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Memorial playgrounds: Special ways of coping with extreme loss

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand how active coping with extreme loss takes place when creating memorial playgrounds, as well as in relation to existing memorial playgrounds. Using qualitative methods and drawing from 63 cases, the research enriches our understanding of bereavement by revealing the central mechanisms through which active coping takes place and by presenting the distinct elements that the mechanisms are composed of. The study contributes to the research on bereavement by showing how active coping takes place both as an outcome of and during the memorial creation process.

Introduction



The death of a child is usually considered one of the most extreme losses that a person has to deal with. For the bereaved parents, it may result in traumatizing and overwhelming grief that transforms their lives permanently (e.g., Arnold & Gemma, 2008). Other family members and friends are also affected and grieve both individually and together with the parents (Bartel, 2020). The death of a child is also a challenge, rupturing culture-specific understandings of community and existentially thematizing notions of “good” and “bad” deaths, since it is often regarded as going against the natural order of things and as, crucially, untimely (Cecil, 1996; Davies, 2004). It is also capable of shattering a group’s general sense of security by making explicit that anyone in the community may face unanticipated extreme loss. Thus, even those indirectly affected members of a dead child’s larger community are prone to feeling grief that may not even be acknowledged by society (Jonas et al., 2018).

Past studies show that parents, other family members, friends, and the community use a variety of ways to cope with the death of a child (e.g., Ahmadi & Zandi, 2021; Bartel, 2020). Continuing bonds with the deceased (Klass et al., 1996; Silverman et al., 2021) and meaning reconstruction have been theorized as central to coping with the loss (Neimeyer, 2001).

Grieving is characterized by intense emotions, especially, “cycling around an emotional core of sadness” (Hooghe et al., 2012, p. 1220). Bereaved close ones may experience depression and powerlessness (Klass, 2013) and face external and self-imposed social isolation (Hawthorne et al., 2021).

However, some bereaved people choose an exceptional way to deal with such immense loss by initiating a search for vast amounts of external funding and engaging in massive construction projects. All of this requires proactively looking for publicity and mobilizing large social networks. While in the midst of deep grief, they put an incredible amount of energy into setting up memorial playgrounds dedicated to lost children, aiming to create happiness and laughter for other children and their families.

Most permanent public memorials are initiated by politicians or the general public. They are designed and built by professionals, and they tend to be dedicated either to famous community members (such as Princess Diana or President Lincoln) or to a large number of people who died suddenly (e.g., the 9/11 attack or school shootings) (cf. Berns, 2011). In contrast, memorial playgrounds are permanent, extensive memorials that are often initiated and at least partly designed and built by grieving families and community members. They are dedicated to young children (the average age in our data was 5.5 years old) who

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were typically not well-known in the community when still alive, but who then became a cause and focus of grief that was felt widely beyond their families and close friends once they were dead.

While memorial playgrounds seem to be special, as they are planned and made exclusively to remember children (and never adults), they are not the only permanent contemporary memorials that can be dedicated to children. Other forms include roadside memorials, such as spontaneously and individually raised memorials to victims of car accidents (Bednar, 2020; Breen, 2006; Welsh, 2017), which are often dedicated to adults but sometimes also to children, ghost bikes (Holloway et al., 2018), which, even though the majority of them are dedicated to adults, some are also made to remember children, and other, more individual and particular forms of memorialization, which can be counted as personal expressions of what Doss (2010) characterized as a general trend in memorial-orientedness.

The seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of memorial playgrounds has been completely neglected in academic research to date, although it exists around the globe and even though it can—in its distinctiveness—inform us about active coping: taking direct action to reduce the impacts of stressors and increasing one's coping efforts (Carver et al., 1989) when facing extreme loss. Although past studies have considered post-bereavement active coping and have shown that it can foster mental health (Videka-Sherman, 1982) and is, in some cultural contexts, even interpreted as facilitating posttraumatic growth (Fisher et al., 2020), surprisingly little is known about what the concept itself encompasses in the form of self-initiated extensive and exhaustive projects lasting several years and requiring constant interaction with various stakeholders and authorities.

Furthermore, research on active coping concentrates on activities, such as taking direct action, adapting to change, planning, solving problems, and identifying and utilizing sources of help to meet one's needs (e.g., Miller et al., 2020; Riley et al., 2007). Studies on the products of these activities are scarce. This is particularly obvious in the research on art therapy that highlights the process of creating the art (such as painting, writing, or composing) as a way of coping with extreme loss (Lister et al., 2008), but that neglects the role that the outcome of this process (for instance, a painting, a book, or a song) may have for the coping process, too. Thus, we lack knowledge of how active coping takes place continuously in relation to the created product. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to understand how active coping with

extreme loss takes place during the memorial playground creation process and how it is related to existing memorial playgrounds as well.

