Abstract

BERGENE, LISA BETH. A Phenomenological Approach to Uncovering the Essence of Grieving Experiences of Undergraduates. (Under the direction of Dr. Carol Kasworm).

Past studies have suggested that during their time on campus, as many as half of all undergraduates will experience the death of a loved one (Balk, 2001; Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010). The purpose of this study was to use a phenomenological method to uncover a thick, rich description of the lived experience of grieving among college undergraduates.

Seven undergraduates took part in this study. Inclusion criteria required participants to have experienced the loss of a loved one within the past year. The participants in this study experienced the death of parents, close friends, a grandparent, or an uncle. Phenomenological method was used to collect and analyze data. Participants completed two semi-structured interviews and a final meeting to review and confirm initial findings. Interview transcripts were reduced into units of meaning. Units of meaning expressing a similar experience were grouped together into clusters. Participants were asked to review and refine these clusters to ensure they accurately expressed their experiences.

Findings of the study can be grouped into four areas: (1) the influence of others on the experience of grieving, (2) the experience of adjusting to new roles and responsibilities, (3) innermost thoughts and feelings, and (4) moving forward after loss. Participants revealed that the feeling of being alone, even amongst thousands of classmates, was a prominent part of the lived experience of grieving. By the same token, peers who were present and consistent in expressing care and concern were an important source of support. Participants described the experience of taking on new responsibilities, such as planning the memorial
service or managing family finances. They considered questions about moving on after loss, often re-prioritizing goals and values.

Three conclusions are suggested based on the findings of this study. The first conclusion is that academic goals were reframed through the experience of meaning-making. A prominent aspect of the grieving process for these students was the search for a resolution between their way of understanding the world and the meaning they attributed to their loss. Through meaning-making, participants engaged in a re-prioritization of important goals and beliefs. For some participants, academic goals and career ambitions changed as a result of the meaning-making process. The second conclusion suggested that participants assumed the campus community would be supportive. Participants judged the actions of some peers, faculty, or staff to be dismissive of their distress. At times, responses from peers were perceived as insincere or insensitive. The third conclusion suggested that participants underestimated the period of grieving. Although painful thoughts and emotions occurred less frequently, the intensity did not diminish.

Based on these findings, future research should further explore assumptions students make about the way that classmates, faculty, and staff will respond to their grieving experience. Additionally, learning more about similarities and differences in how religious and non-religious students make meaning of loss would help explain the differing ways that students may understand death and experience grief.
A Phenomenological Approach to Uncovering the Essence of Grieving Experiences of Undergraduates

by
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the seven students

who participated in this study

and to the loved ones they lost.

This work is also dedicated to my parents & family,

and my friends,

with many thanks for their support,

their encouragement, and their interest in the topic.
BIOGRAPHY

Lisa Beth (LB) Bergene received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History of Philosophy from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She earned a Master of Education degree in Counselor Education from The Pennsylvania State University in University Park, PA. LB has worked in residence life her entire career, serving as an RA/Facilities Manager at Marquette University, then as a Hall Director at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and Duke University. For the past 10 years, she has served as Associate Dean for the first year campus at Duke University. In addition to her interest in the grieving experience of undergraduates, her research interests include mental health issues and the experience of veterans on campus. LB is originally from Wisconsin and cheers loudly for the Green Bay Packers.
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Feeling alone

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Planning the memorial

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Selectivity in sharing

Experiencing insensitive responses from others

Feeling alone

The importance of home

Experience of Taking on New Roles and Responsibilities

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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At some point in life, nearly every person will experience the death of a loved one. However, not everyone experiences grief in the same way. Often, individuals endure an array of emotional expressions and physical manifestations of their grief. Additionally, the experience of grieving can be a time of reflection and can lead to a reconsideration of goals and values. Often, when undergraduates experience the death of a loved one, grieving takes place on campus and away from family and home, leaving students to face their grief alone. The story of “Rick” illustrates one experience of an undergraduate grieving the death of a loved one.

Rick’s Story

There was something going on with “Rick”. Rick had served as a Resident Assistant for nearly two years. Although I did not know him well myself, his supervisor thought highly of him. However, during the past few weeks, his supervisor became troubled by the recent decline in Rick’s performance. Rick missed several team meetings, neglected his administrative duties, and failed to respond to emails and phone calls. His supervisor, concerned but also frustrated with Rick’s lack of engagement, sent him a letter notifying him that his position as a Resident Assistant would be in jeopardy if his performance did not improve. After Rick received the letter, he set up an appointment to meet with me, intending to appeal his supervisor’s assessment of his performance. As the Associate Dean, it was my
role to hear his appeal and determine if he would be able to continue in the Resident Assistant role.

Rick tentatively approached my office and nervously sat down in the chair across from mine. He avoided eye contact, covered his face with his hands, and sighed deeply. When he looked up, he said quietly, “The person [on campus] who died a few weeks ago… he was one of my good friends and I was there when he died.” I was taken aback, but then I recalled hearing about a student who had collapsed while playing basketball. Despite the efforts of the first responders, the student died at the scene. The campus community had been in shock for a day or two but seemed to return to normal function shortly afterward.

Rick was visibly struggling to maintain his composure. When he was ready to continue, he shared that he had spent the past few weeks in his room, barely leaving except to get food. He had skipped most of his classes and had let his Resident Assistant obligations slide. He sometimes found himself getting angry when he heard voices and laughter in the residence hall corridor outside his room. He found himself wondering why their lives seemed to be so easy when his was falling apart. Why didn’t they care that his life was forever changed?

Rick was deeply troubled about feeling isolated from his peers. Although few people knew he had been on the basketball court when his friend died, Rick had assumed that people would reach out to him. He resented the fact that no one seemed willing to help him. To Rick, it appeared that no one cared that he was suffering. He felt deeply wounded by what he believed to be a lack of support amongst others on campus.
During our conversation, Rick revealed that he was troubled by the incongruity of his thoughts and emotions. He knew that it was not fair to hold his peers accountable for not reaching out to him, but he did not know how to mitigate those thoughts. When talking with peers, Rick struggled to find words to describe what he was feeling and what he was thinking. His emotions fluctuated between loneliness, sadness, hopelessness, optimism, and anger. Rick shared that he was worried that people would not understand what he was going through or would try to minimize his experience. For him, the experience of grief was so intensely personal that he felt it dishonored his friend to share it with anyone who was not going through the same experience.

Rick was also troubled by the lack of interest he now felt in his academic pursuits. He shared that he had only sporadically attended class since his friend died. When he did leave his room for class, or when he tried to engage in his homework assignments, he struggled to keep his attention focused. He was conflicted by the lack of interest he now felt toward his classes and his failing to meet his obligations. Further, Rick described a range of distressing physical symptoms, including insomnia and lack of appetite. Although it had been three weeks since his friend had died, this conversation with me was the first time Rick had openly shared his feelings with anyone other than the people who had been with him at the gym that day.

Introduction to the Study

Rick’s experience is both unique and common at the same time. The experience of grief is one that touches nearly half of all students at some point during their undergraduate
Researcher have estimated that in a given year, 22 - 30% of the undergraduates have experienced the death of a loved one (Balk, 2001; Balk et al., 2010; LaGrand, 1986). For such a common experience, relatively little is known about how the experience of grieving impacts college students.

For an undergraduate, the experience of grieving may be influenced by differences between grieving while on campus and grieving at home. When the death of a loved one occurs, a source of support is often found within the home community. These supports may include a spectrum of family, friends, and community members who both knew the deceased and who shared in the grieving process. An undergraduate living on campus and away from home may be the only person on campus who knew the decedent. Subsequently, this student may be the only person on campus who is grieving. Although students may have the opportunity to leave campus for a few days to attend a memorial service, they are expected to return to campus, leaving behind the supportive presence of the home community. In addition, students grieve in an academic setting with high expectations for engagement and performance, requiring students to find ways to focus on their academic work while also coping with loss.

After the student returns to campus, the primary source of supportive presence is fellow students. Often these students are not prepared to support their grieving classmates. Advances in medical treatments and improvements to hospital facilities have extended the life expectancy of the average American from 49.2 years at the beginning of the 20th century...
to the current life expectancy of 77.5 years (Shrestha, 2006). As a result, many students arrive on campus having never experienced the death of a loved one. Well-intentioned peers may try to offer support and guidance to the grieving student. However, these efforts cannot duplicate the same level of support and understanding that comes from being part of a shared grieving experience (Ringler & Hayden, 2000). Often, peers feel helpless and may even begin to avoid the grieving student, furthering the sense of loss and isolation that the grieving student may be experiencing (Barnett, McMinimy, Flouer, & Masba, 1987).

Grieving undergraduates must also continue to attend to their academic responsibilities. Even if a student is able to leave campus for a period of time to be with a dying relative or to attend a memorial service, the reprieve from his or her academic work is only temporary. After a grieving student returns to campus, he or she is expected to quickly and completely re-engage with academic life on campus. Grieving students must resume attending class, participate actively in classroom discussions, complete assignments, and prepare for exams. Often, the grieving student has a brief window of time to make up readings and assignments that were missed while he or she was away from campus. Not surprisingly, the average grade point average for a student who is grieving is lower in the semester when the death occurs (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Similarly, students who have experienced the death of a loved one are more likely to leave the institution (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

Past research has examined specific aspects of the grieving experience of college students. However, to date only a handful of studies have used a phenomenological approach
to gain an understanding of the lived experience of students grieving the death of a loved one. However, one study focused on non-traditional aged undergraduates and another took place at an institution in Taiwan (Jiang, Chou, & Tsai, 2006; Seah & Wilson, 2011). The present study will add to the literature by approaching the experience of grief from a phenomenological perspective and focusing on the experience of domestic, traditional-aged undergraduates.

Statement of the Problem

Past researchers have attempted to develop ways to describe the process and symptoms that develop as part of the grieving process. However, the focus of those studies was on a narrowly defined facet of the grieving experience such as specific physical or emotional reactions (Balk, 2008a; Johnson, First, Block, Vanderwerker, Zivin, & Zhang, 2009; Ott, 2003). Other researchers have examined the relationship between the decedent and the survivor and the impact this relationship had on the grieving process (Cerel, Fristad, Verducci, Weller, & Weller, 2006). For example, Gray (1987) explored the impact of parental death on surviving children. The literature also includes proposals for intervention strategies and assessed their effectiveness in supporting grieving individuals (Janowiak, Mei-Tal, & Drapkin, 1995).

The grief literature is less robust when attempting to describe the grieving experience of undergraduates. Often, these studies are limited in scope and focus on a specific aspect of the grieving process rather than the whole of the grieving experience. Findings of these studies suggest the presence of emotional reactions to grief such as anxiety, depression, and
loss of concentration. These studies also describe physical responses to grief such as changes in appetite, and insomnia in grieving college students (Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001; Prigerson, Vanderwerker & Maciejewski, 2008). Other studies have examined the likelihood of student use of campus support services, such as the study completed by Harrison & Harrington (2001).

While the literature on college students may provide some description of the grieving process, it does not adequately address the experience of grieving. Grief is an intricate and intensively unique experience that can manifest as both physical and emotional reactions in a grieving individual. However, grief also includes a less predictable cascade of expressions that can have a marked influence on how the grieving individual experiences the world (Giorgi, 2005). Grief intrudes upon foundational values, beliefs, and associations as the grieving individual attempts to reframe the world that now no longer contains the living presence of the one who has died (Attig, 1996). Grief often touches the very consciousness of what it means to be that individual (Giorgi, 2005).

For some undergraduates, the experience of grieving may include contemplation of beliefs about love, mortality, and inevitability. What happens to love after a person dies? What is the purpose of life if it necessarily ends with death? What is the value of being a good person? What role does the deceased play in my life now? For others, the experience of grief provides a different perspective on the way that he or she relates to peers and family. Undergraduates may wonder what it means to be a daughter or son after a parent dies. They may be uncertain if developing new friendships is disloyal to a best friend who has died. For
some undergraduates, the grieving process may provoke questions and strengthen or test his or her relationship with his or her faith (Attig, 1996; Park, 2005). How could God allow something like this to happen? How do my beliefs about the Afterlife include my loved one? The reframing of the culmination of these foundational values and experiences grieving can be seen as a re-framing of the way that a person understands and lives in the world (Giorgi, 2005; Park & Folkman 1997).

The grief literature fails to capture this existential understanding of the experience of grief. Researchers in the field of nursing have begun to use a phenomenological approach to try to describe the experience of grieving. In the field of higher education, at the time of this writing, only two research teams have looked at the experience of college students using a phenomenological lens (Jiang et al., 2006; Seah & Wilson, 2011). This study will extend what is known about the grieving experience of undergraduates by employing a phenomenological approach to uncovering the lived experience of grief.

**Background to the Problem**

**Prevalence of Grief among College Students**

The experience of grief among college students is relatively common. LaGrand (1986) asked 3,252 students to indicate the most recent major loss they had experienced. The results of the survey indicated that 27.7% of the respondents identified the death of a loved one as the most recent major loss. In a more recent study, Balk (2008a) found that 22 – 30% of undergraduates had experienced the death of a loved one within one year of his study. In a separate study, Balk et al. (2010) again found that 30% of the students in the study had
experienced the death of a loved one within the past twelve months. That percentage jumped to 39% when the time since death was extended to 24 months (Balk et al., 2010). In about half of these cases, the decedent was a friend of the student. About a quarter of the students referenced the loss of a grandparent (Balk et al., 2010).

**The Outer World of Grief**

Grief can manifest in ways that are observable to the outside world and in ways that are invisible. The literature on grief contains a robust collection of studies that have attempted to describe these observable expressions of the grieving process. Hardison, Neimeyer and Lichstein (2005) reported higher levels of insomnia among grieving students. Balk (2008a) and Johnson et al. (2009) observed that grieving individuals were more likely to experience physical pain and diminished immune responses. Other studies have found that those enduring the grieving process may experience symptoms such as changes in sleeping patterns, changes in appetite, headaches and muscle aches, and increased blood pressure (Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001; Prigerson et al., 2008).

Equally challenging are mental and emotional manifestations of grief that may not always be observable to the outside world. Balk (2001) reported increased stress and anxiety, depressive episodes, inability to concentrate, challenges managing time and deadlines, rumination, and waves of a variety of emotions among grieving individuals. Harrison and Harrington (2001) found that the experience of grieving was associated with an increased likelihood of development of depressive symptoms. Similarly, Melhelm, Day, Shear, Day, Reynolds, & Brent (2004) examined the grief reactions of 146 people to the
suicide of a friend. Findings of their study indicated that in addition to anxiety and depression, the grieving individuals were more likely to experience post traumatic stress syndrome, behavioral problems, and suicidal ideation.

The Inner World of Grief

Less is known about the non-observable experiences of grieving. In addition to the physical and emotional manifestations of grief, the death of a loved one can stir thoughts, associations, and new realities for the grieving individual (Lowe & McClement, 2010). The experience of grieving includes facing existential questions about the purpose of life, the meaning of death, the role of faith, and the vulnerability and significance of relationships (Attig, 1996; Giorgi, 2005). In other words, grieving is about more than just the loss of a loved one. Grieving is the process of reframing the world of the individual who is experiencing that grief (Giorgi, 2005). In many cases, this process is not a welcomed experience and the grieving individual may feel thrown into an unfamiliar place where ideas and associations that were once unshakeable are now open to question (Wertz, 2005). Ideas, beliefs, and assumptions that were foundational to how he or she understood the world may need to be abandoned or reformed. This inner world of grieving is the process of relearning the world in light of what it means to the grieving individual to experience the death of a loved one (Attig, 1996).

Grieving on Campus

The literature suggests that the experience of grieving on campus may be different than grieving at home. Although grieving is a common experience among undergraduates, it
is not often discussed among peers or addressed as a community issue. Classmates, faculty, and staff may struggle to know how to show support. Similarly, grieving students may be unsure how to respond to attempts from classmates and friends to provide support.

Dodd (1988) found that while peers demonstrated concern and empathy for their grieving friends, peers become frustrated by feelings of helplessness. In some cases, peers who have not yet lived through the experience of grieving underestimated the intensity and longevity of the grieving process (Attig, 1996; Balk, 2008a). They advised grieving students to get over their grief or to move on with life (Attig, 1996). Peers felt anxious being around the grieving student and tried to search for the right thing to say (Dodd, 1988; Hardison et al., 2005). This lack of comfort around the topic of death could lead peers to avoid acknowledging the fact that a death took place. Other students shied away from the grieving student completely (Dodd, 1988).

Not surprising, grieving students reported feeling lonely and disconnected from their peers (Dodd, 1988). Inability of peers to provide effective and sustained support increased a grieving student’s sense of isolation (Attig, 1996, Barnett et al., 1987; Gray, 1987; Rack, Burleson, Bodie, Holmstrom, & Servaty-Seib, 2008; Ringler & Hayden, 2000). Rather than finding support from their community, grieving students reported feeling shunned by some peers (Dodd, 1988). The secondary loss of a supportive community can compound the grieving experience for the effected student (Attig, 1996; Balk, 2008b).

The isolation experienced by grieving students is amplified by the fact that campuses cannot match the level of support that a student may receive at home from family and the
community at home (Attig, 1996). On campus, students are often referred to counseling centers or student health centers for support (Balk et al., 2010). Students may be willing to set an appointment with student health services for physical manifestations of grief such as insomnia or headaches, but less willing to seek support services for the emotional experiences of the grieving process (Balk et al., 2010; Harrison & Harrington, 2001).

In addition to the struggle to find support on campus, grieving students are also challenged to meet the academic expectations of the campus. Limited research has attempted to capture the impact of the grieving on the academic experience of students. The most widely cited study, conducted by Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006), found that students who were grieving earned a lower grade point average during the first semester following the death of a loved one than peers who were not grieving. The study also demonstrated that grieving students were more likely to withdraw from classes or take a leave of absence (Servaty-Seib and Hamilton, 2006).

Little is known about the actual number of students who fail to persist at the institution as a result of the grieving experience. Often, physical expressions of grief such as insomnia, physical pain, inability to focus, or headaches may be a reason why students withdraw from courses or leave the institution. However these symptoms are not always attributed to the experience of grieving and are instead viewed as medical withdrawals (Balk et al., 2010; Hardison et al., 2005).

Campuses have attempted to support grieving students through development of policies that permit excused absences from academic requirements for short periods of time
(Balk, 2008b; Harrison & Harrington, 2001). However, after this brief absence from campus, students are expected to re-engage in courses and academic work. The larger question of what it means to be a student during the grieving experience is not often addressed.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Phenomenology as a Philosophy**

At its basis, phenomenology is rooted in existentialist philosophy (Oaklander, 1992). The phenomenological movement can be traced back to philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger who wrote extensively about the role of human consciousness in knowledge (Giorgi, 2008; Oaklander, 1992).

Phenomenology developed in response to the use of empirical method as the primary source of knowledge in the scientific community (Giorgi, 2006). A scientific approach to research suggested that observable and measurable evidence must be used to prove or disprove a hypothesis. However, the scientific approach is not as easily employed when trying to investigate phenomenon that is more difficult to observe and measure. As existentialist philosophers Husserl and Heidegger suggested, a different approach must be used when attempting to gather knowledge about human experience and behavior (Wertz, 2005).

A foundational assumption of phenomenology is that an object can be known in more than one way (Giorgi, 2005). An object may have measurable, observable descriptors such as weight, color, and age, but that same object will also be known as it is apprehended by a conscious human (Shorter & Stayt, 2010). A person observing the object will attribute
meaning to that object beyond its physical characteristics (Giorgi, 2008). This meaning is also considered a way to know and understand the phenomenon.

**Phenomenology as a Method of Inquiry**

As an approach to research, phenomenology has been used extensively in the field of nursing to explore and add to what is known about health-related experiences such as pain, illness, and grief. The phenomenological approach has also been used to study the experiences of nurses themselves as they encounter critically ill patients or face the experience of grieving in their work (Gerow, Conejo, Alonzo, Davis, Rodgers, & Domian, 2009). While phenomenology is beginning to be used in fields outside of health care, only a small number of studies have attempted to use a phenomenological lens to study experiences of college students. Of these studies, a handful focus on the experience of grieving within the college population (Jiang et al., 2006; Seah & Wilson, 2011). The proposed study will add to the literature by utilizing a phenomenological approach to focus specifically on the grieving experience of traditional-aged undergraduates.

The process of a phenomenological analysis of an experience consists of multiple steps with the goal of eliciting the essence of the experience of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2005; Wertz, 2005). Data collection occurs through semi-structured interviews with participants (Giorgi, 2009; Hycner, 1985; Wertz, 2005). Interviews with participants are transcribed and reduced into small units of meaning (Hycner, 1985). Through a process of multiple stages of review, the units of meaning are considered both apart from and against the broader context of the experience of the participant. The end result is the identification of
general themes constructed from the units of meaning that characterize the essence of what it means to experience a particular phenomenon (Hycner, 1985).

**Research Question**

This study will explore the grieving experience of undergraduate students after the death of a loved one. The purpose of this exploratory design is to uncover the lived experience of grieving in the context of students attending college and living away from home. One research question will be explored: How do undergraduate students experience the death of a loved one?

**Significance of the Study**

This study extends what is known about the grieving experience of undergraduates. The phenomenological approach in this study yields a richer, thicker description of the experience of grieving. Few phenomenological studies of grieving have focused on the experience of students. Of the two studies that did examine the experience of students, neither focused on traditional aged students at an institution in the United States. Participants in the Seah and Wilson (2011) study were undergraduates who ranged in age from 21 – 53. Participants in the work of Jiang et. al. (2006) were nursing students in Taiwan. This study adds to the body of phenomenological studies of grief by examining the experience of traditional-aged students at an institution in the United States.

This study will also extend what is known about the undergraduate experience in a more general sense. Based on the findings of Balk et al. (2010) and LaGrand (1986), nearly half of all undergraduates will experience the death of a loved one; however, despite the
pervasiveness of loss, the experience of grieving is not prominent in most student
development theories. The findings of this study could suggest future research that could
allow for the inclusion of grieving in a broader understanding of the undergraduate
experience.
CHAPTER TWO:
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Almost half of all college students will experience the death of a loved one during their undergraduate career (Balk, 2001; Balk et. al, 2010; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Although grieving has been studied extensively, little research has specifically focused on the grieving experience of undergraduates. This study used a phenomenological approach to uncover a richer, more descriptive understanding of the experience of grieving of the students who participated in this study.

This chapter will begin with a review of conceptualizations of grief. In this section, medical models, stage models, relationship-oriented models, and work-based models will be explored. Next, studies of abnormal or complicated grief will be examined. A review of grief research specific to college students will follow. The chapter will conclude with an examination of two phenomenological studies of grieving experiences of undergraduates.

Models of Grief

What exactly is grief? Researchers have proposed differing ways to describe and explain the experience of grieving. Early understanding of grieving likened the experience to the process of recovery from an illness (Engel, 1961; Freud, 1917; Lindemann, 1944, Parkes, 1964). These medical models of grieving were adapted and transformed into stage models. Stage models suggested that the grieving process followed a specific path (Kübler-Ross, 1969). A later understanding of grief focused on relationships, specifically the changed relationship between the survivor and the decedent (Bowlby, 1980). More recently,
researchers have suggested that the grieving process is best understood as a series of tasks that must be completed as the grieving individual moves toward recovery (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Researchers have also proposed the concept of complicated grief to account for individuals whose experience of grieving does not follow the expected course (Johnson et al., 2009).

**Medical Models of Grief**

Freud was one of the first researchers to directly address the grieving experience (Wright & Hogan, 2008). Freud likened the experience of grief to a psychological illness. Grief included both an expected progression to recovery and the potential to digress from that expected progression. In his book *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud suggested that the experience of grieving was a process of severing ties with the decedent (Freud, 1917; Horacek, 1988). The grieving process concluded when the grieving individual returned to normal function. Freud believed that recovery from grief should occur within a prescribed window of time (Wright & Hogan, 2008). According to Freud, grief that was not resolved within that window of time was considered maladaptive and abnormal (Horacek, 1988). Freud likened this maladaptive grief to a psychiatric illness (Attig, 1996).

The concept of maladaptive grief proposed by Freud was extended by another psychiatrist, Eric Lindemann (Lindemann, 1944). Lindemann based his research on the grieving experience of people who had been impacted by natural disasters and war (Buglass, 2010). Lindemann described what he believed to be the normal physical and psychological symptoms that would be expected after the loss of a loved one (Wright & Hogan, 2008). The
description offered by Lindemann became the basis for clinical guidelines that were used to
distinguish between normal and maladaptive grieving (Wright & Hogan, 2008).

In 1961, a medical doctor, George Engel, published a paper titled with the question,
“Is Grief a Disease?” (Engel, 1961). In his writing, Engel described the parallels between the
grieving process and the process of recovering from a disease (Engel, 1961). Engel believed
that understanding grief as a disease had implications for research methodology and the
mindset of health professionals who worked with grieving patients (Engel, 1961). According
to Engel (1961), grief had a common, usual, and predictable response. Grief had an
identifiable cause and the grieving process was the expected response to a loss, similar to the
expected and normal responses to a wound or an illness (Engel, 1961). Engel (1961)
suggested that grief had both psychological and physical symptomologies. Similar to Freud
and Lindemann, Engel differentiated between what he termed as uncomplicated and
complicated grief (Engel, 1961). According to Engel (1961), within a few months, grieving
individuals should recover and return to normal functions.

C. Murray Parkes (1964) extended the comparison of grief to a medical illness
through his study of the medical records of grieving widows. Parkes (1964) suggested that
grieving could be considered a psychological illness with recognizable, predictable, and
treatable symptoms. In his review of their medical records, Parkes found that these widows
were more likely to report symptoms such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, and changes in
appetite. Parkes (1964) believed that the presence of these tangible and treatable symptoms
supported the view of grief as an illness.
Other grief researchers have criticized the notion of comparing the experience of grieving to an illness. Attig (1996) suggested that these medical models of grief ignore aspects of the grieving process that extend beyond the physical and psychological experiences. Intellectual, spiritual, and relationship-oriented areas of the grieving experience are not considered when viewing grief as an illness (Attig, 1996). Attig (1996) also suggested that the predictability praised by Parkes (1964) is actually a limitation of viewing grief as a medical condition. According to Attig (1996), grief should be viewed as an experience that will be unique to each individual. Attempting to view grief as a linear process suggests it is simply a progression of symptoms. This view does not allow for variations in the experience that might be unique to the situation or the grieving individual. Additionally, the absence of symptoms specified by these models suggested that the individual will reach a point of recovery. This suggests that the participant has recovered and is no longer grieving (Attig, 1996).

**Stage Models of Grief**

The early understanding of grief as analogous to a medical or psychological illness was the basis for the development of stage models of grieving. The notion of a predictable path for grieving seemed to suggest the presence of stages. Medical models of grief also employed the notion of stages as the way to conceptualize the process of grieving. However, these stages were generally focused on descriptions of physical symptoms or behaviors. Lindemann (1944) understood grief as a psychological illness. He used the word *phases* to describe a trajectory of five steps that must be completed in order to return to normal
function. For Lindemann, those phases included: somatic disturbances, preoccupation with the deceased, guilt, hostility, and loss of patterns. Parkes (1964) also described phases of the grieving process: numbness, pining, disorganization and disrepair, and recovery.

Arguably the most well known and commonly referred to model of grief is the Five Stages of Grief model proposed by Kübler-Ross (1969). Originally generated from research in her medical practice, Kübler-Ross (1969) collected anecdotal and qualitative data about the experiences, thoughts, and emotions that terminally ill patients experienced as they coped with the notion of dying. She found patterns in the experiences described by patients as they approached death and she used these patterns to construct five stages that seemed to be common experiences to these patients. The Five Stages of Grief Model gained acceptance in the medical and psychology communities and has been commonly taught to medical students and psychology students as the basis for understanding the experience of grief (Maciejewski, Zhang, Block, & Prigerson, 2007).

One limitation of the original research of Kübler-Ross is that the participants who were being studied were people who were facing their own deaths rather than the loved ones who carried on after the loss. The model was often applied to both those who were in the process of dying and those who were experiencing the death of their loved ones. However, it was unclear if the experience of grieving the death of a loved one was the same as the process of facing death. To investigate this question, Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005) conducted a study with families as they anticipated and experienced the death of a loved one. Through this study, Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005) confirmed that the grieving process of
survivors followed a trajectory similar to the experience of a terminally ill person facing his or her own death.

The original model proposed by Kübler-Ross (1969) and revised by Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005) suggested that the grieving process is experienced as a progression through five stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. The Denial stage can be seen as a defense mechanism. At this stage, the grieving individual may be shocked and unprepared to acknowledge the death of the loved one. The Denial stage can be a buffer between the grieving individual and the shock and reality of the death of the loved one. Denial gives the grieving individual the time and distance to prepare to deal with the inevitable reality of the loss. As the grieving individual begins to accept the reality of the death of his/her loved one, the grieving process transitions to the second stage, Anger.

The Anger stage is characterized by strong and complex interaction of emotions (Kübler-Ross; 1969 & Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). These emotions can be a combination of several related responses, including: anger, rage, envy, and resentment. At this stage, the grieving individual begins to identify and wrestle with existential questions such as the meaning of life, the value of goodness, if people are chosen to die, and the existence of a higher power. The grieving individual does not often formulate answers for these questions but the action of projecting these questions and the uncertainty of the responses can provoke strong emotional reactions. For some, the Anger stage can be a time of an uncomfortable inability to control or predict emotional response. This stage also is characterized by a growing awareness and sense of hurt and unfairness that grief does not impact everyone the
same. For those who did not know the deceased as well, the impact of the loss may be less and may result in a less intense grief response. For a grieving individual in the Anger stage, the lack of symmetry in the grieving responses may cause additional distress.

Bargaining is the label given to the third stage of the model. According to Kübler-Ross (1969) and Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005), it is an attempt to postpone the inevitable reality of the death of the loved one. While the second stage begins the process of confronting abstract questions, the Bargaining stage stirs up questions focused on the behaviors and choices of the grieving individual and the deceased. These questions can also be reflective in nature but tend to be more focused on the people impacted by the loss rather than the more abstract and existential questions from the Anger stage. The grieving individual may struggle thinking about how actions or inactions may have changed the course of events. Bargaining may also come in the form of a promise for future behavior in exchange for more time with the deceased. This stage is also characterized by the emergence of guilt and powerlessness as the grieving individual comes to term with the futility of raising these questions.

The fourth stage, Depression, is reached when the grieving individual demonstrates an awareness and acceptance of the inevitability of death for all human beings and begins to contemplate his or her own mortality (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). The grieving individual at this stage begins to understand that the death of a loved one must result in a change to the relationship. This change, though often unwelcome, is inescapable. The absence of the loved one from the physical presence in daily life alters the way the
relationship is experienced. The grieving individual must find a new mode of connection to the deceased. This stage is also a time when the emotional reactions of the grieving individual may include feelings of sadness, loneliness, and isolation. The final stage, Acceptance, occurs when the grieving individual accepts the realization that he or she must move forward with life in this new and different reality.

