

## Bereavement and college students: The role of counseling psychology.

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### Abstract:

In this review article, the authors integrate the theoretical, empirical, and clinical literature relevant to the phenomenon of college student bereavement. They synthesize information on two theories of mourning that appear to fit well with the experience of bereaved college students with information about the developmental, cohort, and contextual situation of college students. They end the article with an integrated illustration and practical recommendations for counseling psychologists who work with bereaved college students in various capacities within higher education (e.g., administrators, clinicians, educators, and researchers).

**Keywords:** academia | college students | counseling centers | well-being | bereavement | college student bereavement | counseling psychologists | counseling psychology | higher education counselors

### Article:

Research suggests that approximately 25% to 30% of college students are in the 1st year of bereavement and that between 40% and 50% are within the first 2 years of experiencing the death of a family member or friend (Balk & Walker, 2008; Hardison, Neimeyer, & Lichstein, 2005; Noppe, Linzmeier, Martin, Wisneski, & Servaty-Seib, 2008). The purpose of the present article is to provide counseling psychologists with information that will assist them in addressing the specific developmental needs of bereaved college students. We begin with a brief argument for why we believe counseling psychologists are uniquely positioned to positively affect the grief experiences of this population. Next, the core of the article is a conceptual synthesis of two current mourning theories with the distinct developmental, cohort, and contextual issues faced by college students. Finally, the article ends with an integrated illustration and practical recommendations for best practices. We believe that learning more about the theoretical, empirical, and clinical literature relevant to the experience of bereavement for college students

will allow counseling psychologists employed in higher education to better fulfill their roles as administrators, clinicians, educators, and researchers.

### Counseling Psychology, Thanatology, and Bereaved College Students

Counseling psychology has directed relatively limited attention to issues of thanatology (i.e., study of death and dying). A review of the table of contents of *The Counseling Psychologist* (TCP) and the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (from 1998 to present) revealed a total of 21 articles devoted to topics connected to thanatology. Of these articles, 8 were focused on suicide (6 within one special issue of TCP), 7 addressed issues related to HIV/AIDS (4 within one special issue of TCP), 2 included samples of individuals with cancer, and only 2 concentrated on the process or outcome of grief therapy. Two articles in the past 10 years have focused on the experience of bereaved college students. Schnider, Elhai, and Gray (2007) investigated the coping, posttraumatic stress, and grief in students grieving traumatic deaths, and Flynn and Heitzmann (2008) offered their perspective on the devastating impacts of the Virginia Tech tragedy. Although HIV/AIDS and suicide are included, the terms bereavement, death, dying, grief, and loss do not appear in the index of the most recent edition of the *Handbook of Counseling Psychology* (Brown & Lent, 2008).

We find this lack of attention quite surprising because we believe that counseling psychologists have much to offer the field of thanatology. We believe the ideological and practical aspects of the discipline of counseling psychology match well with the needs of bereaved individuals. Thanatology is a multidisciplinary field (Balk, Wogrin, Thornton, & Meagher, 2007) composed of professionals practicing medicine, philosophy, theology, sociology, social work, and psychology. The unifying themes of counseling psychology (Gelso & Fretz, 1992; Murdock, Alcorn, Heesacker, & Stoltenberg, 1998) appear to complement the existing work being done in the field of thanatology. Counseling psychologists have traditionally worked with clients who are experiencing normal problems of living rather than psychotic symptoms (Gelso & Fretz, 2001). The death of a loved is arguably one of the quintessential “problems of living.” It is an inevitable, universal, and normative human experience. Research indicates that the vast majority of bereaved individuals do not develop severe psychopathology (Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe, 2008) but rather may need assistance in navigating their own unique journey through the processes of grief and mourning. Counseling psychologists are trained to view clients in just such a fashion, offering brief interventions focused on using clients’ strengths to enhance their ability to cope.

Counseling psychology’s broad focus on person–environment interactions (Gelso & Fretz, 2001) and commitment to diversity (Mintz & Bieschke, 2009) are potentially powerful connecting points with thanatology. Archer (2008) suggested that there has been a clear shift in the field of thanatology away from searching for a universal or linear model to a more dynamic understanding of the vast individual variations that exist in the expression of grief (i.e., multidimensional, involuntary reactions) and the process of mourning (i.e., voluntary actions

taken to cope; for further distinction, see Corr & Corr, 2007). In addition, there has been increased attention given to the distal and proximal cultural influences on the experiences of bereaved individuals (Martin & Doka, 2000; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002; Peveto & Hayslip, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2008). We argue that counseling psychology has a critical role to play in advancing theoretical, empirical, and clinical understanding of the individual, group, and universal (Sue & Sue, 2007) impacts on grief and mourning.

A focus on the experience of bereaved college students is a logical and reasonable place for counseling psychology to link with the field of thanatology. Counseling psychologists are highly represented on college and university campuses, and the discipline has its earliest roots in higher education (Gelso & Fretz, 2001; Lichtenberg, Goodyear, & Genter, 2008). The ever growing diversity of the college student population (Light, 2001) coupled with the idiosyncratic and highly context-based experiences of grief and mourning would appear to create the type of complex and multifaceted mixture within which counseling psychologists often thrive and subsequently make substantial contributions (Munley, Duncan, McDonnell, & Sauer, 2004).

