

**AN EXAMINATION OF STAGE THEORY OF  
GRIEF AMONG INDIVIDUALS BEREAVED  
BY NATURAL AND VIOLENT CAUSES:  
A MEANING-ORIENTED CONTRIBUTION\***

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite its popularity, few attempts have been made to empirically test the stage theory of grief. The most prominent of these attempts was conducted by Maciejewski, Zhang, Block, and Prigerson (2007), who found that different states of grieving may peak in a sequence that is consistent with stage theory. The present study aimed to provide a conceptual replication and extension of these findings by examining the association between time since loss and five grief indicators (focusing on disbelief, anger, yearning, depression, and acceptance), among an ethnically diverse sample of young adults who had been bereaved by natural ( $n = 441$ ) and violent ( $n = 173$ ) causes. We also examined the potential salience of meaning-making and assessed the extent to which participants had made sense of their losses. In general, limited support was found for stage theory, alongside some evidence of an “anniversary reaction” marked by heightened distress and

\*The views expressed here are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States Government.

reduced acceptance for participants approaching the second anniversary of the death. Overall, sense-making emerged as a much stronger predictor of grief Indicators than time since loss, highlighting the relevance of a meaning-oriented perspective.

Several grief theorists have postulated that grief tends to proceed along a series of predictable stages (Bowlby, 1980; Jacobs, 1993; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Parkes & Weiss, 1983). Though these stage models have included subtle variations, each articulates a pathway through bereavement that typically begins with a sense of disbelief or numbness and—after proceeding through intermediate stages that commonly include some form of protest and depression—ultimately ends with acceptance of a loss. Since the birth of these theories, the notion of stages of grief has, to a significant extent, become ingrained in our cultural beliefs about loss, and these models of grieving have been routinely taught as part of the curriculum in medical schools and nursing programs (Downe-Wamboldt & Tamlyn, 1997).

Despite the popularity and intuitive appeal of such models, only a few attempts have been made to empirically test the merits of stage theory. Generally speaking, these studies have provided mixed support, with one study failing to find supporting evidence (Barrett & Schneeweis, 1981) and two others finding some support for a stage-like model (Maciejewski, Zhang, Block, & Prigerson, 2007; Meuser & Marwit, 2001). The most prominent of these tests was conducted by Maciejewski and colleagues (2007) who tested a phasic model of grief based on the work of Jacobs (1993), whereby normal grief is initially characterized by disbelief (which gradually decreases over time), followed by yearning, anger, and depression (which show distinct peaks in the order presented), and concludes with acceptance (which gradually increases over time).

These researchers examined patterns of change in these grief experiences across three time periods (i.e., 1-6, 6-12, and 12-24 months post-loss) among a sample of bereaved individuals, mostly made up of older adults grieving the loss of a spouse by natural causes. In order to examine the smooth peaks and valleys of these grief experiences across a multitude of time points, another analysis was also conducted, which involved selecting one wave of data (at random) for each participant and then modeling the trajectories of different grief Indicators as a function of time since loss. These analyses revealed that participants' predominant response, regardless of the amount of time since loss, was acceptance—a finding that was inconsistent with stage theory. However, Maciejewski and colleagues (2007) did find that each of these grief Indicators reached their respective maximum values in a sequence that was in line with stage theory (i.e., disbelief → yearning → anger → depression → acceptance), even if the absolute magnitude of each Indicator was discrepant with a stage-based conceptualization.

The present study aims to provide a conceptual replication and extension of these findings by examining the relation between time since loss and several grief Indicators, similar to the ones tested previously (Maciejewski et al., 2007), among a large, ethnically diverse sample of bereaved young adults who experienced losses by natural causes (both sudden and anticipated) as well as by violent causes (including homicide, suicide and fatal accidents). Though our cross-sectional design prohibits replication of longitudinal analyses, we plan to examine the relative peaks and valleys of grief Indicators among participants with varying durations of time since loss—similar to Maciejewski and colleagues' (2007) analysis involving one randomly selected wave of data from each participant.