The Five Stages of Grief Model outlined by Kübler-Ross (1969) and Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005) was not intended to be a rigidly followed protocol for grieving. Rather, the researchers suggested that the model be used as a guideline to understand where the grieving individual may be in the process of grieving. This understanding could serve as a tool to help concerned individuals determine the best way to support grieving individuals. Kübler-Ross & Kessler were careful to note that not all people who face the death of a loved one will experience all stages in the Five Stages of Grief model. Kübler-Ross & Kessler also cautioned that the stages would not always emerge chronologically or within a prescribed timeline.

Later researchers examined the accuracy of the Five Stages of Grief Model. Maciejewski et al. (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of 233 people who had experienced the death of a loved one. The results of their study offered support for the Five Stages of Grief Model. Their data showed that grief indicators characterizing the five stages outlined by Kübler-Ross & Kessler did in fact emerge and were observed in the same chronological order predicted by the Five Stages of Grief Model (Maciejewski et al., 2007). An additional finding by Maciejewski et. al (2007) indicated that study participants experienced a decline
in the five grief indicators within six months following the death. This finding suggested that a prescribed time period for grieving may exist.

Holland and Neimeyer (2010) conducted a study similar to the research undertaken by Maciejewski, et. al (2007). Holland and Neimeyer (2010) also found evidence to support the presence of the grief indicators identified by Kübler-Ross & Kessler. However, Holland and Neimeyer grouped the grief indicators into phases rather than stages. Phases allowed for more overlap and less rigid definition of a particular stage. Based on their findings, Holland and Neimeyer (2010) also suggested that movement between phases was not dependent on time. Rather, movement was more closely related to the transitions that occur as the grieving individual begins to make sense of and find meaning in the experience of loss.

Several criticisms have been raised about viewing grief as a series of stages. A prescribed series of stages suggest the existence of one correct way to move from start to finish in the grieving process (Attig, 1996; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The linear progression of stage models suggests that an individual who skips a stage or returns to an earlier stage is experiencing unhealthy or maladaptive grief (Attig, 1996).

Researchers have also expressed concern by the notion of recovery that is proposed in many of stage models of grieving (Bowlby, 1980; Freud, 1917; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Parkes, 1998). Not all grief researchers agree that an individual ever leaves the process of grieving. Attig (1996) suggested that grieving is a life-altering experience and does not end until the death of the grieving individual. Similarly, Rosenblatt (2008) proposed that the word recovery falsely suggested that at some point, the death of a loved one ceases to impact
the survivor. On the other hand, Balk (2008b) suggested that the term recovery should not be literally interpreted to signify a complete return to pre-loss functioning. Rather, it is should be understood as the change that occurs within an individual through the process of grieving, much like retaining a scar after surgery.

Another criticism of stage models of grieving is that the primary focus of the stages tends to be on the emotional expressions and experiences of the grieving individual (Attig, 1996). The stage models of grief do not incorporate the existential process of coming to terms with the death of a loved one. The highly individual process of creating associations, reflections, and finding meaning in the experience are not addressed in stage models of grieving (Attig, 1996). Holland and Neimeyer (2010) even suggest that the emotional expressions described by the stage models are the byproduct of the process of meaning-making, rather than manifesting as independent experiences.

**Relationship-Oriented Models of Grief**

One of the criticisms of stage models of grief is that they are too broadly constructed to adequately describe the experience of an individual (Attig, 1996). For instance, the response to the death of a spouse would likely be different than the response to the death of an acquaintance. For this reason, researchers began to look more closely at the relationship between the decedent and the survivor in the experience of grieving.

One of the first relationship-centered models proposed was the Theory of Attachment suggested by John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1980; Palombo, Bendicsen, & Koch, 2009). In both his clinical psychiatry work and his research, Bowlby focused on the importance of the
relationship between children and parents. Through his work, Bowlby observed the outcome of the separation of children from their parents (Palombo et al., 2009). Based on these observations, Bowlby developed a theory of grieving that described a biologically-driven experience of loss. This theory focused on the response following separation of loved ones, particularly children and mothers (Palombo et al., 2009). The Theory of Attachment was applied to both relationships between surviving individuals and relationships between a survivor and decedent.

The Theory of Attachment is centered on the importance and power of the attachments humans have to one another (Buglass, 2010). When applied more specifically to the process of grieving, Bowlby believed that grieving is the process of relocating his or her attachment to the decedent (Palombo et al., 2009). Bowlby (1980) believed that death caused an imbalance in the social world of the survivor as important relationships were destabilized.

The Theory of Attachment is also represented by a series of stages: shock, yearning and protest, despair, and recovery (Buglass, 2010). Bowlby suggested that emotional responses experienced during the grieving process such as numbness and anger acted to protect the survivor from the distress of the separation (Wright & Hogan, 2008). Unlike the medical models of grieving, Bowlby believed that the grieving process may take as long as two or three years (Horacek, 1988).

Bowlby’s model was extended through the development of the Continuing Bonds model proposed by Nigel Field (Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005). Field (2006a) did not subscribe to Freud’s view that grief resolved when the relationship no longer existed between
the survivor and the decedent. In contrast, Field (2006a) believed that the survivor and decedent continued to have an ongoing relationship, even after death. The relationship between the survivor and the decedent would necessarily change in a world where the decedent was no longer physically present (Attig, 1996). Therefore, the nature of the bond must be transferred to a purely internal world (Field, 2006a). According to Field (2006), grieving is the process the survivor must go through to adapt to this new internal relationship.

Similar to the medical models of grieving, Field (2006a) was also concerned with maladaptive grieving. Field (2006a) suggested that the transformation of the relationship away from the realm of the physical can become problematic if the survivor is unable to accept the fact that the decedent is no longer physically present in the world. Maladaptive grieving can develop if the survivor persists in searching for the physical presence of decedent, denying that the death has occurred. Maladaptive grieving could also occur when failure to accept the death of the loved one is supported by the “illusion of continuing contact in a literal sense” (Field, 2006a, p. 745).

One of the limitations of relationship-based models of grieving is that they are rooted in research on the relationships between young children and their parents, however not necessarily on loss (Palombo et al., 2009). The findings of these studies were later extended to explain the experience of grieving. Additionally, Klass (2006) suggested that relationship-based models might not describe the attachment between a non-parent and child, such as two friends or a romantically paired couple. Klass (2006) suggests that relationship-based theories should be extended to incorporate a broader view of relationships. According to
Klass (2006), models should also be improved by addressing social, political, and cultural influences that might affect the way relationships are formed.

Another limitation of relationship-based models was offered by Goin, Burgoyne, & Goin (1979). Goin et al. (1979) raised concerns recognizing the differences between normal and maladaptive grieving in relationship-based models. Goin et al. (1979) cautioned that the presence of continuing thoughts and behaviors involving dead loved ones should not necessarily be a signal of maladaptive grieving. During challenging times or on happy occasions, the importance of a deceased loved one may be elevated and intensified, resulting in a temporary revival of both the desire for the physical presence of the decedent and the experience of grieving for his or her absence (Goin et al., 1979). Goin et al. did not believe that these periodic moments of heightened grief should be classified as maladaptive.

An additional concern is that relationship-based models do not address how the condition of the relationship impacts the experience of grieving. Attig (1996) pointed out that most relationship-based models presume a positive relationship between the survivor and decedent. However, not all relationships are positive. Some grieving individuals may be experiencing the death of an abusive spouse or an incapacitated parent. Emotional responses may be confusing as the grieving individual experiences sadness, but at the same time is relieved to be released from the demands of that relationship (Attig, 1996).

**Grief as Work Models**

Another way to conceptualize the grieving experience is by viewing the process of grieving as working through a series of tasks. Similar to relationship-based models, task-
based models also require a grieving individual to develop a new relationship with the deceased (Worden, 1991). Work-based models suggest that the process of grieving incorporates the process of developing an understanding of this new world that has emerged after the death of the loved one (Worden, 1991).

Work-based models incorporate a shift in viewing grief as participatory rather than as sometime that happens to an individual. In his research, Attig (1996) stated that grief should be viewed as active work rather than as a passive response. This distinction allows the grieving individual to exert some control over the experience of grieving and progressing toward recovery. According to Attig (1996), viewing grief as active work acknowledges the effort that a grieving individual must exert to face the tasks and realities that must be confronted in order to move through the grieving process.

Several work-based models were an extension of the relationship-based models. These work-based models centered on the relationship between the survivor and the decedent. In some cases, medical models of grief provided the foundation for work-based models of grief. Although Lindemann viewed grief as a psychological illness, his work suggested the goal of the grieving process was to sever the relationship to the decedent (Buglass, 2010). Lindemann’s model included the following tasks: 1) Relinquish attachment to deceased, 2) Adjustment to the environment where the deceased is missing, and 3) Developing new relationships (Lindemann, 1944). Bowlby also embraced the concept of grief as work in his Theory of Attachment (Horacek, 1988). Although the phases in his
model are more descriptive of the emotional experience of grieving, Bowlby believed that the phases involved active work in order to progress toward recovery.

Similarly, Worden (1991) constructed a model that identified four tasks that a grieving individual would need to complete in order to resolve grief. This model was developed with the intention of guiding therapists working with grieving clients. However, it has been expanded as a framework to also provide grieving individuals with a sense of direction in the grieving process (Wright & Hogan, 2008). The first task in this model is to acknowledge the reality of the loss. In this stage, the survivor must accept the death of the loved one from both an intellectual and emotional perspective (Worden, 1991; Wright & Hogan, 2008). The second task is to work through the pain of grief (Worden, 1991). In this task, the survivor must experience the sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, and other emotions that are part of the grieving experience (Wright & Hogan, 2008). The third task is to adjust to the environment where the deceased is absent (Worden, 1991). These adjustments include acknowledging changes to the role that the deceased played in the life of the survivor (Wright & Hogan, 2008). Additionally, the survivor must redefine himself or herself in light of the physical absence of the loved one. The fourth task is to loosen the ties to the deceased. As part of this task, grieving individuals must find new ways to have an ongoing relationship with the deceased that also allows the grieving individual to continue with his or her life (Worden, 1991; Wright & Hogan, 2008).

Not all grief researchers have embraced Worden’s model of grief as a work-based process (Stroebe, 1991; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) sought to
empirically observe the effect of work-based strategies of grieving. In their longitudinal study of 60 individuals who had experienced the death of a spouse, Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) found little difference in the outcome on depression between those who completed the grief work and those who avoided the grief work. However, Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) did find that extreme cases of avoidance of the grief work led to a greater number of negative outcomes. Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) suggested that this finding confirmed that some level of active participation in grieving may be necessary in order to avoid maladaptive grieving.

In response to perceived limitations of earlier work-based models of grieving, Stroebe and Schut (1999) developed the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement. This model suggests that grieving individuals move between two ways, or orientations, of coping (Wright & Hogan, 2008). The first, referred to as Loss-orientation, is the term for grief work and includes the emotional process of dealing with the death of the loved one. The second orientation, Restoration-orientation, is the process of recognizing and incorporating the changes that result from the loss into life moving forward. In Restoration-orientation, lifestyle changes, new roles, and financial realities are acknowledged and integrated into the new reality of the survivor. Grieving incorporates both dealing with the loss of the loved one and also the day to day changes that occur in the life of the survivor.

Stroebe and Schut (1999) viewed Loss-orientation and Restoration-orientation as two distinct but closely linked processes. The separation between the two processes allowed for an understanding of grief that did not operate on an expected timeline and that was able to adapt itself to different grieving individuals. In this model, grieving individuals are able to
work through the practical realities of the death of a loved one while at the same time experiencing the emotional realities of the loss or just focus on one process of grieving. This ability to dose grieving allowed the individual to face the distress of grief, but also take a respite from grief when the distress was too much to face (Stroebe and Schut, 1999).

Critics of the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement have raised concerns about the assumption that the grieving individual has the ability to move between the two orientations without getting stuck (Buglass, 2010). In other words, if an individual does not wish to face the emotional side of grieving, can he or she move forward? Additionally, this model does not take into account the fact that in many cases, more than one person is grieving for the loss of a specific person. For instance, at a given moment, members of the same family may not be in the same orientation of grieving. In a case such as this, a person who is Restoration-orientation may be interested in talking about logistical arrangements for the estate while others who are in the Loss-orientation may not be emotionally ready for a conversation about dividing up personal belongings (Buglass, 2010).

Attig (1996) suggested that in addition to the tasks identified in these models of grief as work, the overarching task for the grieving individual is to relearn the world. For some individuals, the process of grieving upends everything they know, believe, and expect. After the death of a loved one, the grieving individual can feel unsettled and may have the sense that nothing will be the same again (Attig, 1996). Beliefs and foundations that were considered unmovable may no longer be steadfast. These realizations can produce a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty in the grieving individual (Attig, 1996). Attig suggested that
the work-based models could be improved by incorporating a more broad re-orientation to
the world as another process.

**Meaning-Making Models of Grieving**

A growing number of researchers have begun to explore meaning-making as a way to
conceptualize the grieving experience. The death of a loved one can challenge the way in
which people understand the world (Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000; Park, 2005;
Park & Folkman, 1997). Closely held beliefs, ideas, and expectations may no longer make
sense in the light of their loss. Grieving individuals may engage in a process of meaning-
making in an attempt to return a sense of order and predictability to the way they understand
the world.

Park and Folkman (1997) proposed a framework for understanding ways people cope
with stress. Although not specifically addressing the experience of grieving the loss of a
loved one, this model has often been applied to the grieving process. The Meaning-Making
Model of Coping suggested that over the course of a lifetime, assumptions, values, and
beliefs influence the way people expect the world to behave. These assumptions, values, and
beliefs lead to the development of important life goals as well as a sense of order and
predictability in life. According to Park and Folkman, the act of trying to achieve these goals
provides a sense of purpose and a sense of meaning. Park and Folkman termed this as a
global meaning. Global meaning provides the basis for the development of important goals
in life. Additionally, global meaning is the lens through which an individual understands the
world and provides context to understand experiences (Park and Folkman, 1997). For
instance, a person who has a strong belief in the importance of family and expects to be a parent someday will view news of pregnancy through the lens of someone who values family and welcomes the ability to act on that goal.

For many individuals, religious or spiritual beliefs are the backbone of their global meaning (Park, 2005; Park & Folkman, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Religious or spiritual beliefs often influence a vision of lifelong goals and values or outright dictate what those goals, attitudes, and values should be (Park, 2005). Additionally, abstract concepts such as fairness, goodness, and justice may also be shaped by these beliefs and ideas (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). For this reason, the process of meaning-making is often situated in the context of religion or spirituality (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008; Park & Folkman, 1997).

In the Meaning-Making Model of Coping, when a stressful event occurs, such as the death of a loved one, the grieving individual goes through a process of assessing the personal significance of the event. Park and Folkman (1997) referred to this process as assessing the situational meaning of an event (Park & Folkman, 1997). For instance, when a student dies of a chronic illness, classmates may think about what caused that student to die. This initial assessment is referred to as the situational meaning. However, classmates will also consider the loss through the broader lens of his or her global sense of meaning. In a case such as this, a student may understand that the death was caused by the illness but may struggle with wondering why that particular classmate was stricken with the disease but no one else was ill.
This situation is an example of the incongruity that may exist between the situational meaning attributed to a situation and the way that the same situation is understood from a more global perspective. Grieving becomes the act of making sense of the loss from both a situational and a global perspective. A lack of congruity between situational meaning and global meaning can be distressing, producing feelings of loss of control and disorientation (Park & Folkman, 1997; Wortmann & Park, 2009).

Researchers have suggested that coping is the process by which a person comes to terms with the discrepancy between how they make sense of the situation and where it fits in with their greater understanding of the world (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Park & Folkman, 1997). According to Park and Folkman (1997) the process of meaning-making continues until people resolve that discrepancy by either coming to a different way of understanding the situation or a different way of incorporating it into their broader understanding of life. The researchers suggested that the process of discrepancy reduction, or meaning-making, was a way for the grieving individual to regain a sense of control and predictability to the world.

In her later work, Park (2005) further explored the Meaning-Making Model of Coping, focusing on the influence of religious beliefs on the process of coping. Park surveyed college students to learn about their experience of meaning-making. Her findings suggested that students with strong religious beliefs experienced a greater disruption to their meaning system after the death of a loved one. Initially after a loss, students with strong religious beliefs experienced greater distress and higher levels of intrusive thoughts,
avoidance, and depressed mood. However, over time, students with strong religious beliefs seemed better able to adjust to the loss of a loved one. Park (2005) concluded that students with strong religious beliefs used those beliefs as a framework to inform their understanding of loss and to provide a sense of meaning or purpose for the loss.

Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) attempted to explore factors that impeded the meaning-making process of grieving individuals. Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) conducted pre-loss interviews and post-loss interviews with family members of chronically ill patients. Through these interviews, the researchers found that grieving individuals engaged in two distinct meaning-making processes, making sense of the loss and finding benefit in the loss. The researchers suggested that making sense of the loss meant finding a deeper, more personal way to understand the loss. The second process, finding benefit in the loss, referred to the process of learning something new about oneself or noticing a change in abilities as a result of the loss. The researchers concluded that the process of making sense of the loss aided in the resolution of feelings of distress, but the experience of finding benefit in the loss did not.

Researchers have suggested that the meaning-making process can be more difficult when a deeply held belief seems to be violated by an act, such as the death of a loved one (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Park, 2005; Park & Folkman, 1997). As an example, many religions share the assumption that death occurs at the end of a long life. People of these faiths tend to expect that they and the people they love will live until they have reached an advanced age. When a person dies unexpectedly, his or her death is perceived as a
violation of that assumption. Grieving individuals may experience feelings of distress and disorientation as they struggle to reconcile their strongly held belief with the reality of a person who died at a young age (Cait, 2004; Park & Folkman, 1997).

Researchers also questioned if meaning-making was a critical element to the adjustment of individuals after the death of a loved one. Davis et al. (2000) surveyed two different groups, parents who lost babies to SIDS and adults who lost spouses or children in vehicular accidents, to test the assumption that all individuals engage in meaning-making. The findings of this study suggested that approximately two-thirds of participants engaged in meaning-making behavior. Many of those individuals did report finding meaning in the loss; those individuals tended to describe themselves as being well-adjusted after the loss. Those who engaged in meaning-making but were not able to come to an understanding about the loss described feelings of distress and disorientation. Interestingly, in some cases, participants who did not report engaging in meaning-making also appeared to be well-adjusted after the loss, suggesting that meaning-making may not be necessary for adjusting after a loss.

**Complicated Grief**

Nearly all of the grief models address the notion of a normal experience of grieving. Additionally, these models also describe an abnormal or maladaptive experience of grieving (Bowlby, 1980; Field, 2006a; Freud, 1917; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Worden, 1991). The phrase complicated grief came into use to describe the abnormal
grieving experience (Johnson et al., 2009). In most models, complicated grief is identified through the presence of physical and emotional symptoms (Johnson et al., 2009).

Researchers have described complicated grief as a reduction in the quality of life for the grieving individual (Johnson et al., 2009). Complicated grief can be characterized by a variety of symptoms including persistent yearning, inability to accept the death, being on edge, loss of meaning & purpose, bitterness, suicidal ideations, and onset of illnesses such as hypertension (Johnson et al., 2009; Prigerson, Maciejewski, Kasl, Reynolds, Bierhals, Newsom, Fasiczka, Frank, Doman, & Miller, 1995). In some cases, these symptoms can result in loss of daily functioning and manifest both as extreme emotional distress and as debilitating physical symptoms such as inability to sleep, changes in appetite, and chronic health conditions. Additionally, for those experiencing complicated grief, the grieving process may be more intense and last longer. Expressions of complicated grief may also intersect and amplify a previous condition, such as anxiety or depression (Prigerson et al., 1995).

One of the more prominent experiences of complicated grief is rumination, defined as persistently focusing on thoughts and feelings related to grief (Michael & Snyder, 2005). Rumination can be beneficial and productive in providing an opportunity to process the loss in such a way to provide space to construct a sense of meaning from the experience. However, rumination can also be an unproductive process when it leads to repetitive thought. In the case of complicated grief, rumination reduces the ability to adapt after the loss and fails to result in a new sense of meaning (Michael & Snyder, 2005).
Michael & Snyder (2005) voiced concerns about the impact that rumination could have specifically on college students. They suggested that this maladaptive cycle of thought could contribute to the decline in the well-being of the student (Michael & Snyder, 2005). In healthy and productive rumination, the amount of time the participant spends thinking about the loss will gradually reduce over time as the participant adapts to the new frame of reference. Maladaptive rumination does not subside over time and continues to engage the participant in the loss, potentially interfering with a student’s ability to focus on academic work (Michael & Snyder, 2005).

**Undergraduates and Grieving**

The experience of grief among college students is relatively common. In her study, LaGrand (1986) asked 3,252 students to state the most recent important loss they had experienced. The results of the survey indicated that 27.7% of the respondents identified the death of a loved one as the most recent important loss. In a more recent study, Balk (2008a) found that 22 – 30% of undergraduates had experienced the death of a loved one within one year of his study. In a separate study, Balk et al. (2010) found that 30% of 118 randomly selected students experienced the death of a loved one within the past twelve months. That number jumped to 39% when the time since death was extended to 24 months (Balk et al., 2010). The results of these studies seem to indicate that the experience of loss is a common experience for students. Some researchers have even begun to refer to the prevalence of grief on campus as the silent epidemic (Balk & Vesta, 1998).
**Manifestations of Grief in College Students**

How does the grieving experience of college students differ from the experience of other people suffering the loss of a loved one? The literature is limited in responding to this question. Most of what is known about the grieving experience of college students attends to a specific aspect of grief such as intervention efforts, symptoms of interest, or maladaptive grief (Balk, 2008a). Very few studies attempt to address the overall experience of grieving in college students (Hardison et al., 2005).

One way that the grieving experience has been explored within the college population is through the identification of specific symptomatic expressions of grief. One of the most commonly reported manifestations of grief within the college student population is insomnia (Balk, 2008a; Hardison et al., 2005). For students who experience disordered sleeping patterns due to their grief, the disruption is particularly troublesome. These disordered sleeping patterns have a cascading impact on ability to concentrate, process complex thoughts, and attend to details (Hardison et al., 2005). Eventually, a student’s ability to persist in classes or successfully complete a course could be impacted by these expressions of grief.

Researchers have also focused on psychological expressions of grief, particularly depression and suicidal ideation. Although not specifically researching college students, Melhelm et al. (2004) conducted a study that looked at the psychological impact on adolescents who were exposed to the suicide of a peer. Beyond exhibiting a greater tendency to experience depressive symptoms, these grieving individuals also endured greater
functional impairment, poorer physical health, and a higher likelihood of suicidal ideation (Melhem et al., 2004). Melhem et al. (2004) found that these individuals were more likely to engage in periods of crying, numbness, and preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased. Other adolescents experienced sensations of fright, sadness, anger, rejection, shock, guilt, or preoccupation with their own death (LaGrand, 1986; Ringler and Hayden, 2000). Similar to the impact of insomnia, researchers believed these emotional expressions of grief could become an obstacle to maintaining active engagement with both the social and academic experience.

Similarly, Harrison and Harrington (2001) noted an increase in psychological distress and depressive symptoms amongst grieving students. In their study, Harrison and Harrington (2001) found that the relationship between the decedent and the survivor played a role in the intensity of the grieving experience. An additional finding of the study was that the grieving experience of adolescents was impacted by how much change in daily life accompanied the death of a loved one (Harrison & Harrington, 2001).

In addition to emotional and physical expressions of grief, Balk (2008a) noted that students also suffered from cognitive impacts of grieving. Skills requiring concentration such as staying organized and managing time were more challenging to sustain while grieving (Balk, 2008). Janowiak et al. (1995) suggested that these cognitive impacts of grieving were further amplified by the developmental state of the student at the time of the death. For a student who was beginning the process of self-defining, the death of an
important person could suspend development or alter ways the student learned to relate to others (Janowiak et al., 1995).

**Grieving among Peers**

A factor that must be considered when examining the grieving experience of college students is the social environment of the college campus. College students spend the majority of their time living and interacting with peers rather than with their intergenerational family units at home. Relationships with people outside of campus, such as relatives and friends from home, are often peripheral to the daily life of the campus community. This can be problematic, leaving a grieving student to navigate both the campus community and the home community with only limited opportunities to integrate the two communities.

In many cases, the experience of grieving creates boundaries (Balk, Tyson-Rawson, & Colletti-Wetzel, 1993). According to Balk (2001), grieving students experience a sense of isolation, even while being surrounded by peers. Friends, even those with good intentions, are less often a source of support and are more often a source of discomfort for a grieving student. Peers may struggle to understand the intensity and duration of the grieving process and may unintentionally add to the feeling of isolation (Balk, 2001).

Additionally, it is likely that many of a grieving student’s peers have not yet encountered the death of a loved one and do not know how to respond (Balk & Vesta, 1998). Peers do not often know the person who died and may struggle to understand the relationship between the grieving student and the deceased (Attig, 1996). Often, the grieving student is the only person on campus who is grieving for that person (Dodd, 1988).
Barnett, et al. (1987) noted that classmates often recognized the distress of peers but chose not to offer ongoing support or assistance because they felt overwhelmed by the distress they perceived in their classmate. According to Barnett, et al. (1987), peers may feel confused and unable to find the appropriate method to offer support. Others may believe that the grieving process is a private matter, and their presence is an intrusion into a very personal experience (Barnett et al., 1987). Similarly, Attig (1996) found that students recognized the distress of their peers but often did not possess the courage to initiate a conversation about the loss. Dodd (1988) also researched the experience of peer support through an analysis of a classroom panel discussion on grief. His findings suggested that grieving students might interpret the perceived inaction of peers as disinterest and as a lack of care for the distress of the grieving individual.

The literature also suggests that even well-intentioned peers may add to the distress of a grieving student. In an attempt to distract a grieving student, the words and actions of a peer may communicate a dismissive attitude about the intensity and duration of the grieving experience (Balk, 2008a; Dodd, 1988; LaGrand, 1986). In some cases, peers may even become frustrated by the longevity of the grieving process and suggest that a grieving friend get over it or move on with their life (Balk, 2008a).

On the other hand, researchers have also suggested that peers can have a beneficial influence on the grieving experience. Gray (1987) found that peer support was directly related to a decrease in depressive symptoms for grieving students. In an examination of a counseling group for grieving students, Janowiak et al. (1995) noted that student participants
in the group valued the opportunity to both talk about their grieving experience and to hear how others learned to cope with the death of a loved one. Ringler and Hayden (2000) found that students rated peers as the most desired and most helpful source of support.

**Grieving and the Academic Experience**

In addition to the influence of social relationships on campus, the academic responsibilities of being a student play an important role in the way undergraduates experience grief. However, little research has investigated the impact of the grieving process on the academic experience of undergraduate students.

Only one study has completed a large-scale analysis of the impact of grieving on the academic performance of students. Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) found that students earned a lower grade point average during the semester that a loved one died. In this study, the difference in grade point average between bereaved students and non-bereaved students ranged from 0.10 to 0.58, with larger differences being observed in younger students (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). In an earlier study, Balk (2001) found that grieving students are less likely to return to campus or to continue to be enrolled full time following the death of a loved one.

LaGrand (1986) examined the experience of loss on the time and energy available to a student to pursue academic work. Through this study, LaGrand (1986) surveyed over 3000 students about the experience of loss. However, LaGrand used a broad definition of loss, not exclusively loss as defined by the death of a loved one. LaGrand (1986) highlighted the reality of the time and energy that is expended through the grieving process.
students encountered physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive disturbances, vomiting, and rashes. They also engaged in coping activities such as increasing participation in religious activities, writing, and just simply processing the experience in an attempt to alleviate some of the suffering (LaGrand, 1986). LaGrand suggested that these coping activities had an impact on ability of students to focus on their academic work.

Less easy to quantify is the way that the grieving impacts the ability of students to engage fully in the academic experience. Servaty-Seib & Hamilton (2006) suggested that grieving students might experience the same physical and psychological grief indicators as other people who are grieving but do so in an environment where these symptoms are less noticeable or are mistakenly attributed to behaviors that are more common in college students (eg. lack of sleep). These symptoms may hinder the ability of the student to give full effort and attention to academic pursuits, in some cases bringing about a decline in self-esteem and investment in the academic program (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

**Phenomenological Studies of Undergraduate Grief**

Phenomenological studies have been widely used in the field of healthcare to explore the experience of grieving (Dubose, 1997; Gerow et al., 2009; Lowe & McClement, 2010; Melhem et al., 2007; Rodger, Sherwood, O’Connor, & Leslie, 2006; Shorter & Stayt, 2010). However, at the time of this writing, only two research teams have published studies using a phenomenological approach to explore the grieving experience of undergraduates (Jiang et al., 2006; Seah and Wilson, 2011).
Seah and Wilson (2011) conducted in-depth interviews with six undergraduates, ranging in age from 21 - 53. Participants were asked to broadly describe the experience of grieving. Based upon the information relayed by the participants, the researchers focused on the strategies employed by participants to manage their grief. What emerged from the experiences of the participants was a common utilization of ten strategies to manage grief. These strategies included cognitive activities such as making meaning from the loss as well as physical strategies such as exercising and going to work. Seah and Wilson (2011) also identified several limitations of their study including the lack of generalizability of the study because of the small number of participants. Additionally, the researchers noted that the average time since death was 2 years. In this study, the experience of grieving in this study was shared retroactively and after time to reflect rather than as an actively evolving experience.

The second phenomenological study was an examination of the grieving experience of nursing students in Taiwan after a classmate was killed in a car accident (Jiang et al., 2006). Analysis of interviews with the students suggested that the following themes were present in the experience of grieving: morbid anxiety, helplessness, fear of disappearance, and thinking of the future (Jiang et al., 2006). The researchers were particularly interested in the experience of these participants because of their intention to work in the field of health care, where death and grief would likely be a prevalent part of their experience at work (Jiang et al., 2006).
Summary

The experience of grieving has been conceptualized through multiple models. Some models have focused on emotional responses to grief while others have been more action-oriented and suggest that the process of grieving occurs through conscious effort. College students in particular may have a unique experience of grieving, especially how grieving impacts relationships with peers and how grieving impacts the experience of being a student. The specific method and design used to conduct the study will be explored in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY

The experience of losing a loved one can be challenging to put into words. Although previous studies have attempted to quantify grief through capturing measurable physical and emotional symptoms, it is difficult to measure and describe the more internal reactions and expressions of grief. Less is known about the thought processes and reflections that are part of the grieving experience. Although past research has shed light on some aspects of the grieving experience of college students, most of those studies have focused on intervention strategies and have been limited in scope. This study uses a phenomenological approach to more fully explore the grieving experience of undergraduate students, leading to the research question: How do undergraduate students experience the death of a loved one?