There also is a need for counseling psychology, as a discipline composed of scientist-practitioners, to turn empirical attention to the experience of bereaved college students as compared with other bereaved populations (e.g., children, adult spouses) because relatively little is known about how college students cope with death losses (Balk, 1997; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). We contend that college students are an understudied population of grievers with unique challenges that have not been fully explored. We highlight a few of the key limitations of the existing research. Most of the scholars who have conducted grief-related research using college student participants have not considered the developmental and contextual issues faced by this population and have used homogeneous and convenient samples. The designs of studies are limited by a disconnection with theory and the use of cross-sectional, unlevel, and correlational approaches. Preliminary research suggests the need for future investigations focused on why and when bereaved students decide to seek mental health services and on the effectiveness of individual and group interventions with grieving students (e.g., Balk, 1997; Balk et al., 1998).

### Conceptual Synthesis: Grief and Mourning and College Students

Although existing research offers little information on how college students experience grief and mourning or what types of assistance are likely to be effective, we can be helpfully guided by our knowledge of current bereavement related theories and by the distinct person (i.e., development theory and cohort issues) and environment (i.e., college setting) dynamics that can exist for college students. These person and environment dynamics are important to understand because how students respond to a significant death loss will likely vary based on where they are in terms of their development (Roy, 1986). Also, scholars have made specific reference to the idea that colleges and universities may not be settings conducive to the processing of grief and mourning (Balk, 1996; Silverman, 1987). We believe that concepts offered by all of these areas of

scholarship can be examined in conjunction with one another to produce creative and innovative directions for how to best meet the needs of bereaved college students.

We use the dual process model of grief (DPM; Schut, Stroebe, de Keijser, & van den Bout, 1997; Stroebe & Schut, 2001) and meaning reconstruction and loss (MRL; Neimeyer, 2001b; Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002) as our foundation while integrating issues of college student development, cohort, and setting to concretely examine the experience of bereaved college students. In doing so, we “take apart” the student development theories to integrate elements as appropriate. We acknowledge that this approach is not optimal, particularly when development is seen as cumulative (as it is in Chickering’s model; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), but we do so for ease of discussion. In addition, we incorporate available research findings where applicable. We have chosen DPM and MRL because they epitomize the thanatological shift away from the idea of “letting go” as a requirement of mourning (Neimeyer, 2001b) and incorporate inherent elements of complexity, flexibility, and diversity. Both of these theories are also currently receiving substantial clinical and empirical attention within the field of thanatology.

#### Dual Process Model of Coping and College Students

Influenced by general theories of coping with stress (Billings & Moos, 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and approaches to understanding and coping with bereavement as a specific stressor (Cook & Oltjenbruns, 1998; Rubin, 1981), Stroebe and Schut (1999, 2001) built their DPM around the pivotal need to distinguish between two types of stressors associated with death loss experiences. They argued that the bereaved must cope with the primary stressor of the death loss while also coping with subsequent secondary stressors (i.e., consequences of the death loss). Examples of secondary stressors include

mastering the tasks that the deceased had undertaken (e.g., the finances or cooking); dealing with arrangements for the reorganization of life without the loved one (e.g., it may be necessary to sell one’s house); and the development of a new identity from “spouse” to “widow(er)” or from “parent” to “parent of a deceased child.” (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 214)

Central to the DPM is the idea that an oscillation between loss-oriented (associated with the primary loss of the death) and restoration-oriented (associated with the secondary stressors) coping is necessary for optimal adjustment. Based on DPM, there will naturally and appropriately be times when the bereaved directly copes with the death through ruminating about the deceased, looking at photos, crying, and so on. On the other hand, there will be times when the bereaved will just as naturally and appropriately avoid coping with the death. Stroebe and Schut argued that this confrontation avoidance process also operates with regard to the bereaved’s use of restoration coping in response to secondary stressors. Through their concept of oscillation, Stroebe and Schut have combined two of the most difficult to reconcile aspects of the

grief and mourning process: the need to move ahead and continue to function in life and the desire to remain connected to the deceased (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2002).

Stroebe and Schut (1999) have argued that the DPM, originally developed to help explain the coping associated with the death of a spouse, can be applied more broadly. Our review of the literature revealed no current research that has explored the applicability of the DPM with bereaved college students. However, there is some empirical indication that the theory could apply to their experience. For example, Balk (1997) found that bereaved college students indicated the following practices to be helpful in their process of coping with their death loss: “remembering good things about the deceased, engaging in religious practices, crying, keeping busy, talking about the death, and thinking the person is better off because he/she is dead” (p. 215). It is interesting to note that these spontaneously offered strategies do seem to represent a balance of loss and restoration-oriented coping efforts. Silverman (1987) found that bereaved female college students generally focused on “getting back to normal” following their parent’s funeral. This approach appeared to meet their needs, but these women also described difficulties with concentration and studying, suggesting that a singular focus on restoration may be problematic for bereaved students. In a similar vein, previous research has indicated that bereaved college students’ reliance on avoidant emotion-focused coping (e.g., denial, distracting oneself) is positively associated with grief intensity and posttraumatic stress disorder severity (Schnider et al., 2007) and negatively associated with general college student adjustment (Cousins, 2008; as measured by the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire).

Despite the lack of current research, an integration of DPM with what we know about the developmental and contextual lives of bereaved college students leads to some preliminary propositions. More specifically, DPM suggests a need to assess for the particular secondary- or restoration-oriented stressors that may arise for this population and also to consider how the process of oscillation may operate differently based on the developmental, cohort, and contextual issues faced by college students.