This investigation also attempts to shed some light on how a meaning-oriented perspective, which stresses the salience of finding meaning and making sense of loss, might enhance our understanding of the grief experiences associated with stage theory. In contrast to stage theories of grief, a meaning-oriented perspective conceptualizes grief as a highly individualized process that is largely influenced by the personal meanings people ascribe to a loss (Neimeyer, 2001, 2006). Notably, this model of grieving has received empirical support in a number of studies (e.g., Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006; Keesee, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2008). In this investigation, the extent to which a participant has made sense of a loss is examined side-by-side with other grief Indicators, to allow for a comparison of patterns across different durations of time since loss. We also examine sense-making as a predictor of these grief Indicators, and it is hypothesized that sense-making will outperform time since loss in predicting these grief outcomes.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

Participants in this study were drawn from a larger data set of bereaved college students who, following institutional review, were recruited in their introductory psychology courses across four waves of data collection at the University of Memphis, a large state university serving an ethnically and economically diverse student body (see Currier, Holland, Coleman, & Neimeyer, 2008, for a complete description of this larger sample). Each participant was at least 18 years of age and also reported the death of a friend or loved one within the past 2 years. For each wave, eligible participants completed a single-session questionnaire that included measures of meaning-making and grief symptoms as well as questions concerning their background and the circumstances surrounding their loss (e.g., *How did the death occur? How long ago did the death occur?*).

Some waves of the data collection used different measures and omitted others. Therefore, these analyses were restricted to only that subset of participants ( $n = 717$ ) who completed the Inventory of Complicated Grief-Revised

(ICG-R; Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001), the Core Bereavement Items (CBI; Burnett, Middleton, Raphael, & Martinek, 1997), a one-item measure of sense-making, and information about the cause of death and number of months since the loss—all of which were necessary for the present analysis. Because we were primarily interested in individuals who had lost a relationship of some significance, the sample was further restricted by excluding 74 participants who reported that they had lost an “acquaintance” or someone they “barely knew.” In order to maintain consistency with Maciejewski and colleagues’ (2007) work, we also excluded 29 individuals who, based on their responses on the ICG-R, appeared to meet the proposed criteria for Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD; Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2006; Prigerson, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008). Thus, 614 bereaved individuals who lost a person of significance and were exhibiting grief symptoms within the normal range, made up the sample for the present study.

The average age for this group of participants was 21.3 years ( $SD = 5.3$ ), and the average time since the loss was 11.1 months ( $SD = 7.5$ ). The majority of participants were women (76.4%,  $n = 469$ ) and most had lost a loved one to natural causes (71.8%,  $n = 441$ ), with a sizable minority (28.2%,  $n = 173$ ) losing a loved one by violent means (i.e., homicide, suicide, or accident). The sample was also ethnically diverse with 55.4% of the sample being Caucasian, 39.6% African American, 1.1% Native American, 0.7% Asian American, 0.2% Hispanic/Latino, and the remaining 3.0% of the sample identifying themselves as some “other” race/ethnicity. The majority of participants (66.1%) lost an extended family member (e.g., grandparent, cousin, aunt/uncle), and 8.1% and 25.7% lost an immediate family member (e.g., spouse/partner, child, sibling) or friend, respectively. The average age of the deceased was 53.3 years ( $SD = 25.9$ ).

Individuals bereaved by violent causes were similar to those who had lost a loved one to natural causes in terms of time since loss ( $t(612) = .54, p = .59$ ) and sex ( $\chi(1) = .46, p = .50$ ). However, those who lost a loved one to violent causes (compared to those who lost someone to natural causes) were somewhat more likely to be younger in age ( $t(611) = 3.43, p = .001$ ) and to have lost a friend ( $\chi(2) = 204.22, p < .001$ ) who was younger in age ( $t(598) = 28.29, p < .001$ ).

### Grief Indicators

Similar to Maciejewski and colleagues’ (2007) study, one-item Indicators of Disbelief, Yearning, Anger, Depression, and Acceptance were created using a pool of items from existing measures, as there are currently no established, bereavement-specific instruments that tap into these constructs. In particular, items from the ICG-R (Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001) were used to create Indicators of Disbelief (Item 8; *I feel disbelief over [the deceased]’s death*), Yearning (Item 5; *I feel myself longing and yearning for [the deceased]*), Anger (Item 7; *I can’t help feeling angry about [the deceased]’s death*), and Acceptance (Item 4,

reverse-coded; *I feel that I have trouble accepting the death*)<sup>1</sup>. These ICG-R items were drawn from a larger set of 30 items, each of which consists of a declarative statement to which a response is made on a 5-point Likert-type scale describing the frequency of symptoms ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). The ICG-R and the original 19-item version of this measure have evidenced strong psychometric properties in a number of studies (Boelen, van den Bout, de Keijser, & Hoijsink, 2003; Neimeyer, Hogan, & Laurie, 2008). For example, this measure has been tested in the Netherlands where the 29-item Dutch version displayed high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .94$ ), concurrent validity with the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief ( $r = .71$ ; Faschingbauer, 1981), and good test-retest reliability ( $r = .92$ ) over a period ranging from 9 to 28 days (Boelen et al., 2003).