Qualitative Method

A review of the literature underscores the value of approaching the experience of grieving with a qualitative method. Giorgi (2005) explained the importance of qualitative method by differentiating between the aim of human science, or qualitative studies, and the natural science, or empirical approach. Empirical studies approach a phenomenon with the aim of confirming a hypothesis in the hopes of predicting or controlling an outcome (Giorgi, 2005). In contrast, the value of a qualitative study is in the openness of the approach. The goal of a qualitative study is to discover rather than to confirm. This openness may reveal a new perspective or layer of meaning within the phenomenon that was not previously known through the empirical study.
Much of what is currently known about grief has been learned through empirical research studies. However, in addition to experiencing physical and emotional reactions, the grieving individual must also reframe what he or she knows about the world. As suggested by Attig (1996), the experience of grieving can be profoundly different, even for the same individual who experiences more than one loss. These differences can encompass a wide spectrum of experiences. The thoughts and feelings that emerge after the death of a loved one are complex and evolve as the grieving individual develops a new understanding of his or her lived experience (Giorgi, 2009). Additionally, the grieving individual must choose to allow another person to have access to those expressions through the research process in order to gain an understanding of his or her experience (Giorgi, 2005).

Much of the past research has approached the study of grief using a quantitative design. Quantitative researchers have examined specific physical or emotional expressions such as depression or sleep disorders connected with the grieving process (Balk, 1997; Floerchinger, 1991; Hardison, et al., 2005; Ott, 2003; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Other studies have investigated common behaviors related to the grieving process in order to determine the universality of different manifestations of grief (Balk, 1997; LaGrand, 1985; Zisook, Devaul, & Click, 1982). Another example is the Servaty-Seib & Hamilton (2006) study, which viewed grief through the lens of academic performance. The unit of measure used to represent academic performance in this study was grade point average and course completion. However, does grade point average tell the whole story of how an
undergraduate lives the experience of being a student while grieving the death of a loved one?

These quantitative studies are useful to gain insight into one specific aspect of the grieving process, but using a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to more freely explore the grieving experience of these participants. The decision to utilize qualitative research methodology allowed participants the opportunity to share a vivid description of emotions, thoughts, and reflections (Moustakas, 1994). Insights gained through this study provided a richer, more descriptive view of the grieving experience of the select participants in this study.

**Phenomenology**

At its root, phenomenology seeks to clarify the meaning of the experience for the individual who is living the experience (Giorgi, 2005). As described by Wertz, “My mental life involves a transcendence, that is, a relation to something beyond itself that means something to me” (Wertz, 2005, p. 169). In a phenomenological study, the researcher attempts to put himself or herself in the shoes of the participant to try to experience the phenomenon in the same way it is experienced by that participant. This approach allows the researcher to observe the meanings the participant has expressed, precisely as intended by him or her (Wertz, 2005).

The philosopher Edmund Husserl is often credited with the advancement of phenomenology (Oaklander, 1992). At the time of its introduction, phenomenology was a departure from the rationalist school of thought and the scientific method that was the main
mode of research investigation at the time. Rationalist thought suggested that reason, logic, and direct observation were the ways in which knowledge was obtained and research was conducted. Rationalist investigations were mostly related to research within the natural sciences and were not as easily applicable to the lives and experiences of people (Giorgi, 1985).

Phenomenology reorients the way that a researcher approaches the problem. Rationalist thought would lead a researcher to use an established theory or framework in which to compare or fit the problem within. In contrast, the phenomenological approach to gaining knowledge is to focus on gaining a better understanding of the experience rather than attempting to fit the phenomenon into a hypothesis (Oaklander, 1992). Existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger suggested that knowledge is composed of both the everyday, practical understanding that we have of items and events, and knowledge also takes the form of a different way that we know an item or event that is based on the meaning of the interaction between the item or event and the individual (Oaklander, 1992).

Phenomenology as a framework and a research methodology also has roots in the field of psychology. Giorgi (1985) believed that phenomenological psychology offered the opportunity to move beyond just describing the presence of emotions and feelings but rather could uncover vivid insights and a closer look at the meanings individuals find within their lives. As suggested by Worthen & McNeill (1996), the essence of discovery-oriented research is the ability to see the depth and intricacies of the phenomenon within individual cases.
Researchers have begun to use phenomenology more frequently in the study of grief, particularly in health-related fields such as nursing. When applied to the experience of grief, a phenomenological approach allows a richer, more robust description of how the grieving individual gives meaning to his or her lived experience, rather than just focusing on the physical and emotional manifestations of the grieving process (Giorgi, 2009). Dubose (1997) used a phenomenological approach to examine the experience of miscarriage. Gerow et al. (2009) and Shorter & Stayt (2009) looked at the grieving experience of nurses who cared for dying patients. Harrison, Kahn, & Hsu (2004) studied the experience of widowhood for African-American women. Lowe and McClement (2010) also studied widowhood, focusing on young Canadian women. Melham et al. (2007) used a phenomenological approach to learn about complicated grief in children who experience the death of a parent. Rodger et al. (2006) studied the grieving process of surviving spouses after the death of their partner. Muller and Thompson (2003) looked at the experience of grieving adults from the perspective of mental health care providers.

To date, only two studies have employed a phenomenological approach to view grief in the context of the experience of undergraduate students. Jiang et al. (2006) examined the grieving experience of nursing students in Taiwan after a classmate was killed in a car accident. Seah & Wilson (2011) focused on strategies to manage grief. The present study extends known about the experience of grieving by adding a phenomenological study of traditional-aged undergraduate students to the literature, a perspective that has not yet been addressed.
IRB Approval

Request for IRB approval was sent to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. Additionally, contact was made with the Institutional Research office at the university to be the site of the study and the IRB approval was shared. After all IRB and notification processes were completed, the process of recruiting and selecting participants began. Due to the duration of the study and writing process, the IRB was renewed after one year and the status was changed to exempt status. Exempt status allowed for a continuation of the study without a new review since the data collection and analysis work had already been completed.

Research Site

The study took place in a highly selective, private institution in the Southeast that will be referred to as “Southeast College”. Although this campus has a need-blind admission policy, many students who attend this school come from a higher socioeconomic background. Southeast College has a strong emphasis on academic achievement and many students who attend the school plan to attend medical school, law school, or a graduate program upon completion of their undergraduate degree. Student culture on campus tends to encourage high levels of involvement in student organizations, research, and social life. The student culture of Southeast College also emphasizes the importance of accomplishments in both academic work and in activities on campus. Students at Southeast College describe feeling a great deal of pressure to perform well in all of their endeavors. By the same token, students who may be struggling academically or with personal issues are often reluctant to
show any vulnerability. Students strive to maintain an image of being in control and are hesitant to confide any weaknesses in their classmates.

**Participant Selection**

**Sample Size**

The initial goal of the study was to recruit 10 undergraduate participants. Similar studies have targeted 6 – 10 participants to achieve saturation (Jiang et al., 2006; Rodger et al., 2006; Seah & Wilson, 2011). After consulting with the dissertation committee, the number was reduced slightly, with the proviso that a sufficient number of students continued with the study through its conclusion. A total of nine students self-enrolled in the study or were recruited for the study. Of those nine, seven participants completed both interviews and the member checks. One potential participant responded to a general advertisement for the study but did not reply after additional information about the study was sent. A second potential participant was identified through a referral but did not reply to the informational email sent to him. Because these potential participants did not continue to express an interest in the study, they did not receive additional communication about the study.

**Inclusion Criteria**

Participants were required to meet several criteria to participate in this study. The inclusion criteria of Rodger et al. (2006) was used as the model for the creation of the inclusion criteria for this study.

1. Academic standing: The participant must be a full-time sophomore, junior, or senior currently enrolled at the institution. First year students were not
allowed to enroll in the study due to a potential conflict of interest with the researcher whose job responsibilities included direct oversight of the first year class.

2. Relationship to deceased: The deceased must be a member of the immediate family (parent, sibling), another relative who has an important relationship as defined by the student (grandparent, aunt/uncle), or peer who the participant would identify as close friend and loved one.

3. Time period: Past research about the grieving process has suggested that a grieving individual returns to normal function within 6 months to 2 years following the death of a loved one (Attig, 1996; Balk, 2001). Therefore, participation was limited to those students whose loved one died within one year of the beginning of participation in the study.

4. The participant could not have contributed knowingly to the death of the deceased.

5. Age of participant: The participant must be an undergraduate of traditional age of 18 – 23 (Justice & Dornan, 2001). This age range also is approximately the same as many of the studies that have focused on college students (Balk, 2001; Balk et al., 2010).

6. Demographic characteristics: No specific criteria will be established to limit the participants based on gender, race, religion, nationality, or academic program.
7. Location of deceased: The deceased should not be a student at the same institution as the participant.

The inclusion criteria were designed for two purposes. The first was to attempt to create a participant cohort that shared similarities in basic characteristics, following the approach outlined by Rodger et al. (2006) and Jiang et al. (2006). The second purpose of the criteria was to ensure sensitivity in working with participants who were engaged in a potentially difficult and distressing experience.

These inclusion criteria were reviewed with participants through the initial outreach email and during the initial face-to-face meeting. One unexpected factor that emerged during the process was that two of the participants had lost loved ones at home and loved ones who were part of the campus community. The decision was made to allow these two participants to remain in the study because their experiences met all of the other inclusion criteria. Attention was given during their interviews to allow the participant to speak about the on-campus loss but to focus the conversation on the loved ones from home.

Students who were not enrolled as full time undergraduates or who were not upperclassmen were not included in the study. At the time the study was conducted, the researcher was an Associate Dean on the campus. This role is responsible for the oversight of the first year campus including responding to students in distress, student disciplinary cases, and student academic records. Additionally, the Associate Dean oversees the residential staff and community development and intervention efforts. In order to mitigate
any conflicts of interest that might have arisen due to the researcher’s role on campus, first year students were excluded from the study.

Students were not invited to participate if the decedent died more than a year prior or if the deceased was not someone with whom the participant had a close personal connection. Several referrals to the study were made by participants in the study and by colleagues; however, most of those students had lost loved ones several years prior to the start of the study. The researcher did meet with several referred students informally but those students were not invited to enroll in the study. Given the sensitivity of the grieving experience, participants were given the ability to self-withdraw from the study at any point in time, for any reason.

**Participant Well-Being**

Participation in the study was contingent upon the health and well-being of the participant. In addition to ensuring that participants were aware of the option to self-withdraw from the study, a screening process was established to allow the researcher to screen participants for signs that health or well-being may be at risk. Prior to each interview, participants completed a screening tool that would have prompted the researcher to refer the student for a more thorough evaluation by a health care provider if the student exhibited signs of risk to health or well-being. The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 Quick Depression Assessment (PHQ-9) was utilized as the screening tool (Appendix D).

The PHQ-9 is a self-report tool that allowed the researcher to quickly note the presence of minimal to severe depression indicators (Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001).
The PHQ-9 assessment results in a numeric value that can be compared to a range of scores that indicate the presence of depressive symptoms. A protocol was established for the study that required the researcher to suspend the interview and temporarily postpone participation of a student in the study if scores signaled moderately severe or severe depression. These score ranges indicated that treatment from a health care provider would be warranted. In the event that participation was postponed, the participant and the researcher would have discussed the impact of the study on the participant. The researcher would have made a decision to resume the study or to withdraw the participant from the study, depending on the risks identified. In addition, if during an interview the participant used language that clearly indicated a threat to self or others, the participant would have been withdrawn from the study and referred for assessment by campus health care providers or emergency care if appropriate.

**Participant Recruitment**

Consistent with methods used by other phenomenological researchers, purposeful sampling was used as the mechanism to develop the participant pool (Groenewald, 2004). In contrast to the sampling approaches used in quantitative methods, purposeful sampling does not attempt to achieve a random sample of participants (Moustakas, 1994). Rather, purposeful sampling allowed for the deliberate recruitment and selection of participants that experienced the specific phenomenon, in this case death of a loved one (Moustakas, 1994).

During the initial planning phase of the study, two techniques were devised to recruit potential participants to the study, however a third approach also emerged during the study.
The first method was broad scale marketing in an attempt to reach a wide audience within the campus environment. Initially, an advertisement was planned for the campus newspaper. However feedback from several students suggested that students read the newspaper online and therefore would not see the advertisements; that approach was abandoned. However, paper fliers with the same information were hung on residence hall bulletin boards in the upperclassman housing area, similar to the approach used by Seah and Wilson (2011). The paper fliers outlined the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, the compensation for participation, and the researcher contact information. Two potential participants were recruited using this method although only one completed both interviews and member checks.

The second technique that was used, concurrent with the recruitment by advertisement method, was snowball sampling, similar to the approach used by Lowe & McClement (2010). In snowball sampling, participants who were part of the study were asked to recommend the names of others who might make good candidates for the study (Lowe & McClement, 2010). Participants were given the opportunity to share with the researcher the names of any other students whom the participant believed might meet the inclusion criteria and also might not mind being contacted about the study. One participant did make a recommendation about another potential participant who did eventually join the study. Other participants were aware of students who might be eligible for the study but were hesitant about predicting their interest in being part of the study. The referred student was sent an email describing the purpose of the study, the compensation for participation,
and the contact information for the researcher. After a week, she replied to the email and indicated an interest in the study. If that student had not replied to the invitation to participate, she would have been removed from the list of potential participants and would not have received any further contact about the study.

The third and unanticipated technique was referral of students to the study by faculty and colleagues at the institution. Although not pursued initially because of fear of potential conflicts of interest, the researcher learned that when colleagues were meeting with students and the topic of death and grief came up, several of them would bring up this study in the course of their conversation. If the student seemed interested in learning more about the study, the colleague would send the name of the student to the researcher, usually copying the student on the email as well, and offering a general introduction. At that point, the researcher followed the same protocol as though the student were responding to one of the paper flyers, sending an email describing the purpose of the study, the compensation for participation, and the request to contact me if he or she desired to potentially become involved in the study. Five students were recruited to the study in this manner. Three were enrolled and completed both interviews and the member checks. One potential participant did not respond to the email and received no further contact about the study. A final referral was made well after the data collection had been completed. That student was sent a more informal email, offering to talk about the study but not an offer to potentially participate in the study.
Two other participants were recruited through their prior relationship with the researcher. Both students had known the researcher through a variety of venues on campus and had expressed an interest in being part of the study. For these participants, the same protocol that was used for those responding to the paper flyers was used. The researcher sent the formal email describing the purpose of the study, the compensation for participation, and the request to contact the researcher if she desired to potentially become involved in the study. Both opted to participate.

The next step of the recruitment process was to determine eligibility of the potential participants for the study. After the potential participant expressed continued interest in the study, the researcher contacted each potential participant via email and invited him or her to set up a face-to-face meeting to review the informed consent. The potential participant selected the date, time, and location of the meeting in order to ensure that he or she was comfortable during the process. Five of the participants requested to meet in the researcher’s office and two selected outdoor seating areas on campus. After the meetings were set, the researcher sent a confirmation email listing the date, time, and location of the meeting.

Compensation was offered as a way to encourage participation in the study. Students who completed the informed consent meeting, the two interviews, and the member checks meeting were given a $50 gift card. At the end of the first interview, participants were asked to identify a vendor. At the beginning of the final member checks meeting, the researcher distributed the gift card to the participant. Participants would have been compensated with a
$20 gift card to the vendor of their choice if they completed the informed consent meeting and both interviews but not the final member checks meeting.

**Informed Consent Meeting**

An informed consent meeting between the participant and researcher was scheduled to accomplish two goals. The first goal was to describe the purpose of the study, the goals of the study, and an overview of the role of the participant in the study. If the potential participant continued to express interest in the study, he or she was asked a series of questions to evaluate eligibility to participate in the study (Appendix A). Participants were invited to enroll in the study if they met the inclusion criteria. All seven of the participants who completed the informed consent meetings enrolled in the study.

The second goal of the informed consent meeting was to distribute the informed consent document to the participant (Appendix E). The informed consent document included the goals of the research, a more detailed description of the role of the participant in the process, and a list of potential risks and benefits to the participant. A thorough description of the type of information that was to be collected during the study was critical to ensuring that the potential participant was able to make a considered decision about taking part in the study (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). After the consent form was signed, the researcher asked the participant to select a date, time, and location for the first formal interview. In several cases, the participant was eager to begin the process and the informed consent meeting transitioned to the first interview.
**Data Collection**

**Data Collection in Phenomenology**

The goal of data collection in a phenomenological study is to be able to describe what it is like to experience a specific phenomenon (Giorgi, 2005). King (1994) described the purpose of phenomenological data collection as seeing the research topic from the perspective of the participant and understanding how and why he or she comes to have this particular perspective. Wertz (2005) further expanded on King’s definition and suggested that data collection in a phenomenological study was achieved when the researcher is able to “empathetically enter and reflect on the lived world of other persons in order to apprehend the meanings of the world as they are given to the first-person point of view.” (p. 168). These perspectives informed the interview process that was established for this study.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

Phenomenological researchers make use of interviews and in-depth conversations as the strategy to engage participants in the study (Giorgi, 2005; Hycner, 1985; King, 1994; Morse, 1994; Seidman, 2006; Wertz, 2005). Semi-structured interviews provide sufficient guidance to ensure the conversation targets the research question yet allows the interview dialogue to remain open to the content the participant offers (Moustakas, 1994; Wertz, 2005). Similarly, the phenomenological studies of grief by Jiang et al. (2006) and Seah and Wilson (2011) make use of the semi-structured and open-ended interviews. The interview format for this study followed suit.
A key part of the interview process was the interaction between the researcher and the participant. The relationship that developed between the researcher and the participant was crucial in order to overcome some of the boundaries that a participant may have perceived in sharing his or her experience (Giorgi, 2009). The researcher played a very active role in the semi-structured interview process and was intentional about crafting probing questions that offered additional clarity about the experience. Questions had to be timed appropriately so that the train of thought flowed smoothly (Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher allowed the participant to speak freely and openly while also leading the discussion back to an area that best responded to the research questions (Giorgi, 2009; Groenewald, 2004).

The length of the interviews is an important factor in phenomenological interviewing. Giorgi (2009) advised that a prescribed length of time for an interview was not likely to be effective. Rather, Giorgi (2009) suggested the length of the interview should be proportional to the phenomenon. For this study, adequate time (90 minutes) was made available to the participant to share his or her experience of the phenomenon. However, the researcher also drew the interview to a close when the participant began to move beyond the scope of the phenomenon or when the responses produced no new information. Additionally, the rapport and level of candor that were established between the participant and the interviewer dictated the pace and length of the interview (Groenewald, 2004). For the purpose of this study, participants were asked to set aside 90 minutes for each interview, similar to the parameters established by Seah and Wilson (2011). The formal interviews tended to last between 35 –
90 minutes with an additional 10 – 30 minutes of informal conversation before and after the interview.

All interviews were audio-taped using a digital recording device, in this case, an iPhone. The digital files were uploaded to the researcher’s laptop and deleted from the iPhone. The audio files were transcribed by the researcher using the audio playback feature of the laptop. No transcription software was used. The transcripts were formatted into a two columned Microsoft Word document, similar to a document illustrated in a project by Giorgi (Giorgi, 2009). The column on the left was the verbatim transcript of the interview and included non-verbal cues such as long pauses, sighs, emotional intonations, and body gestures (Hycner, 1985). The column on the right was used later during the data analysis. These Word documents were stored using the pseudonym selected by the participant in a password protected file on a thumb drive that was kept secured in a fire proof storage box at the home of the researcher.

**Method of Interview**

The interview process for this study was patterned after the model described by Seidman (2006). In Seidman’s interview model, three separate interviews are conducted with each participant. In the present study, each participant was interviewed twice and then also attended a final member check meeting.

The purpose of the first interview was to establish the context of the participants’ experience and to obtain a focused life history of the participant (Seidman, 2006). For this study, the participants were asked general questions about experiencing the death of a loved
one and about the relationship between the participant and the person who died (Appendix B). During this interview, the researcher also worked to develop a sense of familiarity, comfort, and trust between the participant and herself. Prior to beginning the interview, the participant was given the same PHQ-9 screening tool administered during the Informed Consent Meeting as a way to continue to monitor the health and well-being of the participant. At the conclusion of this interview, the participant was asked to choose a date, time, and location for the second interview. The participant was offered a paper copy of a handout containing the contact information for support services available on campus including the counseling center and student health office.

The purpose of the second interview was to allow the participant an opportunity to give a more lengthy narrative on the experience of grieving. In advance, specific questions were prepared for each individual participant in addition to questions that were asked of all seven participants (Appendix C). Additionally, depending on the direction of the conversation, the researcher asked spontaneously developed questions to more thoroughly explore the experience of the participant (Giorgi, 2009). The researcher intentionally but gently steered the interview toward the topic of grief and looked for opportunities to pose clarifying questions to help the participant reveal the experience with greater clarity (Wertz, 2005). At times, the participants would speak at length about a topic that was not as relevant to the study. At an appropriate time, the researcher would ask a question to bring attention back to the experience of grief. At the conclusion of this second interview interview, the participant was asked to choose a date, time, and location for the member checks meeting.
The participant was offered a paper copy of the handout containing the contact information for support services available on campus. Since the participants had already received this handout at the informed consent meeting, none of them felt it necessary to collect another copy.

Before the member checks meeting took place, the researcher made arrangements to get the full transcripts of the first two interviews to the participants. The researcher offered to print a paper copy and arrange for pick-up or to send via email attachment. Most preferred the email attachment. The researcher requested that participants read through the transcripts and make note of any areas that the participant wished to edit, expand, or clarify. During the member checks meeting, the participant and the researcher reviewed the transcripts together and the researcher took note of any concerns raised by the participant. Only one participant chose to make edits to the document. Most of those edits were not related to the content of her statements but were to remove patterns of speech such as “uhm” and “like”.

It was important to be mindful that the content of the interviews could have possibly sparked an emotional response from the participants. In a study of nursing students who dealt with the death of a classmate, Jiang et al. (2006) described the emotional experience of the participants, many who cried throughout the interview. As part of the responsibility to protect the best interest of the participants, the researchers stayed with the participants until they regained their composure. The researchers also made contact with the counseling center on behalf of the student (Jiang et al., 2006). As a second precaution, the participants in the Jiang et al. (2006) study were also reassured that they could contact either the counseling center or
the researchers at any time for further support. Similar methods were employed in this study to ensure that the participants felt supported both during and after their interviews. A few participants did briefly lose their composure during the interviews, but it took only a matter of a few moments for the participant to feel ready to continue with the interview.

**Data Analysis**

Past researchers who have used phenomenology to inform their research design have utilized a framework of stages that guided the data analysis (Giorgi, 2009; Hycner 1985; Wertz, 2005). Hycner (1985) suggested moving the data through a process of reducing the content of the interviews into units of meaning and then clustering those units of meaning together into broad themes. The broad themes were evaluated across participants to determine which themes were essential to the phenomenon being measured (Hycner 1985; Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005).

**Bracketing**

Before data analysis could begin, the researcher first determined what role her subjectivity played in the study. It was important that the researcher take into account how her own world view and experiences influenced the way that the experience of the participants was heard, understood, and interpreted (Hycner, 1985; Giorgi, 2005).

Past researchers and the founders of the phenomenological movement were not in agreement about the ability of any researcher to completely set aside his or her presuppositions during the data analysis process (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005). Husserl believed that the separation between the researcher and the experience of the participant must
be absolute (Finlay, 2008; Giorgi, 2005). Husserl suggested that without setting aside the beliefs and assumptions of the researcher, the experience of the participant would always be told through the eyes of the researcher rather than through the eyes of the participant.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger, a contemporary of Husserl, agreed that the researcher must acknowledge his or her own beliefs and experiences about the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Heidegger, 1962). However, Heidegger did not believe that these presuppositions could simply be set aside and remain cleanly absent from the interpretation of the data. Rather, Heidegger believed that the reactions and interpretations made by the researcher himself or herself provided another source of data (Heidegger, 1962). Reactions and interpretations of the researcher could help the researcher develop clarifying questions and in turn provide participants with the ability to confirm or reframe the way they expressed their experiences.

Modern researchers tend to strive for the separation proposed by Husserl but accept that completely suspending the presuppositions of the researcher is not possible (Giorgi, 2005; Hycner, 1985; Jasper, 1994). Giorgi (2002) has written extensively about the need to acknowledge and incorporate the subjectivity of the researcher into the study. Similarly, Seidman (2006) suggested that subjectivity is observed through the relationship that develops between the participant and the researcher. However, Seidman (2006) also believed that the researcher must be cautious to preserve the separation between the meaning that is constructed by the participant and the interpretations of the researcher.

In the present study, I have identified several factors that might influence the interpretation of the experience of the participant in the study. I was raised in a community
of Lutherans and Catholics and my orientation to the meanings of life and death incorporates both the overt and the subtle belief structures of these faith communities. Accordingly, I believe that death should come at the end of a long and purposeful life and find it difficult to reconcile when a loved one dies unexpectedly. My own experiences of grief have included the deaths of classmates, grandparents, aunts, friends, pets, and other loved ones. My observations and experiences with grief have likely influenced the interpretation of the experiences of the participants. Additionally, an assumption that I discovered during the research process was an inherent belief that most relationships would be uncomplex and based on a mutual sense of caring between individuals. As I learned through hearing the experiences of participants and reflecting on my own life, relationships were extremely complex and not all relationships are positive. These insights helped me better listen to the experiences of the participants in the study and hopefully more accurately convey their experience of loss.

**Stage One: Becoming Familiar with the Interviews as a Whole**

Data analysis in phenomenological studies occurs through a series of stages. The first stage of data analysis in this study was to become familiar with the interview as a whole (Giorgi, 1985, 2009; Hycner, 1985; Rodger et al., 2006; Wertz, 1985). During this stage, the researcher attempted to lessen the likelihood that her own subjectivity was acting as a filter when attempting to gain a broad picture of the experience of the participant. At this stage, no attempt was made to interpret what was said or to assign categories or codes to the content of the interviews (Giorgi, 1985).
Hycner (1985) suggested transcribing the interviews immediately after the meeting had concluded. For this study, the researcher modified that approach and instead listened to the audio recording of the interview several times, usually 3 to 4 times, before beginning transcription. These listening sessions allowed the researcher to be attentive to inflections, pauses, and word choices that were not as easily noticed while the interview was being conducted. After the researcher had listened to the recordings, she transcribed the interviews. Those transcripts were then read in their entirety several times, focusing on both the literal statements and the notes about non-verbal communication. The researcher also paired the audio recording with the transcript and made additional notes about pauses, sighs, and inflections of tone.

**Stage Two: Units of Meaning**

At this second stage, the content of each interview was closely scrutinized and the entire interview was broken into very small segments referred to as units of meaning (Giorgi, 1974). Hycner (1985) defined units of meaning as “words, phrases, non-verbal or para-linguistic communication which express a unique and coherent meaning clearly differentiated from that which proceeds and follows” (p. 282). The unit of meaning could be as short as two to three words or as long as one or two sentences. A unit of meaning ended when the unique content and context of the particular meaning was distinct from the next segment of the dialogue (Hycner, 1985; Wertz, 1985). The words selected to identify a unit of meaning were primarily literal quotations from the participant or very slight variations made by the researcher (Hycner, 1985).
During this stage, no attempt was made to categorize or interpret the meaning units (Wertz, 1985). Each interview transcript was parsed using this method, regardless of the assumed relationship that the units of meaning had with the research question (Hycner, 1985). Using the right column on the transcript document, the unit of meaning was cut and pasted from the left column and issued a number. The corresponding number was also attached to the quotation in the full transcript so that the context of the quote could be quickly located. This was done for all of the interview transcripts.

**Stage Three: Relevance to the Research Question**

The next stage of the data analysis process was to review the units of meaning to determine their relevance to the research questions (Hycner, 1985). The basic question to answer for each unit of meaning was “Does this segment of the interview respond to the research question?” Both the unit of meaning by itself and in the context of the whole of the interview was reviewed before determining its relevancy to the research questions (Giorgi, 1985; Hycner 1985). Units of meaning that did not seem to pertain to the research questions were set aside but not deleted (Giorgi, 1985). This left only relevant units of meaning in the right column of each transcript document.

**Stage Four: Clustering Units of Meaning**

Hycner (1985) broke the fourth stage into two separately explained operations. However the processes of these operations were intertwined. In this stage, each relevant unit of meaning was considered again, this time with the intention of consolidating units of meaning that appeared to express the same experience into groups or clusters (Hycner 1985).
At this stage, it was also possible to take note of the frequency with which a unit of meaning appeared in the interview. The weight of presence of a specific meaning during the interview sometimes offered a clue as to the essentialness of that unit of meaning. The researcher created a separate Word document for each participant and cut and pasted individual units of meaning under broadly-worded headings, grouping related experiences.

Hycner (1985) suggested reviewing each group and eliminating expressions that were redundant. However, the researcher elected to retain all relevant units of meaning at this stage of analysis. The researcher wanted to be certain that the groupings had been sufficiently developed before deleting a unit of meaning whose importance may not have been apparent during the first attempt at grouping.

After the groupings were established, the units of meaning were reviewed again, this time with the perspective of consolidating units of meaning into clusters (Giorgi, 1985; Hycner, 1985; Wertz, 1985). The clusters were intended to be slightly more broad expressions of the individual units of meaning. An example of this consolidation process would be to cluster together a statement from a participant that described a loss of appetite with a story about meeting friends for breakfast and not being able to eat. These two experiences would both be expressions of the experience of loss of appetite.

At this stage, the judgment of the researcher did begin to play a role in the analysis of the data (Hycner, 1985). The decision to group an individual unit of meaning under a cluster heading was made by viewing that unit of meaning both as a unique expression and also viewing it in the context of the interview as a whole (Hycner, 1985). This process was
challenging as units of meaning sometimes related to more than one broad cluster. The researcher elected to group a unit of meaning under multiple groups if it seemed the unit of meaning could be understood in multiple ways.

**Stage Five: Creating Themes From Clusters**

At this stage, the clusters of meaning were examined to determine if a broader theme could be elicited from the individual clusters. The broader theme can be thought of as a summary statement that incorporates facets of the same essential experience (Hycner, 1985). In this case, these themes expressed the essence of what it meant to experience grief.

Developing themes was an iterative process as potential themes were identified, edited, discarded, or reconsidered. The researcher tried to approach the theme development for each participant independently. However, she often found that a prominent theme in the experience of one participant would trigger the consideration of a similar theme or a modified version of that theme for other participants. In some cases, a turn of phrase used by the participant helped provide wording for a theme that best represented the experience of the participant. At this point, the themes were considered a draft until the researcher had the opportunity to review the themes with the participants during their member check meeting.

**Stage Six: Narrative Summaries of the Interviews**

The next stage of the data analysis process would have been to craft a narrative summary for each interview, integrating the broad themes and clusters of units of meaning (Hycner, 1985). The narrative summary would have served as an opportunity to determine
how well the themes and clusters represent the experience of the participant when viewed in the context of the whole interview.

The researcher opted not to construct these narrative summaries for each interview. The researcher found that the profiles (referred to as “lived experiences of participants”) constructed for each participant in Chapter 4 served the same purpose as summarizing the individual interviews. These lived experiences of participants included descriptions of the broad themes while also being attentive to experiences that did not fit as neatly into a broad theme. As the researcher wrote about the experience of each participant, she continued to mold the themes to capture some of these nuances.