As we are starting with an unexplored real-world phenomenon (memorial playgrounds), our study is exploratory. Drawing on rich qualitative data on memorial playgrounds, we inductively identify four central mechanisms through which active coping takes place.

Methodology

To investigate the phenomenon of memorial playgrounds, we used an inductive grounded theory approach, which is suitable for investigating complex and novel topics (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In the field of active coping with extreme loss, memorial playgrounds represent very particular, unusual, and, in a way, extreme cases, and can thus advance theory building, because in them, “the dynamics being examined tend to be more visible than they might be in other contexts” (Pratt et al., 2006, p. 238). Extreme cases have been suggested for studying extremely elusive concepts because in these cases, the concept tends to be especially highlighted (see Ermakoff, 2014).

Our data collection started by detecting the memorial playgrounds that had been built. For this, we used the Google search engine and keywords and phrases in English, Swedish, Spanish, and Finnish (see [Supplementary Table 1](#)). In total, we detected 112 individual memorial playgrounds. The information on these playgrounds was collected from the Internet, and those playgrounds that did not provide enough public information (i.e., why they were built and how the builders/users felt about them) were excluded from the analysis. After this screening round, our sample resulted in 63 memorial playgrounds, the large majority (51) of them being in the United States, and the rest being located in the United Kingdom (5), Australia (3), Canada (3), and Finland (1). The analyzed playgrounds and the description of their data are presented in [Supplementary Table 2](#).

We decided to utilize only publicly available material instead of, for example, interviews, because we did not want to deliberately disturb people coping with the loss of a beloved child following an ethical cost/risk assessment (cf. Hill, 1995). Since these playgrounds needed publicity to collect the resources, and since they interested the community, the public material was often abundant. Our data consisted of online press articles, YouTube videos, journalistic video interviews, and public social media, such as blogs, Internet sites, and public Facebook profiles.

