About 11 months following the suicide of their 19-year-old daughter Christine, Tricia and Scott reflected with their therapist on the deep changes that had occurred in their view of life since the tragedy.

Scott: What you really realize after losing someone is how interconnected everybody is.

Tricia: Right. I think it has brought us closer as a family. I think we value our relationships more. We know that any moment could be your last moment. Because the day Christine took her life was a Monday after work. It was like any other Monday. And so, who is to say that Scott is not going to get into a car on a Tuesday and drive off and get killed? So, you value those moments. And the one thing we have really learned as a family is that there is a lot of stuff that just doesn’t matter. There are so many things that we stress over until we lose somebody, and then all of a sudden everything has a new perspective, life has a new perspective. You think, “That doesn’t really matter, that’s not important, no one died.” So, people that are stressing out about, “Oh my god, that fax didn’t go through!” or whatever, and you are just like, “Take a chill pill. No one died, it’s not a big deal.” And your perspective changes. And in that way, I can say that it has been a positive thing, I guess. I know that sounds really
bizarre, but to put a positive spin on it, it is like you value things more, you don’t stress over the small things....

**Therapist:** In some measure you are changed as a person in fundamental ways by this, and not all of those ways are about being broken or violated. But there are these other dimensions?

**Tricia:** Right. You can actually find some—you value your friends more, you value your family more, you value the time that you have together more, you try to make more special moments and remember those moments.

Though their quest to make sense of the loss and reconstruct the meaning of their lives in its aftermath continued, these parents spoke hopefully about growing through grief, even, or especially, when loss is complicated. Our goal in this brief chapter is to review research that bears on the relation of postloss growth to complicated bereavement, to extend and illustrate this research with respect to suicide loss in particular, and to conclude by offering some clinical guidelines for winnowing the seeds of transformation from the devastation of a loved one’s tragic death.

**Posttraumatic Growth and Complicated Grief**

In the wake of the loss of a loved one, the majority of mourners will experience a time-limited period of distress followed by a return to baseline, with many showing surprising resilience (Bonanno, 2004). However, others can potentially experience a wide range of negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicide risk, physical health problems, and increased mortality (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007). Moreover, approximately 10% of mourners will suffer a specific type of heightened and persistent struggle to adapt to bereavement known variously as complicated grief (CG) (Shear et al., 2011), prolonged grief disorder (Prigerson et al., 2009), or persistent complex bereavement disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This severe form of grief is characterized by profound and unremitting separation distress reflected in yearning for and preoccupation with the deceased, an inability to accept the loss, considerable difficulty living life in the absence of the loved one, and intense negative emotions (e.g., anger, bitterness, loneliness, or
guilt). With a solid evidence base supporting its distinctive etiology, symptomatology, and biopsychosocial consequences, prolonged grief disorder will be introduced as a mental health diagnosis in the World Health Organization's *International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11)* (release scheduled for 2018; Maciejewski, Maercker, Boelen, & Prigerson, 2016), testifying to the growing global recognition of the uniquely deleterious impact that can follow the tragic loss of an important attachment figure (Neimeyer, 2016a).

But does the prospect of enduring psychological devastation following the death of a loved one mean that growth through grief is illusory or impossible? By no means. In fact, although complicated grief and many other negative outcomes can result from bereavement, both researchers and clinicians have found that mourners can also experience highly adaptive outcomes identified as positive psychological change (Yalom & Lieberman, 1991) or impressions of personal growth (Hogan, Morse, & Tason, 1996), which share similar attributes related to a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life (Hogan & Schmidt, 2002). The most widely validated and studied construct used to define this phenomenon is *posttraumatic growth* (PTG). PTG is defined as the experience of positive change in one's life beyond the point of mere recovery of previous functioning, which comes as a result of a traumatic experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2008). The hallmark features of PTG include an increased appreciation of life, personal strength, a deepened relation to others, the realization of new possibilities, and spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Although posttraumatic growth and distress appear at first glance to represent opposite ends of the outcome spectrum, they are by no means mutually exclusive (Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann, & Hanks, 2010; Taku, Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2008), as some researchers have noted that higher levels of grief seem to co-occur with higher levels of growth (Buchi et al., 2007). Other investigators have determined that the highest levels of growth occur at an intermediate level of grief severity, with mourners at very low or very high levels of complicated grief symptoms experiencing the lowest levels of growth (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2012). That is, when grief-related distress is minimal or transient, mourners are able to assimilate the loss experience into their existing constructs of self, world, and relationships, so that little change is needed. But when losses are tragically premature, the death is violent or unjust, or the mourner loses an attachment figure
who provides a crucial sense of security or validation for his or her identity, grief can be far more profound and prolonged, calling into question key assumptions that previously sustained the mourner’s meaning system or self-narrative (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011). The resulting anguish provokes an attempt to make sense of the loss and its implications for the mourner’s life, resulting in a potentially sweeping reconstruction of meaning (Neimeyer, 2016b). However, when the devastation of the survivor’s meaning system is too profound, and symptoms of grief are too overwhelming, such reconstruction and its associated psychosocial and spiritual growth may be rendered impossible, as illustrated in Figure 1 below (Currier et al., 2012).