Because the ICG-R does not include an item that taps into feelings of sadness/depression related to the loss, Item 16 from the CBI (Burnett et al., 1997; *Do reminders of [the deceased] such as photos, situations, music, places etc. cause you to feel sadness?*) was used as an Indicator of Depression. This item was drawn from a larger set of 17 items that make up the CBI. Each item from the CBI is presented as a question, and responses are given on a 4-point Likert-type scale based on how often the respondent experiences a particular symptom, ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 3 (*Always*). To ensure that all Indicators were all on the same scale, Item 16 from the CBI was rescaled in such a way that the lowest possible score was 1 and the highest possible score was 5. Among a sample of 158 bereaved adults under the age of 70, the CBI has been shown to have high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and successfully discriminate between different groups of griever in expected ways (e.g., higher scores for those who experienced an unexpected versus an expected loss; Burnett et al., 1997).

Finally, in addition to the grief Indicators used in Maciejewski and colleagues' (2007) study, an additional one-item Indicator of how much sense had been made of the loss was used to examine meaning-reconstruction alongside the other grief Indicators. Sense-making was assessed by having participants respond to the question, *How much sense would you say you have made of the loss?*, using a 4-point Likert-type scale from *no sense of my loss* to *a good deal of sense*. Again, to maintain consistency with the other Indicators, this item was rescaled so that the lowest possible degree of sense-making was represented by a 1, and the highest degree of sense-making was represented by a 5. This single-item sense-making item corresponds closely to the single-item questions that other researchers have used to quantitatively measure this construct (e.g., Davis et al., 1998; McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993). Significantly, Davis and colleagues (1998) found that their sense-making item showed adequate test-retest

<sup>1</sup> Because Item 4 on the ICG-R is structured in such a way that higher scores indicate more "trouble accepting the death," this item was recoded when creating an Indicator of Acceptance, so higher scores corresponded with greater acceptance of the loss.

reliability with Pearson correlations greater than .5 from 6 months to 13 months post-loss. In our own work, this one-item sense-making measure has been shown to have impressive utility as a strong predictor of overall grief symptomatology in diverse populations and as a factor that can reliably distinguish between those bereaved by violent and natural causes (Currier et al., 2006; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008).

### Analysis

The analyses in this study were performed separately for those who were bereaved by natural and violent means. Participants were divided in this way so that we could run analyses on a sample that was as similar as possible to Maciejewski and colleagues' (2007) sample, which included only those bereaved by natural causes, while at the same time examining this research question with a previously uninvestigated population of grievors (i.e., those bereaved by violent means). In each of these two subsamples, a series of four linear regression models was tested with time since loss as the independent variable, which was expressed as a

1. linear;
2. quadratic;
3. cubic; and
4. quartic

function in a hierarchical fashion. These regression models were tested separately for each of the six Indicators, which served as the dependent variables.<sup>2</sup> This analytic approach was adopted as a means of examining whether or not the variability of these Indicators could be modeled as a function of time since loss, either linearly or curvilinearly. Distinctions were made between significant and non-significant models, and in each case, models with the lowest value for Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) were selected, as lower values are indicative of better fit. The resulting curves produced by these best-fitting models were then graphed to examine the relative position of the peaks and valleys among the six Indicators.

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that all of the Indicators being used as dependent variables are on an ordinal scale. Therefore, assumptions of linear regression (e.g., normality) are violated to some extent. Given this potential problem, all of the analyses were duplicated using ordinal regression, which allows for a rank-ordered dependent variable. Interestingly, the ordinal regression analyses yielded an identical pattern of results as when linear regression was used. Because of the identical pattern of results and the practical advantages of linear regression (e.g., predicted values can be plotted as a smooth curve), linear regression was used to analyze these data.

## RESULTS

### Sample Bereaved by Natural Causes

As can be seen in Table 1, among those bereaved by natural causes ( $n = 441$ ), the model that included time since loss as a quartic term was the best at predicting scores on the Disbelief Indicator. Notably, this model accounted for 3.3% of the variance overall and was statistically significant,  $R^2 = .033, p = .005$ . In contrast, a statistically significant quadratic model was the best at predicting scores on the Yearning Indicator, and this model explained 1.5% of the variance,  $R^2 = .015, p = .04$ . In this same group of grievers, the cubic model accounted for 2.2% of the variability in Anger Indicator scores and was statistically significant,  $R^2 = .022, p = .02$ . It should be noted that none of the models significantly predicted scores on the Depression Indicator; however, the quadratic model appeared to fit the best compared to the other tested models,  $R^2 = .012, p = .07$ . The best fitting model for the Acceptance Indicator was the cubic model, which explained 2.7% of the variability and was statistically significant,  $R^2 = .027, p = .007$ . Finally, none of the models significantly predicted scores for the Sense-Making Indicator. In fact, for this Indicator a linear model with a very shallow slope appeared to fit the data best,  $R^2 = .000, p = .69$ .

