

ABSTRACTS

Social support 'Internet-works', caskets for sale, and more: thanatology and the information superhighwaySofka CJ. *Death Studies* 1997; 21(6); 553-574

A unique indicator of change in our culture's openness to and interest in death, dying, and bereavement is the availability of 'thanatechnology': technological mechanisms such as interactive videodiscs and computer programmes that are used to access information or help us learn about thanatology topics. This article describes resources available through society's latest and most widely accessible type of thanatechnology, the Internet and WorldWideWeb. Every aspect of terminal illness, death, suicide and bereavement appears to have one or more sites on the Internet. The author discusses the practical, and especially the ethical, implications of these innovative resources, and the need for clinicians, educators and researchers to explore the dilemmas arising out of this new technology.

Spiritual aspects of loss at time of a partner's death from AIDSRichards TA, Folkman S. *Death Studies* 1997; 2(6); 527-52

This article is based on interviews with 125 members of the San Francisco gay community whose partners had recently died from AIDS. In every case the person interviewed had been his partner's main caregiver. The purpose of the interviews was to find out to what extent spiritual beliefs had played a part in helping the survivor to cope with his grief. The writers explored various aspects of the situation: the caregiver's spiritual role in giving the dying partner permission to die; what part, if any, was played by a belief in spiritualism, higher power and oneness; whether the partner felt that the relationship still persisted or, on the contrary, believed that it was over; rituals after the death; and spiritual social support. The authors suggest that therapists who work with the bereaved may find it useful to discover whether spiritual beliefs are a part of the grief process of those whom they are trying to help. This article, though repetitious, is invaluable for its insight into the extent to which spiritual beliefs can help bereaved gay men.

Maternal responses to the life and death of a child with a developmental disability: a story of hopeMilo EM. *Death Studies* 1997; 21(5); 443-476

Losing a child is probably the most devastating event that a mother can experience. If the child had a developmental disability the loss is twofold, for the mother has to come to terms with the death not only of the ideal child she had been expecting but also of the actual child. In this moving and clearly-written article the author describes how eight bereaved mothers felt about the life and death of their handicapped children. Most of them were extremely successful in using cognitive coping strategies to find both meaning and spiritual benefit in the lives of their children and in the exhausting process of caring for them. The problems they faced are discussed as well as the rewards which they felt the children brought them. The article ends with practical and sensible suggestions for helping such mothers. The findings of this study fill a significant gap in the theory of parental coping and bereavement.

A new model of grief: bereavement and biographyWalter T. *Mortality* 1996; 1(1); 7-25**From mourning and melancholia to bereavement and biography: an assessment of Walter's new model of grief**Stroebe M. *Mortality* 1997; 2(3); 255-262**Letting go and keeping hold: a reply to Stroebe**Walter T. *Mortality* 1997; 2(3); 263-266

The three articles which are discussed below provide an interesting prospective on adjustment to the loss of a loved one. Tony Walker sets forth his model which challenges the traditional one of 'letting go' (see also *Bereavement Care* 1997; 16, Vol 3: 27-29), while Margaret Stroebe argues that the two approaches are not necessarily incompatible, but that the newer theory can in some ways supplement and enrich earlier attitudes to bereavement. In the third article Tony Walker replies to Margaret Stroebe.

'The purpose of grief', Tony Walter writes, 'is not to move on without those who had died, but to a secure place for them'. This is best done, he believes, by encouraging the bereaved to talk about the dead person to those who have known him/her, comparing accounts, and

coming to some agreement about who the person was. This theory throws doubt on the belief that sees grief as a working-through of emotion, the eventual goal being move on and live without the deceased. The author's own experience of loss, and recent research papers which he has studied, construct a different story - one that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their own lives.

Margaret Stroebe, while endorsing much of what Walter puts forward, takes issue with him on a number of points: for instance, she suggests that he throws little light on 'what it is about coming to an agreement through discourse that helps the bereaved to find a "secure" place for the deceased in ongoing life'. She also feels that his new model needs to stand the test of empirical validation. However, she concludes that, while not replacing traditional views, his theory does provide a novel perspective on a different, sociological level of analysis.

Tony Walter's brief reply to Margaret Stroebe mainly discusses the detailed points where she agrees with, queries, or finds invalid his model. In some respects he has altered his views since his original article - eg, he is no longer convinced that the story which a bereaved person holds about the dead need necessarily be true or agreed. However, the large number of appreciative letters he has received since his article lead him to affirm 'the revolutionary nature - for some readers at least - of what they and I have written'.

Experiences of AIDS-related bereavement among gay men: implications for careWright C, Coyle A. *Mortality* 1996; 1(3); 267-82

Research on AIDS-related bereavement among gay men is almost entirely North American. This article sets out to redress the balance by analysing the experiences of 16 gay men in Surrey and London who had lost at least one close friend or partner to AIDS. The authors conclude that AIDS-related deaths differ from deaths due to other terminal illnesses for a variety of reasons: the social stigma attached to AIDS and gay sexuality; the fact that the bereaved person may himself be HIV-positive or suffering from AIDS, and so in one way is facing his own death; the comparative youth of the bereaved; and the multiple and ongoing nature of the loss. A range of coping strategies is discussed. **BC**

Sheila Hodges and John Bush

Transcending a devastating loss: the life attitude of mothers who have experienced the death of their only child.Talbot K. *Bereavement: Client Adaptation and Hospice Services*, 1996; available on email: getinfo@haworth.com (eds Infeld DL, Penner NR, Haworth Pr, Binghampton, NY, USA)

To assess the meaning and purpose which they now find in life, 80 mothers whose only child has died answered a questionnaire. A good outcome to this traumatic bereavement was predicted by having friends who were seen as helpful, participating in voluntary activities, discussing grief frequently, having helpful spiritual beliefs and good education and income.

By contrast the 18 who remained stuck in 'perpetual grief' usually saw their family and friends as unhelpful, did not attend support groups or volunteer to help others, have no current relationship with the children of friends and relatives, were usually unmarried and with low income. They were angry with God and the church, feeling that to discover a new life would be to forget their child and invalidate their role as mother.

Those mothers who did best had found new 'mothering' roles as volunteers or carers for the children of others. They had not forgotten their child but felt that the loss had made them more compassionate and better people.

The implications for counsellors would seem to be that we should help mothers to understand that the aim of counselling is not to help them to forget the past but to find new and creative ways to continue their roles as mother.

The role of gender in middle-aged children's responses to parent deathMoss MS, Resch N, Moss SZ. *Omega* 1997; 35(1); 43-66

In a major quantitative study of reactions to bereavement, in which 212 middle-aged adults who had lost a parent during adult life took part, no large differences were found between reactions to the death of mothers and fathers. Sons, losing a parent, showed evidence of more mastery of their feelings, less grief and fewer bodily symptoms. They were thought to have less strong ties to their parents than did daughters. While most children of both sexes control the expression of grief after the death of a parent, the authors suggest that men do this out of stoicism, while women do it in order not to be a burden to others. **BC**

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