Figure 1. The curvilinear association between prolonged grief symptoms and posttraumatic growth, portraying how growth peaks when grief symptomatology is significant, but not overwhelming. The vertical axis corresponds to values on the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, and the horizontal axis portrays centered scores on the Inventory of Complicated Grief—Revised (Source: Currier, Holland & Neimeyer, 2012).

Posttraumatic growth in suicide loss
Of the many tragic ways in which bereavement occurs, the loss of a loved one to suicide ranks as among the most difficult, the severity of whose impact has been well-documented (Pitman, Osborn, King, & Erlangsen, 2014). Each year in the United States, over 40,000 people die by suicide, with nearly a quarter of the population losing someone close at some point in their lifetime (Andriessen, Rahman, Draper, Dudley,
Beyond the shock, disbelief, and disorientation that suicide often engenders, many survivors contend with a daunting prognosis that includes deleterious outcomes such as heightened levels of depression, suicide risk, and complicated grief (de Groot, de Keijser, & Neelman, 2007). Furthermore, survivors often confront crises of meaning, as they struggle to understand the loss and their role in life in the wake of the suicide (Sands, Jordan, & Neimeyer, 2010). Symptomatically, survivors also contend with elevated levels of guilt, shame, and stigma (Steen & Walby, 2008), making adaptation to this particular loss a formidable challenge.

Despite these struggles, growth can serendipitously occur following the tragedy of suicide loss, and represents an important metric for healing among survivors (Feigelman, Jordan, & Gorman, 2009). For example, recent research documents the posttraumatic growth among parents bereaved by suicide within the first two years after losing a child, who on average show low to moderate levels of PTG over this period (Moore, Cerel, & Jobes, 2015). Among a more diverse sample of survivors, Levi-Belz (2014) found that more than 20% had moderate to high levels of PTG. Research has also begun to identify the optimal conditions for such growth, such as time to integrate the lessons of loss; as time since the death increases, the possibility for growth appears to increase in tandem (Feigelman et al., 2009; Levi-Belz, 2014). Intrapsychic and interpersonal factors also seem to facilitate or inhibit positive psychological development following suicide. For example, as Schaefer and Moos (2001) indicate, the transition from grief to growth is likely to vary depending on the relationship between the bereft and the decedent. For survivors of suicide loss, a close and positive relationship with the deceased is associated with greater levels of PTG above and beyond the passage of time (Levi-Belz, 2017), as are interpersonal disclosures of the loss narrative, whereas excessive grief severity seems to stunt such development (Levi-Belz, 2014).

Beyond identifying the prevalence of PTG among survivors of suicide loss and the factors that seem to promote or inhibit such positive adaptation, a smaller body of research has begun to illuminate the lived experience, or phenomenology, of growth in the midst of suicide bereavement. Using an interpretive phenomenological paradigm to study narratives from six survivors of suicide loss, Smith, Joseph and Nair (2011) identified three subordinate themes of positive growth associated with the mourner’s knowledge of self, life view, and...
relations to others. Using these categories, we will illustrate these themes drawing on data from our own study of 10 diverse survivors of suicide loss, in which we utilized the *Meaning in Loss Codebook* (MLC) (Gillies, Neimeyer & Milman, 2014) to analyze their loss narratives with particular attention to forms of positive adaptation or personal transformation (Bottomley et al., 2017). Every survivor honestly spoke of the enormous anguish of their loss, as well as their effort across time to rebuild a sustaining bond to their loved one and to make sense of the death itself. But as this effort progressed, most also began to discern seeds of positive change in their worldview that were cultivated by the experience. As one would expect, when people are speaking of fundamental shifts in their sense of self and world arising from a tragic transition, the different themes can easily meld into one another, often reinforcing a broader and deeper reorientation to life. For this reason, we will acknowledge this melding of meanings when it arises from the interview material.