The predicted curves for these best fitting models are presented in Figure 1 alongside group means from the raw data.<sup>3</sup> As can be seen in this figure, the relative positions of the graphed curves for the models that were found to be statistically significant (i.e., those for Disbelief, Yearning, Anger, and Acceptance) provide mixed support for stage theory. First, it is worth noting that the curves for the Disbelief, Yearning, and Anger Indicators appear to have two distinct peaked areas—one occurring within the first 12 months after a loss and the other peaking at around 24 months. Focusing solely on the initial peaked area within the first 12 months, it appears that Yearning is at its highest for those in the very early stages of grief (peaking around 0-2 months), which is followed by Disbelief (peaking around 3-4 months) then Anger (peaking around 3½-5 months). This ordering is only partially consistent with stage theory, which would predict the relative position of the peaks to follow a somewhat different pattern (i.e., Disbelief, Yearning, and then Anger). Looking beyond the first year of

<sup>3</sup> Group means from the raw data were generated by dividing each of the samples into 10 groups based on the number of months since the loss. Groups were divided as evenly as possible without making arbitrary divisions between individuals who reported the same number of months since the loss. Using this strategy, the sample of bereaved individuals who experienced a loss by natural causes was divided into 10 groups ranging from 39-49 individuals per group, and those who lost a loved one by violent means were divided into 10 groups ranging from 13-20 individuals per group. For each group, the means for the independent (i.e., months since loss) and dependent (i.e., the grief Indicators) variables were plotted on the  $x$  and  $y$  axes, respectively.

Table 1. Summary of Regression Analyses Predicting Grief Indicators as a Function of Time Since Loss

Hierarchical step	Predictor variable	Participants bereaved by natural causes ( <i>n</i> = 441)			Participants bereaved by violent causes ( <i>n</i> = 173)		
		<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	AIC	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	AIC
Disbelief Indicator							
1	Time	.001	.001	138.03	.111***	.111***	73.01
2	Time <sup>2</sup>	.022**	.021**	130.53	.118***	.007	73.66
3	Time <sup>3</sup>	.028**	.006	129.76	.118***	.001	75.55
4	Time <sup>4</sup>	.033**	.005	129.39	.118***	< .001	77.55
Yearning Indicator							
1	Time	.007	.007	101.93	.007	.007	15.75
2	Time <sup>2</sup>	.015*	.008	100.56	.021	.013	15.41
3	Time <sup>3</sup>	.018*	.003	101.14	.031	.010	15.63
4	Time <sup>4</sup>	.022*	.004	101.40	.034	.003	17.11
Anger Indicator							
1	Time	.001	.001	84.96	.008	.008	89.60
2	Time <sup>2</sup>	.013	.012*	81.74	.008	< .001	91.56
3	Time <sup>3</sup>	.022*	.010*	79.37	.009	.001	93.42
4	Time <sup>4</sup>	.023*	.001	80.90	.013	.005	94.61
Depression Indicator							
1	Time	.003	.003	125.08	.004	.004	56.26
2	Time <sup>2</sup>	.012	.008	123.36	.041*	.037*	54.90
3	Time <sup>3</sup>	.012	< .001	125.29	.044*	.003	59.51
4	Time <sup>4</sup>	.013	.001	126.82	.045	.001	64.48
Acceptance Indicator							
1	Time	.001	.001	119.90	.036*	.036*	85.45
2	Time <sup>2</sup>	.016*	.015*	115.18	.051*	.016	84.62
3	Time <sup>3</sup>	.027**	.011*	112.17	.055*	.004	85.93
4	Time <sup>4</sup>	.027*	< .001	114.15	.061*	.006	86.88
Sense-Making Indicator							
1	Time	< .001	< .001	78.61	< .001	< .001	103.31
2	Time <sup>2</sup>	.002	.002	79.92	.016	.016	102.46
3	Time <sup>3</sup>	.004	.002	80.85	.016	< .001	104.46
4	Time <sup>4</sup>	.006	.001	82.34	.019	.003	105.96