Secondary- or restoration-oriented stressors. Some secondary stressors may be common for most college students, but there are likely many more that will be unique to individuals. The common losses will likely occur in the academic and interpersonal domains, whereas the range of additional secondary losses will vary greater based on demographic and cultural factors of the bereaved student (e.g., traditional vs. nontraditional student, race/ethnicity) and the roles the deceased played in his or her life (e.g., parent, friend).

Bereaved students are likely to face academic challenges. Students are, by definition, engaged in academic pursuits in an academic setting. They are enrolled in an institution of higher education and are working to maintain their satisfactory academic standing to graduate. Bereaved students may be faced with the need to cope with academic secondary stressors such as missing class and making up school work. It is important for counseling psychologists working with bereaved students to know that, in addition to the stressor of the death itself, students are also trying to

cope with returning to their status as productive students. Developmentally, traditional-age students who are working on achieving intellectual competence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) may be particularly vulnerable to having bereavement affect their academic performance. Research suggests that traditional-age bereaved students may struggle with difficulties in concentration and studying (Silverman, 1987) and also appear to exhibit lower GPAs than matched peers, particularly during the semester of their death loss (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Non-traditional-age students may have more or fewer academic-related challenges than their traditional-age peers. They may possess a higher level of emotional maturity that allows them to more effectively partition their grief and mourning experiences, or they may have more concurrent responsibilities associated with the death (e.g., executor of the will) that require them to deprioritize their

studies.

Additional secondary stressors may emerge in the interpersonal realm. It is important to note that these changes are likely to be dialectical in nature, resulting from a combination of internal factors or shifts and potential external changes in students' interpersonal environments. Bereaved students may avoid or be incapable of talking with their peers about the fact that they are bereaved. For traditional-age college students, the process of developing mature interpersonal relationships involves growing openness and acceptance of others and development of the capacity for intimacy (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The shift in quality of relationships that takes place as part of this vector is a shift to relationships that can survive distance, separation, and crises and that are characterized by a balanced interdependence. Students who have not achieved this mature interdependence with others may be inclined in the face of a death loss either to swing toward clinging to their partners and close friends or toward withdrawing from them and distrusting intimacy. In addition, students who are working to develop interpersonal competence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) may lack the skills to communicate their situation and their needs effectively to others and also may lack a social network of friends who could serve as sources of support. Research does, in fact, indicate that bereaved college students may either move quickly into or be overly hesitant regarding romantic relationships (Hepworth, Ryder, & Dreyer, 1984; Silverman, 1987). Scholars have offered clinical observations regarding bereaved students' concerns about being exposed or perceived as vulnerable in front of their peers (Janowiak, Mei-Tal, & Drapkin, 1995; Rickgarn, 1996) and even negative shifts in their liking and trust for others (Catlin, 1993).

In terms of potential external shifts, nonbereaved college students may change the manner in which they interact with a peer when they learn the peer has experienced a significant death. Such changes could be related to a lack of knowledge about grief or a lack of skill in how best to interact with troubled peers. Research suggests that bereaved students do not perceive their peers as supportive (Balk, 1997; Silverman, 1987). In fact, bereaved students report that their peers are uncomfortable discussing the topic of grief (Balk, 1997) and generally turn away or communicate the need for the bereaved to "get over it" (Silverman, 1987, p. 393).

The seeming lack of empathy on the part of nonbereaved peers could be connected to a limitation on the part of traditional-age college students to understand the experience of grief because of their developmental lack of ability to take the perspective of others (McEwen, Higgins, & Pipes, 1982). Research on traditional college students' understanding of grief is actually marked by inconsistencies. Although some findings suggest that college students have a fairly accurate sense of what the bereaved experience (Thompson & Range, 1991; Vickio, Cavanaugh, & Attig, 1990), other research indicates that college students either overestimate (Perkins & Tebes, 1984; Thompson & Range, 1992) or underestimate (Thompson & Range, 1992) the difficulties experienced by grieving individuals. Balk (1997) interviewed bereaved college students who reported that the grief recovery process was harder than they had anticipated. They indicated that their friends communicated an expectation that the grief recovery process should involve less sadness, occur more quickly, and in general be easier than was actually the case. In addition, bereaved students noted that their perceptions of grief recovery were similar to those held by their peers prior to the experience of their death loss. It is interesting to note that Laurie and Neimeyer (2008) recently found that African American bereaved college students reported feeling more supported through their mourning process than did their Caucasian peers.

Non-traditional-age bereaved college students may experience an even greater level of isolation than their traditional-age peers. Adult learners are not members of the Millennial Generation (born 1982–2002) and are therefore not likely to share common characteristics of that cohort such as being sheltered, feeling special, being close with parents, and being team oriented (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Non-traditional-age students are more likely to be members of Generation X or baby boomers with distinctive generational characteristics of their own (Howe & Strauss, 2000). These differing characteristics (e.g., higher degree of cynicism, orientation toward individualism and independence) as well as their different developmental status and life circumstances could make it difficult for them to identify with their Millennial Generation classmates as a peer group. In addition, their nontraditional peers are perhaps unlikely to interact with them in a general sense, let alone be open to conversations regarding personal bereavement-related issues. More research is clearly needed to explore the experience of peer relationships for diverse groups of bereaved students.