**Stage Seven: Validity Checks and Modification**

At this stage, the participants joined the data analysis process and became co-researchers. Participants reviewed the transcripts from their interviews and were offered the opportunity to clarify or edit their statements.

The second purpose of this member checks meeting was to review the initial draft of the units of meaning and themes developed from the analysis of the data. The participants reviewed the document with the researcher and offered feedback about the clusters and themes that had been identified. In some cases, the participant would re-frame the wording of a cluster heading to more accurately reflect the essence of that aspect of the experience. Many of the participants found it interesting and helpful to see what had seemed to be random thoughts grouped together into cohesive clusters. One participant, Grace, shared that it felt like the researcher had taken all of her thoughts and organized them for her.
At times, the researcher would borrow the wording of a cluster from one participant to see if the phrasing resonated with other participants. One particular phrase that many of the participants connected with originated with Elizabeth who titled one of her clusters: “It’s a new normal.” If a different participant latched onto the phrasing, the researcher would (with participant agreement) change the heading of a theme to the borrowed phrase. In some cases, the participant hesitated to relate to the phrase and instead offered a counterproposal for a better way of wording the heading.

After re-working the themes, participants were asked to verify if the clusters were an accurate representation of their experience of grieving. Participants were also asked to point out any clusters that seemed particularly important or unimportant. The students in this study largely agreed with the clusters that had been developed and selected several that stood apart as particularly important. They also pointed to some clusters that were part of the experience but not quite as essential as other clusters. For instance, Anne believed that feeling alone was the most important aspect of her experience of grieving. By the same token, Anne also confirmed that although it was true that part of her grieving experience was recognizing how inspired she was by her grandmother, this inspiration was not as much of a hallmark of the experience of grieving as was feeling alone.

Stage Eight: General and Unique Themes for All Interviews

Prior to this stage, the interviews of each participant were considered as independent sources of data. During this phase of the data analysis process, the broad themes and clustered units of meaning were considered across all interviews from all participants to
observe the relationship between the themes. Additionally, themes that seemed to be unique to the experience of a specific participant were noted (Hycner, 1985).

Similar to the initial draft of themes and clusters, the comparison across interviews took many drafts and versions of groupings. From these groupings, an even more broad set of categories was developed:

- Influence of Others on the Grieving Experience
- Experience of Taking on New Roles and Responsibilities
- Innermost Thoughts and Feelings
- Moving Forward After Loss

**Stage Nine: Composite Summary**

According to Hycner (1985), the final stage of data analysis in this study should be a composite narrative that incorporates all of the broad themes and clustered units of meaning. Chapter 5 contains a composite narrative for each of the participants in this study.

**Trustworthiness**

**Confidentiality**

A dilemma encountered in the development of this study was the selection of the institution from which to draw participants. Initially, the researcher had opted to exclude the institution where she worked to avoid any conflict of interest between her role as an Associate Dean on campus and the confidentiality of the participants. In her role as Associate Dean, she might have been required to break confidentiality if students disclosed behaviors that violated the university code of conduct. For instance, if during the interview,
a participant revealed that he or she cheated on an exam, the researcher could be required to follow the institutionally defined protocol for reporting behaviors.

By the same token, conducting the study on the campus where the researcher worked elicited several benefits. Familiarity with the campus culture, student life, and the academic expectations allowed for deeper understanding of the information shared by participants. Valuable time was not spent during interviews asking basic questions to clarify campus lexicon. Additionally, the researcher was known to many students through a variety of roles on campus and this familiarity created an easier path to developing trusting and candid relationships with the participants.

However, the potential for conflict of interest needed to be addressed. Steps were taken to lessen the impact of any conflict of interest that might arise. A statement was included on the informed consent form to clarify that concerns for the health and safety of the participant would require action and could revoke confidentiality. This statement was also verbally articulated during the informed consent meeting and at the beginning of the first interview. Additionally, only upperclassmen were allowed to participate in the study since they would be unlikely to interact with or be influenced by the researcher in any official capacity.

Measures were also taken to protect the identity of the participants. Although the researcher originally anticipated keeping a roster with contact information for participants, the number of participants was so small that she was able to maintain their identities and email addresses by memory and did not need to keep a written list. Handwritten notes from
the interviews were recorded in one notebook. That notebook was kept in a locked box at the residence of the researcher. Audio files of the interviews were deleted from the iPhone and stored in a password-protected file on a thumb drive that was also kept in the locked box at the residence of the researcher.

Email was only used to coordinate interview appointments. The language within the emails referred to “the project” or “meeting” without any reference to subject matter of the research. Emails to and from participants were stored in a password protected email folder. These emails will be deleted following the completion of the research project.

During the informed consent meeting, each participant was given the opportunity to select a pseudonym. Subsequently, all references to the name of the participant used that pseudonym. Exceptions were made when signing the informed consent form and in appointment email correspondence between the researcher and participant. No written or digital list matching pseudonym to true identity was created due to the small number of participants.

Transcripts of the interviews were stored on a thumb drive that was also kept in the locked box at the residence of the researcher and will be deleted at the completion of the research project. Digital records used filenames that did not identify the participants in any way (eg. Peyton1.doc). Care was taken in the writing of the final report to eliminate references that allowed for the identification of the participants.
Beneficence of the Interview Experience

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) used the term *beneficence* to describe the importance of conducting research in such a way that does not cause harm to the participants. Interviewing participants in various stages of bereavement necessitated taking care to provide support for participants during and after the interview was over. For some participants, the content and reflections that emerged as a part of the research project could have exacerbated the distress a participant was already experiencing as part of the bereavement process.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) also described the importance of the nature of the interaction between the researcher and the participant. In this study, the interactions of the researcher with the participants had the potential to delve into very personal areas that may have left the participant feeling vulnerable or exposed. During the interviews, the researcher carefully observed the participants and worded questions in such a way so that they could choose how revealing they wished to be in their responses. If a participant replied, “I don’t want to talk about that”, as happened twice, the researcher moved to a different topic.

However, other researchers have reported that participants often appreciated the opportunity to talk about their grief and felt that being part of a research study had been a positive experience. At the conclusion of the process, the researcher asked the participants how they felt about the study. Many of them said that it was a relief to have someone to talk to about their grief. Though the conversations at time were difficult, participants felt it was helpful to learn more about the grieving process and to feel like their experience was normal. Several took comfort from knowing that other students were also grieving, even if they did
not know whom those other students were. Additionally, several said that the study was important to them because they hoped it might help administrators and other students understand the experience of grieving better. This potential indirect benefit to the participants supports the value of the research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

**Reliability and Validity**

Giorgi (1985) suggested that the reliability of a phenomenological study is established through the methodology, primarily focusing on how the data is collected and analyzed. The phenomenological approach requires that a very thorough and robust analysis of the data be completed. In this study, the same interview was reviewed as an audio recording, a written file, as small bits (meaning units), summarizing statements (clusters and themes), and in the context of other interviews. Giorgi (1985) and King (1994) suggest that this depth of analysis is akin to the experience of having multiple researchers coding the same data (Giorgi, 1985; King, 1994).

Reliability was observed when the broad themes could be similarly applied to the experiences of all participants (Beck, Keddy, & Cohen, 1994). Reliability was also increased through the acknowledgment of the subjectivity of the researcher and the careful consideration of how the experiences of the researcher filtered the information provided by the participants (Giorgi, 2009). Although complete bracketing of the experience of the researcher may not have been possible, awareness of how these perspectives influenced the way that the experience of the participant is understood to increase reliability (Groenewald, 2004; King, 1994).
Another measure of reliability was the consistency found in the interview protocols. All participants were asked to respond to similar questions. The broad theme of each interview remained the same across participants, even if follow-up questions differed.

A second important element of trustworthiness in this study was to establish the validity of the data collection and data analysis. Giorgi (1985) suggested that validity in a phenomenological study could be achieved if the essential description of the phenomenon truly captures the intuited essence. One inherent issue in establishing validity in a phenomenological study is that the data being gathered are all elements of consciousness such as beliefs, values, and associations between ideas (Giorgi, 2005). Thus, validity of the data is dependent upon the ability and willingness of the participant to find a way to articulate and share these elements of consciousness.

To accomplish this, the students in this study participated in a member check meeting. Participants reviewed the interview transcripts to allow for an opportunity to clarify and expand statements to increase the level of understanding between the participant and researcher (Groenewald, 2004; King, 2001; Meadows & Morse, 2001). Additionally, the participants were given the opportunity to review and re-conceptualize the themes and clusters that had been drafted after the initial data analysis. The involvement of the participant in the data analysis helped to increase the likelihood that what was being reported in the findings was a true representation of the grieving experience.
Limitations

The decision to approach the topic of grief using a qualitative methodology does have some limitations. First, limitations related to the scope and scale of the study will be discussed. Next, issues that arose during the collection of data will be identified. Finally, a review of limitations related to the analysis of the data will be shared.

The decision to use a qualitative approach for this study limited the scale and scope of the data collected. The findings and implications of the study told the story of the seven participants who completed the study. Those findings and implications may not be generalizable to all undergraduate students who experience the loss of a loved one. However, information learned through this study could inform future research. Findings and conclusions could help identify common themes in the grieving process that may be a guidepost to the formulation of research questions to test the applicability of the themes to a broader population. However, it is likely that the individual nature of a grieving experience will also yield some responses that are unique to the individuals involved and are not necessarily a predictable outcome in the larger population.

Another limitation of the study is that the population is not large enough to draw any conclusions related to demographics. Although six of the participants were women, it is unlikely that six participants is a sufficiently large number of respondents to confidently say that the experience of these women would be similar for all undergraduate women. It is possible that some nuances of the grieving experiences expressed by the students in this
study are related to other identity characteristics. However, sufficient data is not available to support that conclusion.

One concern that is raised when using a phenomenological approach to study grief is the distinguishing between the true experience and the expressing a memory of the experience. Participants did speak to the thoughts and feelings they were experiencing at the present time. However, they also spoke about the way they experienced grief over a period of time. As stated by Oiler (1982), “In reflecting back on experience, what is uncovered is not pure experience but rather it is remembered experience. There is a tendency to interpret experience in reflection rather than to allow it to speak simply for itself” (p. 179).

The passage of time can also present a limitation to the study. Each student was interviewed over a time interval of one to three months. Therefore, the data collected was both an articulation of their present grieving experience at that moment and their recollection of the grieving experience prior to the start of the interview process. It is possible, in fact probable, that the participant would describe a different grieving experience if they were interviewed several months later. A more longitudinal approach would create a fuller picture of the experience of grieving but limitations on time did not allow for an extension of the scope of the grieving period being measured.

A difficulty of data collection in this study is the fact that the data is all self-reported. The ability of the participant to effectively express his or her thoughts and feelings determined the accuracy of the data. Sometimes participants found it difficult to put into words the abstract thoughts, ideas, emotions, and reflections that were part of their
experience. The data collection is limited in that it is dependent upon the participant to be able to effectively and accurately convey the experience.

Similarly, the participants also had to willingly choose to disclose information. The participants could opt to omit parts of a story or to change details. For instance, Ray was initially reluctant to disclose that her father died from an apparent overdose of prescription drugs because she did not want people to make judgments about his character. The researcher had to trust that what the participants were sharing was their best attempt at sharing full and accurate information. However it is possible that participants chose to share socially acceptable responses that reflected what they believed were the intended outcomes rather than being truthful to their own experience.

Finally, a methodological limitation of the study was employing only a single-rater data analysis rather than including additional researchers in the interviews or analysis of the data. It is possible that other reviewers might pull different units of meaning from the transcripts or develop different themes. However, a key step in the data analysis process was allowing the participant to review both the transcript and the clusters of units of meaning. Participant feedback improved the fidelity of the findings and mitigated the limitations of a single-rater data analysis.

**Summary**

This chapter focused on the methodological approach used to explore the experience of grieving. The chapter outlined participant inclusion criteria as well as recruitment efforts. Next, the chapter outlined the research design, which followed Hycner’s (1985) approach to
phenomenological research. The chapter concluded with a review of confidentiality, beneficence to the participants, reliability, validity, and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 will explore the lived experiences of each participant.
CHAPTER FOUR:

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GRIEF

The purpose of this study is to uncover the experience of seven students who were grieving the death of loved ones. This chapter will reveal the lived experience of grieving as it was disclosed by the students in this study. Each sharing of the experiences of these individuals is unique and responds to the thoughts, feelings, and meanings that arose from their experiences of grieving. This chapter will share a select set of understands that situate grieving in the world of each participant.

Overview of Participants

This study focuses on seven undergraduates from the same medium-sized, private university. The study included three sophomores, one junior, and three seniors. Six women and one man completed the study. Participants identified as Caucasian or Latina. Study participants were affiliated to varying degrees with a variety of faith communities: Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Jewish, and Christian. One participant was not affiliated with a faith community.

The time between the death of loved ones and participation in the interview process varied for the study members. One student met with the researcher just a few days after her father died. Another began participating two weeks after her friend died. Several joined the study one to two months after the death of their loved ones. Two participants met with the researcher about a year after their loved ones died. Two of the participants in the study had lost multiple loved ones within the same year.
Research by Ringler et al. (2000) suggests that the nature of the relationship between the deceased and the grieving individual affects the grieving process. In this study, five of the participants shared stories of the loss of a close friend. One participant lost three close friends within the past four years. Three participants lost their fathers; one lost both parents. One participant lost a grandparent, an uncle, and a close friend during one semester. The cause of death varied. Most of the deaths were the result of accidents or related to a health issue such as a heart attack or cancer. At least two of the deaths were described as potentially self-inflicted.

**Lived Experiences of Grief**

In this section of Chapter 4, select aspects of the experience of grieving will be shared. These lived experiences will focus on the thoughts, feelings, and other descriptions offered by participants about their grief. Quotations from interview transcripts will be used to illustrate aspects of the experience of each participant.

**Grace: “Everything Just Went Still”**

For Grace, the experience of grief began with an unexpected phone call from home late one evening while she was with friends on campus. She learned that her friend Sam had been killed by a drunk driver while he was biking home from work.

Sam was a very close friend from home, someone whom Grace had known most of her life. Their friendship had evolved over the years and deepened after Sam began dating Anna, one of Grace’s best friends. Sam blossomed in his relationship with Anna and, in Grace’s words, “turned his life around.” He took charge of his life. He lost weight, got a
job, and moved to a new city. That evening, just before leaving work, Sam texted Anna to let her know he was on his way home. A few hours later, Sam’s family contacted Anna to let her know about the accident. Sam was rushed to the hospital but did not survive his injuries.

For Grace, the phone call came as an incredible shock. Her first reaction was an overwhelming sense of disbelief. She recalled screaming “No! No! What happened? What happened?” into the phone while her friend quietly assured her it was true. Grace was torn between her own distress and worrying about her friend Anna. Grace felt helpless as she tried to imagine what Anna must be experiencing.

After she learned of Sam’s death, Grace felt an immediate need to leave campus. She desperately wanted to be at home with her friends and the community where she, Sam, and Anna had grown up. Over the past few years, the community had been rocked by the deaths of two other high school classmates. Grace believed her home community needed her as much as she needed them. Grace was able to book a flight home and spent several days with Anna and her other high school friends, finding comfort in their familiarity and their shared loss.

After she has returned to school, Grace felt disconnected and lost as she tried to re-enter her life on campus. Some friends offered support and reached out to Grace. Grace perceived their efforts as intentional ways to re-incorporate her into their daily activities such as studying at the library and meeting for dinner. Grace found her roommate to be particularly attentive. Grace believed that her roommate was able to sense when Grace
wanted to talk and when she just needed space by herself. Grace appreciated that her roommate would directly ask her about Sam and about how she was feeling.

Other friends on campus were less helpful. At times, their questions and attempts to comfort Grace came across as insincere and burdensome. Grace was frustrated and hurt by reactions of people on campus as they learned of Sam’s death. Grace felt conflicted about the support she received from her friends. On one hand, Grace believed that her friends had good intentions in their efforts to reach out to her. However, interacting with them demanded a lot of energy and patience. Grace retreated from some of her relationships to escape these interactions. Sometimes, even the well-intentioned gestures from friends came across as wooden and insincere. Grace was uncomfortable with the attention she received and grew frustrated when she felt like people reached out to her because they felt an obligation to do so rather than because they truly cared about Sam. In particular, people who told Grace they were sorry for her loss made her angry. Grace said:

What are you sorry for!?! Just say, like, I’m here for you. Say I’ll listen. Say if you want to talk to me. ‘You want to get lunch?’ ‘You wanna do this?’ ‘Come with me to the library.’ I would love to hear that. But, like, hearing I’m sorry does nothing. Like, I’m sorry he’s gone too but it’s not anyone’s fault. It’s just, I don’t know. I’m sorry is such an empty phrase to me these days.

During our first interview, just weeks after Sam’s death, Grace shared that she felt numb. She had no energy and was having trouble focusing. Her sleep patterns were off and she found herself pulling away from her friends and had stopped showing up for
organizational meetings. Grace was keenly aware of these behavioral changes and was frustrated that she didn’t seem to be returning to her normal self. In particular, she was distressed by the impact that this lack of energy was having on her academic work and her relationships with friends.

Grace was highly involved in student leadership, community service, and social organizations. She had always been the type of student who volunteered to help with everything and was at the center of both her social groups and her extracurricular activities. After Sam’s death, Grace felt that everything seemed to just stop. Grace described the experience as “going still.” She shared:

I’m always thinking a million miles an hour and I’m moving a million miles an hour. And, like, I hate to be still. And things like this, they make you go still for a little bit. And so it’s, like, good. It makes you really reflect and think about things but it’s like scary territory for me to be in because I’m always… moving and doing and thinking and traveling. I’m always running, always moving. That’s how I function and I compartmentalize things. But with Sam and I guess things like this, they force you to stop. And that can be really scary because it’s just one of those things where, uhm, you can’t just brush on by. You can’t just, you can’t just be like okay, like, oh, I have to do this paper. Like, oh, Sam died. Now I’m going to go to the library. Like, it’s such, like, an all-permeating event that, like, it touches, like, every decision or every behavior and action that you’re about to do. And it, and you’re constantly reminded and weighed down with this reminder and this, yeah, this stillness to just, to just stop.
Several weeks later during our second interview, Grace was relieved to report that her energy was slowly returning. She was re-engaging with her classes and she had begun spending more time with her friends. Her extracurricular activities, which seemed trivial in light of what she was experiencing with the loss of Sam, were becoming important again.

However, the relief in regaining a sense of normalcy was countered by feelings of guilt and regret. Moving forward meant leaving Sam behind. Grace struggled to know how to keep Sam in her life after his physical presence was gone. Grace shared:

I’m moving and growing and changing and I could never, I can’t ever picture what he’d be like today. I can only picture what he used to be like. And yeah, time is definitely what scares me the most about things like this... the fact that I know I’m always going to carry him with me but it’s like a fading thing and- (sigh). It worries me.

During our final meeting, Grace reflected on the role that Sam played in her life a few months after his death. Throughout their friendship, Grace and Sam bonded through their mutual love of literature and music. After Sam’s death, several of Sam’s friends discovered some of his writings. The friends spent time together, reading Sam’s work, feeling like Sam was still part of their group even if he was only represented through his writing. Similarly, Sam’s friends often discussed Sam’s favorite bands and felt his absence at concerts since he would likely have attended with them.

As more time passed, the impulse Grace felt to be with her home community faded a bit. Grace began to feel more comfortable with the idea of continuing on with her life and
felt less guilt about doing so without Sam. She felt empowered by the belief that Sam would have encouraged her to pursue new opportunities like studying abroad and getting reconnected to her friends. Grace still thought of Sam often and found herself trying to imagine his reaction to her writings and to books she was reading. For Grace, her memories of Sam and the connection that she continued to feel with him after his death served as both an inspiration to seek out opportunities and at the same time reminded her of the importance of her roots at home.

**Kristen: “Is This Normal?”**

Since middle school, Kristen’s father had been battling cancer. Kristen recalled her father’s determination to not concede his life to the cancer. Despite his illness, he remained active, participating in marathons and snow boarding in his free time. Throughout high school and her first few years of college, Kristen’s father experienced intervals of good health and times of struggle. Although cancer had been a part of much of Kristen’s life, she was selective about sharing her story with others.

Growing up in a family with three sisters, Kristen felt blessed by the relationship she had with her family. She felt very connected with her father and they shared many traits and interests. Kristen and her father were both early risers and loved spending mornings reading and writing in local coffee shops. They shared a passion for psychology and sought to understand the behavior of others. Kristen’s father was a professor of psychology and Kristen was his manuscript editor. Kristen described herself as a dreamer and attributed some of this trait to her father.
When she left for college, Kristen’s father continued treatment for his cancer. Kristen stayed closely in touch with her family, anxious to hear any news about a change in his condition. During her senior year, Kristen’s father was injured in an accidental fall. Kristen rushed home from school to be with her family. Her father recovered from the fall but it was clear that his health was declining.

Kristen felt conflicted between her desire to stay home with her family and her fear of not graduating if she missed additional academic work. Her father had always stressed the importance of her education and had been looking forward to seeing her graduate. Since only a few weeks remained in the semester, her father encouraged Kristen to return to school to complete her classes.

Not long after she arrived back on campus, Kristen learned that her father’s health was rapidly deteriorating. In all likelihood, it would only be a matter of days before he would die. Kristen made arrangements to fly home as quickly as possible. Knowing she would need to miss more class, Kristen set up a meeting with her academic dean to talk about her options. Understandably, Kristen was emotional during the meeting, knowing how ill her father had become and knowing that this trip home would likely be the last time she would spend with him. Although her dean offered her his sympathies, Kristen judged him to be uncomfortable during their meeting and stared silently at a box of tissues while Kristen cried. He gave her permission to miss classes and then suggested she seek out counseling on campus. Kristen was taken aback by his lack of comfort in talking with her and left his office as quickly as she could.
As she prepared for the trip home, Kristen knew she had to share her situation with her friends. Kristen called her friends together and had, in her words, a “team meeting.” She matter-of-factly shared with them what was happening and let them know what support she anticipated needing when she returned to campus. She knew she would only have a few weeks of classes remaining and she felt that she needed the support of her friends to help her make it through to graduation.

Shortly after the team meeting, Kristen flew home to be with her father and her mother and sisters. Her father died shortly after she arrived. A few days after his death, Kristen reluctantly returned to campus to complete the semester. After she returned to campus, Kristen’s friends took her earlier requests to heart and rallied around her, even going so far as to sleep on the floor in her bedroom every night. She found that this was the only thing that helped her feel safe during the frightening panic attacks she had begun experiencing.

As she resumed going to classes, Kristen found it hard to focus on her course material. The panic attacks continued and Kristen worried about having one in the middle of class. Additionally, changes in her sleeping patterns made it difficult to resume her routine schedule. Her energy level diminished and academic assignments seemed both uninteresting and daunting at the same time. Kristen felt obligated to push through the final weeks of classes but also desperately wanted to put her academic work on hold so she could focus on her family. Kristen shared:
I’ve worked my whole life to be here, I still feel, (pause), you know, an underlying sense of failure and guilt. This is the first time in my time at [Southeast University] that I’ve asked for an extension. And my friends had to talk me through it, like, the whole way because I want to, like, I want to do well. But it’s physically impossible to get things done. And sometimes it’s physically impossible to go to class and I wish that I hadn’t this semester. So in that way school is something I care about but it’s more the overall picture than individual classes. Because I sit down and I’m, like, I absolutely do not care about this essay about Frankenstein. Somehow, like, relevance becomes more important. It’s not that I want to, like, have something like life is short! I need to seize the day! It’s more like I don’t have the energy for this. It’s like I just want to be at home.

Kristen’s friends became a very important source of support while she struggled to finish out the last few weeks of the semester. Despite her preoccupation with thinking about her father and her family, she was keenly aware of the efforts her friends were making. She described several occasions when friends would assign themselves shifts to ensure that someone was around to check on her. When Kristen would get overwhelmed with her academic work, her friends would reassure her that it was okay to just rest. They adjusted their social activities to accommodate her desire to be around people or to be alone.

Kristen saw her willingness to allow her friends to take care of her as a demonstration of her own strength. She knew that the support of her friends would be crucial to making it through the next few weeks. She did not hesitate to ask them for help, but it was also very
important for her to believe that her peers were motivated to support her by their love for her, not by pity for her situation. Kristen stated:

I’m not their peer in a lot of ways right now because, like, they’re taking care of me in very real and physical ways and... yeah, I think our friendships have been altered. Uhmm, I’m looking forward to someday being, having the give and take be equal, even if it can’t be right now. And they all taught me how okay that is.

Kristen later learned that her friends also supported her by protecting her from outsiders. They would keep people away from her bedroom while she was trying to sleep. They steered people away from her when attempts to offer condolences became awkward. At times, her friends made the decision to share Kristen’s situation with others in the hopes that people might be more understanding of her change in demeanor.

Kristen was amazed that her friends were so devoted to supporting her. Most of her friends had not experienced the loss of a loved one, especially the loss of a parent. Kristen felt strongly that their lack of experience helped them be more open to trying to understand what she was experiencing. Those who had previously lost a loved one did not try to compare their own experiences to hers.

However, being amongst peers who had not experienced the death of a loved one meant that Kristen struggled to know if what she was experiencing was normal. Her friends were wonderful about listening and supporting, but they were not able to give her guidance on what to expect in the grieving process. Being far away from her mother and sisters, Kristen was alone in her grief. She was unsure if what she was thinking and feeling, and
especially if the panic attacks she had begun experiencing, were a normal part of the grieving process. Kristen stated:

I was just confused about what is, what is normal with grieving and what is not. I was a lot more freaked out about how I was reacting, that I just didn’t see people. I don’t know, I guess once you get into it, like, I just found out last week that my uncle who is like the happiest, most chill guy was, like, had a lot of panic attacks and was, like, ‘She could call me anytime day or night and I’ll say great things to her.’ So I’m understanding now that what is normal is not necessarily talked about.

These panic attacks were one of the most difficult parts of the grieving experience for Kristen. Seeking some relief, Kristen sought a referral to a therapist. After a few sessions, Kristen was disappointed that her panic attacks continued. Kristen felt that she spent her time in the sessions just rehashing feelings she had already identified. In her mind, she already knew how she was feeling and why she was distressed. She appreciated the efforts of the clinician but was not finding much benefit from the sessions and was frustrated that the panic attacks continued.

Seeking some form of relief, Kristen made an appointment with a physician hoping, if nothing else, to receive medication to help her sleep. Unfortunately, the first few doctors Kristen visited steered her back toward therapy and brushed aside her panic attacks. Kristen finally turned to her father’s former doctor for help. Knowing what the family had been through, he immediately prescribed medication to help her sleep. Kristen finally felt like she
was beginning to gain control over the panic attacks but was exhausted from the effort it took to get treatment.

Although the symptoms had subsided, Kristen still wondered if her response to the death of her father was normal. Although her therapy sessions had not been particularly helpful in addressing her concerns, her campus minister offered her the reassurance she had been seeking. Kristen shared:

Talking to the [deleted] campus ministers were helpful in that they would just be like ‘You are normal. It’s okay. What you are feeling is not out of the ordinary. There’s not something wrong with you.’ And so, like, it was helpful to hear that at first especially because, I mean, I do react very differently than my sisters. And, like, my friends haven’t gone through this. So it was helpful in that sense to kind of like hear an expert of sorts say that.

As she prepared to graduate, Kristen was saddened by the fact that her father was unable to attend her graduation. Kristen learned that she had earned high honors for her senior project. For Kristen, earning this distinction was bittersweet because her father was not there to celebrate with her. However, realizing how important his role would have been in the family’s celebration of Kristen’s achievement, Kristen’s sister did an imitation of the animated response and word choice her father would have had to the news. This reaction from her sister touched Kristen deeply. Her family made a point of assuring Kristen that her father would have been immensely pleased and proud of her.
Through reflection and conversation with her family and friends, Kristen found some comfort in the fact that she continued to be influenced by her father, even after his death. Kristen was deeply moved when she recognized traits and interests she shared with him. These connections were an important source of support for Kristen. She shared: “I think I’m more aware than ever of the ways in which he shaped who I am and he’s a part of who I am.”

**Peyton: “I Choose to Have a Good Day”**

Peyton’s experience of grief began in high school when a dear friend shot himself while playing Russian roulette. Peyton had been devastated, especially since they had recently talked about his excitement about heading off to college. A few years later, during her sophomore year of college, Peyton learned that another dear friend from home had unexpectedly died of an alleged drug overdose. Peyton was in a state of shock. She couldn’t believe she had lost another friend to what she believed was another suicide. Luckily, Peyton’s boyfriend, Hamilton, was there to support her and also offer a welcome distraction as she attempted to move forward in her life on campus.

A few months later, Peyton was on her way to a study abroad program thousands of miles from home. Though she and Hamilton had dated for a year and a half, they decided to break up, mostly because of the physical distance between them while she was away from campus. However, once she arrived overseas and settled in at her new university, she and Hamilton resumed communication and made a point of video chatting at least once each week. Though they were no longer dating, their connection to one another continued to
deepen. Peyton shared that she suspected they both assumed that their relationship might resume when Peyton returned to campus for the spring semester.

A few weeks into her time abroad, Peyton was having dinner with friends when she received a call from her mother. Peyton’s mother broke the news that Hamilton had been killed in a car accident. Peyton was stunned. One of her first thoughts was “Not again!” Being so far from home, Peyton could not bring herself to take in what she was being told. She did not want to believe what her mother was saying. Peyton shared:

This conversation was very much a blur for me but I, I remember just like immediate denial. And I just told her, like, ‘I can’t deal with this right now. Uhm, like, please don’t tell me any more. Don’t tell me anything. I don’t want to know any of this. Please, stop talking.’ I basically hung up on her.

Peyton decided to temporarily leave her abroad program so that she could attend Hamilton’s memorial. While at home, she was able to spend time with Hamilton’s family and with her own family. Peyton found her mother to be extremely supportive. Peyton appreciated that her mother made herself available to Peyton. She offered to listen when Peyton wanted to talk and did not intrude when Peyton wanted to be left alone.

Peyton struggled with the decision to stay at home or to return to her study abroad program. After much consideration, Peyton choose to return to her program. She shared:

I think for me it was really difficult to decide to go that far away from home again. I had just gone so far away and look at what happened. And like why did I want to leave again? But at the same time, I had to, like, think to myself, like, what am I
going to do here if I’m home? Anytime you go so far away from home no matter if you’re the most paranoid person or the least paranoid person, you’re always kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop. I feel like for the past six years I’ve been in constant grief because every time I seem to be moving forward, it’s like somebody new dies so suddenly, out of nowhere. My anxiety has gone through the roof! Like I am a different person. I used to be so carefree. Like now if I call my mom and it’s 11 o’clock on a Saturday night, I’m like, where are you? You should be picking up right now. And if she doesn’t call me back until the morning I’m nervous about it a little.

