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## Meaning Making In Grief Counseling

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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**The Effectiveness of Meaning Making in Grief Counseling**

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Lindsey A. Stuhr

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

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### Abstract

Loss is experienced in every life. How individuals work through loss is a very personal experience for each individual. To date, many experts in the field of grief counseling are continuing to try and understand the most adequate way to help individuals to work through grief while moving forward in life. This review of the concept of meaning making in grief counseling intends to answer the following questions: 1). How do we define meaning making as it relates to grief? 2). What are the key components that experts in the field have learned about grieving and the concept of meaning making? 3). Is meaning making an effective strategy for individuals to experience and work through loss?

*Keywords:* grief, bereavement, meaning-making, sense-making, benefit-finding

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## **Meaning Making In Grief Counseling**

### **Introduction**

Throughout the course of each individual's life, they experience some form of grief, whether bereavement through the loss of a loved one, the loss of a career, an adored family pet or the loss of an important relationship. How a person processes their loss is determined by their own personal story – one which is very intimate, has no time limit and is truly experienced only by that person.

### **Review of Literature**

This paper will identify how experts have explained grief and bereavement as well as recent concepts for processing through grief. "Grief, understood in human terms, has existed as long as humanity itself..." (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014, p. 3). Grief counseling continues to evolve with a variety of therapeutic techniques that support clients who are processing grief. Today one of the most recent concepts in grief therapy is meaning making. A number of experts in the field have found this concept to be highly effective for individuals who have experienced a loss or are in a period of bereavement. This review aims to uncover the most current research on the concept, determine the effectiveness of meaning making in grief and identify the gaps in research to gain a better understanding for the factors that need to be considered as the concept evolves.

### **What are Grief and Bereavement?**

According to the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, grief is defined by the phrases “a strong emotion,” a “natural reaction to loss,” and “both, a universal and personal experience” (MFMER, 2021). Bereavement is more specific and defined by the U.S. National Library of Medicine as “the period of grief and mourning after death” (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2020). Yet even with these definitions, there is no single way to define either term. Due to its intimate nature and vast identity, grief occurs in some form by each individual in life and is experienced in different ways. Hence, it is imperative for counselors to understand that each person will have their own experience with grief – there is no definitive way to grieve and no timetable for being in a bereavement period. This reveals the importance of grief counseling to be an ever-evolving field finding new understanding for therapeutic techniques that provide support for individuals to adequately process grief.

Although several focus areas regarding grief have been researched, each personalized experience is different from another. “Evidence supports the idea that the ability to make meaning after a loss is a positive coping strategy that can reduce symptoms of anger, lead to increased well-being and lead to fewer symptoms of complicated grief” (Flesner, 2013, p.10). Complicated grief can hinder the full process of grieving, therefore leaving individuals inability to cope with the loss and find a deeper meaning.

What is complicated grief? According to Dr. Schear in the *Dialogues of Clinical Neuroscience*, complicated grief consists of either ruminating about the death or loss or excessive avoidance of the loss, accompanied by extreme worry about the consequences that follow the death. Individuals experiencing complicated grief are unable to grasp the finality of their loss and, while experiencing the intense emotions of grief, they will either ruminate or

avoid. Overall, complicated grief interferes with the healing process of grieving, and individuals experiencing it are immersed with emotion and froze in their grief (Shear, 2012).

### **The Concept of Meaning Making**

In the book “Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief,” author and grief expert David Kessler defines meaning making as a way to sustain your love for the person you have lost. While loss happens to all individuals, meaning is what we make of the loss (Brody, 2019). For some, meaning making after a loss could be finding a cause to give to, for example, donating to an organization that would have meant something to the individual or creating a scholarship in memory of the person. Others may decide to plant a tree, share stories of the person with others or build park benches with an engraved message of remembrance. Meaning making is a subjective process, determined by the grieving individual, as loss is experienced differently by each person.

Psychologist and grief expert Robert Neimeyer argues that meaning making is central to effectively working through grief (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). Three components within the concept of meaning making while experiencing grief include sense-making, benefit finding, and identity reconstruction. These concepts are thought to be navigators in helping bereaved individuals work through grief (Flesner, 2013). Later in this review, each concept and its definition will be explored in-depth.