The secondary stressors and the subsequent need for restoration-focused coping will likely depend on the place that the deceased played in the bereaved student's life. Even though we offer specific thoughts about the potential roles that parents and friends play in the lives of bereaved college students, the primary "take home" message is that assumptions can likely not be made about such roles based on the formal relationship with the deceased. Rather, detailed assessment regarding roles of the deceased is important when working with bereaved students.

The potential roles that parents play in their children's lives are virtually endless and can vary greatly based on development, cohort, and other issues of diversity. Traditional-age students who have not negotiated the task of moving through autonomy toward interdependence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) may experience significant difficulties coping with parental death and may also

experience developmental disruption in this vector. The aspects of instrumental independence and emotional independence may pose difficulties if they depended on the parent for assistance and support. Still lacking instrumental and emotional independence from parents, the traditional-age bereaved student may be at a loss for where to seek the practical assistance (e.g., financing college) and reassurance and approval formerly provided by the parent. The bereaved student may turn to the surviving parent, who is also grieving and will likely, therefore, not be able to fulfill the roles previously filled by the deceased parent. Students may express the feeling of losing both parents as one has died and the other may be lost in his or her grief. This sense of loss is particularly important because research suggests that family communication (including with parents) may be significantly related to how college students adjust to a death loss (Tyson-Rawson, 1996). In contrast to their traditional-age peers, nontraditional students are less likely to have depended on parents to meet their daily needs and may have been more likely to have actually been in a caretaking role for their now deceased parent. Such students may struggle with the conflicting feelings of sadness at their loss and relief from the burdens of caretaking.

Cohort issues may heighten the difficulties experienced by traditional-age students when a parent dies. Given the particular closeness with parents that most of the Millennial Generation of college students express (Howe & Strauss, 2000), the death of a parent may involve the loss of a significant confidant. Furthermore, being a sheltered generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000) may make these students less well equipped to cope with loss. They may have been sheltered from opportunities to develop resilience as by definition resilience is connected with the notion of overcoming adversity (Wright & Masten, 2005). If these students are sheltered from the majority of life's difficulties, they may be less able to cope when struggles do arise.

Potential sex, socioeconomic, and cultural differences are important when considering the roles that parents play in their children's lives. For example, the developmental process of moving through autonomy toward interdependence may unfold differently for women than men (Huber, 2003), for underrepresented groups than for those from the majority culture (e.g., Neff, Brabeck, & Kearney, 2006), and for those from nonintact and low-income families than it does for those from intact and high income families (e.g., Carter, 2007). In addition, feeling the pull to return home following parent death may be particularly salient for first-generation college students (cf. Carter & Robinson, 2002) or for students from collectivistic cultures (cf. Sy & Romero, 2008).

The death of a friend will likely result in a distinct set of secondary- or restoration-oriented stressors, again depending on the roles that the deceased played in the life of the bereaved. As noted by scholars (Astin, 1993; Buoto et al., 2007), friends play critical roles in the lives of traditional-age college students. For example, if the friend who died was a roommate, then the daily life of the bereaved student may change completely. How will she cope with living alone or having to adjust to living with a new roommate? If the friend was his primary study partner, how will he adjust his routines to maintain his academic performance? If the friend was her primary emotional support, who will she turn to for support in her grief and during other subsequent difficult life experiences? Another important secondary stressor with the death of a peer may be



a heightened sense of one's own mortality. Research suggests that bereaved traditional-age college students who have experienced the death of a friend are less likely to view themselves as invincible and death as a distant possibility (Sklar & Hartley, 1990).

The impact of friend, nonkin, or extended family deaths can vary greatly, and counseling psychologist will serve bereaved college students best if they are sensitive to the multiple levels of diversity that may come to play. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students may experience unacknowledged grief following the death of someone who others perceive as a "friend" but who was actually a romantic partner. Foster children may experience significant grief following nonkin death losses (cf. Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005), and research indicates that African American students exhibit higher grief intensity following the death of extended family members than do their Caucasian peers (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008).

Oscillation. The process of oscillation between loss-oriented and restoration oriented coping is likely to vary based on developmental, contextual, and cohort-related factors. Traditional-age college students may be less developmentally open to the whole process of oscillation than their older, nontraditional peers. Students in a more dualistic phase of cognitive development (Perry, 1968) may focus solely either on loss or on restoration. They are likely to need concrete information (and perhaps even permission) about how moving back and forth between these types of coping is acceptable, possible, and likely more healthy for them. Bereaved students who are thinking dualistically may find the conflicting emotional responses they experience difficult to understand and accept. They may search for the authority who will tell them the correct way to grieve and to cope with loss. They might be vulnerable to feelings of guilt about grieving incorrectly, possibly based on the response they receive from the authority or the feedback they hear from peers that they need to "get over it" (Silverman, 1987), which could affect their feelings of competence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Perry (1968) described deflections from growth, that is, patterns in which students do not move forward as expected. The challenge of a significant death may trigger such a deflection, possibly "escape" (taking refuge in alienation) or "retreat" (moving from a more cognitively complex way of thinking back to dualism). Bereaved students might retreat from the more cognitively complex process of oscillation to being stuck in either restoration-oriented coping or loss-oriented coping.