Peyton completed her abroad program and returned to campus for the spring semester. During this transition, Peyton struggled to bring a sense of normalcy back to her life. She was dismayed that administrators who had reached out to her while she was abroad seemed to have forgotten about her once she returned to campus. After she arrived back on campus for the start of the semester, Peyton waited for administrators to contact her with meeting times. She expected people to reach out to her with lists of resources and offers of support. Several weeks went by and no one reached out. Peyton grew angry as she realized that while she was abroad, people had forgotten about her. Offers of support may have been well-intentioned but were quickly overlooked as life moved forward on campus. Peyton said:

I have to be the one to make the effort. It’s like… I’m exhausted. I’m trying to do a million things. Trying to have some normalcy to my life right now. The last thing I
want to have to do is reach out and make the appointments. Like, make the efforts. Like, I don’t know. It got to a point where I felt selfish for thinking shouldn’t someone just be showing up at my door right now, making this a little bit easier for myself? And then I thought like oh no, that’s so selfish. Why would anyone do that? But, you know, it shouldn’t be. That shouldn’t be selfish. Just like totally gets swept under the rug.

For Peyton, one of the more challenging experiences in dealing with Hamilton’s death was navigating relationships with her friends. Hamilton’s death was particularly difficult because her social circles on campus were intertwined with his. Some of their mutual friends avoided her and others shied away from any conversation about Hamilton. If she wanted to talk about Hamilton, she had to initiate the conversation. Peyton often felt like people saw her as a widow. She was hurt that the people who knew Hamilton best were seemingly too caught up in their own lives to care about her.

Initially, Peyton’s friends were attentive and supportive. They were willing to listen when she wanted to talk and offered to distract her when she didn’t. However, after a few weeks, her friends stopped asking her about Hamilton and seemed to refocus on their own lives. Some friends made offers to listen but were too distracted by the demands on their time to be consistent in their support. Peyton felt angry, hurt, and alone.

One particular interaction that bothered Peyton occurred while she and a friend were studying for an exam at the library. Her friend talked about feeling the stress related to an upcoming job interview. Peyton perceived that she was too distracted to notice that Peyton
was also stressed, but for a very different reason. That particular day would have been Peyton and Hamilton’s two year anniversary and Peyton was struggling. As her friend continued to complain about missing class due to the interview, Peyton found herself getting angry that her friend could be so oblivious and insensitive. Peyton said:

She, like, had to fly to New York for a job interview. (She was) gonna miss the section before the test and whatever and whatever. And she’s, like, basically crying to me, having a mental breakdown in the library. And, like, I didn’t say it but I just wanted to turn to her and be like, ‘You know what? Today would have been my two year anniversary with my boyfriend who’s dead. And I’m studying for this test.’ …You don’t think that I’m like some, you know, depressed person, like, wishing that this person were still alive 24/7, doing nothing and not moving on with my life. But like at the end of the day, you know that this is the priority on my mind. And like I think just, just knowing that someone is, like, thinking about you the way you think about yourself is really helpful.

In her reflections about her grieving experience, Peyton shared that the unexpected deaths of so many loved ones left her feeling anxious and vulnerable. Earlier, as she prepared to leave for her study abroad program, Peyton harbored fears for the health and safety of her family. One of her greatest worries was that the next phone call she would receive would be a phone call about her father who getting on in age and was not in the best of health. After Hamilton died, Peyton’s anxiety was amplified. She lived in almost constant
fear for the safety of her friends and family, worried each time that she answered the phone that it would be more news about a loved one.

As time went on, and Peyton began to re-enter her life on campus, she worried that she did not think of Hamilton as consistently as she had during the first few days after his death. Peyton had the realization that she would have to be intentional about her thoughts if she wanted to remember Hamilton as a person and not just remember his death. She willed herself to focus on memories of their relationship and day-to-day life. She forced herself to think about “the little things” such as driving in his truck and lazy days spent watching movies together. While walking around campus, Peyton tried to associate locations with positive memories of Hamilton, memories that made her laugh or touching moments from their relationship. Peyton was intentional in her efforts to make these associations positive, even though they reminded her how much she missed him. For her, the positive memories became a way to “visit” Hamilton and preserve their relationship.

A few months after Hamilton’s death, Peyton began to think about what it would mean to move forward. The unfinished nature of the relationship with Hamilton left Peyton feeling confused. Adding to the confusion were friends who seemed uncomfortable with the idea that Peyton was thinking about dating again. Although it wasn’t clear that Hamilton and Peyton would have gotten back together after she returned from her abroad program, Peyton did believe that Hamilton would have continued to be an important part of her life. The idea of moving on to another romantic relationship was difficult to imagine but at the same time something Peyton realized she was hoping she would eventually do. Peyton shared:
I know in the future, it’s gonna turn into one more something that’s very important that happened to me in the past that you should know about if we’re going to get to the next level of, not necessarily, not intimacy, like whether it’s a friend or a boyfriend or whatever. Just, it’s like a big step. You know, it’s a big moment in my life obviously. And I think it’s just like, it’s just part of who I am that you don’t reveal about yourself right away. But as of right now what role does he play? I mean, he’s still the last and *only* boyfriend that I’ve ever had. Like, he was my first love. He always will be. I think grief is something that lessens over time but it leaves an imprint on you that’s so strong that it changes who you are. Like, because this happened to me, it’s something that I want everyone to know about me. But I also don’t want to be defined by.

**Ray: “It’s Complicated”**

Ray’s parents divorced when she was very young and Ray lived with her mother for most of her childhood. The physical distance and the complexity of the relationship between her parents strained the relationship between Ray and her father. Ray’s relationship with her father became even more complicated after Ray’s father remarried. His new wife was less than kind to Ray; Ray perceived her actions as an active attempt to try to keep Ray away from her father. Still, Ray felt close to him and her stepsister, Christine. She continued to put forth the effort to stay connected with them, despite her stepmother’s efforts to keep them apart.
A few days before the fall break of her first year at the university, Ray’s father confirmed that he had made arrangements to visit her at school. Ray was excited because her father had never been to campus and she was eager to show him around the university. During his visit, they explored the city together and spent time walking around campus. After the visit, Ray felt closer than ever to her father and looked forward to spending more time with him at home during the Thanksgiving Break.

Unfortunately things grew complicated when Ray visited home. Ray and her father made plans to share breakfast one morning and Ray was dismayed to learn that her father had invited along her stepmother. Ray and her father argued over the phone and Ray almost decided not to go. However, the desire to spend time with her father outweighed her desire to avoid her stepmother. At the last minute, Ray decided to go to the breakfast. She returned to campus shortly afterward and began to prepare for final exams, looking forward to spending more time with her father over the semester break.

One evening after she returned to campus, Ray was focusing on preparations for final exams. She studied most of the day and was looking forward to the end of finals week so she could go home. While taking a break from studying, she checked her phone messages saw that she had several missed calls from her mother and other relatives. Concerned, she called her mother back and was stunned to learn that her father had died. He had died sometime during the early morning hours as a result of an alleged prescription drug overdose.
Ray’s family had been trying desperately to reach her but her cell phone did not have a strong signal in the classroom where she had been studying, so several hours had already passed. Ray was distraught. She had just had breakfast with her father two weeks ago while home for Thanksgiving! And though Ray had long suspected that her stepmother was abusing prescription medication, she was stunned to learn that her father had also taken the medication. At this point, Ray had no idea if his death was an accidental overdose or an intentional act. Ray felt completely shattered. Her already fragile relationship with her father was further tested as she found herself questioning how well she really knew him.

Ray felt overwhelmed by the decisions she felt she needed to make when she learned her father had died. She desperately wanted to go home but she also worried about leaving during the middle of finals week. With the help of her mother, Ray sent out a notification to her professors about her father’s death and explained that she would be leaving campus. Initially, Ray’s professors responded with support and offered to allow her to complete her coursework after the semester break. At first, that seemed like the best course of action to hasten her ability to leave campus. However, Ray later discovered that this meant she would need to study for her final exams while she was at home for the memorial service. Although she half-heartedly considered taking a leave of absence, the idea of not returning to school seemed out of the question. Ray studied as much as she could manage while she was at home. Upon returning to campus, Ray felt weighed down with the burden of finishing her fall classes while also starting her new set of classes. Ray shared:
When I got here I was really overwhelmed and was, like, unsure that I could get back into the swing of things. It was especially hard starting my new classes… and I still had to worry about the finals that I missed. And I begged one of the professors to just look at my grade as it was and just take it, but he said no. And they ended up going okay. But it was hard. It was just hard. So, in a way it was hard to come back. But in a way it was good because it got my mind off of (pause) things.

Not many people on campus knew about Ray’s situation. She chose not to share her story with many friends, preferring to confide in her best friend who attended a different school on the other side of the country. For Ray, talking about her father’s death meant having to tell people the whole story, if they had any hope of understanding how she was feeling. Ray believed that it was just too personal and too revealing to share her story with others. For her, the gestures that friends made to offer support were more important to her than actually talking with them about what she was experiencing. She said:

My friends wanted to be there for me but I’m mostly internal, except for a few people. And it is more of a burden to explain the whole story. It’s not, like, they kept trying to contact me to ask if I was okay. And one day they brought over cookies and a bear and something. So I got that and I said okay, I guess I’ll explain it. You know, I appreciate the gesture. But they don’t understand that it’s more of a burden to explain it. My friends had no idea how to (pause) help. And I don’t blame them. They had no idea how to react. But when I was home, it turns out they sent me a bouquet of flowers actually. I forgot about that. They had gotten my address from
[my best friend]. And the ones I’m really close to, the ones I’m still close to now, and then like a few others that I’m pretty close to, they sent me flowers… I still have the note, at my home. I still have the card that came with it. It had all their names. It was something my friend… had written and it was like all their names. Uhm, it was really nice ‘cause it’s just a silent gesture but it’s fine with me.

One of the more difficult aspects of losing her father was knowing how to respond when people asked Ray how her father died. She knew that as soon as people heard the words “drug overdose,” assumptions would be made about her father and his lifestyle. She could not bear the thought of people judging his actions. At the same time, Ray was struggling to reconcile the man she knew and the decisions he may have been making. Ray felt cheated. Even after the shaky start to the Thanksgiving breakfast, Ray had begun to feel more optimistic about her relationship with her father. Now, the relationship with her father felt interrupted and unfinished.

Ray grew even more confused about her father when it was discovered that he had taken out an insurance policy and named Ray as the sole beneficiary. Almost instantly, the insurance policy became a source of tension in the family. People argued over the money and openly talked about whether Ray should or should not receive the funds. The money dominated conversations and created an even larger rift between Ray and her stepmother. For Ray, the money was not a gift. She saw it as another example of a side of her father that she knew nothing about.
The insurance policy continued to be a distraction for several months. In addition to trying to catch up with her academic work, Ray felt burdened with the responsibility of managing the insurance funds. Additionally, the insurance funds changed her financial situation and the university made a change to Ray’s financial aid award. For several months, Ray endured meetings and correspondence with the financial aid office. For Ray, the responsibility of managing the funds was a constant reminder of the complicated relationship she had with her father. Ray shared:

I was struggling with this whole life insurance because it ended up being a seven or eight month process of them investigating the cause… the cause of death and stuff and… getting the autopsy back. It was hard. But, uhm, yeah, and that was, like, an added thing that’s still ongoing because there’s a lot of financial aid issues associated with it now. I was talking to my mom the other day, it’s actually been my entire sophomore year… when I reflect on it, with this money that I didn’t know about and don’t even care about, it’s my responsibility now.

After her father’s death, Ray worried about the impact his absence would have on the relationship between Ray and her half-sister, Christine. While their father was living, Ray made a point to stay in close contact with Christine. Her father encouraged the relationship and often picked activities that they could do together. Ray took her responsibility as big sister very seriously, especially since Christine was only six years old. Ray felt protective of her and after her father’s death, her protective instinct intensified. Ray often worried about Christine and because of the gap in their ages, found it difficult to stay in contact with her.
The buffer their father offered between Ray and her stepmother was no longer there. After his death, Ray had to resort to working through other members of the family to get updates about Christine. It was proving difficult to see her without also having to engage with her stepmother.

In the weeks after her father’s death, Ray felt an instinctive need to collect and preserve anything she could find that reminded her of him and of their relationship. Ray described the experience of packing up her father’s belongings at his house. While going through the house, she frantically grabbed his shirts and a hat she remembered that he bought during his trip to visit her on campus. She took with her anything that evoked a memory of her father.

Ray also tried to preserve artifacts of their communication. She made sure she saved text messages but photographed them as well, just to ensure they would not be lost. She saved voicemails he had left on her phone and uploaded those recordings to digital files, storing them in multiple places. It was important to Ray to feel assured that she would always be able to hear his voice. She clicked through his Facebook page and copied photos to her own files, worried that those photos would be lost if his Facebook profile was deactivated. Ray cherished those items and images. They reminded her that her father was real and that their relationship had been real.

Ray shared that she has often wondered if she actually grieved for her father. She suspected that the complicated family dynamics and the pressure of the insurance policy took the focus off her relationship with her father. Except for her best friend, most of Ray’s peers
had not lost a parent. Ray often felt like no one understood what she was experiencing, even if they were willing to listen. She found herself thinking about the more existential questions surrounding the meaning of life and death and realized that it was her father who she usually sought out for these types of abstract discussions. His absence made her more keenly aware of how alone she felt. Ray shared:

It’s hard because I don’t know when it’s me being overwhelmed by grief and when it’s me being overwhelmed by the drama. My dad was always interesting because he could have these abstract, almost philosophical, discussions; and we’d always had those religious discussions and stuff like that. And I always struggled with… these are the things we talked about, like what happens afterwards and that’s what he’s experiencing. And I hate that, not knowing. I think that’s the center of being human, I’m sure. Not knowing what happens afterwards but, uhm, that was hard too and then I didn’t have the one person I would have wanted to talk to about this stuff. I didn’t have (him) anymore.

Elizabeth: “I Don’t Show Weakness”

Late one evening, Elizabeth heard a loud crash and then moaning that seemed to be coming from the kitchen. Her father was having a heart attack. By the time Elizabeth reached him, he was lying on the kitchen floor. Elizabeth flew into action. She woke her mother and called 911. Elizabeth administered CPR for 15 minutes while they waited for the ambulance. Once at the hospital, Elizabeth knew even before the doctors told her that her father had not survived.
Several months later, reflecting back on that night, Elizabeth described a sense of pride and resolve in knowing that she had tried to save her father’s life. At times, friends and clinicians have made statements that have led Elizabeth to believe that they do not understand her feelings about the events of that evening. Elizabeth believed that they assumed that she would be distraught that her efforts had not been enough to save her father. On the contrary, Elizabeth was proud of her efforts to save her father’s life. She felt honored to be with her father as he died.

After her father died, Elizabeth contacted her best friend, Amy. Elizabeth and Amy had been close for many years, seeing each other more as sisters than as friends. This relationship was particularly important because just recently, Elizabeth had supported Amy after the death of Amy’s grandfather. Elizabeth watched helplessly as Amy struggled with panic attacks and depression. Elizabeth learned that the best support she could offer her friend was just being a caring presence. Elizabeth described the experience of supporting Amy:

It was hard for me to show that I was upset in this situation (pause), because I had to be strong for her. And, uhm, she was having a lot harder of a time than- not to say that my time wasn’t hard- but hers was more. It manifested itself in a different way through panic attacks and like physical pain for her. Like, she couldn’t eat. She couldn’t sleep. She was going to the ER. That kind of thing. And, there was not really anything I could say to make that go away. So that was very difficult for me.
After Elizabeth’s father died, Amy set aside her own struggles and quietly stepped into the role of supporter for Elizabeth. In the days following his death, Amy took charge of passing the news to Elizabeth’s friends and also asking them to give Elizabeth space. Elizabeth was especially appreciative that Amy was thoughtful about being present without being intrusive. From Elizabeth’s perspective, Amy did not seem to assume she understood what Elizabeth was thinking and feeling. Additionally, the fact that Amy also knew and was very close to Elizabeth’s father helped Elizabeth feel more comfortable allowing Amy to share in her grieving experience.

In contrast to the sensitivity and support that Amy offered, Elizabeth often interacted with others who were not as intuitive or thoughtful. Elizabeth felt hurt and angry at “outsiders” whose attempts to comfort Elizabeth felt insincere and forced. Elizabeth was particularly bothered by those people who seemed to be motivated by a desire to appease their own feelings of obligation rather than a genuine interest in offering support. Elizabeth shared:

That morning at like 8 am, one of our neighbors came over and she was like ‘What? Tell me it’s not true!’ And I’m like ‘Get out of my house!’ Like, I have to go to the funeral home in 15 minutes. Like, leave me alone. And, of course, like, my mom is (pause), like, a mess. And my aunt, his actual sister, is like medicated… she just can’t even function. It was nice to see all the people there that I would have wanted but it was also, like, ‘Why are you here? You didn’t know any of us, but you’re here.’ Okay?! And, like, Facebook (pause) really pissed me off. Because I had,
like… 35 friend requests in, like, that week. And I’m like, ‘Oh, let’s all be friends with the dead guy’s daughter.’ Every single human being I was friends with wrote on my wall and I was, like, this is the most insincere thing you could possibly do. I felt like everybody else was being selfish, like ‘Oh…I want to know that [Elizabeth] knows I’m thinking about her.’

In the days following her father’s death, Elizabeth felt angry and resentful toward the responsibilities that were put upon her by her family. Her mother was not able to cope with the idea of planning the memorial. The task fell to Elizabeth who took charge of picking the music and flowers, and planning the service. At the same time, her anger and resentment also created a sense of resolve within her. She had never thought of herself as someone who showed weakness and even now under these circumstances, she felt even more resolved to be composed and not show any vulnerability.

Elizabeth viewed her ability to step in to plan the memorial as a demonstration of her inner strength. People often commented on how strong and composed she was being. Elizabeth felt that keeping her composure and taking charge of important family decisions was a way for her to honor her father. Elizabeth was proud that she had planned the memorial service. At 19 years old, she was making decisions that she never thought she would be called upon to make on behalf of her family.

Conversely, Elizabeth was reticent to show any signs of vulnerability, especially in the presence of people who were not close with her or her father. She did not want to be comforted by strangers and she did not want to be pitied. Elizabeth did choose to confide in
a peer who had lost his mother to cancer. Elizabeth was able to be open about her feelings and found comfort in his presence. It was important to her that he did not claim to understand exactly what she was thinking and feeling. He simply listened, offered to hold her when she cried, and offered supportive comments rather than advice.

Three weeks after her father died, Elizabeth returned to campus to begin her sophomore year. She met with her academic dean who steered her toward a lighter course load and also made her call the counseling center to make an appointment. Elizabeth allowed herself to be guided and she was grateful that her dean was being directive. After her experience at home with taking charge of the memorial service and the family obligations, she felt relieved that someone else was making decisions for her.

Elizabeth did attempt to participate in counseling on campus. At first, the sessions were helpful but after a while, Elizabeth found them to be repetitive and even a hindrance when her appointments would fall during times that she did not feel she could afford to break her focus from her academic work. Her interest in the counseling sessions waned and she eventually just stopped going to the appointments. Shortly afterward, she began to attend a group meeting offered through the campus ministry. This group offered her a different type of support and also gave her a forum to explore her father’s death through the lens of her faith. Elizabeth said:

I feel stronger, in a weird way. Like I am more religious. Like, I got to church more often... I bear the cross every week. I pray a lot. But yet my actions don’t necessarily reflect. Like, I’m going in two different directions. And I’m fine with that.
Elizabeth felt a very strong bond with her father. Within the first moments of the initial research interview, Elizabeth displayed several items related to her father that had a great deal of significance to her. She shared two photos she carried with her in her journal and told stories to explain the importance of those photos. She extended her hand to show a thick, banded ring that she wore on her right hand. The ring was her father’s wedding band. Finally, she pointed to her foot and described a tattoo she had designed of her father’s signature.

Elizabeth greatly admired her father. She took it as a compliment when people told Elizabeth that she was ‘just like her father.’ Her father had always been the first person she called when she had good news to share. He was also the first person she called when she needed support or guidance. A few months after he died, Elizabeth learned that she had been awarded a grant. Her first instinct was to call her father to share her good news. The realization that she would need to call someone other than her father was difficult for Elizabeth to handle.

Moving forward was an experience of conflicting thoughts and feelings for Elizabeth. The idea of being at home with her family was different. Family traditions that involved her father had to be changed and family roles also changed as Elizabeth and her mother adjusted to being a family of two. Elizabeth used the phrase “a new normal” to describe the experience of adjusting to and learning to accept the absence of the living presence of her father. She struggled to predict how the relationship she had with her father would manifest
in her daily life now that he was not physically present. She feared that accepting the “new normal” meant that in some way, she would need to let go of her father.

I don’t want to forget (pause) at all... I force myself to think about it. About him. Not about it. Like you don’t ever really get over it. You get used to it. And I feel like that describes it perfectly. Because I don’t want to get over it. Like, (pause) I feel like getting over it means you don’t really remember what happened… and I don’t want that. Like he was an awesome enough person to not get over… But, I hope I don’t get over it.

Anne: “You’re Scared It Will Happen to Someone Else”

As long as Anne could remember, her grandmother, affectionately referred to as “Nanna”, had struggled with health issues. After returning home from a summer abroad, Anne learned that Nanna’s health had further declined and she was not expected to leave the hospital. Luckily, Anne had arrived home in time to be able to visit with Nanna and spend time with her before her death. Anne vividly recalled being at home, being in the process of getting ready to go to the hospital when her father had called to let her know that Nanna had died. Even though Anne and her family knew that Nanna was nearing the end of her life, the news of Nanna’s death was still difficult to hear.

A few weeks into the semester as Anne was settling back into her routine on campus, she learned that a close friend had been badly injured in an accidental fall and was not expected to survive. Groups of her friends gathered and held vigil while his condition was monitored. A few days later, he succumbed to his injuries and died. Anne was devastated.
Nanna’s death had come at the end of a long life, but the death of Anne’s friend was incomprehensible. Anne could not understand how someone who should have had an entire lifetime ahead of him could suddenly be gone.

Just weeks later, Anne received a phone call from home. Without warning, her uncle had suffered a heart attack and died. In a period of less than six months, Anne had lost three people who were very important in her life. Anne could not believe this was happening again. Even though it was the middle of finals week and Anne still had exams left to take, her first instinct was to go home. At that point, final exams were the last thing on Anne’s mind. She wanted nothing more than to be with her family and flew home as soon as she was able to arrange a postponement of her final exams.

Anne attended her uncle’s funeral and spent the remainder of the semester break with her family. When she returned for the start of spring classes, Anne found that her energy level and her interest in her day-to-day activities had waned. At times, Anne was inspired to “seize the day” and try to make sure that everything she did had value and meaning. She spent more time thinking about living with a purpose and considered whether the way she was spending her time was a reflection of this purpose. At times she had doubts about the value of her academic work. She sometimes had to push herself hard to muster the energy to go to class and complete her assignments.

I experienced this with each person that I lost… You kinda just think that: ‘I don’t feel like doing a physics problem set.’ Like, ‘this means nothing in the grand scheme of life.’ And it’s not that you’re lazy, you just realize that there’s so much more to
life than that. So it was hard to concentrate and sometimes hard to sleep. And so then you can’t concentrate as well. Some of it was a distraction and some of it was just overwhelming because I just couldn’t concentrate, because I didn’t feel like this was important enough. I think I’m definitely more ‘live in the moment’ kind of person. Not to say that I put my schoolwork second but all the opportunities to do something you’ve never done before, like spend a few extra minutes and call somebody and say hi… those have become more important to me.

Anne struggled to make sense of three very different losses. As hard as it was for the family to endure their grief over the death of Nanna, her passing was not unexpected. On the other hand, Anne’s friend was just months from completing his degree and was one of the most lively and connected people on campus. He was healthy, young, and had a bright future in front of him. His unexpected death frightened Anne. Anne’s uncle was the same age as her parents. He did not appear ill before the heart attack. His death too was unexpected. The suddenness of the death of her friend and her uncle left Anne feeling vulnerable and out of control. Additionally, Anne was angered by what she perceived to be the injustice of cutting the lives short of two people who were good people and still had a lot of life left to live. She was deeply unsettled by the thought of people just disappearing. Anne shared:

It was very scary and very upsetting as you go from one day, seeing somebody. And then the next day, they’re not there (pause) at all. And it’s not like somebody in the hospital who you always have that thought in the back of your mind, like, that was just very sad… A tragedy is the best way I can describe it. It’s (pause) how quickly
life can be taken from you… I think that’s the scary part. It’s not telling those that you love that you love them. Or doing something you’ve always wanted to do. Or (pause) just almost feel like fearing for your life, I guess… It’s really scary. And you’re scared it’ll happen to somebody around you. ‘Cause (pause) you never know and you don’t want to always be on edge. ‘This could be it!’ You don’t want to be that person, but sometimes… every time you get on a plane you always text everybody.

For Anne, one of the more challenging experiences in her grieving process was navigating the relationships with friends on campus. When she returned to campus at the end of summer, just weeks after her grandmother died, it was easy to get caught up in the frenzy of activity on campus. As much as she appreciated the support of her friends, sometimes it was easier to be around people who didn’t know she was grieving. Even though this meant having to hide her feelings, Anne appreciated being able to focus on something other than her grief. However, at times, being around people who did not share in her grief left her feeling like she was not being authentic. Anne shared:

It was really hard because I was so used to being around my family, and (pause) being able to openly talk about our feelings and what was going on. And going back to school, especially not going abroad, I’m really thankful I didn’t go abroad. But, campus was different because (pause) I didn’t have as big of a home base as I did my freshman and sophomore years, because most of my friends went abroad. But it was just hard because life went on. And it was hard to bring down the orientation week
happiness with ‘Somebody close to me just passed away and I want to (pause) think about this and really let it marinate before I can move on.’ That was hard, just jumping back into everything.

Anne was selective when it came to sharing her grief with friends. Anne sought out people who were patient and respectful of her desire for privacy. Her closest friends did not press Anne when she was not in the mood to be social. They were intentional about giving her an “out” so she didn’t feel like she had to explain if she wasn’t up to being around people.

At times, Anne felt like she had to hide her thoughts and feelings. Anne would make an effort to outwardly appear that she was fine. Sometimes, Anne would choose to surround herself with friends who did not know about the losses she had experienced. She felt a sense of relief in being able to be “normal” and push her thoughts and feelings to the side, if only for a few moments. However, these temporary moments of relief were often followed by feelings of guilt and exhaustion. She felt like she was wearing a mask instead of being open about what she was thinking and feeling. When asked to describe how she felt when she was among her peers on campus, she said:

I think ‘alone’ is one thing, because death isn’t something people openly talk about and people get awkward about it. And so you just feel like you can’t really talk to anybody and you don’t want to go to [counseling center]. You want to talk to somebody you know. And so (pause) I can talk to my parents and stuff about it. Or people who knew who had passed away… Tired; I think that you just get
emotionally drained. So, alone and tired. But it, like I said before, it comes in waves. It really does. It can be one little thing that sets you off and then you’re just kind of in a funk for a little bit.

Anne found that she was often more comfortable being around people who had also experienced the loss of a loved one. She and her friends didn’t necessarily spend their time together talking about death or about the loved ones who had died. Rather, being around others who understood what they were experiencing comforted them. She said:

Not that I understand (pause) death better. I just, I tend to gravitate toward people who have lost people. So when [friend] passed away, I spent a lot of time with my friends who were going through that period. And so I don’t think I understand death any better. It’s just that I’m more comfortable being around people who experience it and will try to do whatever it is to help.

A year after the loss of her family and her friend, Anne continued to struggle with her feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty. She found herself searching for any thread of control or understanding in the loss of her loved ones.

The question that kept resonating was ‘Why? Why is all of this happening?’ … I was kind of panicky. It was just a very panicky feeling because you feel like at any moment something could be lost. It’s just a big loss. That’s what I think of. Because I think of the good stuff. But then I think of the good stuff and it’s just- why?
Charlie: “I Don’t Have a Safety Net”

Charlie grew up in a rural area in the South. Charlie’s mother and father were not in a relationship so for most of his life, Charlie lived with his mother and had occasional contact with his father. When Charlie was ten years old, his father moved back to the region. He expressed an interest in being a more active part of Charlie’s life and obtained partial custody. During his visits his father and his father’s family, Charlie became closer to his stepsiblings. However, he and his father, who was a quiet man, remained distant. Not long after Charlie began living with his family, Charlie’s father suffered a heart attack and died. Charlie recalled the anger that he felt after his father died. It didn’t seem to be fair that he died just when he and Charlie were beginning to form a relationship. Although he was only 10 years old, Charlie was forced to think about life and death in ways that had never been real to him before the loss of his father.

After the death of his father, Charlie was encouraged by his aunt to record his thoughts and feelings in a journal. At first, he was opposed to the idea of journaling but after he began writing, he found a sense of relief and even amusement in putting his thoughts on paper. Writing allowed him time to intentionally chose his words and form his thoughts in a way that conversation did not allow.

When he was in high school, Charlie used the income he received from his father’s estate to move out of his mother’s home and into an apartment with a friend. Charlie’s relationship with his mother became strained because of his decision to live outside her home. Although Charlie and his mother loved each other very much, they had differing
beliefs and differing personalities, which at times led to clashes. After Charlie moved out, he and his mother made an effort to stay in close contact and worked on building their relationship. During his senior year of high school, Charlie was invited by one of his friends to rent a room in his family’s house. For Charlie, after so much change during his childhood, the opportunity to live as part of a nuclear family was hard to pass up. Charlie became close with his new family. However, he was aware that this new relationship was difficult for his mother, so he made an effort to reach out to her and visit her often.

Although their relationship had improved after he began his first year of college, Charlie described the distance that still existed between them. During his second year of college, Charlie was shocked to learn that his mother was suffering from breast cancer. She had held back the news from him, not wanting to disrupt his academic work. By the time she shared the news with him, Charlie’s mother was very ill. After receiving news of his mother’s illness, Charlie put more effort into visiting home and setting aside their differences to make their time together more peaceful. When describing his mother, Charlie was careful not to exaggerate the emotional experiences of their reconciliation. He loved his mother but also acknowledged the struggle he still felt in trying to relate to her. Charlie sometimes worried that people might believe he was cold and unfeeling toward his mother. However, it was important to him that the depiction of their relationship not be romanticized.

Despite her illness, Charlie’s mother encouraged Charlie to continue to take advantage of the opportunities available to him through the university. With his mother’s encouragement, he went abroad. It wasn’t until he returned home that he learned how
seriously ill his mother had become. About a month into his senior year, Charlie’s uncle called and share that Charlie’s mother was very close to death. His uncle asked Charlie to come home. Charlie left school and stayed with his mother in the hospice for three day. Charlie recalled a powerful and very meaningful moment when his mother was able to recognize him and show her joy in his presence. She died a few days later.

As Charlie grieved the death of his mother, he perceived a sense of familiarity in the experience of grieving. During the interview, Charlie shared his belief that the loss of his father had prepared him for handling tragedies later in life. After his mother died, Charlie found that he was faced with the same thoughts and feeling he had experienced when his father died. However, his familiarity with the experience made the grieving process feel different. Charlie shared:

I think that when my dad passed away, it was really hard on me. I think that I dealt with the worst part of loss then. Even though it may sound silly and I may not be sure psychologically how that works, but I just think that, I honestly think that I dealt with the worst part of it then… [The worst part of it] is sort of the conceptual notion of death, which is that they’re never going to be there again…. I’d already felt that. And it’s, it’s not like it made it easy but it made it much more understandable.