\**p* ≤ .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

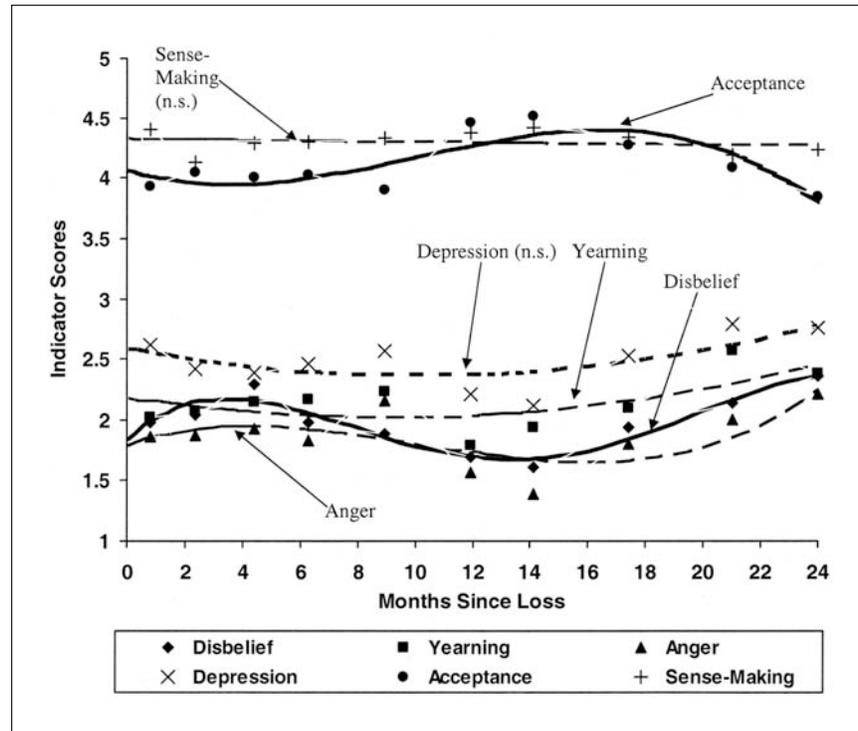


Figure 1. This graph depicts scores on the various Indicators (*y*-axis) as a function of months since loss (*x*-axis) among participants bereaved by natural causes. Predicted curves derived from the linear regression models are labeled with arrows. The initials "n.s." are used to identify statistically non-significant models. As a means of assessing how well each predicted curve maps onto actual scores, group means from the raw data are presented as single points of varying shapes, each of which represents scores on a particular Indicator as indicated by the key that appears below.

bereavement, however, it appears that the Acceptance Indicator is largely in line with stage theory, exhibiting its first substantial peak after those of Disbelief, Yearning, and Anger among participants who had lost a loved one approximately 15 to 17 months ago. However, for those persons approaching the second anniversary of the death, this Indicator seemed to take a downturn, approximating levels shown in the near aftermath of loss.

Though derived from a non-significant model, the best fitting curve for the Depression Indicator yielded two peaked areas—one around 0-2 months and another around 22-24 months after a loss—neither of which would be consistent with stage theory. Additionally, the non-significant linear model that provided the

best fit for the Sense-Making Indicator appeared as a relatively straight line. It should also be noted that this Indicator along with the Acceptance Indicator appeared to be at consistently higher levels overall compared to the other Indicators, suggesting that the predominant response for many of these participants was to accept and make sense of their losses. In contrast, across the entire 2 years, the so-called “negative” grief Indicators of depression and yearning were much less evident, though each appeared to rise visibly as the second anniversary of the death drew closer. In terms of absolute levels, these Indicators were followed in intensity by denial and anger, which showed a low, oscillating pattern across this same period, cresting both early and late in the two-year window of bereavement represented by our sample.

### **Sample Bereaved by Violent Causes**

Among those bereaved by violent causes ( $n = 173$ ), a statistically significant linear association between time since loss and scores on the Disbelief Indicator provided the best fit, accounting for 11.1% of the variance,  $R^2 = .111$ ,  $p < .001$ . None of the tested models was statistically significant for the Yearning Indicator, although the quadratic model provided the best fit,  $R^2 = .021$ ,  $p = .17$ . Similarly, the Anger Indicator was also not significantly predicted by any of the four models. For this Indicator, the linear model provided the best fit, explaining 0.8% of the variability in Anger Indicator scores,  $R^2 = .008$ ,  $p = .25$ . Scores on the Depression Indicator were significantly predicted by the quadratic model, which provided the best fit and accounted for 4.1% of the variability,  $R^2 = .041$ ,  $p = .03$ . The best fitting model for the Acceptance Indicator was also the quadratic model, which explained 5.1% of the variability and was statistically significant,  $R^2 = .051$ ,  $p = .01$ . Likewise, the quadratic model provided the best fit for the Sense-Making Indicator, although this model was non-significant,  $R^2 = .016$ ,  $p = .24$ .

The resulting predicted curves for these best fitting models among the sample of participants bereaved by violent causes are presented in Figure 2. For those Indicators that yielded a statistically significant model (i.e., Disbelief, Depression, and Acceptance), it is noteworthy that the Disbelief and Depression Indicators peaked first (around 0-2 months), with Disbelief steadily decreasing across time since loss and Depression peaking again for participants bereaved around 22-24 months ago. Consistent with stage theory, the Acceptance Indicator peaked after the Disbelief and Depression Indicators among participants bereaved around 16 to 19 months ago.