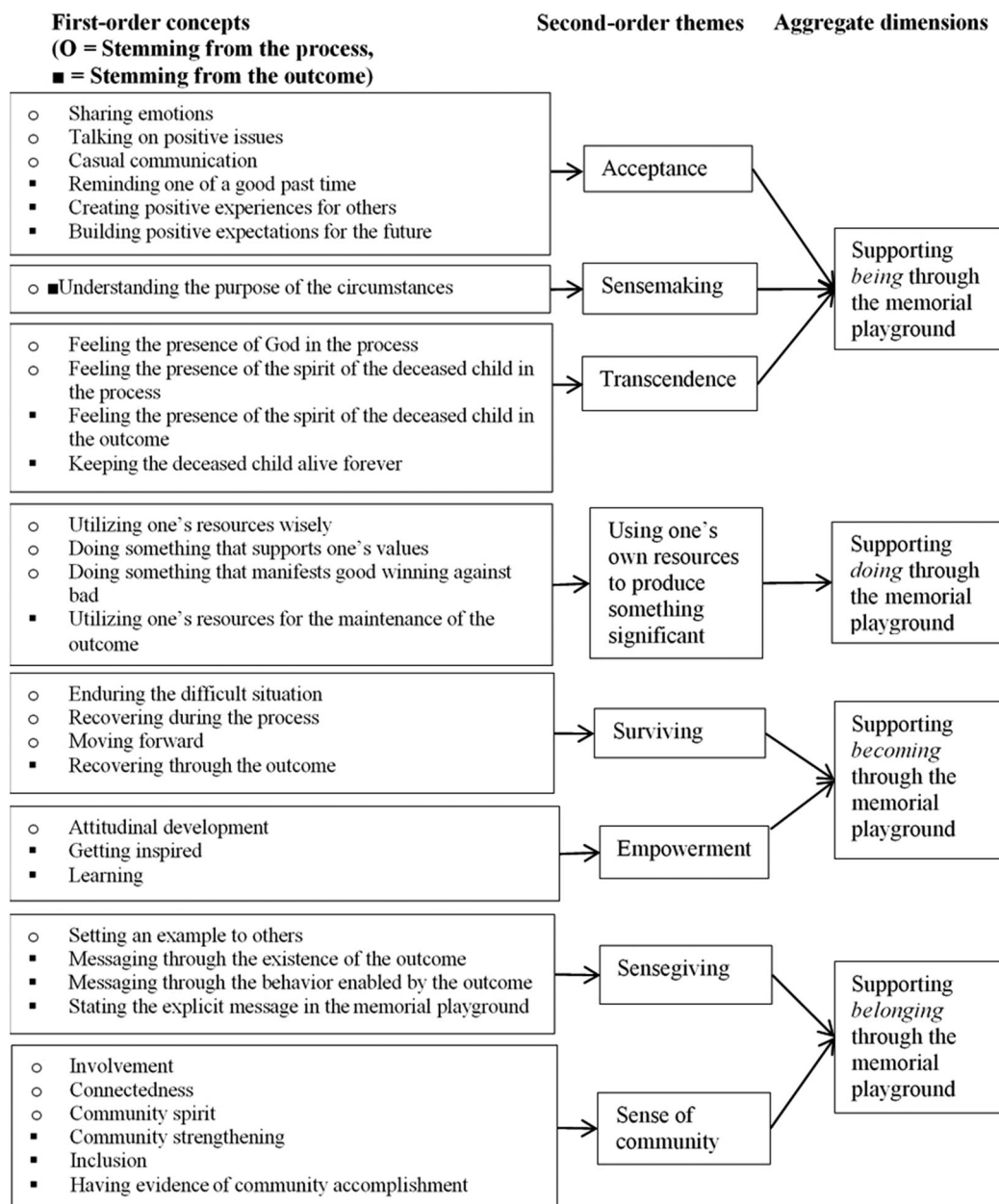


Figure 1. Data structure.

Although we utilized publicly open research material, we still reached out directly to those with public Facebook or personal blog material for research permission. Without research permission, we did not include any of these data in our analysis.

The data (including transcribed video data) were transferred to QSR NVivo. First, the data were read through, and a general view formed. The data were then coded inductively utilizing a qualitative content analysis, in which the textual data were coded into emerging themes and sub-themes (Brummett, 2018). We applied the established Gioia methodology in our analysis (Gioia et al., 2013) and identified the initial themes in informant-centric terms, with our

preliminary codes reflecting on the motives behind building or using playgrounds, and the feelings and experiences that their building and utilization evoked in individuals. To ensure analytical robustness, the coding was conducted via interaction between two researchers and modified when disagreements occurred. Our interpretations were developed and compared with the theory in an iterative manner. The insight gradually emerged that active coping was related to both the process and the outcome, and that the central mechanisms of active coping were being, doing, becoming, and belonging (Figure 1). The findings of the analysis are presented in the following section. To protect the grieving families, all the names in the findings section have

been anonymized, and playgrounds are referred to by numbers that were given to them in a random order.

Findings

Our analysis identified four central, closely interrelated, and partially overlapping mechanisms of active coping: being, doing, becoming, and belonging (see Table 1). We noticed that in memorial playgrounds, each of these may stem either from the process of creating the playground or from the outcome—that is, the playground that was built. Active coping was undertaken by both those facing the extreme loss (in this case, parents and other family members) and those experiencing the loss from more of a distance (in this case, other members of the community and volunteers helping to build the memorial playgrounds).

Supporting being through the memorial playgrounds

Being was seen to be composed of acceptance, sense-making, and transcendence. Acceptance was demonstrated in recognizing the realities of the life situation and coping with them in the best way possible. In the memorial playgrounds, this was seen during the building process, when participating in building apparently helped the bereaved to contemplate the situation and also to publicly talk about their lost loved one: “This playground project allowed our family to talk about [her] and not cry” (Mother of the deceased on playground builders’ website, Playground 61).

Participation in the creation created possibilities to ponder upon one’s situation and share one’s emotions and thoughts casually while working on the building project. On the other hand, the outcome of the creation process also contributed to acceptance. The finished playground was seen to represent the positive memories of the deceased child; additionally, it even served as a refresher and broadener of existing memories, as these reminiscences often arose from the thought of other children having fun in the playground: “I just wanted to make his friends smile when they think about him instead of cry. And I think that the playground might just do that. It might make them smile” (Mother of the deceased in a local newspaper, Times Union, Playground 46).

Thus, the created memorial playground reminded them of the past, of good experiences, and even symbolically transfigured and revived the deceased children. The latter happened whenever new impressions blended with the memories, with the new impressions

being generated by the children using the playground. The data also indicated that being able to create positive experiences for others helped in accepting the situation and finding meaning, even in immense tragedy.

Sensemaking was demonstrated in understanding the purpose of the circumstances by seeing their constructive repercussions either during the creation process or when experiencing the finished outcome: “I’m looking for some kind of positive outcome from this tragedy” (Mother of the deceased in a local newspaper, Daily Gazette, Playground 46).