Sense-making pertains to the ability of the person experiencing the loss to understand it and, in turn, continue the process of grieving. In other words, the individual grieving is able to construct what the loss means to them and, in doing so, is able to make meaning of it (Currier et al., 2006).

The second concept of meaning making, benefit finding, is when an individual is able to recognize factors that are positive from their loss (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). For example, an individual who has lost a loved one to cancer may feel at peace because they know their loved one is no longer suffering, or an individual who was close to a grandparent might become even closer to the other grandparent after experiencing the loss. The third concept, identity reconstruction, embraces the idea of re-creating one's identity after experiencing a loss. "Identity is that collection of attributes that defines how individuals see themselves" (Blose, 2019). After experiencing loss, individuals may feel lost, as they deeply identified themselves with, for example, a certain job or the role of a parent or spouse. Identity reconstruction aids the individual to re-define who they are with consideration to the loss they experienced.

One of the most current strategies in meaning making during grief is narrative reconstruction or narrative therapy. Grief experts including psychologist Robert Neimeyer, explain this as sharing the stories, or creating new stories to make meaning from the experienced loss (Whiting & James, 2006). Likewise, another therapeutic technique that has been evolving in recent years is narrative art therapy. Similar to narrative reconstruction, narrative art therapy focuses on creating meaning from a loss through different forms of art such as; painting, photography, drawing, or crafts.

Whether the methods using narrative therapy involve creating artwork or sharing stories, the process of reconstructing one's own personal narrative shifts after experiencing losses in life. In search of meaning from the loss, an individual can alter the story or artwork and incorporate meaning based off the loss they have experienced. Author Deena Metzger (1992) stated, "When it is our life story that we are telling, we become aware that we are not victims of random and

chaotic circumstances, that we too, despite our grief are living meaningfully in a meaningful universe” (p.5).

Although experts in the field of grief have introduced the importance of narrative therapy, significant and most recent research studies of its positive effects are lacking, proving the importance of newer studies to be conducted over vast and diverse populations. Without up-to-date research, the overall impact of narrative reconstruction in grief counseling is merely subjective.

### **Grief Counseling as An Evolving Process**

Research on the grief process has shown an important shift in the last two decades, moving from traditional theories of grief to postmodern or constructivist theories (Flesner, 2013). Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of grief was the first identified theory of grief counseling in 1979 (Jackson-Cherry& Erford, 2014). Freud argued that individuals move on from their loss after letting go of their attachment (Jackson-Cherry& Erford, 2014).

The second influential concept in grief counseling came from Eric Lindemann over twenty years later in 1944. Lindemann normalized reactions to grief that were not priorly viewed as normal (Doughty& Hoskins, 2011). Lindemann’s theory of grieving argued that once an individual in bereavement was able to discontinue the bond from the deceased, they would be able to readjust to their life and form new relationships and bonds (Jackson-Cherry& Erford,2014).

Next came the ideas of Kubler-Ross (1969), Bowlby (1980), Rando (1984), Sanders (1989), and Worden (2002). Their concepts provided clinicians with tools to help clients in grief (Doughty& Hoskins, 2011). Kubler-Ross created the five stages of dying, which later turned into the five stages of grief. Kubler-Ross argued that individuals would move through these

stages and at times would move backwards and begin the process again (Jackson-Cherry & Erford, 2014). The five stages include denial, shock, anger, bargaining, and acceptance. Acceptance, as the last stage, occurs when an individual has let go with the hope of moving forward with life (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014).

More recently, the concept of meaning making after experiencing a loss has become well-known in the field of grief counseling. Psychologist Robert Neimeyer (2013) states, “people are driven by a need to find or create a sense of purpose, or meaning in their lives” (Flesner, 2013, pp. 1-2). Due to this need to find a purpose and meaning, individuals who have experienced a loss may gravitate to searching for its meaning. In other words, the concept of meaning making explores making sense of the suffering and who we are as we move through it (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011).