The graphed curve of the non-significant, best fitting model for the Yearning Indicator yielded peaks for those bereaved early on (peaking around 0-2 months) and those who had been bereaved for nearly 2 years (peaking slightly around 22-24 months). Conversely, the best fitting curve for the Anger Indicator, which was also derived from a non-significant model, was linear with a slight negative slope. Thus, the peak for this Indicator occurred among those who were most

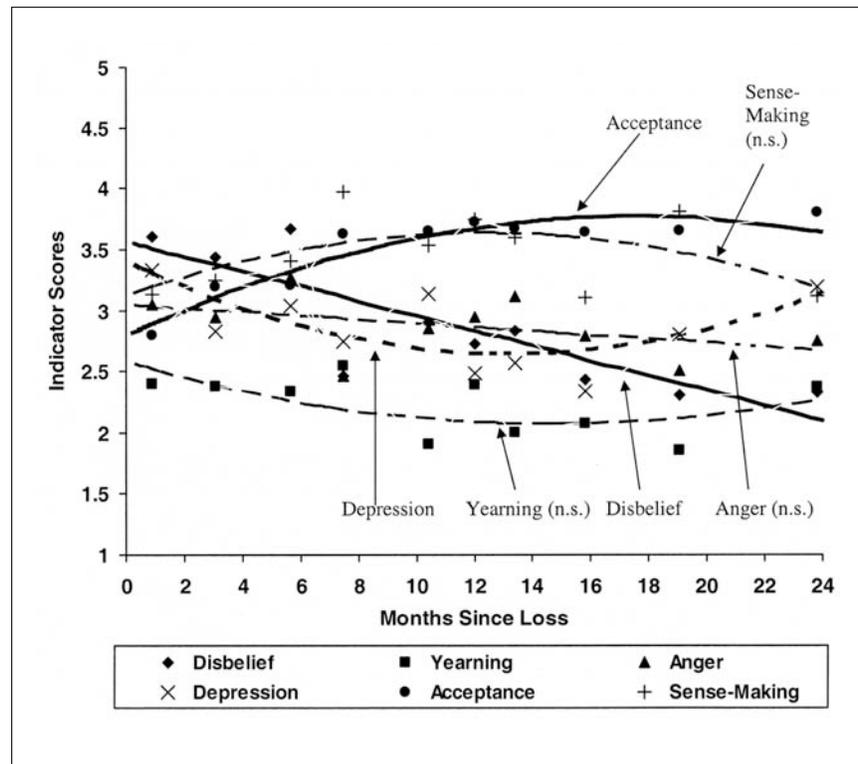


Figure 2. This graph depicts scores on the various Indicators (*y*-axis) as a function of months since loss (*x*-axis) among participants bereaved by violent means. Predicted curves derived from the linear regression models are labeled with arrows. The initials "n.s." are used to identify statistically non-significant models. As a means of assessing how well each predicted curve maps onto actual scores, group means from the raw data are presented as single points of varying shapes, each of which represents scores on a particular Indicator as indicated by the key that appears below.

recently bereaved (i.e., around 0-2 months after a loss). Finally, the best-fitting, yet non-significant, model for the Sense-Making Indicator yielded a peak around 11-13 months, with a visible reduction for those respondents approaching the second anniversary of the loss. It is also interesting to note that among those bereaved by violent causes, sense-making and acceptance were not necessarily the dominant responses, particularly among participants in the early months of bereavement, who tended to score highest on the Disbelief Indicator. Generally speaking, it also appeared that values for the negative grief Indicators were higher within this subsample of participants bereaved by violent causes, compared

to those bereaved by natural causes. A notable exception was Yearning, which displayed an elevation and general pattern that closely approximated that evidenced by persons bereaved by natural death. Relative to Depression, Disbelief and Anger, however, it was less prominent in the grief response of violently bereaved participants.

### **Sense-Making Analysis**

As a point of comparison for these findings, several regression analyses were performed using sense-making scores as the independent variable and the grief Indicators proposed by stage theory (i.e., Disbelief, Yearning, Anger, Depression, and Acceptance) as the dependent variables. The full sample of 614 bereaved participants was used for these analyses, as the purpose was simply to examine sense-making's ability to predict scores on the grief Indicators overall. These analyses revealed that the degree of sense-making a participant reported was negatively associated with scores on the Disbelief Indicator ( $R^2 = .108$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Yearning Indicator ( $R^2 = .042$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Anger Indicator ( $R^2 = .174$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Depression Indicator ( $R^2 = .071$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Conversely, higher degrees of sense-making were significantly associated with higher levels of Acceptance ( $R^2 = .149$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Overall, these analyses revealed that sense-making significantly predicted each of the five Indicators, accounting for 4.2% to 17.4% of the variability in scores.