**Knowledge of self**

Narratives that suggest a transformed knowledge of self commonly invoke a sense of personal growth, the discovery of unexpected strength, or greater humility or authenticity that grows in the months and years following a loved one’s suicide. Liz, 40, who had experienced the suicide of her sister just seven months prior to the interview, noted the role that growth had played in her life both before and after the loss and how that growth fortified her sense of identity and her capacity to manage distress:

*Karla’s death is like the icing on the cake... You know, I’ve been through some [expletive] storms, and um, I have learned from experience that whether you like it or not, personal growth does spring from awful stuff. It, you know, it springs from dealing with things that you didn’t think that you were strong enough to deal with, or get through, and get through them anyway... I’m being more successful in doing that regularly. Even if it’s only for a moment, and being easier on myself. Being gentler with myself, letting go of that shame. It’s okay.*

Other survivors noted their greater sense of humility, opening the door for a less judgmental stance toward others facing major life difficulties. For example, Kathy, a 67-year-old whose daughter died by
self-inflicted gunshot, clearly articulated what growth meant to her in the context of her bereavement:

> I’m also a lot less judgmental, because before Ashley died—I can be honest, looking back now—I think I must have been pretty arrogant, I thought—I had a master’s degree in teaching—I thought I knew everything about being the perfect parent and all this, and I’m sure I passed judgment on parents of kids who used drugs and that kind of thing, and then all of a sudden ‘it’s me?’ So, it took me down a few notches.

PTG was also experienced as a shift in goals toward becoming, in humanistic terms, a fuller, more actualized individual. Michelle, a 49-year-old woman who lost her sister to a self-inflicted gunshot wound two years prior, stated:

> Authenticity is one of my main goals now. I’m more determined now than ever to try to make my life worth living, in the sense of [having] purpose and fun.... I have let go of a lot of negativity. I’ve learned to value more the things that mean a lot to me like serenity and love and peace.

**Life view**

Themes related to survivors’ *life view* referred to their gaining a deeper understanding of human existence and their place in the world. Like Tricia’s comments in the opening story, survivors often emphasized the value of life and the relative unimportance of petty concerns. This frequently carried over to a more conscious embrace of the value of their own unique lives, in a sense reclaiming their worth from the devastation brought on by the suicide and the debilitating self-doubt and guilt it engendered. For example, Rona, 62, described how the loss of her daughter decades earlier to an intentional overdose had allowed her to renew her lease on life and her sense of efficacy as a mother:

> I think my life’s worth living. I think I am worth living. I think I’m a nice person; my sons love me, I love my sons, I love the people in [my support group], and I hope they love me as well. But life is always worth living. Always.... At the beginning I thought I must have been a really bad mother, you know, for
my child to do that. I thought I must be a really bad mother, but that has changed over the years, because I was a good mum, and my boys tell me I’m a good mum, although David says I’m a pain in the behind! But my boys tell me I’m a good mum, Nicola said I was a good mum, [but] at the beginning I thought I must have been a really bad mum and a bad person for something like this to happen in my life.

Acknowledging the limits of control over one’s life was another way PTG was represented in this sample. Shannon, who lost her father to a self-inflicted gunshot wound just seven months prior, lucidly conveyed this lesson, and with it the paradoxical recognition that forgoing control had engendered a sense of strength for her:

I’m realizing that I don’t necessarily have control. Letting go of the control has been hard, but learning that it’s not always up to me, I guess, has become easier since losing my dad. Before it was like, “No, you have to do this because you have to control everything,” and now I realize maybe I don’t have control over everything, even though I want all the control… My thing… is realizing I don’t have control over everything, but the biggest [learning] has been that I’m stronger than I thought I was.

Other survivors experienced a changed direction in life, relinquishing one set of priorities or values to make room for others. Beverly, a 34-year-old attorney who lost her best friend to suicide two years prior to the interview, stated:

There is personal growth, but it’s almost like kind of being a baby again. I mean, [the loss] just really brings up things and what it is that I want in life. My career has always been the biggest thing in my life, and so that’s one thing that has changed. My career is still there, I still want to be a prosecutor, but my career is not the most important thing in my life anymore. My friends and my family are, and traveling and enjoying life, and I need to work to do that. But it used to be the other way around.
Relations with others

As Scott and Tricia also recognized after their daughter’s death, the loss of a loved one to suicide frequently helped survivors to acknowledge the intimate interconnectedness of lives, in a way that led to both deeper empathy for people’s suffering and a more profound appreciation for the impact of one’s actions on others. Lily, 49, who was surviving the suicides of both her father and best friend, stated:

I am more, I think, tolerant of people’s depression, anxieties. I’m a gentler person. I’ve said several times, I’m more willing to interact on an emotional level with people. I do not have the time or the patience for silliness, foolishness, or game-playing. And at the first sign of any of those things, I’m gone. I’m more about being transparent in all areas of my life, from my significant relationships down to my work relationships.