Charlie believed that losing both of his parents made him stand apart from his classmates. Not many people knew about Charlie’s family. He knew it would be difficult for others to relate to his situation. He chose to share his story with a few close friends and his girlfriend. Charlie was drawn to them because they openly acknowledged their inability
to understand his experience. Charlie’s friends were willing to patiently listen when he wanted to talk and leave him alone when he didn’t feel like sharing. Charlie shared:

Right now I don’t really have a lot of people to talk to that understand. And it’s been okay. I’ve never been one to really need someone to talk to… And it’s less about having someone to talk to than just knowing that other people understand. And my friends have been incredibly supportive but they just truly don’t know what it’s like and admit it.

Charlie was aware that his grief did have an impact on relationships with his girlfriend and with his close friends. At times, his girlfriend and close friends were both curious and slightly concerned about the lack of outward expression in Charlie’s grief. However, Charlie was more comfortable keeping his thoughts and feelings to himself, continuing to turn to poetry and writing as a way of expressing his experience. The kindness and unassuming approach that his girlfriend and friends used when checking in with Charlie helped him to better understand how his grief affected him.

As a way of exploring his thoughts and feelings about the death of his mother (as well as other topics), Charlie continued to pursue writing, becoming more passionate about his work. Charlie’s writing expanded to include poems, short stories, and other creative writing. He also began to share his writings with others. Charlie often used his writing to explore his thoughts and beliefs about life and death. Charlie said:

I don’t think that life would be so good if it wasn’t for the fact that we weren’t here forever. And so that… philosophy has really helped me get through this and has
helped me just get through life in general. I’m not a very spiritual person particularly. I’m always open to those things ‘cause I can never really cross anything out if you don’t know. But my mind right now, and maybe this is just a defensive mechanism, but my mind tells me, you know, that probably nothing happens when we die.

Charlie put a lot of thought into what it meant for him to face the world without the living presence of parents. The independence Charlie felt after the loss of his parents instilled both a sense of pride and also a sense of isolation from his peers. Charlie spoke about the dilemma of not having a “safety net.” There was no back-up plan for Charlie if he could not pay his bills; he was now responsible for all of his own finances. He assumed responsibility for paying for his own insurance, health care, and rent. He knew that after graduation he would need to find a job and provide a home for himself. Although he was concerned about these responsibilities, Charlie was also relieved that he was free to make his own decisions. He was free from parental pressure to choose a specific career or live in a certain location. However, as the heir to his mother’s estate, Charlie was responsible for attending to his mother’s finances, including distributing the death certificate to creditors. Charlie felt a sense of pride in being called upon to manage these responsibilities but at other times, Charlie was overwhelmed. Charlie shared:

It’s… just the logistical things are always a pet peeve of mine. Especially in light of a significant situation like that. It’s like this is not the thing I want to be worrying about right now. But I still have to do these things! You know, because if not,
they’re going to have implications later on. And that’s the frustrating part. It’s like I
don’t care about them but they have to get done.

Summary

The lived experience of grieving, as it was disclosed by the participants, was shared in this chapter. Each experience of loss was unique and responded to the thoughts, feelings, and meanings that the participants perceived as they grieved the death of a loved one. These lived experiences will provide context for the findings of the study, which will be explored in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

This study explores the grieving experiences of undergraduates after the loss of a loved one. Unique attributes of the collegiate setting may impact the way in which these individuals experienced grief. In particular, the undergraduates in this study resided on or near campus, many miles away from their families and home communities. As a result, the primary support available to these students was through classmates, many of whom had not experienced the loss of a loved one. Additionally, these students were grieving in an academic setting with high expectations for engagement and performance. Researchers have studied the experience of grieving from a variety of perspectives; however, little is known about how attributes of the collegiate setting may influence grieving. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to uncover the phenomenon of grief as students living in this unique setting experience it.

Essences of the Experience of Grieving

This study used a phenomenological approach to examine the experience of seven undergraduates. Participants were sophomores, juniors, and seniors and were grieving the loss of parents, close friends, a grandparent, a former boyfriend, and an uncle. These students participated in two interviews and a member check meeting. Four broad themes emerged through the analysis of the data: the influence of others on the grieving experience, the experience of taking on new roles responsibilities, innermost thoughts and feelings, and moving forward after loss.
Influence of Others on the Grieving Experience

The grieving experience for these participants often occurred in the context of relationships and interactions with other people. Participants described the challenge of navigating relationships with both their friends on campus and with family and friends back home. They recounted the experience of finding comfort, support, and understanding from friends and family. However, these students were selective in choosing with whom to confide their story. They expressed the need to conceal emotions and thoughts from others in order to avoid unwanted conversations. Participants felt conflicted by their feelings of resentment and annoyance at the efforts to be consoled by friends and people who were peripheral to their social group. References were made to feeling alone, even while among classmates. In some cases, this sense of aloneness was connected to strong feelings of wanting to be at home with family and friends rather than being on campus.

The findings of this study indicated that the lived experience of grieving for these students included key experiences representing the influence of others on the grieving experience. These findings include: being in the caring presence of others, selectivity in sharing, experiencing insensitive responses from others, feeling alone, and the importance of home.

**Being in the caring presence of others.** Participants shared stories that illustrated the importance of being with friends and family during the grieving process. Participants described the importance of friends who were patient listeners and who acknowledged that they did not understand what the participant was experiencing. Willingness to be present
was more important than the ability to find the right words to say to bring comfort.
Additionally, they emphasized the importance of friends who gave up their time to be with the students as they grieved.

When describing the experience of grieving, participants often recounted stories of friends who were attentive and patient listeners. They spoke about the importance of an individual friend or a small group of friends who allowed them to control the content and pace of the conversation. For example, Charlie offered a description of the way his friends responded:

Anytime I was willing to talk about it, they were willing as well. But they were much more, it was much more like an… absorptive-like listening conversation. They had a much less active role in the conversation. They were just letting me talk. And they were never really pushy at all. So that was really helpful, just to be normal.

Participants reported feeling most comfortable being with friends who were open about their inexperience with grief. In particular, friends who acknowledged that they did not know what it felt like to lose a loved one were judged as supportive. The fact that these friends expressed their uncertainty in how to be helpful was perceived as a signal that they were open to trying to understand the experience of the grieving students. A statement by Kristen illustrated this point:

My best friend here… at first she thought it was a really bad thing that she didn’t know what to say… She doesn’t realize how great she is or how smart she is sometimes. And she was like ‘I just don’t know what to say. I’m not wise. I don’t
know what you’re going through. I’m so sorry that, like, I just, I’m the worst friend for this.’ I just, like, look at her like, that’s what makes you the best friend… this humility that you bring to the situation.

Additionally, participants felt supported by the sense of togetherness and camaraderie that emerged while spending time with certain specific friends. They were comforted by the authenticity that was projected by friends who chose to set aside their own academic and social demands in order to spend time with the grieving individuals. Participant judged the presence of these friends as an assurance of their support and concern, even if they did not always know what to say or do.

**Selectivity in sharing.** Participants described the experience of being intentional when deciding to whom to talk about their grieving experience. Participants were also deliberate in choosing what information to share. When in the company of peers, faculty, and staff, these students were often hesitant to openly talk about their loss. They were reluctant to share experiences that were perceived to be deeply revealing and intimate. Additionally, at times participants were reluctant to disclose the context of their loss, preferring to keep details of the death of their loved one private. In some cases, participants also made intentional choices to spend time with people who were unaware that they were grieving.

The students in this study described many situations in which they made deliberate choices to either share or withhold information about their loss. In general, they did not often feel comfortable talking with people about their innermost thoughts and feelings. Many of
these experiences seemed too intimate to share with anyone who was not a trusted confidant. Participants closely controlled the decision to share their experience with others. Similarly, revealing the cause of death was considered to be very personal, particularly when the cause of death was believed to be suicide or drug-related.

In addition to their hesitancy to talk about their thoughts and feelings, these students were also reluctant to enter into a conversation that would require them to explain background information about their families. As an example, Charlie believed that others could not truly understand his innermost thoughts and feelings about his mother’s death without also being aware of Charlie’s family history. He believed that the death of his father and the complexities of the relationship with his mother influenced the way he experienced his mother’s death. However, Charlie was hesitant to reveal these details of his family to others, even to many of his friends. Charlie was more comfortable opening up to the few close friends who were already aware of his history.

Ray was similarly hesitant to openly discuss her father’s death. According to Ray, talking about her father’s death usually led people to ask how he had died. Ray did not often reveal to others that her father had died of a suspected prescription drug overdose. She feared that others would judge her father once they heard that drugs might have been involved in his death. Ray did not know how to respond when people asked her how she was doing. In order to answer that question truthfully, Ray believed that she would need to explain the complexities of her family and the tensions created by her father’s insurance policy. It was easier for her to just deflect questions. Ray explained:
My friends wanted to be there for me but I’m mostly internal, except for a few people and it is more of a burden to explain the whole story… they kept trying to contact me to ask if I was okay and one day they brought over cookies and a bear and something. So I got that and I said okay, I guess I’ll explain it. You know, I appreciate the gesture but they don’t understand that it’s more of a burden to explain it.

The decision to be selective in sharing their experience of grieving sometimes was a source of distress for participants. At times, these participants opted to deflect questions, simplify responses, or even intentionally lie in order to avoid feeling compelled to open up about their thoughts and feelings. For instance, after the death of her grandmother, Anne sometimes intentionally surrounded herself with people who did not know that her grandmother had died. She found a sense of relief in being around friends who were unlikely to ask her about her grandmother and would not expect her to speak openly about her distress. She was “pretending to be fine,” even when she in distress. However, although Anne appreciated the respite from talking about her grief, she also felt conflicted. Anne felt like she was misleading these friends. Although she stopped short of calling it dishonest, Anne was uncomfortable with the feeling that she was holding back.

**Experiencing insensitive responses from others.** All of the participants described the difficulty of navigating responses that were not perceived as sensitive or supportive. At times, the use of specific trigger words or phrases added to the experience of feeling misunderstood. Peers sometimes made comments that were intended to be supportive but were perceived by participants as thoughtless and inappropriate. Communication through
social media, specifically Facebook, was a problematic intrusion into the grieving experience of these participants. Although participants were often hurt by these insensitive responses from others, they rarely expressed their distress to peers.

Participants described interactions with peers, faculty, and staff that left them feeling unsupported or misunderstood. Each participant identified specific trigger words or phrases that elicited a powerful reaction. For Kristen, it was when people would tell her “it was going to be okay.” Kristen shared that she understood that people intended it was meant to be a statement of reassurance. However, Kristen described feeling agitated when others used expressions that were not the absolute truth. Other participants reported becoming frustrated when people used the phrase, “I’m sorry”. These students recognized that the use of this phrase was often a result of people not knowing what else to say. However, they perceived this statement as hollow and obligatory instead of as a genuine expression of care and support.

Participants also described interactions with peers who attempted to be supportive but whose choice of words resulted in hurt feelings and even anger. For example, after the death of her former boyfriend, Hamilton, Peyton thought she would find support among his friends. She had hoped that their shared affection for Hamilton would make it easier for her to be open about her thoughts and feelings. After she returned to campus, Hamilton’s friends invited Peyton to a party. Peyton was excited for the opportunity to socialize among Hamilton’s friends. Then, one of Hamilton’s friends blurted out, “I dare you to hook up with someone.” After her initial shock and anger, Peyton realized that Hamilton’s friend was
actually trying to communicate approval for her to move on from her relationship with Hamilton. However, in the moment, the insensitive nature of the comment made Peyton feel betrayed by people whom she thought she could trust.

Insensitive interactions were also observed by participants through interactions in social media, particularly Facebook. These participants noted messages posted on their Facebook walls from a variety of contacts including family, friends, and acquaintances. Posts were often simple messages such as, “I’m sorry for your loss.” Although these postings were offered as expressions of support, they were perceived as intrusive into a very personal experience. Participants were particularly irritated by contact through social media from casual acquaintances who would not otherwise have known about the loss and who would not have reached out to express their condolences. These postings were judged by participants as more of a social obligation than an authentic expression of support. Participants were often taken aback at how many people became involved in their grieving experience and sometimes resented losing the ability to control the flow of information about the loss.

Although participants were sometimes hurt or angered by the insensitive comments made to them by their peers, they did not often express these feelings to their peers. For instance, Peyton choose not to confront the person who made the inappropriate comment daring her to hook up with someone at a party. Similarly, Grace did not confront her peers when she felt like they were insensitive to the fact that she was grieving the loss of her friend, Sam. As she was grieving, Grace would at times become quiet and withdrawn. Her
friends often asked her why she was in a bad mood. And though she believed that these questions were asked out of genuine concern, Grace also expected friends to be sufficiently perceptive to connect her moods with her feelings about Sam’s death. When her friends seemed to misunderstand the origin of her mood, Grace judged their questions to be insensitive. Grace shared:

> It frustrates me when I’m, like, in a bad mood or whatever and people are like ‘Why? Why are you in such a bad mood?’ I’m like ‘Shut up! I don’t want to talk about it with you. I just want to be by myself. You don’t know him. Stop comforting me. You don’t even know what you’re consoling me for.’

**Feeling alone.** All of the participants shared that a significant experience of grieving was the feeling of being alone. They described the concept of “alone” in several contexts. To several participants, alone meant being the only person among peers who was grieving the death of a particular loved one. Additionally, alone signified the absence of peers who had ever experienced a loss. The concept of alone also referenced the lack of conversation about grief and death in the collegiate setting.

Participants often believed that they were the only students on campus who were in the process of grieving. Although they acknowledged the probability that others on campus must have also lost a loved one at some point in their lives, few participants were able to identify more than a handful of peers who had recently lost a loved one. Participants were also curious about the stories of other students participating in this study. In particular, those who had lost a parent were surprised to learn that other participants in the study had also lost
a parent. Several participants shared that even if they didn’t know the identities of the other students in the study, it was comforting to know that other peers on campus were going through a similar experience. The perceived absence of peers who were grieving sometimes made participants feel different from their classmates. In Charlie’s case, the loss of both his mother and father made him feel unique among his peers. He shared:

I don’t really have the peer support and the peer network of understanding that people would usually have around the time that this starts happening. You know, I assume… your parents will start passing [at] 40 to 50 to 60, I think, is when people’s parents generally start passing away. And so then, that’s- everyone can share that. But right now I don’t really have a lot of people to talk to that understand.

Participants also observed that grief and death were not openly discussed among peers. For these students, the experience of grief was prominent in their day to day lives on campus. Therefore, the absence of conversation about grief and death was both disheartening and isolating. Participants also believed that peers actively avoided conversations about grief and death. Participants felt unprepared to anticipate the experiences of grieving. They believed they would have benefited from hearing stories about grieving from their peers. However, these students also expressed apprehension about the idea of starting a conversation about grief with classmates. They were generally only comfortable broaching the topic with close friends. Anne summed up her feelings:

Death isn’t something people openly talk about and people get awkward about it. And so you just feel like you can’t really talk to anybody and you don’t want to go to,
like, [the counseling center]. Like, you want to talk to somebody you know. It was really hard because... I was so used to being around my family, and (pause) being able to openly talk about our feelings and what was going on.

**The importance of home.** Participants spoke about the influence of “home” on the experience of grieving. This feeling was particularly important because during the academic year, all of the participants resided on campus or were away from home in a study abroad program.

Participants described the concept of home in a number of ways. To some, home meant being among family who were sharing in the grief over the death of a member of the family. Home also meant being with people who were more willing to openly discuss their innermost thoughts and feelings. For some, home was also a return to a community where the student was known and where the complexities and backstories of relationships were already known and understood. Additionally, in contrast to the experience of being on campus, home was perceived as familiar and predictable. For the most part, these participants anticipated finding a sense of comfort and support by being at home.

Several participants referenced the strong urge they felt to be at home with family or close friends immediately following the loss. These students found comfort in being among people who shared in their grief. The opportunity to talk openly about their thoughts and feelings was judged as comforting. For instance, after she learned of Hamilton’s death, Peyton immediately began making plans to return home even though it meant many hours of travel to return from her overseas program. Peyton knew she would be more comfortable in
the presence of her family. Additionally, her family had previously experienced the loss of other friends and the familiarity of grieving together was an experience Peyton found reassuring and familiar.

**Experience of Taking on New Roles and Responsibilities**

For these participants, the experience of grieving included the need to adapt to changes in their lives that resulted from the death of their loved ones. Several participants described the experience of assuming new responsibilities. Often, participants played an important role in planning the memorial service for their loved ones. Additionally, those who lost relatives described the experience of adapting to new financial realities that arose as a result of the loss of their loved ones. Participants also attempted to navigate academic policies as they made decisions regarding class attendance and course completion. These new responsibilities led to feelings of anxiety and frustration. However, despite these struggles, participants also took pride in being able to adapt to these new responsibilities.

**Planning the memorial.** Several of the participants assumed responsibility for planning the memorial for their loved one. Although the planning process was often an emotionally painful experience, participants believed that planning the memorial was a way of expressing their love for the person who died. Additionally, they regarded their involvement in the service as a way to honor the person who died. For example, Grace and a few other friends were selected to choose the music for Sam’s memorial service. She and Sam had both been very interested in music and enjoyed lively conversations about new bands and upcoming concerts. The experience of choosing songs for Sam’s memorial was
meaningful because of this connection Grace believed she shared with Sam. Although choosing the music had been a difficult and painful experience, the opportunity to honor her relationship with Sam through her selections was an important part of Grace’s experience of grieving.

For some participants, the experience of planning the memorial service was more closely connected to assuming a new role in the family. For example, Elizabeth assumed responsibility for planning the entire memorial service for her father. When her father was alive, he was the primary decision-maker in the family. After his death, Elizabeth quickly learned that her mother was not able to manage the process of planning the memorial. Elizabeth pushed aside her own needs and feelings in order to ensure that the arrangements for the memorial service were made. It was very important to her that the service reflect her regard for her father and she saw it as a way to honor their relationship. For Elizabeth, the experience of taking responsibility for planning the memorial was also the experience of transitioning to a new role in the family. Although she did not consider herself to be the new primary decision-maker, Elizabeth was uncertain about what her new role in the family should be and how she and her mother would relate, moving forward.

**Adapting to new financial realities.** For several of the participants in this study, the death of a loved one often led to changes in the way finances were managed by the family. In some cases, the death of a loved one also led to a change in the availability of funds. Several participants reported feeling burdened by assuming responsibility for managing
family finances. By the same token, participants described feeling pressured to make decisions about their future based on these new financial realities.

The responsibility for managing family finances was often a source of stress for the participants. Ray felt burdened by the responsibility of managing her father’s insurance policy. Because she was the sole beneficiary, Ray was required to deal with complicated financial policies, taxes, and lawyers. This change to her financial standing also entailed navigating changes to her financial aid status on campus. Ray did not want to be the person responsible for the insurance policy and at times was resentful that she was forced to take on this role.

Charlie was also required to take on the role of managing his family’s finances; however his experience differed from that of Ray. After the death of his mother, Charlie was required to assume responsibility for managing his mother’s estate. Charlie described the experience as frustrating and burdensome as he added this responsibility to his other priorities, including managing his academic workload. As part of assuming responsibility for his mother’s finances, Charlie navigated the process of closing several of his mother’s accounts and paid as many bills as he could. As the sole heir to his mother’s estate, any unsettled accounts had the potential to impact Charlie’s financial future. Charlie stated his frustration in balancing his academic workload with these new responsibilities:

Just the logistical things are always a pet peeve of mine. Especially in light of a significant situation like that. It’s like this is not the thing I want to be worrying about right now but I still have to do these things! You know, because if not they’re
going to have implications later on. And that’s the frustrating part. It’s like I don’t care about them, but they have to get done.

The experience of adapting to a new financial reality also entailed adjusting to changes in the availability of funds. As an example, prior to the death of her father Kristen did not have concerns about affording her tuition. After her father became increasingly ill, Kristen learned of the change in availability of funds from her family to contribute toward paying tuition. Kristen made the decision to expedite her academic program so that she could graduate a year early. For her, missing out on academic experiences such as study abroad and research were weighed against the financial burden felt by her family if she extended her time on campus. Kristen shared:

I’m on halfway scholarship… but there’s always this fear that health insurance isn’t going to cover something that my dad needs to save his life. And to know that my parents are putting that much [money] into my education, it is pretty scary… I really needed to finish this semester and graduate early.

**Navigating academic responsibilities.** All of the participants in this study were full time students. After the death of their loved ones, participants needed to make important decisions about taking time away from class and making plans for work that was missed. Participants described feeling anxious and frustrated during their attempts to navigate academic policy and in making important decisions regarding their academic futures.

After the death of their loved ones, all of the participants took some time off from classes. For some, the time away was only a few days. In other cases, the time away was
more extensive and entailed missing key exams and assignments. Several of these student contemplated not returning to school. However, eventually they all made the decision to resume taking classes for a variety of reasons. In some cases, participants felt leaving school would have been a disappointing decision to their loved one. For others, returning to class was a result of not understanding how the leave policies worked and what options were available to take more extensive time away.

Participants expressed awareness that their feelings of obligation to catch up or finish classwork often influenced the choices they made in deciding how much time to be away from campus. For example, both Anne and Ray left campus during finals week and as a result, had to postpone exams. They were required to make up missed exams at the start of the spring semester. Subsequently, it was necessary to study for these exams over the semester break while they were at home with their families. Ray in particular expressed her frustration that this important time with family was limited by her need to study.

**Innermost Thoughts and Feelings**

Participants recounted the jumble of thoughts and feelings that occurred throughout their grieving experiences. The dynamics of grieving encompassed a range of thoughts, realizations, and emotions. At times, these thoughts and emotions were overwhelming and left participants feeling out of control. This lack of control led to a sense of vulnerability as participants realized that they could not always control their own fate. Through these thoughts and emotions, participants engaged in the experience of meaning-making as they tried to regain some level of predictability in their lives. In addition, participants were
unsettled by feelings of listlessness, distressed by their lack of motivation or energy to engage in their academic and social pursuits. The intensity of these thoughts and feelings was overwhelming for many participants, leading them to wonder if the grief they were experiencing was normal.

**Feeling out of control.** During the process of grieving, participants reported experiencing a range of emotions while grieving. Participants described moments of feeling anger, fear, confusion, frustration, and loneliness. At the same time, participants also experienced feelings of warmth, hopefulness, and love. Often, these emotions came in waves with moments of intense feelings followed by moments when emotions felt more muted. During the more intense moments, participants reported experienced feelings of panic. In some cases these feelings were manifested as panic attacks.

Often, these intense emotions were unexpectedly triggered by a cue, such as after seeing an object that was connected to the deceased, such as a photo. Sometimes, these emotional waves were initiated by less direct association, such as reacting to flyers on campus for Parents and Families weekend. Additionally, these participants believed that their emotions could be triggered by a number of stimuli on campus. For instance, Anne felt strong emotions about the loss of her friend when she encountered people on campus whom she knew had also been close with him. Grace’s emotions were triggered by listening to music or when she was engrossed in a new book. Ray associated a tree on campus with her father because of a conversation they had about that tree when he visited. Ray described her experience with the presence of thoughts and emotions about her father:
I think about him pretty constantly. Definitely once a day... probably more. And not like direct thinking... my mind seems to block that. But just like ‘Oh, it’s a pretty day, he would have loved this.’ Anyway, stuff like that... the sadness, the actual real sadness comes in waves.

Participants struggled with the intensity of these emotions and were unsettled about their inability to control their feelings. Several expressed frustration at not being able to intentionally divert their thinking away from their grief. Additionally, many participants reported at least one episode of strong feelings of panic. For some, the sensation was short lived and occurred within the first few days of the death of their loved one. Some participants continued to have feelings of panic or experienced medically diagnosed panic attacks for an extended period of time. Kristen offered a description of her experience of a panic attack:

I had one on Friday where I lost vision in one eye for maybe like five minutes or so. Just saw purple splotches and felt dizzy and couldn’t put together a sentence. And I think it’s just kinda like all the stuff going on, chemically. And then yesterday while I was in the chapel, I didn’t have a panic attack, or it didn’t really manifest itself in the way that it normally does in terms of hyperventilating. But I was just pretty upset, and I had been for a while. And I was talking to my friend who visited me and then all of a sudden I couldn’t see out of one eye. And it’s the same eye, same spot. ... same, like, dizziness except this time the lack of vision lasted for maybe, like, 20 minutes or something. So it’s just like there are ways that body and mind are
interconnected but there’s not necessarily something that’s treating both of them at
the same time.

Feeling vulnerable. Before the loss of a loved one, participants had often believed
that the course of events in their lives would be predictable, even controllable. After their
loved ones died, participants struggled with the realization that they were not always in
control of their own fate. The unpredictability of life unsettled several participants,
particularly those who lost loved ones unexpectedly. For this reason, these students
commonly reported feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability after the death of a loved one.

The notion of vulnerability was experienced as fearing the inability to predict and
control the future. Several participants, especially those whose loved ones died
unexpectedly, were unsettled by the notion that death did not just occur to those who had
lived a long life. In some cases, this struggle with the unpredictability of life was reflected
through a fear of losing more people. For instance, after losing three people in less than six
months, Anne was troubled by the uncertainty she felt about the future. She noted her
realization that “life can be taken from you at any moment.” Peyton also struggled with the
unpredictability of death after also unexpectedly losing three people in a short window of
time. She was often preoccupied with worry about friends and family, especially while they
were traveling. Peyton was troubled as she grew aware that she now expected bad things to
happen to people she loved. In her words, she seemed to always be “waiting for the other
shoe to drop.” Many participants found themselves becoming quickly concerned if a text
message wasn’t returned or if a parent didn’t pick up the phone. However, these students
also spoke of a renewed commitment to keep in touch with loved ones and were more attentive to expressing affection. Several participants seemed to believe that despite their inability to predict the fate of their loved ones, they could at least control their ability to express their feelings to those they loved.

Several participants viewed vulnerability as a sign of weakness. The inability to control emotions was frustrating to some, particularly for students who usually felt capable of handling difficult situations. Often, participants were apprehensive about appearing vulnerable in front of other people. Elizabeth in particular was adamant about not showing her vulnerability as she grieved. She stated:

It’s just been the process of, like, battlin’ myself to push it out or not… Like I said, I don’t show weakness. I don’t do it. Even, like, through this whole situation, I don’t do it… I’m not the kind of person who likes to be taken care of.

**Making sense out of loss.** All of the participants struggled at some point to make meaning out of the death of their loved ones. The question of “Why?” resonated differently for each participant, but all questioned how the death of their loved ones fit into a larger understanding of the world. Often, beliefs and assumptions about the world that were shaped through life experiences and the influence of religious and spiritual beliefs, were in conflict with the way these participants understood the experience of losing a loved one. Participants engaged in a process of rethinking their way of understanding the world as they tried to make sense of their loss.
The unexpected death of loved ones seemed to trigger a search for an explanation for the loss. For example, Anne’s grandmother died at the end of a long life. Though Anne missed her grandmother, Anne was comforted by the fact that her grandmother had enjoyed a long and full life. In contrast, the unexpected death of Anne’s uncle seemed to have no meaning. He was only in his 50’s when he died. He still had many plans for the future and had not been ill prior to his death. His death made no sense to Anne. She searched for ways to make sense of his loss and struggled with the realization that she might never find an answer.

The search for meaning was also explored through the question, “Why is this happening to me?” In some cases, participants felt like they were being tested. For instance, Peyton described feeling angry that the death of her loved ones seemed so unfair. After Peyton lost two friends to self-inflicted injuries, she was devastated to learn that her former boyfriend had died as a result of a drunk driving accident. Peyton searched for some reason to explain why, once again, she was forced to grieve for a loved one who had died seemingly before he should have died. She sometimes wondered why she was the only one among her peers who seemed to be this burdened. She shared:

    I guess my initial reaction was self-centered. And that I just could not believe this was happening to me again. Like, I had been through this with Perry. I’d been through this with someone in high school. And I just, like, when it happened with Perry, I couldn’t believe it was happening again, you know? And here I was in [overseas] and, like, still dealing with that in such a tough way… and I just felt like I
couldn’t catch a break, you know? I really did not understand why it was all happening again.

For some participants, religious or spiritual beliefs offered a perspective on the loss of a loved one. Participants differed in the depth of their devotion to their faith and some participants did not claim affiliation with any organized religion. However, all of the participants perceived incongruity between the meaning attributed to their loss by their religious or spiritual beliefs and their own way of understanding the loss. This incongruity provoked reflection, in some cases resulting in an affirmation of religious beliefs. For other participants, the search for meaning created more distance between the participant and his or her beliefs.

**Feeling listless.** Participants expressed concern about changes they perceived in their level of energy and their motivation to be actively engaged in their academic work and social lives. Energy levels seemed to change frequently and unpredictably, causing participants to feel anxious about keeping up with their friends and activities on campus. In some cases, participants lessened their involvement in campus activities or stepped down from organizations completely. Several participants shared that even going to class and focusing on assignments was challenging.

In several cases, this feeling of listlessness led participants to distance themselves from activities on campus. Several participants chose to stop attending organized activities such as non-profit work, sports clubs, and student government. Participants also experienced less interest in continuing day-to-day activities, such as going to the gym. Grace shared: “I
just, like, pretty much bailed on everything. Just very uncharacteristic of me… I’ve had no
motivation to... even, like, clear my head. I just wanted to be alone. “ Anne described a
similar lack of interest in her activities:

    It’s like I just don’t feel like doing anything at all. I really just don’t feel like doing
anything at all… You can’t concentrate. You’re tired even though you slept the
whole night… Sometimes you’re really hungry and nothing satisfies you. Sometimes
you’re like ‘I don’t want to eat anything at all’. So it’s like a lazy day but not like an
enjoyable lazy Sunday. It’s like a stressful lazy.

Levels of energy and motivation also seemed to fluctuate, further adding to the
confusion of the experience. Like the other participants, Elizabeth recalled specific days that
were particularly challenging. On those low motivation days, she shared that she did not
want to get out of bed and could not muster the energy to interact with her friends. Elizabeth
summed up her thoughts on those days as: “I just can’t do this today.”

The lack of interest in daily life also spilled over into academic work. Participants
felt overwhelmed as they thought about sitting through lectures, completing readings outside
of class, and preparing for exams and major projects. Participants often forced themselves to
go to class, even when they were not interested in being there or in the course material.
Concentrating in class was difficult for some, particularly when the topics seemed
unimportant or even irrelevant to daily life. In some cases, after time, participants began to
regain their interest in coursework but still experienced moments of feeling overwhelmed by
the effort of being in class.
Feeling overwhelmed by the sustained intensity of grief. Participants expressed their surprise that they continued to grieve for months (and in some cases, years) after the death of their loved ones. Participants had expected their grief to become less intense in a short amount of time. Instead, thoughts and emotions about the loss continued, even after several months had passed. Friends of the participants also underestimated the grieving experience, sometimes unintentionally minimizing the thoughts and feelings participants continued to endure.