Traditional-age students in the midst of learning to manage emotions (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) may also have difficulty identifying and accepting the intense and sometimes conflicting (Janowiak et al., 1995; Roy, 1986) emotional responses they feel, and they may experience difficulty finding appropriate ways to express and act on these feelings. For such students, it may, again, be more comfortable to retreat to restoration-oriented coping. In contrast, non-traditional-age students may be able to tolerate and process cognitive ambiguity and fully manage their emotions to the extent that they can oscillate more smoothly between the loss and restoration oriented coping. The greater number and variety of restoration-oriented coping tasks that may confront nontraditional students (e.g., funeral arrangements, parenting, employment, and school) may hinder their ability to be more loss focused. The college environment may also

affect students' ability to oscillate. On one hand, students may be more able to oscillate because they have more control (than may older adults) over their schedules. On the other hand, the college environment (as is society as a whole) is likely to emphasize restoration-focused coping over and above that of loss-oriented coping. It has been argued that U.S. society does not tend to tolerate extended periods of mourning (Walter, 2008), and campuses with their focus on productivity and fun (Nathan, 2005) may mean that students tend to favor restoration coping as they concentrate on tasks (e.g., coursework) at which they can achieve.

Cohort issues may contribute to students' openness to or ability to engage in the process of oscillation. Both traditional-age college students who are part of the Millennial Generation and their nontraditional, Generation X peers may, again, be prone to a tendency toward restoration- rather than loss-oriented coping, although for different reasons. With their orientation toward achievement, traditional-age college students may instinctively turn their attention to their academics and may need guidance and permission from counseling psychologists to experience the loss aspects of their grief reactions and to be open to the idiosyncratic and unfolding process of their mourning. Non-traditional-age Generation X students with their pragmatic worldview also may be inclined to focus on tasks and may need to be convinced of the benefits of loss-oriented coping and may need to find more practical or concrete expressions of their grief (e.g., activism in organizations such as the American Cancer Society).

### Meaning Reconstruction and College Students

The process of meaning making following significant death loss has received considerable attention within the field of thanatology (e.g., Attig, 1996; Nadeau, 1998; Neimeyer, 2001a). At a basic level, the experience of a death disrupts the previously unexamined assumptions that people have about how the world works and who they are as people. Bereaved individuals are, therefore, faced with the task of "relearning" and "reauthoring" their understanding of how the world works, their personal identity, and their life narrative.

Neimeyer (2001a) has argued that meaning reconstruction is, in fact, the central process of mourning and is a dynamic process with multiple facets (Neimeyer, 2000). He cautions against a view of "meaning" as a purely conscious, cognitive, and intellectual concept and advocates for a deeper understanding of meaning making as a "predominately tacit, passionate process that unfolds in a social field" (p. 552). Neimeyer (2000, 2001c) has offered important emphases for clinicians to consider as they conceptualize and work to assist bereaved individuals through the process of meaning reconstruction. These emphases include finding or creating meaning in the life and identity of the bereaved as well as in the death of the loved one, acknowledging the process in addition to the contents associated with finding meaning, highlighting the idiosyncratic nature of meaning reconstruction, recognizing the interpersonal and cultural contexts within which people find meaning, and closely attending to the tacit and often inexpressible meanings of loss.

Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) offered a framework for understanding the process of meaning reconstruction organized around three core dimensions: sense making, benefit finding, and identity reconstruction. They described sense making as the ability to find some kind of explanation for the death. Even though they acknowledge that making sense of the death is an ongoing process, Neimeyer and Anderson consider sense making to be particularly important early in the grief process. Benefit finding, the second core dimension, also is supported by research (e.g., Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). Individuals who are able to identify personal, philosophical, and/or spiritual benefits associated with bereavement seem to adjust better. The final dimension offered by Neimeyer and Anderson is identity reconstruction. Consistent with many other scholars, they posit that the death of a central person requires bereaved individuals to reorganize their sense of self and reauthor the story of their lives.

The meaning reconstruction approach to conceptualizing the grieving process appears to fit well when considering the experience of bereaved college students. As emphasized by Tyson-Rawson (1996),

Because of the psychosocial tasks facing the late adolescent college student during this phase of the life cycle, the need to integrate the loss into the internal world may be particularly relevant. In the case of the bereaved college student, the pressures to separate from the nuclear family and form new intimate, peer relationships—issues to which attachment and loss are salient—continue to exert influences during the grieving process. (p. 128)

The following sections integrate the core dimensions of sense making, benefit finding, and identity reconstruction with relevant research and the developmental and contextual issues faced by bereaved college students. Again, we offer examples, not an exhaustive discussion of every possible point of intersection.

**Sense making.** Research indicates that sense making is a significant aspect of the grieving process for bereaved college students. Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991) found that 90% of their parentally bereaved college student sample described asking themselves “Why him/her?” (in reference to the parent who died) at some time during their grief. In all, 50% indicated that they had never been able to reach a satisfactory answer to the question, whereas 50% indicated that they had found answers to those kinds of questions. The ability to find meaning in their death loss was negatively related to grief intensity. Tyson-Rawson (1996) found that parentally bereaved college women who described coming to terms with the death, in the sense of its having meaning, exhibited an increased ability to function effectively and a greater sense of acceptance of the loss as part of their life histories when compared to those who did not describe such a sense of meaning. Michael and Snyder (2005) found that finding meaning in the death was negatively associated with rumination and positively associated with well-being for bereaved college students. This finding was particularly strong for those within the 1st year of the death loss in comparison to those who were bereaved 13 or more months.