Understanding one’s place between the past and future is essential for feeling alive. However, transcendental experiences also seem to be important in terms of how one sees oneself being in the world. Transcendence was experienced during the building of memorial playgrounds. Spiritual experiences, such as feeling the presence of God or the deceased child, took place when creating memorial playgrounds, as well as in relation to existing playgrounds; the child’s spirit was felt in the playground or above it, watching over those playing:

I truly believe that our sweet Angel is present in the laughter, the excited screams as children slide down slides, the courage as they complete the monkey bars for the first time, and the thrill as they get higher on the swings. She is dancing in the wind. (Mother of the deceased on a Catholic Review website, Playground 33)

The memorial playground was also used as a means to convey a sense of infinity, which was manifested in endeavors to keep the spirit of the deceased child alive forever and to provide a special place for the spirit: “We want to bring her home, so her spirit will always be with us and this community” (Construction company representative in a local newspaper, New Haven Register, Playground 7).

To sum up, active coping stemmed from both the process of building a memorial playground and from the outcome of that process through accepting the circumstances, making sense of them, and experiencing transcendence. These elements were seen to form the mechanism of being, since they were rather passive, were related to the state of existence, and to the contemplation of one’s situation and a higher level of reality.

Supporting doing through the memorial playgrounds

Doing, or coping linked to the action itself, seems to be a core mechanism in active coping. Based on the

Table 1. Active coping by supporting being, doing, becoming, and belonging through a memorial playground: data supporting the interpretations.

| | Elements | Representative quotations on active coping stemming from the process of creating a memorial playground | Representative quotations on active coping stemming from the created memorial playground |
|-----------|--|---|--|
| Being | Acceptance | Sometimes it's hard to talk about it, but rather than to have people talking about your grief, to have them talking about something positive. Rather than talking about how you're doing, they are asking how the playground is going. (Mother of the deceased on a local news channel, North St Paul Notes, Playground 1) | The playground means finding acceptance in tragedy. It means comfort in knowing that she will never be forgotten and that every day she plays a role in children's happiness and laughter. (Sister of the deceased on a Catholic Review website, Playground 33) |
| | Sense-making | Our little girl's life had meaning, and we felt that it was our job to find this meaning. (Mother of the deceased on her blog site, Playground 57) | Even though the worst-case scenario has happened [with his passing], look what has come out of it. (Mother of the deceased in a local newspaper, The Whitsunday Times, Playground 11) |
| | Transcendence | I'm sure they're laughing still right now and they're looking down on us. (Father of the deceased on a local DWM news site, Playground 17) | I'm thinking at some point, he'll be playing on a local news channel, WNEP, Playground 24) |
| Doing | Using one's own resources to produce something significant | When this happened [...], we felt very helpless [...] that was not in character for [my wife] or me. We felt that if we could help kids, that would help. (Father of the deceased in a local newspaper, The Jewish News of Northern California, Playground 44) | A decade later, the park is beloved, heavily used, and maintained by community volunteers, some of whom were there from the beginning and others who are caught up in that sense of ownership and caring. (Reporter for a local newspaper, Delmarva Daily Times, Playground 32) |
| Becoming | Surviving | There are times when, if I didn't have this, I didn't know what I would do. I don't know where we would be. (Mother of the deceased on a podcast channel, Omny, Playground 17) | This helped us greatly in our healing process. For years, I have been able to take my children to play at [the playground], and while they run and play, I was able to sit in the memorial garden and be at peace in my thoughts. (A community member and volunteer on a Catholic Review website, Playground 33) |
| | Empowerment | No parent should lose a child like this, not one. If we can become more compassionate toward one another to create solutions, that would be love winning. (Father of the deceased in a local newspaper, New Haven Register, Playground 7) | As I walked around that afternoon and watched them joyfully explore the new play equipment, the happy tears flowed. I thought about the sad story behind the creation of the [playground] and [...] I thought about how, for all the bad people and all the bad things in this world, there are people who work selflessly for a better world. ... and for a brief moment in time my cynicism faded away and I was filled with peace and calm and a little bit of faith in humanity. (A community member on a mother's blog site, Playground 57) |
| Belonging | Sensegiving | All the students helped plant the oak tree [...]. "This is a great day for us not only to teach the kids about Earth Day and the importance of Earth Day," [the Principal] said, "But just to show them that our community partners are important and vital to the life of our school." (Reporter for the local WPSD TV channel, Playground 53) | The plaque, which bears [her] face, and a tribute to her, is mounted on a large boulder [...]. "To all that visit here: live, love, and laugh during your lives and never take for granted the time we have together," the end of the tribute reads. (Reporter for a local newspaper, Baltimore Sun, Playground 33) |
| | Sense of community | The best part in this process is not that we're going to have this wonderful playground; it's the people we've met in the progress of doing that. [...] We've made a stronger community out of it. (Mother of the deceased on a local TV channel, North St Paul Notes, Playground 1) | Honestly, it [the playground] symbolizes community; it's togetherness, and it's the light pushing back on the dark. (Mother of the deceased in a local newspaper, Leader Telegram, Playground 13) |

data, this mechanism consisted of using one's own resources to produce something significant. During the creation process, this was seen in efforts to utilize one's resources (such as money, skills, and time) effectively. For instance, for some who volunteered, the creation process gave them the chance to benefit from their own expertise and even develop it further. An example of this is presented in the following quotation concerning a volunteer participating in constructing the playground equipment: "She is interested in toy design, and this project is a large-scale opportunity for her to use her building skills" (Reporter for the local newspaper on a Twin cities news channel, Playground 1).

