complicated spiritual grief*, understood as an intense form of spiritual struggle precipitated by the death. When it occurred, complicated spiritual grief often suggested a disruption in the mourner's relationship to God, as illustrated by the comments of one 69-year-old woman grieving her grandson's murder:

I felt that God had allowed the capriciousness of life to invade our world. I wondered aloud if our entire family and our belief system were merely a cosmic joke. I questioned why God permitted such a painful and horrendous act when he had the power to stop it.

For others, the complication arose from changed relationships with fellow church members. Another 59-year-old woman spoke of the aftermath of her husband's homicide:

I thought I could rely on my church community, but they grew tired of trying to console me and took advantage of my vulnerability. They said they would be there for me, but I didn't know there would be a time limit.

For many survivors, the two forms of struggle were conjoined, becoming a constellation of "negative religious coping" (Koenig et al. 1998) that compounded the literal loss with a symbolic and social one. We have subsequently documented the association between such spiritual struggle and poor grief outcomes in ethnically diverse, but predominantly Christian, samples grieving a variety of natural and violent deaths (Burke and Neimeyer 2014).

Longitudinal study of the relation between attempts at religious meaning making and distress has also begun to suggest some interesting overlap. For example, tracing the adaptation of the African American homicide survivors across 6 months, we discovered that complicated grief at Time 1 prospectively predicted complicated *spiritual* grief at Time 2, suggesting that the violent sundering of attachment associated with this horrific loss also undermined a sense of meaning and relationship with God and the spiritual community in the months that followed. Interestingly, the reverse was not the case. Spiritual struggle earlier in bereavement did not portend later complicated grief. Nor, to our surprise, was "positive religious coping" in the form of

grounding oneself in one's beliefs or turning to God or coreligionists for consolation predictive of less complicated grief (Burke et al. 2011), a finding we have replicated in other samples (Burke and Neimeyer 2014). Further study has demonstrated that neither Time 1 depression nor PTSD forecasts spiritual struggles at Time 2; instead, intense grief uniquely seemed to provide the instigating context for such crisis (Neimeyer and Burke 2011).

The absence of a clear link between positive religious coping and attenuated grief notwithstanding, a strong spiritual orientation may nonetheless predispose to positive bereavement outcomes in another sense: those who self-identify as religious and who practice their tradition tend to report greater post-loss growth in our studies, as do those who mourn a violent death as opposed to a natural death (Currier et al. 2012). Thus, while religiousness might not mitigate the pain of loss, it may nevertheless set the stage for greater growth through the experience.

9.4. Methodological Contributions

If research is to do more than document the existence of global suffering, and even hope to illuminate the mechanisms that exacerbate or ameliorate suffering, then appropriate methods are required to render these visible and open to analysis. From a psychological standpoint, the concept of meaning systems holds promise, but only if psychometrically valid and existentially relevant methods are devised to do so. Here, I summarize some of our own attempts to construct such methods, several of which are currently being translated to permit their application and adaptation to other cultural settings.

Park and Paloutzian (2013), too, argue for a “multilevel methodology,” rightly recognizing that methodologically distinctive studies—such as those using quantitative questionnaires, qualitative interviews, and experimental research—when converging on similar conclusions, contribute to the identification of more robust principles than do those relying on a single methodological base. In keeping with this principle, and to augment the fairly narrow range of measures currently available to advance the MS research agenda in bereavement studies, we have constructed a number of quantitative and qualitative assessments of relevant constructs to which I will briefly orient the reader.

9.4.1. Assessing General Meaning Systems

Because my colleagues and I have been interested in the role of meaning systems in general in helping people accommodate unwelcome life transitions and losses, we have developed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the assessment of meaning amenable to both secular and spiritual contexts.

9.4.2. Inventory of Stressful Life Experiences Scale

One such measure is the 16-item *Inventory of Stressful Life Experiences Scale*, or ISLES (Holland et al. 2010). This is an easy-to-use, multidimensional, and well-validated measure of the meaning made after a stressful life event. In two samples of young Americans—178 who experienced a variety of stressors and 150 who experienced a recent bereavement—ISLES scores were shown to have strong internal consistency and, among a subsample of participants, to exhibit moderate test–retest reliability. In both samples, support was also found for a 2-factor structure, with one factor assessing one's sense of *Footing in the World* (e.g., “This event made me feel less purposeful”) and a second measuring the *Comprehensibility* of the event (e.g., “I am perplexed by what happened”). Convergent validity analyses revealed that ISLES scores are also strongly associated with other theoretically related measures and with mental and physical health outcomes, offering support for the potential utility of this measure in research and clinical settings. Subsequent research on a large sample of 741 bereaved adults confirmed the factor structure of the scale in both its original and in an

abbreviated 6-item form and demonstrated the incremental validity of both formats in predicting health and mental health outcomes even after such factors as demographics, circumstances of the death, and prolonged grief symptoms were taken into account (Holland et al. 2014).