Research (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006) suggests that the process of making sense of the death may be an important coping strategy for bereaved college students. More specifically, Holland et al. (2006) found that sense making (i.e., single item rated on a 4-point scale—“How much sense would you say you have made of the loss?”) was a significant and meaningful predictor of grief reactions (i.e., preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased, hallucinations, etc.). The power of sense making in predicting grief for college students also appeared to remain stable even when those students who experienced sudden death losses were studied separately (Currier et al., 2006). In contrast, the extent to which students could identify benefits (i.e., single item rated on a 5-point scale—“Despite the loss, have you been able to find any benefit from your experience of the loss?”) was not associated with grief intensity.

How college students make sense of a death loss may be influenced by their developmental phase. Although Neimeyer (2001a) has cautioned against viewing meaning making as a purely cognitive process, the ability of bereaved students to engage in productive sense making will likely be influenced by their level of cognitive development. Because sense making is a highly individual and unique process, it may be difficult for college students who are oriented toward external authorities for knowledge (Perry, 1968) to engage in sense making. Those thinking dualistically will seek right answers from authorities; those thinking at somewhat more advanced levels will turn to authorities for the right process. If bereaved students receive some kind of answer to “Why?” from some authority (e.g., a religious leader), they may not be inclined to search further, accepting the answer they have received as

right. Students thinking multiplistically will struggle with issues related to “fairness” as they attempt to make sense of the death, particularly if the death was sudden, unexpected, or of a young person. Students thinking relativistically will tend not to look to authorities for answers but will attempt to bring critical thinking skills to their attempts to make meaning. They may struggle, therefore, with how to evaluate the “adequacy” of their possible meanings.

Sense making also may be closely connected to the development of the concept of purpose of life (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) in a general sense. Although the vector of developing purpose is typically thought of as focusing on career development, the vector actually involves the creation of plans that balance vocational interests, avocational interests, and family and lifestyle commitments and concerns (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), purpose becomes a developmental focus in the junior and senior years of college; therefore, sense making may be more difficult for younger college students. Research suggests that bereaved individuals who exhibit high general purpose in life, when compared to their peers

with lower purpose in life, report fewer avoidant and intrusive symptoms (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992), a lower level of grief intensity (Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991), and less bereavement-related anger (Pfof, Stevens, & Wessels, 1989). The death of a close family member or of a partner may complicate development along this vector as a student may struggle to accommodate new and unanticipated family commitments following the death of a parent, for instance, or the need to remake plans that included the now deceased partner. In the aftermath of a significant death loss, students could reconsider their chosen paths, committing to a major field of study because of a perception that that is what the deceased would have wanted or abandoning a path they were pursuing that seems irrelevant now that the person to whom it was important has died.

Unfortunately, the college environment may not be conducive to sense making, and today's cohort of pressured college students (Howe & Strauss, 2000) may not be naturally inclined toward sense making. The college campus is a busy place, and students frequently report that they are stressed out or overwhelmed (American College Health Association, 2008). Immersion in the busy environment of classes, work, and extracurricular activities may provide little time or opportunity for the reflection necessary to engage in sense making.

Benefit finding. Research is mixed with regard to the importance of benefit finding (identifying personal, philosophical, or spiritual benefits associated with the bereavement; Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002) in the mourning process of bereaved college students. Investigations with primarily traditional-age bereaved college students have indicated benefits offered by students such as positive reprioritization of what is considered important, deeper appreciation of life, and a growing awareness of the true nature of grief (Balk, 1997; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Oltjenbruns, 1991; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991). In addition, research suggests that many bereaved students report shifts in their religious beliefs in connection with a death loss (Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991). Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) argue that their ongoing clinical and empirical work suggests that a significantly lower number of bereaved college students, when compared to bereaved older adults, are able to find even one spiritual, existential, and/or personal benefit following a death loss experience.

Whether or not bereaved college students seek to find or perceive benefits associated with their death loss may be influenced by developmental and timing issues. The concept of benefit finding may be particularly difficult for students thinking dualistically (Perry, 1968) because it may seem counterintuitive that anything good could come out of a clearly bad event such as a death. Similarly, students thinking multiplistically may struggle with the fairness of deriving benefit from death. Neimeyer and Anderson's (2002) observation that college students may be limited in their ability to find benefit could be partially explained by research findings (e.g., Love & Guthrie, 1999) that suggest that few traditional-age students reach the more advanced levels (e.g., relativistic) of cognitive development in Perry's scheme prior to graduation. Students' progress in the development of integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) may be one important developmental factor related to benefit finding. In their presentation of the vector of developing

integrity, Chickering and Reisser (1993) describe the movement from a rigid application of moral principles to a more nuanced value system, the adoption of a personal set of values, and a progression toward bringing one's actions in line with one's espoused values.

Michael and Snyder (2005) found that finding benefit in the death was positively associated with well-being for more recently bereaved students and negatively associated with well-being for those bereaved for a longer period. They argued that sense making may be a more finite process than benefit finding such that finding one benefit does not imply the process is over. They suggested that benefit finding may be more beneficial in the earlier rather than later phases of the grieving process.

Identity reconstruction. Despite the fact that identity development is clearly a key task for traditional-age college students, little research is currently available that offers insights into how the process of identity development may influence or be influenced by the process of bereavement for this population. Schultz (2007) qualitatively studied the grief experience of six bereaved women college students who had experienced the deaths of their mothers sometime earlier in their lives. She found that these women reported identity-related effects in the areas of "relatedness" (p. 28) to others and in the integration of the loss into their sense of self.