However, for participation to support coping with the loss, it seemed to be important for it to align with one's personal values: "It's not just another job to us. It's something with significance to it, so you want to make sure you do it right" (A building company representative in a local newspaper, The Bendigo Advertiser, Playground 4). Related to personal values, but particularly emphasized in the data, was the desire to show by doing that goodness wins:

There's too much tragedy in the world, and too much focus on tragedy, and that we didn't want our daughters' lives to be remembered by the tragedy that took their life [...] I feel like we've done a really good job of taking the focus off [of that] and just putting it on the fact that our girls are amazing. (Mother of the deceased on a local news channel, KPTV, Playground 22)

A desire to show the goodness winning through was shared by both the close relatives of the deceased child and the more distant community members. Naturally, the desire to use one's resources to produce something significant was emphasized during the building process, not in the outcome. However, there were also some indications of using one's resources when the outcome (playground) was ready for maintenance, indicating a sense of ownership and the desire to be part of the enablers of the outcome. For example, some playground visitors engaged in maintenance, such as cleaning, during their playground trips. Even though they did not originally help build the playgrounds, they said that they would still like to be stewards.

In summary, active coping stemmed from both the process of building a memorial playground and from the outcome of that process through using one's own resources to produce something significant. This was named as the mechanism of doing, since it was related to actions making something happen.

Supporting becoming through the memorial playgrounds

Becoming can be seen as personal growth related to active coping. The data indicated that the mechanism can be divided into surviving and empowerment. Surviving was an active process, including coping with the circumstances and recovering from the initial shock. Participation in playground creation helped people to endure the difficult situation because it provided both structure and concrete aims, as well as concrete things to do, and allowed for social contacts to be developed through the long building process: "The outpouring from this community is what has kept (our) heads above water" (Mother of the deceased on a local news site, The Olympian, Playground 45). It was also frequently stated that participating in the creation process helped individuals to recover and heal, and to move on: "Working on [the playground] is a gratifying way to spend our energy as we slowly begin to heal" (Grandmother of the deceased in Stanford Magazine, Playground 41).

Participating in the creation and also enjoying the outcome were seen to create a sense of recovery. This was expressed in the quotation concerning the recovery of a sibling of the deceased children: "It'll hopefully be a nice place, a healing place for him. A place where he thinks about his roots, how he began his life with Mom and Dad and his siblings" (A community member on a local news site, Good4Utah, Playground 12).

The empowerment—becoming stronger and working toward resilience—felt during the creation process was manifested in attitudinal development, as expressed by a former volunteer:

I was part of the crew who built this playground. [...] I was at junior high school when we went out in the heat with the cement and mulch. It was a grueling process for a wonderful cause, and it definitely gave me the work ethic I needed as a difficult teenager! (A community member and volunteer, a comment on a Facebook website, Playground 32)

Empowerment stemming from the outcome, a finished playground, was also demonstrated by an increase in inspiration: "[He] was an inspiration to his entire community and beyond ... we feel that this playground will serve as a reminder of that inspiration, and of the children out there that are still battling cancer and need our help" (Mother of the deceased on an online fundraising website, Playground 23).

Besides inspiration, the outcome also offered opportunities for learning, education, and prevention, and providing these opportunities was an inherent part of some memorial playgrounds. For example, in one case where the memorial playground was built for a toddler who drowned, swimming lessons were organized in a pond located in the playground. In addition, many playgrounds emphasized all-inclusivity and, in this way, taught all the visitors about special needs. This was indicated by a mother who pointed out the inclusive playground equipment to her son and reminded him that not all the kids could use the conventional equipment: “We’ve had a learning moment around it” (Playground visitor in a Chicago Lawyer Magazine, Playground 41).

To sum up, active coping stemmed from both the process of building a memorial playground and from the outcome of that process through surviving and empowerment. These elements formed the mechanism of becoming since they were related to personal growth.