### **What Do We Know About Meaning Making While Grieving?**

Jodi Flesner (2013) reviews some of the main approaches to meaning making by examining the various theories of grief, beginning with Kubler-Ross’s stages model defined in her book *On Death and Dying*. The stages model describes five stages of grief that an individual may experience throughout their grieving process: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Flesner’s article also mentions the attachment theory in grief therapy, which focuses on the emotional bond between two individuals and the need to seek security through the connection of being close. Kubler-Ross’s stages model, the attachment theory, and the cognitive and trauma theories evolved into the most recently focused concept in grief therapy, the Dual Process Model (DPM), which emphasizes the impact of meaning making during bereavement (Flesner, 2013).

Flesner discusses the DPM by bringing in research from various clinicians, including Robert Neimeyer, an expert psychologist who specializes in grief therapy.

Flesner's article notes that Robert Neimeyer has suggested that the concept of meaning making in grief has been linked to all of the theories of grief combined, beginning with the stages model and developing into the more recent models which emphasize the need to find meaning in loss (Flesner, 2013). "Meaning making in response to loss can be said to include the ideas of sense making, benefit finding and identity change" (Flesner, 2013, p 2). Additionally, Flesner's article states that Neimeyer's research on meaning making finds that "individuals experiencing post-traumatic growth express many identity changes including, feeling more resilient, having more awareness...and having more empathy for others" (Flesner, 2013, pp. 2-3).

Flesner concludes by acknowledging that there have been inconsistencies in grief research on how to define meaning making and how to measure it. To help bring resolution to these issues, researchers have created various models for meaning making to help define it better. These models include Park's general meaning making model, Neimeyer, Burke, Mackay, and van Dyke Stringer's meaning reconstruction theory, and Armour's meaning making grounded in action approach (Flesner, 2013).

Flesner's article provides an important contribution to grief work because it helps identify the changes that have taken place in grief therapy, emphasizing the most recent concept of meaning making. Flesner also acknowledges that there are still questions concerning meaning making that lack definitive answers, which recognizes the importance of further research on this topic.

### **Sense-Making**

An important component that includes the ability to make meaning of a loss is the ability of the individual to make sense of loss. Rachel Hibberd (2013) states that a “common thread running through much grief research and theory has been the question of whether one’s life makes sense” (p. 671). Hibberd argues that depending on how we define, meaning will determine if we are able to find meaning after a loss (Hibberd, 2013). In grief therapy, there are several different models for clinicians to use. Similar to Flesner’s article, Hibberd’s article also examines the various models in grief work including cognitive, stress and trauma models, bereavement-specific models, social constructionist and constructivist models, and lastly, the model of meaning reconstruction.

Hibberd’s article overall reaffirms the evolution of the grieving process by identifying how the field has continued to understand the process; emphasizing the changes in grief research and how *meaning* has been defined from the late 1990s to the most current studies. Hibberd argues that identifying meaning in loss has evolved in grief research from the concepts of sense-making and benefit finding, to those in addition to identity change (Hibberd, 2013). As grief research continues to evolve, defining meaning for individuals who have experienced the loss of a loved one continues to become more well defined. Hibberd notes that although bereavement research has evolved over the past twenty years, more research is needed on life significance; how it’s affected by loss, its role in meaning, and its overall correlations to grief - both positive and negative (Hibberd, 2013).

Both Hibberd and Flesner acknowledge the importance of how grief therapy has evolved throughout the past century. Rachel Hibberd’s article provides important validation for Neimeyer’s research on meaning making and how an important contributing factor in meaning

making is the capability to make sense of the loss. This is important for clinicians to understand, so they are able to find individualized techniques to help clients work through the sense-making process or come to terms with the fact that loss does not always make sense.