The meaning making necessary for optimal coping with a death loss may be difficult for traditional-age bereaved college students because they are in the midst of the identity formation process and live in a primarily task-focused environment. Identity reconstruction seems particularly challenging for individuals whose identities are still "under construction" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Because each of the first four vectors is seen as a necessary precursor to the vector of establishing identity, difficulties in achieving these vectors because of bereavement may result in difficulties in establishing identity. Students who have doubts about their competency, difficulties expressing or managing emotions, difficulties acting autonomously, and/or difficulties forming relationships with others are likely to experience difficulties in figuring out who they are and who they want to be in the world. How can those who have not yet established identity manage to reconstruct their sense of self? At a basic level, the experience of a death loss may disrupt the previously unexamined assumptions that individuals have about how the world works and who they are as people. Bereaved college students also live in an environment that may provide little room for introspection and may experience intrapersonal and interpersonal shifts that raise questions about their basic sense of self (e.g., "I am an extroverted person; why don't I feel like being around people right now?").

Neimeyer (1999, 2000) argues that human beings are inveterate meaning makers and that the meanings people make are necessarily anchored in their culture. In fact, he has argued the meaning-making perspective on mourning recognizes the sociologically important concepts of ritual, local culture, and the discourse that partially defines each social system. Empirical studies with adults also support the applicability of the meaning reconstruction framework to the grief

experience of diverse groups. For example, Rosenblatt and Wallace (2005) found that meaning making was a significant component of the mourning process of African Americans.

With regard to thanatological scholarship in general, future research is needed that not only focuses on the use of more diverse samples but also incorporates a general openness to cultural epistemology. Rosenblatt (2008) has emphasized the need for a research agenda that considers cross-cultural information and perspectives at a higher order level. He argues that it is not enough to be sensitive to the potential risks of ethnocentrism in the use of restricted samples or the interpretation of findings but rather that investigations must also be free of the idea “that all cultures and all humans can be understood on the basis of principles, concepts, categories, and processes that make sense in English and a few European languages” (p. 219). As Rosenblatt so succinctly stated, “The reality is that with a genuinely open perspective on culture, everything is open to question—what is grief, what are standards for human and family-functioning, what is ‘normal,’ and how it is we know what we know” (p. 219).

Counseling psychologists working with bereaved students will serve those students best when they consider issues of diversity in connection with the process of meaning making. For example, nontraditional college students who experience parental death may particularly struggle with sense making if both parents are now dead. More specifically, they must now make sense of the world and revise their own identity now that there is no generation between themselves and death (Goldstein, 2005). In addition, they may struggle with feelings of perceived benefit and relief if they were the primary caretaker for an aging parent who has now died. An international student separated from her family of origin may struggle with sense making if she was not able to be present and help care for her grandmother while she was dying. A gay student may battle with guilt when he experiences relief following the death of an older sibling who terminated all contact with him because of his sexual orientation. In addition, a student majoring in art may describe losing her identity when her maternal grandmother, her mentor and the only other artistic person in her family of engineers, dies suddenly.

### Integrated Illustration

We offer here one example, out of countless possibilities, of how the bereavement theories and the unique developmental, cohort, and contextual factors faced by grieving college students may interact. Notice how each of these elements interacts with all of the other elements to contribute to the complexity of this admittedly oversimplified example. A 19-year-old female college student experiences the death of her 16-year-old brother as a result of a car accident. As she returns to campus, following the funeral, she finds that she is overwhelmed by thoughts and feelings related to her brother’s death (managing emotions) and is working on a memorial Facebook page (loss-oriented coping; sense making; technology adept cohort). However, she is struggling with the unfairness of her brother’s death (cognitive multiplicity) and with not knowing who she is without him in her life (identity reconstruction). She feels compelled by those on campus (context) to function as usual (restoration-oriented coping) and by her advisor

(context) to focus on her academics (restoration-oriented coping; context). The student herself has become quite concerned about her ability to complete the semester and stay on track for graduation (pressured and achieving cohort; developing competence). Her parents have requested that she transfer to a college in her hometown as the loss of one child has heightened their concerns for their surviving child (sheltered cohort; moving through autonomy toward interdependence).

A change in the demographic characteristics of the student or in the particulars of the death situation would alter the application of any one component as well as the interplay among components. Consider the following questions, for example: What if the brother had been drinking? What if the death had been a homicide rather than accident? What if the bereaved student was African American? What if the bereaved student was male? What if this was an international, non-Christian student and the brother died in the country of origin? We argue that working with bereaved college students requires vigilance to all aspects of the person in her environment and the dynamic relationship among these aspects with each other and with theory.

Recommendations for Administrators,  
Clinicians, Educators, and Researchers

In this section we provide recommendations for counseling psychologists to consider in their professional work with bereaved college students. As counseling psychologists play a number of roles on college and university campuses, our recommendations are divided into four categories: administrative, clinical, training, and empirical. Walter (2008) contends that there is a societal pull to inhibit grief, and we believe counseling psychologists have an opportunity to provide acknowledgement and recognition that others, particularly on a college campus, may not be offering. We argue that the task is actually quite straightforward. Corazzini and May's (1985) suggestion, made 25 years ago, that bereaved students need support, empathy, and opportunities to reminisce is consistent with recent research on what bereaved college students perceive as supportive (Rack, Burlison, Bodie, Holmstrom, & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Based on his many years in academia (as both a clinician and administrator), Wrenn (1999) proposed that bereaved college students "especially want to know that they are dealing with things normally and well and that they did what they could, knowing what they knew at the time of the death" (p. 134).