Supporting belonging through the memorial playgrounds

Belonging is closely related to a sense of affinity with the community in which the memorial playground is embedded. Based on the data, this mechanism was divided into sensegiving and a sense of community. Sensegiving indicated aspirations to influence the sensemaking of others. During the memorial playground creation process, it was demonstrated in actions influencing the community by setting an example to others: “This project will positively affect others and not only help to carry on [her] legacy but also remind us how we can best serve and love one another” (The family of the deceased on a website dedicated to Playground 38).

Sensegiving stemming from a finished playground, occurred in three main ways. First, the entire outcome was used to signal a multifold message: The existence of the playground was seen to communicate the memorial of the deceased child. A child’s name was usually included in the name of the playground, and photos of the child and the story behind the memorial playground tended to be placed in a sign set up in the playground. Furthermore, the playground was utilized, to create awareness about certain illnesses and safety measures, and/or to remind the community members of important issues, such as hope, love, kindness, and faith. This is illustrated by a citation from a relative of a deceased child: “It is my great hope that people who

go there will learn the greatest lesson ... life is precarious and full of challenges, so hold dear to all the moments you have with loved ones. Embrace the joy they bring” (Aunt of the deceased on a Catholic Review website, Playground 33).

Second, the message was conveyed through the behavior enabled by the playground:

[We] would also like to promote the significance of PLAY and its benefit to a child’s development. With childhood obesity on the rise, it is even more important now that parents find the time to get their children outside to play for many reasons, such as communication, social/emotional development, and, of course, exercise. But besides all these attributes, play allows a family to spend quality time together. Time we sometimes all take for granted! (Father of the deceased on a website dedicated to Playground 24)

Third, sometimes the message was explicitly stated and highlighted in the playgrounds. For example, the exit gate of a memorial playground dedicated to a pedestrian victim repeated the lyrics of a famous children’s song, “Drive safely, darling,” and it was aimed at influencing the thinking of the playground visitors: “[To] make people to think that is their own busyness so important that they would kill others’ children because of it?” (Mother of the deceased in a local newspaper, Turun Sanomat, Playground 10).

A sense of community—that is, a sense of belonging to the community by the family members of the deceased and by the people building the playgrounds—was highly present during the creation process. Playground projects were large, expensive projects requiring years or decades of volunteer work to collect funding and set up the playgrounds. During that time, the projects became a focus of community life: “This park is not what we’re building; it’s what our community is building. [...]. It’s not rare that a child will come to my doorstep with a bag of change that they raised at a lemonade stand to help” (Mother of the deceased on a local news channel, KOIN, Playground 22).

During the creation of the playgrounds, a sense of community was demonstrated via three constituents: involvement, connectedness, and community spirit. Community involvement was concretized in the hard work related to funding collections and to concrete building tasks: “There’s an opportunity for everyone to take part—whether you want to run, walk, or volunteer—and remember the fun, loving, upbeat girl [she] was” (Friend of the deceased in a local newspaper, The Lakes Region Weekly, Playground 34).

Hence, connectedness was seen in the way in which the creation collected different people together. It allowed people to get to know each other and build relationships. The connectedness of the community was perhaps felt the strongest by the family members of the deceased child: “It’s the saddest our family has ever been, but we feel really loved because this cool thing is happening. You live in a community, but you don’t know it until this happens. [...] They’ve really wrapped themselves around us” (Father of the deceased in a local newspaper, *The Knoxville News Sentinel*, Playground 29).

The community spirit felt during the creation process was evident in the enthusiastic comments of those participating in the process:

I am so, so proud of this town [...] Everyone heard the tragic story and people want to do whatever they can to help out. It’s a great testament to this community ... we are so, so honored to be a part of it. (Community member on a local CBS Washington news channel, Playground 17)

Later on, when the outcome was achieved, belonging was manifested in three ways: community strengthening, inclusion, and having evidence of community accomplishment. The playground was seen as a way to “give back to the community” and to support and build a stronger community: “[The principal of the school] believes this new playground will improve the [overall] health of the community, as thousands of children will have the opportunity to play on the playground and meet new friends” (Reporter for the local newspaper, *The Troy Record*, Playground 46).

Meeting new friends and the inclusion of different kinds of people were seen as important. Many memorial playgrounds highlighted the inclusive playing features. As stated by a mother of a deceased child, even though the completely accessible playground enabled children who had never had the opportunity to play freely, it was not just them who would benefit: “Parents, grandparents, and veterans with disabilities can now take their children to the park” (Mother of the deceased on a community website, Playground 55).

Furthermore, the community members proudly used the playground as visible evidence of what they had accomplished together. The accomplishment was used both to increase their own communality and to communicate the power of their community to outsiders: “What an amazing community. Met so many great people today. Proof that ordinary people can come together for a common cause and do something extraordinary. Great job [our town]. You rock!!!”