Participants who had only recently experienced the death of their loved one reported that the intensity of their thoughts and feelings had not changed over the few months they participated in the study. Though the frequency of these thoughts and feelings might have decreased slightly, the intensity was still present. Those who had a little more distance between the time of loss and the interviews also consistently shared that the intensity of the thoughts and feelings continued even as the frequency of these thoughts and feelings diminished slightly.

Participants were aware that other people often underestimated both the intensity and the duration of the grieving process. As Anne shared, “people usually expect you to get over something in a week.” Several participants mentioned that as more time passed, they became less comfortable talking about their grief with other people because it felt like other people had forgotten about their losses. Similarly, after a few weeks, friends stopped bringing up the loss and stopped connecting the disposition of the participant with grief. For instance, Grace perceived that after a few weeks, her friends on campus were less patient with her and
she believed they did not understand how much the death of her friend Sam was still impacting her daily life. She said: “It’s been harder these past two weeks actually because it’s one of those things were like, they’re like, ‘oh, it’s been a couple of weeks, she’s okay now.’”

**Is it normal to feel like this?** All of the participants shared that at some point in time, they wondered if what they were experiencing was normal. Participants observed that grief and death were not often discussed on campus. They were aware of only a small number of peers who had also experienced grief. Similarly, being away from home meant grieving without the constant presence of family and community support. Without these resources, participants had no frame of reference to judge whether their grief was normal. Several turned to campus support services such as the counseling center or campus ministry to assuage their concerns. In general, interactions with campus ministry personnel seemed to be more successful in affirming questions of normality. Additionally, some participants inquired about the experiences of the other students in this study in the hopes of determining if their own experiences would be judged as normal.

Several participants felt reassured when they encountered another person who shared similar thoughts, feelings, and experiences while grieving. For instance, Kristen was worried that the frequent panic attacks she was experiencing were not normal. They frightened her, especially because her mother and her sisters were not having them. Kristen was relieved when she learned that her uncle, whom she thought of as an easygoing and happy guy, had also been experiencing panic attacks. It was important to Kristen to know that what she was
experiencing was normal, particularly because her grieving had seemed so different than the experiences of her mother and sisters.

Other students sought affirmation of their experience through support services on campus. For example, Elizabeth found reassurance through a conversation with her campus minister. In the days after her father died, well-intentioned friends and relatives questioned Elizabeth’s reactions, asking her why she was not crying. In the face of all of these questions, Elizabeth began to wonder if her reactions were normal. Elizabeth sought assistance through the counseling center and group therapy but was more comfortable sharing her experience with her campus minister. The campus minister assured her that what she was thinking and feeling was normal for her. She took great comfort in hearing this affirmation from someone she trusted and respected. Although it did not making losing her father any easier, this affirmation helped Elizabeth feel more at peace.

Ray, on the other hand, wondered if she actually had grieved at all. Ray felt like she was not often given the opportunity to focus on her feelings about her father’s deaths. Family did not often talk about Ray’s father or about his death. Instead, conversations with family were dominated by interpersonal conflict and quarreling over her father’s insurance policy. Ray believed her grief was fragmented and interrupted by all of these conflicts. A year later, Ray still felt unsettled and uncertain if what she had experienced was actually grief or if she at some point would experience some form of crash as her postponed grief caught up with her. She shared:
I mean the first few weeks… I didn’t feel like I was okay. And then like after a month or two, I was like, wow, I’m actually proud of myself. I’m handling this really well. And I still feel that way. But now, I’m not so sure I actually ever grieved… properly. I thought I did. And I might have still, but… I’ll never know if I did.

**Moving Forward After Loss**

After the death of their loved ones, the world seemed different to these participants. Through the experience of grieving, priorities and goals were reconsidered and, in some cases, changed. Family traditions and important milestones had to be re-considered in the absence of their loved ones. At times, participants struggled with the idea of moving forward in life without the presence of their loved ones. For these participants, moving forward with life also seemed to mean letting go of the ones who died.

**Re-thinking priorities.** The death of a loved one triggered a reconsideration of the priorities and goals for all participants. For some, the loss of life inspired a feeling of, as Anne termed it, “carpe diem”. Some felt motivated to try new things and to explore their passions. For these students, the lack of certainty about the future inspired them to be adventurous and also to be less inhibited in seeking out opportunities that seemed important to them. Peyton’s experience illustrated her inspiration to be more intentional about enjoying life after the death of her former boyfriend, Hamilton. Although she was tempted to stay at home with her family, Peyton made the decision to return to her overseas study abroad program. Part of her motivation for returning to the program was to be able to participate in a special trip she had planned with friends. Peyton felt that returning to the abroad program
and taking this trip with her friends was an important reminder for her to enjoy her life and to not put everything on hold.

Through the grieving experience, many of the participants resolved to spend more time with family and friends. After experiencing the deaths of three important people in her life, Anne felt strongly that she wanted to be more involved in her relationships with family and friends. She shared:

I think just realizing that life is short. If you want to do something, do it. Don’t wait.
If you want to tell somebody you love them, do it. There’s no point in making some long dramatic thing. Just… tell people you care about them. Like, taking that extra minute if someone looks upset and asking, ‘Are you okay?’ Just little things like that have become more important to me.

All of the participants felt the experience of losing a loved one changed how they valued their academic pursuits. Several shared that while they judged their education to be important, the day to day grind of classes and assignments had lost some of its meaning. Participants expressed concern about the amount of time they spent on assignments, wondering if their time should be directed toward other purposes. Additionally, participants sometimes failed to find meaning in their academic work. Grace described her feelings:

After Sam, I just couldn’t make myself... like, I understood the long term consequences of doing well in school but, like, short term things like ‘You need to read these thirty pages tonight’.. I’d just be, like, why? What am I even doing in college right now? Why? I could be getting so much more out of life. Why aren’t
you doing things you love and, like, not trapping yourself here? What’s the point of this problem set? Like, how’s this going to make you a better person?

On the other hand, the experience of losing a loved one inspired some participants to find new meaning in their academic studies. Some participants felt connected to their loved ones by a common academic interest. Several participants were inspired to re-engage in their academic programs, believing it might be a way to honor the ones who had died. Kristen valued the connection she and her father shared over the study of psychology. Elizabeth followed in her father’s footsteps, choosing the same majors he had studied. Grace and her friend Sam shared a love of music and literature. For her, declaring a major in the humanities was inspired by the passion for music and literature she shared with Sam.

Other participants developed an academic interest that had been part of their coping process as they grieved. For instance, Charlie began journaling after the death of his father. As time moved on, he became more passionate about his writing, exploring topics such as death and the loss of both of his parents. Charlie eventually decided to pursue the study of writing, earning a degree in the humanities and working toward a graduate degree in writing. Similarly, Kristen and her sisters created an art exhibition about the idea of healing for their father not long before his death. Kristen found the experience of creating this art exhibit with her family very meaningful. As she continued to explore her artistic vision as a student, she was able to use some of the pieces she and her sisters had created to inspire her final project for her senior thesis.
Keeping the deceased real. Participants described their struggle to remain connected to their loved ones after their death. Some participants preserved touchable items that belonged to or represented their loved ones. Objects such as photos of loved ones, clothing that belonged to loved ones, and emails from loved ones were treasured. Without the physical presence of their loved ones, these items served as a link to the person who died. In addition, it was important to these participants to maintain an authentic memory rather than an idealized memory of their loved ones, even if this meant also remembering their flaws and idiosyncrasies.

During the interviews, all of the participants shared an object that represented their connection to their loved ones. Elizabeth shared two photos taken of her father. Peyton played a short video of her former boyfriend on his birthday. Grace retrieved Sam’s Facebook profile and shared pictures and postings from his page. Ray pulled out her phone, which was covered in a peacock feature design. She explained that the peacock feature reminded her of a park that she often visited with her father. Kristen spoke of the poems she had written in honor of her father. Anne described a letter written by her grandmother that Anne had received on her graduation day. Charlie spoke of the journal that his aunt had given him after his father died.

Participants spoke of the importance of retaining those physical reminders of their loved ones. For those who had digital images and recordings, they preserved those files in multiple places to ensure that they would never be lost. Others copied Facebook pages and downloaded photos, fearing that those pages might be deleted and those images would be
lost. Ray spoke of going to her father’s home after his death and searching for shirts and a hat. These objects were reminders to her of important times they had together.

Participants were often just as careful about maintaining authenticity in the way they perceived those who died. Although participants loved the people who died, during interviews, they sometimes spoke of the struggles and flaws in their relationships. For example, Ray learned about her father’s alleged prescription drug misuse after he died. She struggled to know how to incorporate that information into her understanding of who he was. For people who did not know her family, Ray was concerned that they spoke of the relationship between her and her father as though it was an idealized father-daughter relationship. In reality, although she and her father loved each other, their relationship was complex and at times difficult. As tempting as it was for Ray to allow herself to believe that her relationship with her father was without fault, Ray felt it would dishonor her father’s memory to think of him other than as he actually was.

Similarly, Peyton was also reflective and honest about her relationship with Hamilton. Although she loved him very much, she was able to articulate things about him and about their relationship that troubled her. Even after his death, she continued to question whether their relationship would have evolved into a lifelong commitment if he had survived the car accident. Although this acknowledgement was painful, Peyton felt that being honest with herself was an important part of moving forward in life. She also felt it was important to remember Hamilton and not an idealized version of him.
Another way that participants preserved their memories of loved ones was in the appreciation, and sometimes emulation, of shared traits and interests. For instance, Anne recognized several personality traits and interests she had in common with her grandmother. One particular way that Anne connected with her grandmother was through the art of cooking. Anne’s grandmother was known for her cooking skills. After she became ill, her grandmother gifted her pots and pans to Anne. Anne was very touched by this gesture and was inspired by this connection she felt to her grandmother. Anne even signed up for a cooking class and used her grandmother’s recipes as part of her coursework.

**Reconsidering traditions and the future.** Participants often mentioned feeling the absence of their loved ones during times of celebration. Traditional family events such as Christmas celebrations and birthdays changed both in format and in feeling in the absence of their loved ones. This absence was also projected into the future. Several participants were saddened by the realization that their loved ones would not take part in important milestones, such as graduation and marriage ceremonies.

Participants who lost parents seemed to be the most impacted by the changes to annual holiday celebrations. As an example, Elizabeth described the first Christmas without her father. Each year prior, Christmas had been celebrated at home with her parents. The house had always been decorated and Elizabeth had looked forward to spending time with her family. After her father died, Elizabeth and her mother could not face celebrating the holiday at home without her father. Instead they turned Christmas into a beach vacation. The experience of changing this important tradition was disorienting to Elizabeth. But she
also began to recognize that from that time forward, holiday celebrations would always be different now that her father was not physically present. Similarly, for as long as Anne could remember, the New Year’s Day had always been a dual celebration of the holiday and her grandmother’s birthday. Traditionally, the whole family gathered for dinner at a downtown restaurant. After her grandmother’s death, Anne wondered if the family would continue to gather now that her grandmother was not part of the celebration.

Equally painful were the missed opportunities to share important milestones with the deceased. Anne had always pictured her grandmother being part of her graduation celebration and her wedding. She had looked forward to sharing these experiences with her grandmother. Anne grew tearful when she shared, “When I get sad is… when I got accepted to school… I will never tell her that I’ll be a doctor or she’ll never be at my wedding.” Similarly, Elizabeth was keenly aware of her father’s absence when she learned she had been selected to participate in a prestigious program on campus. Prior to his death, her father would have been the first person Elizabeth would have called to share her good news. Though she could imagine what his response might be, it was not the same as actually experiencing it with him. In a related example, Kristen learned that she would be graduating with honors just days after her father’s death. Education had always been very important to her father and had been a goal they had shared. For Kristen, not being able to share this news with her father made this important honor feel somewhat hollow.

Letting go. Most of the participants had mixed feelings associated with moving on with their lives. For many, the passage of time was dreaded because it only increased the
distance between them and their loved ones. Participants became distressed and confused when they realized that over time, thoughts of their loved ones occurred less often, even if they were still intense. At the same time, participants felt a sense of relief at returning to some sense of normalcy, even if it meant having to develop a “new normal”.

Anniversaries associated with loss were difficult for all participants. During interviews, they would often make a point of identifying the amount of time that had passed since their loved one’s death. Some measured time in weeks; others were saddened to realize that months had passed. Participants found the first anniversary of their loss to be particularly painful. It was difficult to acknowledge that an entire year had passed since their loved one had died. Similarly, participants who had lost loved ones more recently expressed apprehension as they anticipated the first anniversary. The passage of time seemed to make their loss more real and more permanent, according to these students.

Several participants expressed concern that moving on in life meant leaving behind the one who died. As time passed, participants thought of their loved ones less frequently. Participants worried that thinking about their loved ones less often meant that their loved ones would be forgotten. Grace shared, “It… worries me that I don’t think about him as much as I used to. And, like, it freaks me out that I will have days that I don’t think about him. And that’s… the scariest part.” Kristen expressed a similar reaction as she anticipated changes in the way she thought about her father after his death:

Even my grief… if I’m not sad anymore, it feels like I’ll have forgotten a part of who he is and how much I care about him. Not that I think that’s entirely true but the
sadness is such an affirmation. So, in those ways, like, I don’t feel rushed to stop grieving.

Summary

The findings of this study indicate that the experience of grieving is characterized by complex thoughts, feelings, and realizations. Themes identified through this process included: the influence of interactions with others, the experience of taking on new roles and responsibilities, innermost thoughts and feelings, and moving forward after loss. Implications of these findings will be discussed in Chapter 6.
CHAPTER SIX:

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This purpose of this study was to gain a more rich and robust understanding of the experience of grieving. Through a series of interviews, seven undergraduates shared their lived experience of grieving after losing loved ones. This study sought to expand what is known about the grieving experience of these students and to explore in greater depth the expression of their grief.

This final chapter will begin with a review of the findings from the data analysis, highlighting key themes. Next, based upon these findings, three conclusions will be explored. These conclusions suggest 1) academic goals were reframed through the experience of meaning-making; 2) participants assumed the campus community would be supportive; and 3) participants underestimated the period of grieving. Next, implications for theory and practice will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for future directions in research.

Key Findings

This study explores the grieving experiences of undergraduates after the loss of a loved one. Unique attributes of the collegiate setting may have impacted the way in which these individuals experienced grief. In particular, the undergraduates in this study resided on or near campus, many miles away from their family and home communities. As a result, the primary support available to these students was through peers, many of whom had not
experienced the loss of a loved one. Additionally, these students were grieving in an academic setting with high expectations for engagement and performance.

Seven undergraduates participated in this study. Three of the students were sophomores, one was a junior, and three were seniors. Participants were affiliated with a variety of faith communities; some participants identified as spiritual but not religious. All of these students had experienced the death of a loved one within the past year. Several described the loss of more than one person. The deceased included parents, close friends, a former boyfriend, an uncle, and a grandparent.

After attending a meeting to discuss the study, each student participated in two interviews and a final meeting to complete member checks. The first interview explored a focused life history of each participant and responded to broad questions about the experience of grieving the death of a loved one. The second interview allowed participants to give a more lengthy narrative of their experience of grieving. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and reviewed multiple times. Each interview was then broken into units of meaning. Similar units of meaning were grouped together to form clusters. During the final meeting, participants reviewed both their interview transcripts and the clusters of units of meaning. Participants were given the opportunity to edit or clarify both the transcripts and the units of meaning.

Key figural experiences emerged from the descriptive understandings of the participants. These four key findings will be explored, including: the influence of others on
the experience of grieving, the experience of taking on new roles and responsibilities, innermost thoughts and feelings, and moving forward after loss.

The first key finding in this study was the influence of others on the grieving experience. Participants found the caring presence of classmates, family, and other members of the campus community to be important sources of support as they grieved. These students were selective in opening up to others and perceived some interactions with peers and administrators as dismissive or insensitive. Unlike being at home among family who were sharing in the experience of loss, participants often felt like the only person on campus who was grieving.

A second key finding focused upon new roles and responsibilities that were taken on by these students. The death of a loved one, particularly the loss of a parent, led to changes in the way the family functioned. Those participants who lost parents often believed they transitioned to new roles within the family, sometimes assuming new responsibilities for the family. As part of these new roles, participants assumed responsibility for planning aspects of the memorial service for the deceased. Additionally, some participants became involved in the management of family finances. Most of these students had to adjust to new financial realities, leading to the need to make difficult decisions regarding their long-term academic plans.

A third key finding suggested that participants experienced a complex array of thoughts and feelings as they grieved. At times, these thoughts and emotions were overwhelming and left participants feeling out of control. As they grieved, these students
struggled with living in a world that no longer seemed predictable and understandable. Participants engaged in meaning-making in an attempt to try to regain a sense of order in their lives. The experience of grieving continued for many months after the death of their loves ones, prompting some participants to wonder if what they were experiencing as they grieved was normal.

The final key finding related to the experience of moving forward after the loss of a loved one. During the grieving process, participants reconsidered important goals and began to think about what it felt like to experience traditions and important milestones without their loved ones. Part of the grieving experience for these select undergraduates was the process of rethinking priorities and reconsidering roles, traditions, and plans for the future. Participants questioned if they would ever stop grieving and felt conflicted as they wondered if moving on meant letting go of loved ones who had died.

**Key Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to uncover the lived experience of grieving as it was described by the students who participated in this study. The conclusions from this study are based on the experiences that were shared by these students. Three key conclusions were drawn from the findings of this study: 1) academic goals were reframed through the experience of meaning-making; 2) participants assumed the campus community would be supportive; and 3) participants underestimated the period of grieving.
**Academic Goals Were Reframed Through the Experience of Meaning-Making**

The findings of the study indicated that these students engaged in a process of meaning-making as they grieved. As part of that meaning-making process, these students questioned the value of their academic goals. Long term goals such as career direction and graduate school were revisited. Additionally, these students questioned the value of their courses and even wondered if being in school was important. Participants were pre-occupied with two main issues: ensuring that they were using their time well, and following their passions and interests as they developed their future plans.

Prior to the loss of their loved ones, these students directed much of their time and energy toward their coursework. Achieving strong grades and performing well on exams and assignments were perceived as important goals. After the death of loved ones, participants began to question the significance of those goals. Students questioned the value of directing so much time toward classes, particularly when subject matter was not interesting to the participant or relevant to the major. Participants experienced feelings of distress, and sometimes even resentment, as they perceived their time being wasted. Additionally, these students questioned the importance of their grades and why they were trying so hard to achieve these high marks.

After the death of their loved ones, these participants also reconsidered their goals for the future. For some, this meant spending time thinking about their career path. Others refocused their vision for the future to place a stronger emphasis on family and relationships. Through the process of meaning-making, participants affirmed the importance of using their
time in a meaningful way. Revisiting goals often resulted in clarification of priorities. These students believed strongly that their future goals should be centered on following their passions. The idea of spending time on pursuits that were not aligned with goals and values was distressing to these students.

This process of reframing goals through meaning-making is especially important when the grieving individual is a student. Undergraduates in particular are in the midst of making important choices that have an impact on their long-term direction in life. Academic goals inform decisions about majors, future enrollment in graduate programs, and career paths. Changes to academic goals or to the importance of academic performance could lead to choices that may limit access to future options such as admission to graduate school or maintaining a scholarship. Conversely, revisiting goals may also re-energize a student to work harder in courses in order to realize long-term goals.

The reframing of academic goals experienced by these students seems to align with the process of coping through meaning-making described by Park and Folkman (1997) and Park (2005). The authors suggest that the death of a loved one challenges how the grieving individual perceives goals, beliefs, and assumptions about the world, also known as a global sense of meaning. The process of meaning-making entails reappraising these goals, beliefs, and assumptions, sometimes revising important goals in an attempt to find meaning in their loss. Similarly, the participants in this study reappraised both their short term and long term academic goals in an attempt to realign their direction in life with what they perceived to be their values and beliefs. For instance, Charlie chose to pursue a graduate degree in writing
after realizing that writing had become an important part of his life.

![Diagram of Process of Meaning-Making](image)

**Figure 1.** Process of meaning-making. An individual’s understanding of an event is viewed through the lens of important influences. Adapted from “Meaning in the Context of Stress and Coping” by C. L. Park and S. Folkman, 1997, *Review of General Psychology, 1*, p. 117.

Park and Folkman (1997) and Park (2005) also suggest that a grieving individual experienced distress through the process of reconciling their global sense of meaning with the meaning they initially attributed to the loss of a loved one. Park and Folkman (1997) believed that the perception of loss of control over the course of events of life contributed to feelings of distress. Similarly, the experiences described by the participants in this study indicated feelings of disorientation, confusion, lack of direction, frustration, and fear as they attempted to make sense of their direction in life and how it fit into their larger goals in life. For some participants, this distress was the motivation that led to re-thinking their academic priorities.
Participants Assumed the Campus Community Would Be Supportive

One of the most intriguing findings of this study was that participants expected the campus community to be supportive and understanding of their grief. However, participants learned that these assumptions were unfounded. They were often taken aback by interactions that were judged to be insensitive or dismissive. At times, exchanges with classmates, faculty, and staff were painful and left participants feeling unsupported and alone. However, at the same time, these students also recognized that most of their peers had never experienced a loss and were unsure what to say or do to be helpful. In some cases, participants even began to avoid spending time with certain classmates in an effort to escape these painful interactions.

The perceived lack of support from some peers is an important observation, because prior research suggests that relationships with peers play an important part in the student experience (Astin, 1993). In his research, Astin found that the peer group influenced the values, behaviors, and academic plans of students. Astin’s (1993) research suggested that the quality of the interaction between students and their peers played a role in student learning and development. Although Astin did not focus specifically on students who were grieving, his findings demonstrated the general importance of peers in the experience of students. Similarly, several prior studies suggested that peers were an important source of support for grieving students (Balk, 2001; Dodd, 1988; Gray, 1987). Peers were defined in these studies as fellow undergraduates who were approximately the same age as the grieving individual.
The experience of the participants in the present study resonated with the notion of the importance of peers. However the findings also demonstrated that peers could be a source of distress. The participants in the present study assumed that their peers on campus would be understanding and supportive throughout the grieving process. They expected peers to recognize the significance of the loss and to be able to connect changes in mood and behavior with the experience of grieving. They also assumed that peers would be intentional about avoiding comments or questions that would be perceived as insensitive or intrusive. The general lack of support experienced by the students in this study raise questions about the ability of the peer group to impact the positive influences outlined by Astin (1993) when considering the experience of a student who is grieving.

These assumptions about support carried over into expectations for interactions with faculty and staff. Little research has investigated the role of faculty and staff in the grieving experience of undergraduates. However, the participants in this study seemed to anticipate that faculty and staff would respond with the same level of support they had expected from their peers. For many of these participants, the death of their loved ones was one of the most significant experiences in their life. They expected faculty and staff to not only acknowledge their loss but also to show empathy and ongoing interest in their process of recovery. For instance, Elizabeth was hurt that she did not receive any outreach from key administrators after the death of her father, who had been an alumnus of the institution. The death of her father was so important to her that she assumed it would be important to the leaders of the institution as well.
Little research has addressed the presence of the assumptions made by these students about the responses of others to the experience of grieving. Additionally, the impact of these assumptions may have been enhanced by the experience of grieving in a collegiate setting. At home, these participants would have been around others who were also grieving and may have been quicker to anticipate a need for support. Family and friends at home would be more likely to acknowledge their shared grief and to have a greater sense of understanding of the significance of the loss to the participants. On campus, the participant bore the responsibility of articulating the significance of the relationship and of the loss to members of the campus community.

However, participants were also aware that their peers often did not know how to be helpful. This finding is supported by other studies that suggested peers were able to recognize the distress of grieving individuals but were unsure how to respond (Attig, 1996; Balk, 2001, Barnett, et al, 1987). Balk & Vesta (1998) suggested that peers who have not yet experienced the loss of a loved one may be more hesitant to respond to a grieving peer. Interestingly, the students in this study were disappointed but forgiving of close friends who did not know how to respond. However, they were less understanding when the lack of support came from members of the campus community who were not as close.

These findings were also supported by the conclusions reached in Dodd’s (1988) study of the perceptions of grieving students on the behaviors of peers. Similar to the experience of the participants in the present study, Dodd (1988) found that peers who were willing to be present and listen were perceived as most supportive. On the other hand, peers
who did not acknowledge the death or who avoided the grieving student were judged as unsupportive.

Additionally, a novel finding of this study is that participants actively avoided interactions with some members of the campus community whom they perceived as unsupportive. Participants were intentional about staying away from certain peers, including those who had previously been dismissive of their grief and those who had made insensitive comments. Similarly, participants avoided faculty and staff who seemed uninterested or uncomfortable talking about the participant’s experience. Several participants noted that after an initial meeting with key academic personnel, no further outreach was made. They were more inclined to avoid these key academic personnel afterward, perceiving the lack of follow-up from these administrators as disinterest in their experience and dismissiveness of the significance of their loss.

**Participants Underestimated the Period of Grieving**

Participants anticipated that the struggle to adjust to the loss of their loved ones would take several weeks. However, months and even years later, they continued to experience intense moments of sadness and preoccupation with thoughts of their loved ones. Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the realization that the experience of grieving was likely to continue for long after their loved ones died. However, at the same time, these students saw the continuation of their grief as a testament to the strength of their connection to the deceased.
Researchers have not reached agreement about the duration of the grieving process. Early models of grieving described a specific window of time during which grieving should occur (Freud, 1917; Lindemann, 1944; Engel, 1961). More recent studies have suggested that grieving individuals should make progress toward coming to terms with the death of loved ones within 6 – 12 months (eg. Balk, 2001). However, other researchers have suggested that the loss of a loved one can be so significant to an individual that grieving will continue for the duration of his or her life (eg. Attig, 1996; Balk, 2004; Blank & Werner-Lin, 2011; Park & Folkman, 1997; Shear, 2011).

The findings of this study indicate that these students were surprised that their grief did not completely resolve, even years after a loss. Although these students entered the study to discuss their most recent loss, nearly all of the participants had experienced the death of other loved ones (grandparents, parents, friends) earlier in life. The more recent death triggered a re-awakening of thoughts and feelings about earlier losses. Participants reported experiencing a flood of memories of earlier losses. Additionally, thoughts and feelings associated with the grief experienced with earlier losses seemed to return. These students reported feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of re-experiencing that grief. Participants were confused and unsettled as they questioned whether they would ever stop grieving the loss of their loved ones.

Participants who experienced an earlier loss of loved ones seemed to endure a heightened awareness of their inability to predict or control life. The loss of control participants perceived after the death of a loved one seemed to be amplified when multiple
losses occurred in a short span of time. With the loss of one important person, participants were distressed by the realization that life was not as predictable as they had previously thought. They searched for an explanation that would make the loss make sense. When more than one loss occurred, this seemed to compound the feeling of loss of control. Even if a participant had previously found some way to make sense of a loss, additional loses raised questions about the explanation for the earlier losses.

One factor that may have played a role in the extension of the period of time over which grieving occurred is that these participants did not necessarily want to stop grieving. Participants believed that if they stopped grieving, it meant that they had forgotten the person who died. Although they hoped that the intensity of the thoughts and feelings would diminish over time, participants did not want to stop thinking about their loved ones. This fear of forgetting may have contributed to an intentional decision to continue grieving.

**Implications for Theory**

Although many researchers have attempted to describe the experience of grieving, the stress and coping framework proposed by Park and Folkman (1997), and later extended by Park (2005), most closely resembles the grieving experience of the students in this study. Park and Folkman (1997) and Park (2005) put forward the idea that coping occurs through the process of meaning-making. The findings and conclusions of this study suggest implications for several key elements of the stress and coping framework: the development of systems of global meaning, the emotional distress experienced as a result of incongruity between global meaning and appraised meaning, and the reframing of goals.
Development of Systems of Global Meaning

An important aspect of this study is that it expands the understanding of the construction of systems of global meaning. Park and Folkman (1997) suggested that systems of global meaning are the goals, values, and commitments that construe meaning on the way an individual understands the world. A system of global meaning is the foundation for the long range goals an individual hopes to achieve and is the measuring stick used to evaluate decisions that impact those goals. These systems of global meaning are formed through an accumulation of life experiences and interactions with others, primarily family and other caregivers. In other words, if a family believes in the importance of charity toward neighbors, it is likely that an individual member of that family will also incorporate that value into the his or her system of global meaning. In addition to family, religious meaning systems can be an important influence on the development of the global meaning (Park, 2005).

The construction of the system of global meaning is of particular interest when viewing the meaning-making process of undergraduates. In this study, participants were college students who lived away from home, away from their family and their home community. Once arriving on campus, their primary interactions were with peers. These peers hailed from all over the world and had presumably experienced different influences throughout life. Therefore, it is likely that peers would have constructed systems of global meaning that differed from those of the participants. At home, students would have been surrounded by family who shared similarly constructed systems of global meaning. These
systems of global meaning would have been shaped by common influences such as faith community and shared life experiences. On campus, differences in systems of global meaning would result in students displaying differing ways of appraising the loss of a loved one. Participants brought this difference to light through their descriptions of interactions with peers who seemed to minimize their loss or failed to understand the significance of the loss to the participant.

The findings of this study also suggest that the development of systems of global meaning are constructed both with and without the influence of religion. In her continued investigation of the meaning-making coping model, Park (2005) noted that religious systems of meaning influence the way in which individuals cope. However, Park (2005) noted that little research has examined the meaning-making process of those who described themselves as non-religious or as spiritual. The participants in the present study included students from a variety of faith communities as well as participants who expressed no affiliations. When studying the meaning-making experience of students, looking beyond religion as the primary source of influence for the development of systems of meaning will be important.

**Distress Through the Experience of Meaning-Making**

The meaning-making coping model identifies the feelings of distress that individuals experience as they confront the incongruence between their situational appraisal of loss and their systems of global meaning (Park, 2005; Park and Folkman, 1997). However, the exploration and articulation of these feelings of distress is limited in this model.
Park and Folkman (1997) suggested that the experience of loss could lead to feelings of vulnerability as individuals learned that they were not entirely in control of their lives. Similarly, the participants in the present study were frightened and confused by their lack of ability to control their emotions. These feelings of distress also extended to their lack of ability to feel any sense of control over their situation. The unpredictability of the experience of grieving was frightening and made participants feel vulnerable.

Although Park and Folkman (1997) noted the presence of distress, they did not offer much detail on how distress was manifested. The present study extends the understanding of this theory of meaning-making by offering more thorough descriptions of the emotional experience of grieving. Participants in this study experienced a variety of emotions as they
grieved: sadness, loneliness, fear, confusion, frustration, anger, vulnerability, love, and warmth. For some participants, distress resulted from being overwhelmed by the intensity of these emotions and a desire to be able to bring them back under control.