9.4.3. Meaning in Loss Codebook

A complementary approach to meaning assessment is grounded in the qualitative analysis of the narrative responses of a diverse sample of 162 mourners. The study concerned the survivors' attempts to make sense of loss and find some compensatory benefit in the experience. The result was the development of the *Meaning in Loss Codebook*, or MLC (Gillies et al. 2014), a reliable and comprehensive coding system for analyzing meanings made in the wake of the death of a loved one. The MLC encompasses 30 specific categories of meaning made, demonstrating excellent reliability and comprising both negative (e.g., *Lack of Understanding, Regret*) and positive (e.g., *Compassion, Moving On*) themes that arise. The MLC could thus prove useful in ethnographic or laboratory research on meaning making as expressed in interviews in the wake of political violence or natural disaster, analysis of naturalistic first-person writing about bereavement experiences in grief diaries and blogs, communal accounts of shared losses, and clinical assessment of meanings made in the course of bereavement support or professional intervention. A further advantage of such a narrative coding system is that it does not require literacy (though, like other methods described in this paper, the MLC would require translation and probable adaptation to capture the nuances of meaning-making in different cultural settings).

9.4.4. Assessing Spiritual Struggle

Although we have found general measures of religious coping (Hill and Pargament 2008) useful in studying the spiritual struggle that often follows the death of a loved one, we have ultimately found it valuable to develop a measure specifically validated for use with bereaved populations. The result is the *Inventory of Complicated Spiritual Grief* or ICSG (Burke this reference should be Burke et al., 2014 a et al. 2014a , b). With two diverse samples of bereaved adult Christians (total = 304), we found that the ICSG had strong internal consistency and high test-retest reliability for its constituent subscales in a subsample of participants. Analyses of both samples supported a 2-factor model, with one factor measuring *Insecurity with God* (e.g., "I don't understand why God has made it so hard for me") and the other assessing *Disruption in Religious Practice* (e.g., "I go out of my way to avoid spiritual/religious activities [prayer, worship, Bible reading]"). Analyses further supported the convergent and incremental validity of the 18-item ICSG relative to other theoretically similar instruments and to measures of poor bereavement outcome. This suggests its specific relevance to studying spiritual crisis in bereavement.

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Finally, as with our general assessment of meaning systems, we have pursued qualitative research that fleshes out our understanding of the meanings made in the context of spiritual struggle (Burke this reference should be to Burke et al. 2014 b et al. 2014a , b). Using 84 participants' written responses to open-ended questions along with systematic exploration of this topic with a focus group, we conducted a directed content analysis. This revealed 17 different themes subsumed in an overarching narrative of resentment and doubt toward God, dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received, and substantial changes in the bereaved person's spiritual beliefs and behaviors. Thus, the study clarified the construct of complicated spiritual grief and laid the groundwork for the development of more specific study and treatment of this condition.

9.5. Conclusion

To an even greater extent than the measures of general meaning making described above, methods bearing on

spiritual meaning making are particularly likely to be culture specific. For example, both the ICSG and the qualitative study described here concentrated on the spiritual struggles of Christian samples, both black and white, most of whom presumed a personal relationship with a beneficent deity they construed as watching over them. They were typically quite active, at least prior to the death of their loved one, in their church communities.

The generalization of our findings to other cultural or religious settings can be legitimated only by study of the relevant groups, and should not be assumed in advance. For example, although a sense of anger and betrayal by God following the unjust killing of a loved might characterize survivors from other monotheistic traditions that feature an omnipotent God who hears our prayers—as in Judaism or Islam—spiritual struggle is likely to take different forms in religious traditions such as Buddhism or Hinduism. Similarly, in a world that is increasingly secular, challenges to a world of meaning occasioned by loss are likely to take more psychological, naturalistic, and social forms. Given this, forms of therapeutic intervention relying on a broad range of psychological (Neimeyer 2012) and expressive arts (Thompson and Neimeyer 2014) may prove effective across quite different personal and cultural systems of meaning and to be robust resources in addressing the world of suffering that can follow loss.

In conclusion, my colleagues and I are optimistic about the potential contributions of a meaning systems perspective as an integrative frame for studying the psychology of suffering. We are encouraged by the burgeoning research in this area and hope that our own line of investigation into the quest for meaning and spiritual significance in the wake of loss makes a modest contribution in the understanding and amelioration of suffering.

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