(Visitor, a comment on a Facebook website, Playground 13).

In summary, active coping stemmed from both the process of building a playground and from the outcome of that process through sensegiving and a sense of community. Together, these components formed the mechanism of belonging since they were related to feelings of being an active and appreciated part of the community.

Discussion

Mechanisms in active coping

The mechanisms that were uncovered through which coping with extreme loss was undertaken—being, doing, becoming, and belonging—deserve further exploration. Before discussing the mechanisms individually, it ought to be acknowledged that as we arrived at this categorization inductively, we noticed that it had been used in occupational therapy, where doing, being, becoming, and belonging have been acknowledged as integral to epitomizing occupations (Wilcock, 2002). Thus, they seem well-suited to the discussion of *active coping* with extreme loss.

Being as a mechanism in active coping

Being refers to existence itself (Frankl, 2008 [1946]), and it can be characterized as static or passive behavior. It is “about being true to ourselves, to our nature, to our essence and to what is distinctive about us” (Wilcock, 2002, p. 5) and thus reflects a culture-specific ideal of personal identity and assumed authenticity. In our findings, we divided being into acceptance, sense-making, and transcendence. Acceptance has been accentuated, especially in situations in which the routines of everyday life are interrupted. In these situations, individuals need to regasp the reality of everyday life, that is, the intersubjective world that they share with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Concretizing reality in the form of concrete objects, in our case, the created memorial playground, made the reality easier to accept.

Making sense has been seen to belong to individuals’ search for the confirmation of their basic assumptions of life being fair and of events occurring for a reason (Davis & Novoa, 2013). Our findings showed how the creation and outcome of the memorial playground helped individuals to make sense of events whose purpose was difficult to understand.

Transcendence has been connected to experiencing a higher reality while rising above the everyday world (Smith, 2017) and encountering something greater

than the self (Dein, 2020). Our findings showed that experiences of transcendence stemmed both from the creation of the memorial playground and from the outcome. As our empirical study dealt with extreme loss, it was natural that spiritual transcendence was highlighted in the data.

Doing as a mechanism in active coping

Doing was here associated with the coping that arises from the action itself. Doing has been seen to be important in individuals' physical and mental well-being, especially when it is connected to personally meaningful tasks or outcomes (Hitch et al., 2014; Wilcock, 2002). In our findings, we saw doing to be connected to one's resources to provide something significant.

It enabled the undertaking of concrete tasks and socializing, both acknowledged as ways of active coping (Carver et al., 1989). Furthermore, the findings indicated that the feeling that the memorial playground one built was something significant and that it fitted with or expressed one's own personal values were considered important. This is consistent with the literature suggesting that when individuals feel that their work contributes to something beyond their own benefit—for a greater good—their sense of meaningful work is enhanced (Martela & Pessi, 2018).

Becoming as a mechanism in active coping

Becoming can be seen as personal growth. Becoming refers to the ongoing development of individuals as they change during their lifetimes (Wilcock, 2002). In the findings section, we divided becoming into surviving and empowerment. Surviving is rooted as a basic human need (e.g., Durante & Griskevicius, 2018). Our findings indicate that the creation of a memorial playground contributed to surviving extreme loss. It gave the bereaved a new reason to carry on.

Empowerment has been seen as important for those experiencing extreme loss (e.g., Snaman et al., 2017). It can be seen as a process and outcome by which individuals increase their own power to gain more control over the conditions of their lives (Boehm & Staples, 2004). In our study, both the creation of the memorial playground and the completed playground empowered individuals.

Belonging as a mechanism in active coping

Belonging means "perceiving oneself as part of a larger whole, as having a place in this world" (Schnell, 2021, p. 7). Belonging has been acknowledged as important in coping with extreme loss (e.g., Reilly

et al., 2008). It has been suggested that belonging requires both interaction and bonds: Individuals require frequent positive interactions with others, and they need those interactions to take place in stable, caring relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, belonging can also mean maintaining relationships with, for example, places or communities. These relationships are characterized by reciprocity, mutuality, and sharing (Hitch et al., 2014). In our findings, we divided belonging into sensegiving and a sense of community.

Sensegiving can be defined as "attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). It helps others make sense of ambiguity and thus safeguards against confusion, misinterpretations, and errors (Daskalopoulou et al., 2020; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Our findings revealed that sensegiving took place both during the creation of the memorial playground and via the outcome, the finished playground: Participating in the creation was used as an implicit message to others, and the outcome was purposefully used to convey both implicit and explicit messages.