## **DISCUSSION**

As a whole, these results do not closely corroborate a stage theory of grief; however, neither are they entirely inconsistent with it. Though the grief Indicators examined in this investigation did not strictly follow the sequential pattern found in Maciejewski and colleagues' (2007) study, there was some evidence suggesting that experiences of grief distress, such as disbelief, yearning, anger, and depression, were generally most salient for those bereaved for a shorter period of time (compared to those bereaved for longer periods). Likewise, acceptance was typically most evident among those bereaved for longer periods of time.

This general pattern, with grief distress and acceptance rising and falling asynchronously, fits with Prigerson and Maciejewski's (2008) model, whereby grief and acceptance are conceptualized as "opposite sides of the same coin" (p. 435). In this model, specific manifestations of grief distress (e.g., disbelief, yearning, anger) are regarded as different "grief states" (all of which represent a single underlying construct of grief), rather than distinct psychological phases or stages (Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2008). Therefore, such a model would simply hypothesize that grief distress and acceptance would be inversely related, but it would not necessarily predict that different grief states would adhere to a strict sequential pattern.

Looking beyond the sequence of these grief experiences, it is worth noting that participants in the present study who were bereaved by natural causes were primarily characterized by acceptance regardless of time since loss—a finding that is consistent with Maciejewski and colleagues' (2007) study. These participants were also found to be characterized by a high degree of sense-making, which was essentially unrelated to time since loss. Interestingly, these trends were less pronounced for those bereaved by violent causes, who generally had higher scores on the more negative grief Indicators. In fact, among those bereaved by violent loss for 3 months or less, disbelief showed up as the primary response, highlighting the difficulties faced by this population of grievers. Also of concern is the predominance of possible Indicators of more traumatic adaptation (e.g., anger, disbelief, and depression), which could interfere with processing of attachment-related emotions such as yearning in this tragically bereaved population. Although grief-related distress was much more marked and persistent for these violently bereaved individuals, acceptance still emerged as the dominant response among individuals bereaved for a longer period of time, possibly indicating that most grievers are fairly resilient even in the face of objectively traumatic loss.

Though we found some evidence that might suggest that grief distress and acceptance wax and wane in a predictable fashion, these results also indicate that other factors, even with regard to time, may be just as (or more) important. For example, in several instances, grief Indicators exhibited peaks beyond the first year that appeared to reach a maximum point among participants who had been bereaved for roughly 24-months. These results could suggest the presence of an anniversary effect (Musaph, 1990), whereby grief is aggravated as the bereaved approach significant dates that call to mind their losses. However, peaks were not generally observed among bereaved individuals at the 1-year mark. Though subject to a variety of interpretations—including the possibility that this finding is an artifact of our cross-sectional design—it could be that anniversary effects may be more salient in the second year of bereavement (and conceivably beyond), perhaps once the protective coping responses or social support of the first year have waned.

This study also indicates that sense-making (which appears to be somewhat independent of length of bereavement) is a more robust predictor of these grief Indicators, compared to time since loss—even when time is modeled in complex ways. Specifically, the one-item sense-making measure consistently accounted for more variability in the five grief Indicators than the “best-fitting” regression models that used time since loss as the independent variable, illustrating the predictive advantages of a meaning-oriented perspective. The only exception to this general trend was for the disbelief Indicator within the subsample of participants bereaved by violent causes. In this case, time since loss and sense-making performed similarly, possibly indicating the particular importance of time in helping these individuals come to grips with the painful reality of violent loss.

Given the uneven support for a stage-like conception of grieving offered by these findings as well as those of Maciejewski and associates (2007), it is worth considering why a phasic model of grief continues to hold such appeal for the general public, and, to a lesser extent, bereavement professionals. One answer might be that human beings are inveterate seekers of patterns to organize the flux of experience in a fashion that enhances their sense of prediction and control (Kelly, 1955). Certainly such motivation could be greatly enhanced by the cognitive, emotional, and social turmoil occasioned by the death of a loved one, when the promise of a modicum of predictability conferred by even a provisional “roadmap” through the terrain of loss would be welcomed by many of the bereaved.

A second and perhaps still more basic reason that a sequential plotting of grief responses is difficult to resist is that it may correspond to the fundamentally narrative structure of much of human thought (Fireman, McVay, & Flanagan, 2003; Neimeyer, van Dyke, & Pennebaker, 2009), which seeks to order temporal events so as to “tell a good story” by arranging them in terms of a meaningful beginning, middle, and end, moving from an early perturbation of the plot through various obstacles to the achievement of valued goals (Bruner, 1990; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000).