Administrative

- Determine if policies (e.g., bereavement leave, course or semester withdrawal options) are in place to assist bereaved students.
- If yes, review current policies to determine if they are aligned with the material presented here. For example, are students allowed the opportunity to make up work following a bereavement-related absence?



- If no, be an advocate for such policies. Colleges and universities rarely have bereavement leave policies for students, even though such policies are commonplace for faculty and staff.
- Ensure that such policies are responsive to the range of bereavement practices of the members of today's diverse student population.
- Promote the idea of an annual memorial service for the families and friends of students who have died (see Hamilton, 2008, for further information).
- Determine an identifiable place on campus where bereaved students can go to seek support (Balk, 2001). This could be the counseling center, or it could be offices such as the office of the dean of students or the student wellness office or—particularly on religiously affiliated campuses—campus ministries.
- Facilitate establishment of support programs for bereaved students such as those offered through the National Alliance of Ailing Mothers and Fathers (AMF) Support Network. AMF is akin to other grassroots efforts (e.g., Compassionate Friends), as it was initiated by a committed group of bereaved college students.

#### Clinical

- Make a thorough loss assessment a routine part of intake interviews. Both death and nondeath losses (e.g., parental divorce) are important to understanding the experience of college students who present for counseling.
- Make a thorough assessment of the roles that the deceased played in the bereaved student's life (e.g., a grandparent could have been his/her primary caregiver).
- Be aware that the unique quality of the relationship (e.g., supportive, ambivalent, conflictual) with the deceased affects the grief experience of bereaved college students.
- Remain mindful of the distinction between general college student adjustment and the construct of grief. Bereaved students may operate well on a daily basis, but they may be experiencing significant grief that affects their intrapersonal functioning (Cousins, 2008).
- Become familiar with how developmental issues interact with grief and mourning for college students.
- Become familiar with current bereavement-related theories and avoid using stage or phase theories in conceptualizing grief and the mourning process.
- Be aware that the generally believed need for the bereaved to “say goodbye” or break ties with the deceased is, in fact, a myth (Wortman & Silver, 2001).

- Educate students about the “grey” involved in the mourning process; mourning is not linear but rather an unfolding and idiosyncratic process.
- Educate bereaved students about the unique person–environment challenges they face as grievors in a college setting.
- Carefully consider the unique ethical concerns that may arise when treating bereaved college students. For example, the dual roles that often exist on college campuses (e.g., the counselor who also teaches) can challenge the concerns that bereaved college students have regarding confidentiality (Balk, Tyson-Rawson, & Colletti-Wetzel, 1993).
- Engage in interventions that are perceived as most helpful by bereaved college students including expressing care and concern and providing opportunities to talk about emotions and reminisce about the person who died. Avoid those perceived as not helpful including advice giving, minimizing feelings, and encouraging avoidance strategies (Rack et al., 2008).
- Offer psychoeducational programs on grief through residence halls, Greek organizations, academic courses, and/or offices that oversee student activities and groups (Vickio, 2008).

#### Training

- Include content on bereavement-related theories and college student development theory as a standard part of program curriculum. This content should include information on diversity within each of these arenas of scholarship.
- Provide opportunities for students to apply theory in their clinical work.
- Encourage faculty and students alike to engage in continuing education regarding grief and mourning through organizations such as the Association for Death Education and Counseling ([www.adec.org](http://www.adec.org)).

#### Empirical

- Increase the empirical attention currently directed toward thanatological issues and, more specifically, to the experiences of bereaved college students.
- Determine what factors affect how bereaved college students define their need for help and what influences their decision to seek or not seek counseling services.
- Establish what types of interventions (e.g., individual, group, psychoeducational) are most effective in meeting the specific needs of bereaved college students.
- Examine how the grief reactions and mourning process of bereaved college students may differ from the experiences of older adults.

• Conduct research based on college student development and mourning theories. Below are examples of research questions related to theory:

- Is oscillation between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping most effective for bereaved college students?
- How does the experience of bereavement affect the identity construction and reconstruction process for grieving college students?
- Examine how diversity interacts with the experiences of grief and the process of mourning for bereaved college students through the use of diverse samples. For example, at this point little is known about how race/ethnicity, family structure, nontraditional student status, social class, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion or spirituality affect the grief reactions or mourning process for this population.
- Use instruments specifically designed to measure grief in combination with more traditional psychiatric assessments.
- Further validate and/or develop psychometrically sound instruments to assess the grief and mourning of bereaved college students.
- Move beyond basic cross-sectional and correlational designs through the use of longitudinal, mixed-methods, and multilevel and hierarchical modeling approaches.

## Conclusion

Bereaved college students are a population worthy of attention. A significant portion of students must cope with the experience of a death loss while in college, and these death loss experiences can and often do affect their emotional and academic functioning. Counseling psychologists are in administrative, clinical, training, and research-related positions that allow them to be of assistance to bereaved students. Being informed about how the developmental, cohort-related, and contextual issues faced by college students interact with the experience of bereavement will contribute to counseling psychologists' ability to be helpful. Theory, research, and clinical literature provide specific recommendations for best practices for counseling psychologists in their work with bereaved students.

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## Bios

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