While Hibberd focused on sense-making and the changes that have taken place in understanding grief, Michael and Snyder (2005) examined three focus points in meaning making in grief: hope, cognitive processing, and the overall adjustment in bereavement. Their research published in *Death Studies* examined the relationship between hope, bereavement rumination, and meaning making after the loss of a loved one. Their study included 158 undergraduate college students (49 men, 109 women) ranging in age from 18-37 years old who had experienced the death of a loved one. The study began with five hypotheses that covered sense-making, bereavement rumination and hopes connection to rumination, self-esteem and psychological well-being (Michael & Snyder, 2005).

The results from the study revealed: 1). A negative relationship between bereavement rumination and psychological well-being 2). Making sense through meaning making was connected to decreased levels of rumination about the loss of a loved one and overall positive well-being 3). Hope was not connected to either lower levels of bereavement rumination or higher levels of making meaning but does have an impact on overall well-being (Michael & Snyder, 2005).

Further, the results of the study revealed that finding meaning in the loss of their loved one connected to positive adjustment in those who had recently lost a loved one versus those who had lost a loved one with more time that had gone by (Michael & Snyder, 2005). The study also showed that the more rumination that occurs during the grieving process, the lessened well-being for the individual grieving (Michael & Snyder, 2005).

Michael & Snyder's study is significant in understanding meaning making because it validates its importance in grief therapy. Similar to Rachel Hibberd's argument, Michael & Snyder's study proves that if individuals in bereavement are able to make sense of a loss, they are able to adjust in positive ways long-term because they are ruminating less, leading to less complicated grief and overall healthier well-being.

### **Benefit-Finding Through Goal-Setting**

Another study conducted by Stein et al.(2009) published in the *Journal of Loss and Trauma Focused* on making meaning after loss. The study examined the connection to religion, goal setting, and benefit finding. Benefit finding is another factor in being able to make meaning after a loss. Similar to Michael & Snyder's study, this study once again used participants pulled from a college campus. The participants included 111 young adults (75 women, 38 men) with an average age of 20, attending a Midwestern university, who had experienced a personal loss (Stein et al., 2009). The study found the young adults were affected by their loss, that loss impacted their goal-setting, that young adults use religious and benefit finding strategies to search for meaning in their loss, and lastly that these methods can be connected to forms of psychological distress (Stein et al., 2009).

The study clarifies the connection between these strategies and distress by explaining the difference between the two forms of goal-setting. More distress was linked to future goal orientation or life plan versus strategies that create connections between the loss and future goals (Stein et al., 2009). Overall, this study reveals factors that help individuals in bereavement find benefit in their loss. Benefit finding is the second concept within meaning making that helps clients in bereavement make meaning of their loss. Being able to identify the different factors

such as this study examined with religion and hope, clinicians have a deeper understanding of their client's perspectives as they process grief.

Another study that explored the factors that contribute to finding benefit out the negative experience of loss is a qualitative study released by Steffen and Coyle (2011) published in *Death Studies*. Steffen and Coyle's study explored the connection of sense-of- presence experiences with a loved one who is deceased in the meaning making process of bereavement.

Unlike the previous two studies mentioned, this study used semi-structured interviews with a significantly smaller group of 12 participants from the general public who reported having a sense of present experience with their deceased loved one and had lost their loved one within the last 18 months. The study examined how these experiences have impacted the lives of those who reported them and how their experiences impacted their worldviews (Steffen & Coyle, 2011).

According to Steffen and Coyle, the data showed benefits for individuals in bereavement and the ongoing existence of their lost loved ones. Data also revealed that the sense of the deceased's presence helped develop an individual's memory of their loved one (Steffen & Coyle, 2011). The participants in the study reported feeling "calm and comforted" and that the experience was "magical and precious" (Steffen & Coyle, 2011, p. 580).

Steffen and Coyle (2011) stated that the goal of their study was to "gain in-depth understandings of subjective processes reported by a small, specific set of participants" (p. 602).

The importance of Steffen and Coyle's study in grief counseling is significant. When individuals in bereavement work with counselors, they need to be able to express how their grieving and the experiences they have encountered after the loss. By developing a trusting and safe environment for clients, counselors can help clients process these experiences while feeling

validated and supported. Steffen and Coyle's study reveals that sense-of-presence encounters exist to the individuals who perceive they have experienced them (Steffen & Coyle, 2011). If these encounters provide a sense of meaning and benefit through their loss, it is important for the client to share these experiences.