A further and related factor could be that stage theory suggests a particular *kind* of narrative structure to grieving, one in which the protagonist is thrust into what Joseph Campbell (1949) described as *the hero's journey*, an archetypal narrative discernible across widely varying cultures in which the hero is called forth from the normal world to face and overcome a series of great trials, ultimately to return triumphant with special knowledge or a special gift to bestow on others. This epic narrative structure is easily enough seen in popular depictions of “the griever’s journey,” which like Campbell’s “monomyth” commonly entail a shift in the protagonist’s spiritual center of gravity as he or she crosses a liminal threshold into an unknown and dangerous world, typically undergoing a personal metamorphosis as the journey proceeds, before reentering the known world transformed and bearing a special boon to confer on his or her fellows. This implicit description of grieving as a heroic quest for recovery of a lost treasure or conquest of a series of obstacles could ennoble the bereaved in their own eyes and that of their community, and provide a canonical cultural script for a positive “ritual re-inscription of identity” that is part of the rite of passage for survivors of a loved one’s death (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). In this view, the seemingly magnetic draw of a stage-like depiction of grieving that begins with a disorienting separation from the “normal,” pre-bereavement world, and that progresses heroically through a series of clearly marked emotional trials before eventuating in a triumphant stage of acceptance, recovery, or symbolic return, may owe more to its compelling coherence with a seemingly universal narrative structure than to its objective accuracy. Simply stated, stage theory may have functioned as the bereavement field’s own cultural “monomyth.”

Finally, although stage theorists typically have focused their attention on the sequential nature of grief experiences, it should be noted that the conclusions drawn here are not necessarily diametrically opposed to more flexible accounts of stage theory, as most also acknowledge the unpredictability of individual responses and the limitations of a “one size fits all” model. For example, Jacobs (1993) wrote:

Although it is sometimes instructive to conceptualize the manifestations of grief in this manner, it is important to emphasize that the idea that grief unfolds inexorably in regular phases is an oversimplification of the highly complex, personal waxing and waning of the emotional process. (p. 18)

Thus, rather than refuting these models of grief, the findings of the present study would suggest that more attention should probably be placed on the qualifications and caveats associated with stage theory than the theory itself.

### **Limitations and Implications**

The conclusions drawn from this study are limited by the fact that a cross-sectional data set was used to address what may be considered an inherently longitudinal question. Therefore, variability among the grief Indicators accounted for by time since loss might be due to the passage of time or individual differences among participants. Though doing so would pose obvious practical challenges, future studies would do well to examine the merits of stage theory using a prospective, longitudinal design with enough time points (perhaps using monthly assessments) to fully capture the waxing and waning of different grief experiences. In addition, even though the items used to construct our grief Indicators were drawn from psychometrically-validated measures of grief, these Indicators, by themselves, have not been rigorously evaluated as measures of the constructs of interest. Because no grief-specific measures presently exist for constructs like anger or yearning, future examination of stage theory would benefit from the development and validation of measures that reliably tap into these grief experiences.

It is also worth noting that this sample was made up primarily of young adults who were grieving the loss of an extended family member, which limits the generalizability of the results and could account for differences between our findings and those of Maciejewski and colleagues (2007). Within our own sample, it also appeared that those who had lost a loved one to violent causes tended to be younger and more likely to have lost a young-age friend, compared to those bereaved by natural causes. Thus, it is possible that differences in patterns of grief observed between those bereaved by violent versus natural causes could be influenced by these confounding factors.

Despite these limitations, the present findings suggest that, even though some predictable patterns in grieving may be observed as a function of time since loss, a meaning-oriented approach may prove to be more relevant. Thus, clinicians

working with the bereaved would do well to focus their assessments on how a client has come to understand or make sense of a loss, rather than trying to determine one's stage of grieving. This information about the personal meanings a client has ascribed to a loss may also serve as a focal point for treatment, as problematic grief reactions are often conceptualized as arising from difficulties in finding meaning in the aftermath of these painful experiences (Neimeyer, 2001; Park, 2008). By drawing upon interventions with a strong narrative component (e.g., revisiting/ re-telling the story of the loss, journaling about any sense made of the loss or its unsought benefits, enacting imaginal dialogues with the deceased; Lichtenthal & Cruess, in press; Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005; Wagner, Knaevelsrud, & Maercker, 2006), clinicians may assist clients with problematic reactions to bereavement through reconstructing a world of meaning that allows them to make sense of loss and envision a more hopeful future.

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