

Abstracts

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Denise Brady presents a round-up of recent research literature and other publications relating to bereavement.

Using photography with young men who have lost a friend

Creighton G, Oliffe JL, Butterwick S, Saewyc E (2013). 'After the death of a friend: Young men's grief and masculine identities'. *Social Science and Medicine* 84 35–43

This article explores the grief of 25 young men aged 19–25 years old who have grieved the accidental death of a male friend. Most of the participants were white Canadians living in Vancouver.

There were three phases to the research starting with an initial interview where they were asked open-ended questions about the accidental death of their friend. Towards the end of the interview they were given a photographic assignment that in some way reflected their bereavement experience, and how they thought being a man influenced the taking of these photographs. The photographs informed the second interview and the interviewer and the bereaved men discussed the photographs together.

Following a thematic analysis that highlighted stoicism as a mainstream response, as well as the self-protection offered by not having to reveal feelings, the researcher postulated three archetype responses. The most frequent was that of adventurer – many of the men had taken part in the risky behaviour that had caused the death of their friends eg. extreme sports or substance abuse. They considered their deceased friends were unlucky to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They would go on being adventurers. The second was the father figure who wanted to protect others affected by the death from further grief and who had to remain stoical to do this. The third was the lamplighter who has been affected by his friend's death to the extent that he now planned to live a more controlled life but also wanted to prevent other young men from suffering a death similar to his friend. The lamplighters were often marginalised youth and poor in socio-economic terms. The author stresses that these archetypes were not fixed and rigid in each man. Elements of each archetype could be found in any one person.

The results of the research not only provide insight into reactions to grief but also attitudes of young males generally towards risk-taking. The authors state that the findings suggest the potential for 'catalysing young men's efforts towards advancing (rather than risking) their health and well-being'. This goes beyond the remit of the original research of understanding and assisting young men with their grief, but nevertheless underlines the associations between the two.

It was particularly interesting to read about how photography was utilised in the research, and how it might also be used in this way in clinical work.

Music and continuing bonds

O'Callaghan C, McDermott F, Hudson P, Zalberg JR (2013). 'Sound continuing bonds with the deceased: The relevance of music, including pre-loss music therapy, for eight bereaved caregivers'. *Death Studies* 37 (2) 101–125

This research involved interviews with seven bereaved relatives and one friend about the value of music and music therapy in bereavement. Like the article above, this was part of a continuum of care from pre- to post-bereavement. In fact one of the authors has also written about music therapy pre-loss and how recorded music by the person who died is a meaningful legacy.

The authors each read and discussed the transcripts of interviews until they all agreed with various categories, codes and themes. The impression is that these bereaved people had an appreciation of music, and its importance in the lives of the deceased. They also placed value on any music that their loved ones had created. The main themes that emerged were:

- a) remembering how music enhanced the lives of those they mourned and how sharing music with the deceased was supportive
- b) music elicited memories of the deceased which were sometimes supportive but occasionally distressing
- c) occasionally the non- use of music signified efforts not to intensify sadness
- d) there was a positive effect of the legacy of listening to music by the person who died.

The bereaved recommended that other caregivers consciously use music with their loved ones pre-loss and consider using music to improve their mood in bereavement.

The authors found that music provided a vehicle for a continuing bond with the deceased and a striking finding was that music could contain conflicting emotions such as sadness but comfort simultaneously. They also noted that music could help people 'struggle well', that families found solace and meaning in the fact that other people could enjoy the recorded music of the deceased and a funny family song could always help a family to cope with their loss.

O'Callaghan C (2013). Music therapy preloss care though legacy creation. *Progress in Palliative Care* 21 (2) 78–82

Concurrent bereavement groups for adults and children

Werner-Lin A, Blank NM (2012-2013). 'Holding parents so they can hold their children: Grief work with surviving spouses to support parentally bereaved children'. *Omega* 66 (1) 1–16

This descriptive article details a community family oriented service in the United States that aims to help a family when an adult member is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. The organisation 'Family Matters' provides three types of support:

- a) when a parent has been diagnosed with a serious life-threatening illness
- b) as a family faces a death or as it adjusts to life after the illness that no longer poses the threat of death
- c) when a family has to deal with bereavement.

A member of the team can be with the family through each of these stages and this continuity is a key part of the holistic care provided by the agency.

Although it is not clear how families are referred to the service, the obvious continuity of care from pre- to post-bereavement is an excellent model of care. The service provides educational programmes, support groups, family interventions and social events for both adults and children. These are provided by a variety of health professionals eg. social workers, psychologists, exercise specialists, family therapists and nurses. The bereavement section of the programme aims to enable the surviving parent to engage with children's expression of sadness and to focus on coping skills for the whole family. The authors suggest some avenues for future research – eg. the needs of fathers in particular, the varying challenges of the needs of daughters versus sons and the needs of single sex parents.

What is also useful about the article is the suggested curriculum for concurrent child and parent bereavement groups. They provide eight themes: telling our stories; saying goodbye (to the deceased parent); talking about death; taking time for one's own grief; shared language; family change; remembering; and endings. In each of these categories, there are three or four therapeutic aims with bereaved children and a similar number of different aims with adults. The article well illustrates the equally important needs of both parents and children and suggests useful guidelines for addressing them.

Life as a widower blog

Brooks-Dutton B (2013) *Life as a widower*. <http://lifeasawidower.com/>

A blog of a recently bereaved London widower with a young child clearly illustrates some of the types of support described in

the above article that can help a surviving parent, especially how to support a child's grief even as it accentuates a parent's own sadness and helplessness (for example when Brooks-Dutton's young son hurts himself and screams for his mother). This well-designed blog describes many facets of the grief of a widower and father. He indicates he has been in contact with child and adult bereavement services in the UK to help him cope with their grief. It is a useful resource to help any health professional or any bereaved parent understand and deal with family grief. The author's 'problem-solving' approach to helping his son may also help in reducing reactive depression, as suggested in the article by Creighton (above).

Analysing grief on a blog

DeGroot JM, Carmack HJ (2013). 'It may not be pretty, but it's honest': Examining parental grief on the callapitter blog'. *Death Studies* 37 (5) 448–470

This is an analysis of a blog of a bereaved mother which has received a great deal of publicity in the US (<http://callapitter46.blogspot.co.uk/>). Amy Ambrusko, the author of the blog, is a single mother and her two children were killed in a car accident in which her ex-husband was driving. The analysis is of 39 posts to her blog that she wrote between August 2009 and December 2009. Her children died in April 2009.

The authors sought to analyse the blog as a case study. I would quibble with the fact they used, as a starting point, a model of grief from 1984 and barely mentioned continuing bonds. The dual process of grief is alluded to. They do, however, emphasise the complexities and multidimensional aspects of loss and they illustrate how a thoughtful blog can indeed be analysed as a case study.

They identify three key themes in the text. The first is (re)questioning reality – for many months Amy could not truly believe the children had died. The second is experiencing discursive and corporeal guilt. They include here bodily reactions to the bereavement that it could be argued are not related to guilt. The third is 'rationalising a new normal'. Amy has to live not just a different role but a completely different life.

It is easier to criticise a blog than a written case study because the experience of the bereaved person is fully available to the reader and they can interpret it in different ways. However, it would have been a richer case study if the authors had waited to write it as Amy's struggles to recreate the 'new normal' continued. It seems to me she had gone through more struggle and was beginning to live with greater equanimity by the time she closed it in August 2012. There was more room for fruitful analysis, had they waited longer. However they have highlighted a valuable resource which can be helpful to bereaved people, to clinicians and the academic community.