### **Gaps in Research**

After reviewing different research articles and studies about the effect of meaning making after experiencing a loss, an important factor to acknowledge is most of the research that has been released is now becoming outdated. The most recently published articles were dated 2015 and 2016: Michael and Snyder (2005), Neimeyer et al. (2006), Stein et al. (2009), Steffen and Coyle (2011), and Flesner (2013).

Psychologist Robert Neimeyer began most of his research on meaning making nearly twenty years ago. The lack of research related to meaning making in the past 3-5 years provides evidence for the need for more current research studies. Why? Clinicians need to have the most up-to-date strategies to help clients. As Rachel Hibberd and Jodi Flesner's articles revealed, there are still inconsistencies about how to define meaning making, and by continuing to research it, counselors may find new ways to explain it to their clients as well as understand the experiences their clients have had.

An important factor to recognize through the published research on meaning making is that although various studies can be conducted utilizing different groups of people who have experienced a loss, there is no universal and definitive way to mark their experiences. The concept of meaning making in itself is very subjective, and the experience of grief ranges for each individual. For example, someone who has lost a sibling may have a completely different

grieving process from someone who has lost a grandmother. Likewise, making meaning from the loss might look and feel entirely different for the two people.

After establishing its importance in the field of grief therapy, it is equally as crucial to identify the gaps in research. Both the Michael & Snyder and Stein studies involved a group of participants attending college. Both studies provided fascinating data yet by only surveying college students, the studies missed the voices of several different population groups. It would have been interesting to review the results of adolescents, widowed spouses, or the elderly. Likewise, both studies predominately surveyed Caucasian participants, this leaves out a world of different cultures. There is a clear gap in multicultural research on grief.

### **Applying Meaning Making to Clinical Mental Health Counseling**

The concept of meaning making is not just important to clinicians working with clients in bereavement. “Grief, understood in human terms, has existed as long as humanity itself...” (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014, p. 3). As counselors, we will work with individuals who have experienced a loss, as all human beings have. This could be a loss of a job, a dream, a relationship, a health issue, a financial loss, or the loss of a loved one. Similar to trauma, a loss is at the root of the deepest form of change. Having a profound understanding for how processing grief has changed over the years as well as some of the different ways clinicians can help clients process through grief is essential in being empathetic and effective counselors.

As any profession that involves a component of power, privilege, and working with other human beings, it is only ethical that clinicians continue to learn new approaches, understand experiences at a deeper level and continue to be life-long learners. Grief, one of the most important and personal experiences in an individual’s life, is necessary for clinicians to understand. Unresolved grief can contribute to complicated grief and have a negative impact on

the rest of someone's life. Clinicians need to be empowered to learn more about loss and the methods that can help an individual heal and process grief.

Each article reviewed provided the importance of meaning making in grief therapy by examining previous research, conducting studies of different populations of people experiencing loss, and exploring some of the subjective experiences of others. Clinicians must review what is currently provided for research, compare how it has changed over time, and continue to develop new strategies for helping clients achieve a healthy life and well-being.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, once seen as a lateral process of stages, the experience of grieving has changed, although human beings experiencing loss have not. Loss, whether it is of a loved one, a pet, a relationship, or a dream is subjective and is marked by a highly individualized experience. A clinician can know a great deal about grief but will have no idea what grief means to each client. This marks the journey and the relationship between the client and counselor. The privilege to sit with a client as they are experiencing the most personal time in their life is the only way a counselor can begin to understand what grief means for that client. Having a deep understanding for the process and the methods that can help a client work through their grief is one of the most important things clinicians can offer their clients.

“Although in its infancy, research on the process and outcome of individual's efforts to derive meaning from loss and trauma has the potential to greatly inform our understanding of human suffering and growth” (Stein et al., 2009). The essence of this review is to provide insight on the concept of meaning making in grief counseling, to explore some of the most current research on this concept and to identify gaps where it is essential to conduct further research.

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