A sense of community has been argued to consist of four elements: a feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness, a feeling of mattering to a group, a sense of having one's needs fulfilled through belonging to the group, and a shared emotional connection entailing that members have shared and will share similar experiences together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Our findings showed that a sense of community was accentuated in the creation of memorial playgrounds. It was concretized in the involvement, connectedness, and community spirit. Furthermore, the completed playgrounds strengthened the communities, highlighted inclusion in the community, and acted as proof of community accomplishments.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our research enriches our understanding of bereavement by revealing the central mechanisms through which active coping can take place and by showing the distinct elements that the mechanisms are composed of. We detected four central mechanisms of active coping: being, doing, becoming, and belonging (Figure 2). An understanding of these mechanisms contributes to the abstraction of active coping and shows that it entails much more than just doing-related behaviors; direct action is closely intertwined with, for instance, belonging—that is, a

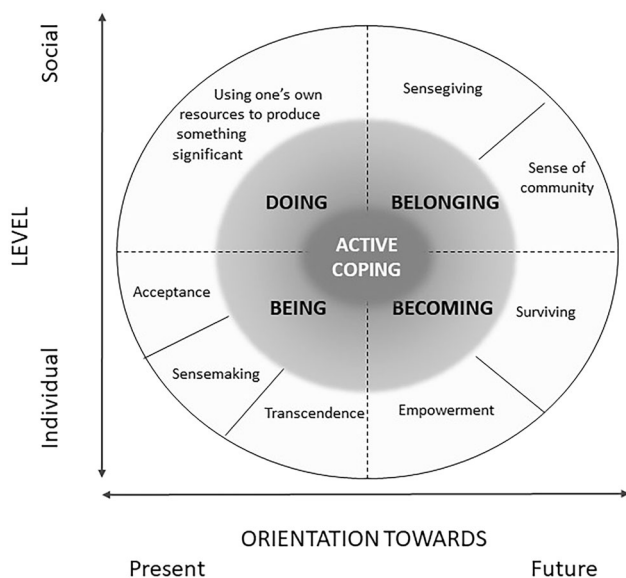


Figure 2. Mechanisms of active coping.

support-seeking way of coping (cf. Carver et al., 1989). Furthermore, this research demonstrates that each of the identified mechanisms is composed of distinct elements: acceptance, sensemaking, and transcendence forming the “being,” using one’s own resources to produce something significant constituting the “doing,” surviving and empowerment forming the “becoming,” and sensegiving and a sense of community constituting the “belonging.”

We also show how active coping takes place both as an outcome of and during the memorial creation process. Thus, acknowledging that bereavement is an ongoing process, and that healing does not entail closure (cf. Berns, 2011). The categorization of the detected active coping mechanisms shows that they emphasize either the individual or social level and are primarily oriented either toward the present or future (Figure 2). The mechanisms of being and doing relate to the present based on the past. The goal of coping in being is to reconstruct a new subjective reality where the individual lives: “what am I and where am I; what is my child, where is my child.” The goal of coping in doing is to reconstruct a new reality for the community that has been ruptured: “something good to believe in.” The mechanisms of becoming and belonging both relate to the future. The goal of coping is growth and development—in the former, at the individual level, and in the latter, at the community (social) level.

Practitioners may enhance individuals’ sense of being by offering interaction and by acknowledging the individuals’ feelings of transcendence. Individuals’ sense of doing can be supported by offering possibilities to participate in the creation and maintenance of

a memorial. It is also important that individuals are able to utilize their particular resources and capabilities in this. Individuals’ sense of becoming may be supported by providing them with opportunities to develop themselves. Practitioners may also enhance individuals’ sense of belonging by providing them with opportunities to interact with and influence the community. In particular, memorials can be used to communicate messages that are considered significant. Furthermore, thinking about the current crisis in Ukraine, the post-war building of such memorial playgrounds could be a way for communities to work through their shared grief and trauma. There is some indication that future war memorials may include features of both respectful remembrance and recreational entertainment (see Rey-García et al., 2020).

We acknowledge that our study also has some limitations. Our focus on an extreme phenomenon was beneficial in revealing new insights (cf. Ermakoff, 2014), but it may pose challenges when translating the results to other contexts. Further research in other settings is needed regarding transferability. Second, the context of the United States, in particular, and the so-called Western cultures, in general, dominated the data collection. Thus, coping with extreme loss should be studied in other cultural contexts. Furthermore, coding qualitative data relies on interpretation by researchers. Thus, the study cannot be directly replicated by others (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Therefore, researchers are encouraged to operationalize the central mechanisms of active coping identified in this study and to quantitatively test them further to validate the findings. Additionally, comparing the motivations for and effects of memorial playgrounds to the motivations and effects of other memorials (e.g., war memorials) goes beyond the scope of this paper, yet it remains an interesting avenue for future research on memorials.



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