Just as Lily’s words imply, a greater compassion for others was commonly coupled with a corresponding shift toward greater openness and transparency regarding oneself. This same empathic grasping of the perspective of others carried moral implications for the life decisions that now were, and were not, considered legitimate. For example, Liz emphasized that her sister’s suicide by hanging now precluded her from considering such an action as an option for herself—something that had frequented her mind prior to the death:

I can’t emphasize enough, you know, had she not died, it’s entirely possible that I could have gotten into another depression where, you know, suicide then once again came back up as something that I considered, you know...Karla took that option off the table. I mean, I cannot do that. And even though I’m not in a place where I would want to do that, I mean that’s just a really tremendous shift.

In summary, nearly all of the survivors interviewed reported not only great pain, but also great gain, in the effort to reconstruct lives of meaning in the aftermath of traumatic loss, which was evident in their core views of life, human relationships, and their own sense of identity. As Shannon conveyed it:

I’ve been through bad stuff before but nothing like losing my dad to suicide.... And I don’t know if it’s because I’m the
oldest sibling or what, but I kind of feel like even though I was allowed to do my own thing and be upset, I am able to say, you know, I came out on top of all this. It gives me a sense of strength. It made me realize that I can overcome a lot more stuff than I thought I could. Because this is, by far, the most difficult thing I thought I would ever have to go through.

**Principles of Practice**

As the survivors quoted above testify, resilience and even personal transformation are indeed possible even in the wake of traumatic loss. Many of those who have struggled through complicated grief to find the seeds of new growth do so without the benefit of formal therapy, drawing on their own internal, social, and spiritual supports to adapt to a reality that once was unimaginable. But often enough the crisis of tragic loss leads people to seek guidance of a professional kind that seems insufficiently available in their families and communities, and sometimes even in online or face-to-face support groups. We will therefore close with a few practical principles that we have found helpful in working alongside mourners struggling with staggering losses as they seek to re-engage life and move forward with renewed purpose and clarity.

- **Lead from one step behind.** Growth through grief is to be facilitated, never forced. Allow your client to take the lead in noticing the first delicate shoots of new growth, which are typically not visible for several months or more following the conflagration that reduced their previous life to ash. Join them in gently inquiring about what the experience is teaching them, and what they would like to see take root in the changed landscape of their lives (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

- **Reduce symptom burden.** Pain may prompt growth, but when it becomes overwhelming it can also stifle it. Lead with the intent to bear witness to your clients’ suffering, and help them find a way of bearing it. This implies offering yourself as a therapeutic secure base to survivors who often have lost theirs (Kosminsky & Jordan, 2016). It also implies helping them develop capacities for self-soothing in a harsh world (Perlman, Wortman, Feuer, Farber, & Rando, 2014), as well as reaching out to others in their lives who can offer them respite, understanding, and practical support in a difficult time (Bottomley, Burke, & Neimeyer, 2015; Doka
& Neimeyer, 2012). As the complications of grief are brought down to manageable levels, space for reflective processing of the experience can be more readily found.

- **Foster healing dialogues.** Although learning the affirmative lessons of loss can arise in the natural give-and-take of compassionate conversation with a counselor, clients can also draw on healing dialogues of other kinds to considerably deepen their engagement with their own “growing edge;” that is, those areas in which their need to change and their readiness to change converge. For example, meaning-oriented journaling about the sense and significance of the loss (Lichtenthal & Neimeyer, 2012) in the longer-term aftermath of a death can help clients articulate more clearly those lessons about living and loving that their loss or their loved one has taught them, just as symbolic correspondence with the deceased (Neimeyer, 2012b) can give them permission to once again embrace life in all its sweetness and brokenness. Likewise, orchestrating imaginal dialogues in session between clients and their deceased loved ones using empty-chair or two-chair work can lead to deepened understanding and forgiveness of self and other (Neimeyer, 2012a). Alternatively, symbolic dialogue with alternative wisdom positions within themselves such as their “best self” or a religious figure (Neimeyer & Konopka, 2018), can help clients lift above their suffering and recognize both their strength and common purpose with others who know similarly heartbreaking life transitions.

In short, both quantitative research and qualitative studies amply document what many of the bereaved learn intuitively: that grief and its complications can often set the stage for growth and compassion, when approached with openness, validation of the pain, and willingness to discover the “collateral beauty” that can attend even some of life’s darkest moments. Counselors can serve as appreciative audiences to this development, sometimes suggesting timely practices that further foster such transformation.

**Editor’s Note:** Some names in this chapter have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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