These feelings of distress began to resolve as these students began to sense a return to order and predictability in their lives. Students made progress toward a sense of normalcy through a variety of pathways. In all cases, supportive persons who were able to help sort through confusing thoughts and feelings were judged to be most helpful. The participants who were less connected to a faith community tended to look toward a close friend or formal counseling for support. In most cases, counseling was discontinued after a few sessions when no further benefit was derived from the conversations. The students in this study who were the most active members of faith communities sought out both formal counseling and support through campus ministry personnel. They found that talking with campus ministry personnel gave them an opportunity to process complex questions about purpose and meaning. Both of these students did not continue with counseling and instead continued to find support through their campus ministry relationships.

**Re-Framing Global Beliefs and Goals**

Park and Folkman (1997) suggested that through the coping process, an individual needs to revise how they understand the situation or what they believe about the world in order to move forward. When applied to the experience of grieving, this means that an individual who is struggling to make sense of the loss of a loved one must either reframe how he or she understands that loss (he was too young to die) or the system of global meaning
(understanding of what it means to live a long and full life). Although Park and Folkman (1997) were not directly addressing the experience of students, their theory could be extended to include not just values and beliefs but also important life goals. When applied to students, this might include a consideration of the influence of coping on their academic goals.

**Figure 3.** Process of making-meaning after the death of a loved one. Students must revise the way they make sense of the loss or the way they understand the world. Adapted from “Meaning in the Context of Stress and Coping” by C. L. Park and S. Folkman, 1997, *Review of General Psychology, 1*, p. 117.

The findings of this study suggested that after the death of their loved ones, the participants spent time reflecting on their academic goals. As they grieved, participants were concerned about using their time well and about ensuring that their interests and passions guided their career choices. The process of meaning-making included the re-consideration of long-term career goals and direction of study. For some participants, this raised questions
about the value of being in school. Others grew frustrated at courses and assignments that did not seem to contribute to the achievement of these academic goals. However, some participants felt a renewed sense of commitment to their academic goals, believing that the pursuit of these goals gave them a sense of purpose.

The process of meaning-making could be used as a framework to give context to a student’s experience of grieving. This study extends this theory by providing more detail about the distress that was experienced as the students in this study attempted to make meaning of their loss. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest the importance of considering the place of academic goals in the development of systems of global meaning when considering the coping process of undergraduates.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study suggest opportunities to design and facilitate practical applications to support students who experience the death of a loved one. Framing support structures to incorporate meaning-making can be beneficial to helping students cope with loss. Several strategies will be explored, including: development of a bereavement policy, the importance of outreach, and training for key personnel.

**Benefits of Engaging in Meaning-Making**

Prior research has demonstrated that engaging in meaning-making following a negative life event is positively related to adjustment (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1999; Silver, Boon, and Stones, 1983). The process of meaning-making helps to mitigate the distress a student might feel after the loss of a loved one. Rather than just focusing on
lessening the symptoms of distress, the meaning-making process focuses on identifying and resolving incongruities between a student’s foundational beliefs about the world and the way he or she comes to terms with a loss.

An additional benefit of engaging in meaning-making is that meaning-making acknowledges the influence and importance of religious or spiritual beliefs in the grieving process. As Park (2005) suggested, therapists are beginning to incorporate discussions about religious or spiritual beliefs in sessions as a result of the realization of the importance of these beliefs in the way individuals make sense of information. Encouraging students to engage in the process of meaning-making allows those with strong religious or spiritual beliefs to include the consideration of those beliefs in their coping process.

**Bereavement Policy**

The findings of this study demonstrate the importance of having an academic protocol in place to guide grieving students and administrators. The experiences of these participants can be used to draw out several key issues to be considered when developing an effective bereavement policy.

One of the decisions the students in this study faced was determining the amount of time to be away from campus. A bereavement policy needs to be sufficiently broad to be applicable to a variety of possible scenarios. In some cases, students will only need to miss one or two days of class to attend a memorial. Other students may need a more extensive absence from campus, particularly those who are spending time with an ailing relative or when responsibilities related to the loss, such as planning the memorial, are time-sensitive.
Additionally, the bereavement policy should provide direction on the protocol for notifying key academic personnel about the potential absence from campus. Identifying a point of contact to notify in the event of a death would provide clarity for both students and academic personnel and ensure that information reached those who needed to be informed.

The findings of this study also suggest that these students were not always aware of the implications of the decision to take time away from classes. The protocol should designate an individual who can initiate a discussion with the student to explore possible impacts of decisions on degree progress. For example, the decision to withdraw from a course or take an incomplete grade in a course may initially allow for some relief for a grieving student. However, in the rush to leave campus, a grieving student who chooses to take an incomplete grade or withdraw from a course may not be considering the long-term implications on his or her degree progress. The decision to withdraw from a course may force a student to overload in future semesters or even add an additional semester of study. A student who is grieving may not have the foresight to consider these long-term implications of decisions made in the confusion following the loss of a loved one.

In addition to academic implications, decisions about leaving campus could also have financial implications for grieving students. Key personnel should be prepared to discuss with students the connection between options and potential impact on finances. For instance, campus policies may dictate the number of credits needed to retain full time status. Additionally, scholarships or other forms of financial aid may be contingent upon carrying a specific credit load. A grieving student may not be thinking about the loss of an entire
semester of tuition when he or she makes the decision to withdraw from courses for the semester. Campuses should consider the way that tuition refund policies apply to students who leave campus due to the death of a loved one.

By the same token, campuses need to ensure that financial implications do not persuade a student to return to campus or remain fully enrolled if the health and well-being of the student is jeopardized by remaining in courses. Several participants in this study shared that they returned to campus and resumed their courses only because they could not afford to pay for a subsequent semester or because withdrawing from courses meant potentially postponing graduation. Key personnel who are familiar with the long-term implications of student choices could be invaluable in guiding the student through the decision-making process.

Even a well-thought out bereavement policy is not very useful if students, faculty, and administrators do not know the policy exists. Campuses should take steps to ensure that bereavement policies are visible and easily located on websites and in student handbooks. For websites, this could include using easily searched keywords such as death, passed away, and funeral leave. Additionally, during department meetings at the beginning of the academic year, department heads should briefly highlight expectations regarding students who take time off while grieving. Similarly, in the same area of the syllabi where faculty address their policies for missing courses, faculty could include a referral to the bereavement policy website. Additionally, the academic advising center or the counseling center could send a notice to the entire university community at the beginning of the year highlighting the
policy, support services, and informational website. This notice could also be included in the beginning of the year message from the Dean of Students office that outlines policies and supportive resources.

**Importance of Outreach**

In addition to initial guidance in making decisions related to academic work, participants also expected key academic personnel and faculty to continue to be involved during the grieving process. However, in all cases, after the initial support, no additional outreach occurred. Campuses should consider the importance of outreach and case management in working with grieving students.

Participants in the study appreciated the effort that was made by their deans and faculty to assist them in the process of making decisions about enrollment. However, participants expected the same level of attention to be given to them to attend to their non-academic needs. Often, after the initial meeting to solidify decisions about courses, no additional contact or follow-up was made. Several expressed the wish that their academic deans had checked in with them later in the semester, even if their class-related decisions had been resolved.

This desire for outreach was a common thread amongst the participants and a topic that should be considered by campuses hoping to strengthen their support of grieving students. Several of these students shared that participating in this research study offered one of the few opportunities available on campus to talk openly about their grief. For some, this research study was one of their only sources of support on campus. Many of the
participants expected to be contacted by the counseling center. However, the act of taking the initiative to make an appointment proved to be a barrier for some, particularly those who were already hesitant about the idea of counseling.

Campuses should consider designating one office such as Case Management or personnel from the Dean of Students Office to coordinate outreach to grieving students. After learning that a student has experienced the death of a loved one, that office could send an initial outreach and invitation for an appointment to grieving students. Additionally, this office could also periodically reach out to grieving students for both the practical purpose of attending to questions or needs that may have arisen but also to offer a more symbolic acknowledgement of the importance of the loss.

**Training for Key Personnel**

The prevalence of the grieving experience suggests that all key academic administrators, faculty, and student affairs staff will come into contact with a student who has experienced the loss of a loved one. The experience of the students in this study suggests that campus personnel were not always comfortable talking with students about their grief. They sometimes inadvertently interacted with students in ways that were perceived as dismissive or uninterested. Planning workshops and training sessions about the experience of working with grieving students could help position these key campus personnel to be an important source of support when students are coping with the death of a loved one.

Workshops should address several key elements. First, training sessions should inform participants about the experience of grief. Faculty and staff can be trained to
recognize expressions of grief such as the physical manifestations (appearing tired, distracted, physically ill) and the emotional manifestations (irritable, depressed, apathetic, decreased energy). Sharing stories of students who have struggled to manage their academic responsibilities while grieving could help illustrate grieving as it is experienced by students. Second, training sessions should provide participants with campus and community resources that could be of potential support to grieving students. Additionally, workshop participants should be provided with examples of effective ways to refer students for additional support. It will be important to showcase sensitive ways to direct a student toward counseling or other support services without appearing disinterested in engaging with the student. Finally, workshops should include an interactive role play so that faculty and staff can practice active listening and referral skills. These skill enhancements will help faculty and staff feel more comfortable and prepared when encountering a grieving student.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study has added to what is known about the grieving experience of undergraduates. However, future research is warranted to extend the findings of this study. Although this study suggested that systems of global meaning played an important role in the grieving experience, there is much work to be done to learn more about the development of these systems of meaning. Extending the work of Park (2005) to discover more about the connection between religious beliefs and a student’s system of global meaning could help determine how to structure support services on campus that could respond to student distress at the incongruity between their loss and their way of
understanding the world. The diversification of the student body on campuses necessitates that more work is done to understand the influences that shape the way students understand concepts such as life, death, and loss. This additional context could be helpful in shaping the development of support services on campus.

The findings of this study suggested that students reframed and reprioritized their academic goals as a part of the grieving process. However, it is not known if these revised goals were a temporary way to alleviate the distress of grieving or if the changes were incorporated into the long-term plans of the student. For instance, did the students who planned to spend less time in class and more time with family follow through with that goal or did they revert to their previous way of prioritizing their time? Additional research is needed to determine the permanence of changes to long-range goals.

Another critical area for future study is to look more closely at the assumptions students made about the support they expected to receive from the campus community. A more thorough investigation of these assumptions and their origins could potentially help prepare members of the campus community to better understand and anticipate the support expected by grieving students. Additionally, a stronger understanding of these assumptions could help guide students in developing realistic expectations of those whom they expect to support them as they grieve.

Another way to extend this study would be to examine the similarities and differences between grieving for the loss of a member of the campus community and grieving for the loss of someone outside the campus. In this study, participation was limited to students who
had lost someone outside the community. However, several of the students in the study were acquainted to varying degrees with classmates who died and noted a difference in their experience of grieving when that loss was shared amongst other students. Study that is focused specifically on these similarities and differences would add to what is known about how students respond to loss.

An interesting finding in this study was participants had a strong reaction to peers who used social media to offer messages of condolence or support. To date, little research has examined the relationship between social media and grieving. Targeted study of the impact of social media on the experience of grieving could add to what is known about the types of interactions that influence the way students experience feelings of support or isolation on campus.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to uncover the lived experience of grieving of undergraduates. Findings and conclusions of the study suggest that a number of important experiences influenced the way these select undergraduates perceived the experience of grieving. Key findings included: the influence of others on the experience of grieving, the experience of taking on new roles and responsibilities, innermost thoughts and feelings, and moving forward after loss. Based on these findings, three key conclusions were suggested: 1) academic goals were reframed through the experience of meaning-making; 2) participants assumed the campus community would be supportive; and 3) participants underestimated the period of grieving. Based on these findings and conclusions, several areas for further study
should be explored. In particular, understanding more about the construction of the global system of belief is important, particularly when students are grieving among others who may not share their way of seeing the world. A specific focus on the role that religious or spiritual beliefs play in developing these global systems of beliefs would provide a better vantage point for understanding the distress students experience after a loss. Select implications for practice include the advocacy for inclusion of academic protocols in a bereavement policy and designation of key personnel who are able to assist students with making decisions that may have important financial and long-term academic consequences.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Inclusion Criteria and Demographic Information Template

1) General introduction of the researcher and the participant

2) General demographic information about participant:
   a. Age
   b. Academic year
   c. Dwelling (on/off campus; with/not with family)
   d. Faith community & practice
   e. Academic program
   f. Gender
   g. Ethnicity

3) Confirmation of general inclusion criteria:
   a. Undergraduate student at Duke?
   b. Beyond first year at Duke?
   c. Currently enrolled?

4) Relationship to deceased:
   a. Relationship (parent, sibling, friend)
   b. Circumstances of death:
   c. Time since death

5) Exclusion criteria:
   a. Physical wellness
   b. Emotional wellness

6) Physical experiences
   a. Insomnia
   b. Changes in appetite
   c. Illness
   d. Headache
   e. Other pain

7) Emotional experiences
   a. Crying
   b. Anger
   c. Inability to focus
Appendix B

First Interview Protocol

First Interview

1) Draw a timeline of the major events in your life.

2) How have those events shaped who you are?

3) Please share any people, institutions, or other things that you consider to be major influences on your day to day life.

4) Please share a general overview of your prior experience with the death of loved ones.

5) What contextual factors have played a role or influenced your experience grieving?

6) Please share the story of the loved one who has died. What were the circumstances of this person’s death?

7) Please describe your experience of grieving.

8) Follow-up questions will be constructed to further explore particular directions expressed by the participant.
Appendix C

Second Interview Protocol

Second Interview

Discussion points include:

a. Who was the person that you lost? Describe your relationship with that person.

b. What has been your experience with your peers as you have been grieving?

c. How has the fact that you are a student impacted your experience of loss?

d. Talk about your relationship with the loved one who was lost. How has that relationship changed since the person passed away?

e. Describe the critical incident that best depicts your grief process.

f. Reconstruct a day that has been particularly challenging for you during the grieving process.

g. What were your thoughts and emotions during your grieving process? How have they changed over time?

h. What, if anything, has changed in your life since the loss?
Appendix D

Patient Health Questionnaire

**PATIENT HEALTH QUESTIONNAIRE (PHQ-9)**

**NAME:**

______________________________________________________________

**DATE:**

_________________

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?
(use "✓" to indicate your answer)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Somewhat difficult</th>
<th>Very difficult</th>
<th>Extremely difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Feeling tired or having little energy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Poor appetite or overeating</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Feeling bad about yourself—or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed. Or the opposite—being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself in some way</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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**add columns:**

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(Healthcare professional: For interpretation of TOTAL, please refer to accompanying scoring card.)

PHQ-9 is adapted from PRIME MD TODAY, developed by Drs Robert L. Spitzer, Janet B.W. Williams, Kurt Kroenke, and colleagues, with an educational grant from Pfizer Inc. For research information, contact Dr Spitzer at rls8@columbia.edu. Use of the PHQ-9 may only be made in accordance with the Terms of Use available at http://www.pfizer.com. Copyright ©1999 Pfizer Inc. All rights reserved. PRIME MD TODAY is a trademark of Pfizer Inc.

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Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: A Phenomenological Approach to Uncovering the Essence of Grieving Experiences of Undergraduates

Principal Investigator: Lisa Beth Bergene Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Carol Kasworm

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
This study will explore the grieving experience of undergraduate students after the death of a loved one. The purpose of this exploratory design is to uncover the lived experience of grieving in the context of an environment with unique attributes.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
1. Participate in an initial meeting with the researcher. During this meeting, the researcher will describe the purpose of the study, the goals of the study, and a quick overview of the role of the participant. If the potential participant continues to express interest in the study, he or she will be asked a series of questions to evaluate eligibility to participate in the study. These questions will include demographic information about the potential participant (academic year, affiliation with faith community, age, gender, academic major, ethnicity). The questions will also seek general information about the relationship between the participant and the decedent. If it is determined by the researcher that the potential participant meets the inclusion criteria, the researcher will go over this informed consent form with
the participant. If participant still wishes to participate in the study, he or she will be invited to choose a date, time, and location for the first interview. The initial meeting is likely to last 60 minutes.

2. Participate in three interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes each. The interviews will take place at the date, time, and location chosen by the participant. All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed.
   a. The first interview will center on relaying a focused life history of the participant. General questions will be asked about the death of the loved one and about the process of grieving experienced by the participant.
   b. The second interview will also focus on the participant’s experience of grieving. This interview will further explore the participant’s thoughts, feelings, and reflections about the death of your loved one.
   c. The third interview will be a review of the transcripts of the first and second interview. I will review the transcripts from your first and second interviews to be sure that I have captured your comments and expressions accurately. We will also review the initial themes identified based on the first two interviews. You will have the opportunity to comment further to expand upon, clarify, or correct the identified themes.

**Duration of the Study**

The initial meeting and interviews will take place over the course of three months. The dates, times, and locations of the meeting and interviews will be chosen by the participant.

**Risks**

The experience of grieving can have intense and distressing moments. Talking about the loss of a loved one and the reactions to the loss could trigger a period of distress for the participant.

Support would be given to the participant in five forms:

1) A participant may elect to withdraw from the study at any point in time.
2) At any point in the process, participants who demonstrate signs of intense distress (immediate danger to self or others) would not be allowed to continue in the study and will be assisted in receiving emergency care through Duke University Medical Center.
3) Participants who experience persistent distress or whom the researcher observes to be in a state of persistent distress will be referred to the Counseling and Psychological Services office at Duke University and may be withdrawn from the study if it is determined that continued participation in the study will be detrimental to the well-being of the participant. The PHQ-9 screening tool will be utilized at the beginning of each interview to assist with screening participants for signs of distress.
4) During the initial screening interview, I will provide the participant with a printed copy of available support resources. I will also offer a printed copy of these resources to the participant at the conclusion of each interview.

5) I will follow up by email the day after each interview to check in on the participant. Resources (Duke Student Health, Duke Counseling and Psychological Services) appropriate to the distresses experienced by the participants will be shared and referrals for expedited appointments will be made as needed.

Benefits
The benefit of this study is to provide a better understanding of grieving as it is experienced by undergraduate students. The findings in this study may inform university administrators as they work to develop support services on campus that better serve the needs of grieving students. As a participant, the benefit to you is that you will have the opportunity to talk openly, candidly, and reflectively about grieving experience. For some individuals, this opportunity may offer some level of support and personal development as they work through their grieving experience.

Confidentiality
The identity of the participants in the study will be kept confidential. Several steps will be taken to secure written and digital data. A roster and contact information for participants will be kept in a file separate from any written or digital data. Handwritten notes from the interviews will be recorded in one notebook and will be secured in a locked box at the residence of the researcher. Audio files of the interviews will be stored on the personal computer of the researcher and will be kept in a password protected file. Email will only be used to coordinate interview appointments. Emails to and from participants will be stored in a password protected email folder. These emails will be deleted following the completion of the study. Transcripts of the interviews will also be stored on the personal computer of the researcher and will also be password protected. Data will be stored using filenames that do not identify the participants in any way (participant1.doc). Care will be taken in the writing of the final report to eliminate references that may allow for the identification of the participants.

It is possible during the interviews that a participant will reveal an experience that would be classified as a violation of the Duke University Community Standard or the laws of the State of North Carolina. The role of the researcher as the Assistant Dean for Residence Life and Housing Services will require action to be taken if the participant shares a behavior that alleges a violation of the Community Standard or North Carolina law. Examples include but are not limited to experiencing or perpetrating physical or sexual assault, attempting or communicating intent to harm oneself or others, possession or use of illegal drugs, or academic misconduct such as plagiarizing or other forms of cheating. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if admission is made of violence against self or others or if the participant presents a significant risk of self-harm.
Compensation
Participants who complete the study will receive a $50 giftcard toward the merchant of the participant’s choice at the conclusion of the study. Participants who participate in the initial meeting but do not complete the study will receive a $20 giftcard toward the merchant of the participant’s choice.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Lisa Beth Bergene at lbbergen@ncsu.edu or (919) 684-5320.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514), or Joe Rabiega, IRB Coordinator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-7515).

Consent To Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time.”

Participant's signature __________________________ Date ________________
Investigator's signature __________________________ Date ________________
Appendix F

IRB Form

North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
SUBMISSION FOR NEW STUDIES

GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Date Submitted: 9/9/2011
   Revised Date: 11/4/2011
2. Title of Project: Phenomenological Approach to Uncovering the Essence of Grieving Experiences of Undergraduates
3. Principal Investigator: Lisa Beth Bergene
4. Department: Department of Leadership, Policy and Adult and Higher Education
5. Campus Box Number: N/A; 22 Dansey Circle Durham NC 27713
6. Email: lb.bergene@duke.edu (lbbergene@ncsu.edu)
7. Phone Number: 919-812-2845
8. Fax Number: N/A
9. Faculty Sponsor Name and Email Address if Student Submission: Carol Kasworm; carol_kasworm@ncsu.edu
10. Source of Funding? (required information): self (no outside sources)
11. Is this research receiving federal funding?: no
12. If externally funded, include sponsor name and university account number: N/A
13. RANK:
   [ ] Faculty
   [ ] Student: [ ] undergraduate; [ ] Masters; or [ ] PhD (D Ed)
   [ ] Other (specify):

As the principal investigator, my signature testifies that I have read and understood the University Policy and Procedures for the Use of Human Subjects in Research. I assure the Committee that all procedures performed under this project will be conducted exactly as outlined in the Proposal Narrative and that any modification to this protocol will be submitted to the Committee in the form of an amendment for its approval prior to implementation.

Principal Investigator:

Lisa Beth Bergene

(typed/printed name) (signature) (date)

10/26/2011

As the faculty sponsor, my signature testifies that I have reviewed this application thoroughly and will oversee the research in its entirety. I hereby acknowledge my role as the principal investigator of record.

Faculty Sponsor:

Carol Kasworm

(typed/printed name) (signature) (date)

*Electronic submissions to the IRB are considered signed via an electronic signature. For student submissions this means that the faculty sponsor has reviewed the proposal prior to it being submitted and is copied on the submission.

Please complete this application and email as an attachment to: debra_paxton@ncsu.edu or send by mail to: Institutional Review Board, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (Administrative Services III). Please include consent forms and other study documents with your application and submit as one document.

************************************************************************************
For SPARCS office use only
Reviewer Decision (Expedited or Exempt Review)
[ ] Exempt [ ] Approved [ ] Approved pending modifications [ ] Table

Expedited Review Category: [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5 [ ] 6 [ ] 7 [ ] 8a [ ] 8b [ ] 8c [ ] 9

Reviewer Name Signature Date
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
GUIDELINES FOR A PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

In your narrative, address each of the topics outlined below. Every application for IRB review must contain a proposal narrative, and failure to follow these directions will result in delays in reviewing/processing the protocol.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Briefly describe in lay language the purpose of the proposed research and why it is important.

The purpose of this study is to learn about the grief that undergraduates experience when a loved one dies. While much research exists about grief, very little is known about how the added dimension of being a student impacts the experience of grieving. This study will not just look at the process of grieving but also the lived experience of grieving. This study is important because it will add to the general knowledge base of college student development. More specifically, this study will add to what is known about an event that nearly half of all undergraduates will experience at some point during their time on campus. Additionally, an indirect benefit of this study could be how the information gained through the study is used. Institutions could potentially use the results of this study to inform a review of their own approaches to providing support services and crafting campus policies such as bereavement leave.

2. If student research, indicate whether for a course, thesis, dissertation, or independent research.

B. SUBJECT POPULATION

1. How many subjects will be involved in the research?

Estimates or ranges are acceptable. Please be aware that if you recruit over 10% more participants than originally requested, you will need to submit a request to modify your recruitment numbers.

10 participants will be initially enrolled in the study with the hope that sufficient participants (estimate 5 or 6) will complete all three interviews to allow the data analysis to be completed.

2. Describe how subjects will be recruited. Please provide the IRB with any recruitment materials that will be used.

Participants for the study will be recruited via two techniques:

   1) General campus fliers- Paper fliers will be posted broadly to announce the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, the compensation for participation, and the researcher contact information. These paper fliers will be hung on residence hall bulletin boards in the upperclassmen student housing areas. After sufficient participants have been recruited, the fliers will be removed. (appendix a)

   2) Snowball sampling- After at least one participant has been recruited, I will make use of snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. In snowball sampling, participants who are included in the study are asked to recommend others who appear to meet the inclusion criteria. In this case, participants would be given the opportunity to share names of other students whom the participant believes might meet the inclusion criteria and be interested in the study. I will send these students an email describing the purpose of the study, the compensation for participation, and the contact information for the researcher. If the student replies and indicates an interest in the study, the student will be invited to participate in a face to face meeting. If the student does not respond to the invitation to participate, the student will not receive any further contact about the study (appendix b)

3. List specific eligibility requirements for subjects (or describe screening procedures), including those criteria that would exclude otherwise acceptable subjects.

Participants must meet several criteria to participate in this study.
- Full-time sophomore, junior, or senior currently enrolled at Duke University
- The decedent must be a member of the immediate family (parent, sibling), another relative who has an important relationship as defined by the student (grandparent, aunt/uncle), or peer who the participant would consider to be a loved one
- Participation will be limited to those students whose loved one died within one year of the beginning of the study. The participant must not have contributed knowingly to the death of the decedent.
- The participant must be an undergraduate of traditional age (18 – 22).
No specific criteria will be established to limit the participants based on gender, race, religion, nationality, or academic program.

Participants will not be enrolled if the following is true:
- Student is not enrolled full time or is not upperclassmen
- The decedent was a current Duke student
- Participation in the study will also be dependent upon assessment that continued participation in the study will cause harm (emotional or physical) to the participant
- Participant actively expresses a threat of harm to self or others; in this case, the participant will be removed from the study

Given the sensitivity of the grieving experience, participants may elect to self-withdraw from the study at any point in time, for any reason. Similarly, once the study is in progress, I may elect to remove or postpone participation in the study if emotional or physical health of the participant appears to be declining. If the participant appears to be at imminent risk of self harm or harm to others, the participant will be removed from the study.

4. Explain any sampling procedure that might exclude specific populations.

None

5. Disclose any relationship between researcher and subjects - such as, teacher/student; employer/employee.

I am the Assistant Dean for Housing, Dining, and Residence Life on the first year campus at Duke University. Due to this role, I will not include any first year students, current academic advisees, or members of the student organizations I advise in the study. Rarely in my role do I have any influence or responsibilities for sophomores, juniors, or seniors so I will focus on those students as potential participants in my study. Prior to submitting my IRB application, I consulted informally through email with Ms. Deb Paxton about the potential conflict of interest in conducting the study at the institution where I work. I have put safeguards in place to reduce the conflict of interest including utilizing a small number of participants in the study, electing to exclude populations over which I have influence such as first year students, and clarifying my responsibility to break confidentiality in the event that the participant expresses a threat to the health and safety of self or others.

6. Check any vulnerable populations included in study:

- minors (under age 18) - if so, have you included a line on the consent form for the parent/guardian signature
- fetuses
- pregnant women
- persons with mental, psychiatric or emotional disabilities
- persons with physical disabilities
- economically or educationally disadvantaged
- prisoners
- elderly
- students from a class taught by principal investigator
- other vulnerable population.

7. If any of the above are used, state the necessity for doing so. Please indicate the approximate age range of the minors to be involved.

N/A

C. PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED

1. In lay language, describe completely all procedures to be followed during the course of the experimentation. Provide sufficient detail so that the Committee is able to assess potential risks to human subjects. In order for the IRB to completely understand the experience of the subjects in your project, please provide a detailed outline of everything subjects will experience as a result of participating in your project. Please be specific and include information on all
aspects of the research, through subject recruitment and ending when the subject’s role in the project is complete. All descriptions should include the informed consent process, interactions between the subjects and the researcher, and any tasks, tests, etc. that involve subjects. If the project involves more than one group of subjects (e.g. teachers and students, employees and supervisors), please make sure to provide descriptions for each subject group.

1) Study participants will be recruited through two paths: participant initiated contact with the researcher in response to posters in the residence halls on the upperclassmen campuses or referral by students who are already enrolled in the study.

2) Potential participants who are identified through referral of another student in the study will receive an email with a brief explanation of the study (appendix a) and an invitation to contact me if interested in being considered for the study. If that student does not respond to the email or responds back declining interest in the study, no further contact with that student will be initiated.

3) For potential participants who respond to the invitation email with an interest in being considered for the study, and for students who directly initiate contact with me in response to the posters, they will receive a more lengthy email with details about the study (appendix c). If the participant believes that he or she meets the inclusion criteria and continues to show interest in the study, he or she will be invited to contact me to set up a date, time, and location of the participant’s choosing for the initial meeting.

4) During this initial meeting (60 minutes), I will describe in more detail the purpose of the study, the goals of the study, and an overview of the role of the participant. If the potential participant continues to express interest in the study, he or she will be asked a series of questions to evaluate eligibility to participate in the study including general information about the relationship between the participant and the decedent. These questions will also include demographic information (academic year, affiliation with faith community, age, gender, academic major, ethnicity) and preferred method of contact (email, text message). If it is determined that the potential participant meets the inclusion criteria, I will go over the informed consent form. I will provide two copies of the informed consent document- one for the participant to keep and one for the participant to sign for the research file (appendix d). The student will have the opportunity to ask questions and get clarification about any aspect of the study before signing. (appendix e) If participant still wishes to participate in the study, he or she will be invited to choose a date, time, and location for the first interview.

5) Participants who elect to complete the entire study will take part in three interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes each. The interviews will take place at the date, time, and location chosen by the participant. All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

a. The first interview will center on relaying a focused life history of the participant. General questions will be asked about the death of the loved one and about the grief experienced by the participant.

b. The second interview will also focus on the experience of grieving. This interview will further explore thoughts, feelings, and reflections about the death of the loved one. Some of the interview questions will be based on responses of the participant from the first interview.

c. At least one week prior to the third interview, the participant will receive a hard copy of the transcripts of the first and second interviews.

d. The third interview will consist of a review of the transcripts of the first and second interview. This review will be an opportunity to verify that the participant believes the thoughts and expression of the previous interviews accurately captures and portrays his/her experience. The participant will have the opportunity to expand upon or clarify thoughts and expressions from the first two interviews. The participant and I will also review the initial phenomenological themes identified based on analysis of the first two interviews.

6) Two approaches will be used to minimize the risk to the health and safety of the participant during the interview process.

a. Since the interview dates and times will be scheduled in advance, before beginning the interview, I will ask the participant if he/she is comfortable doing the interview on that particular day. If the participant for whatever reason feels that this particular moment is not one in which he/she wishes to discuss the experience of grief, the participant will have the option to postpone the interview or to self-withdraw from the study.
b. Prior to the beginning of each interview, a more objective measurement of health will also be given. The participant will also be asked to complete the Personal Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) screening tool (appendix f). The PHQ-9 is a self-report questionnaire that provides an assessment of the presence of symptoms and functional impairment, especially as it relates to depression but can be used to screen for other concerning symptoms such as the presence of suicidal thoughts or severe somatic issues such as sleep deprivation. The results of the questionnaire will not be used as a basis for exclusion from the study but will be used as a prompt for me to further review with the participant the efficacy of participating in the study that particular day. The exception to this would be if the participant responds affirmatively to question indicating a threat of self-harm or harm to others. If that should occur, the interview will be stopped and the participant will be referred to support services on campus or actively assisted in receiving emergency medical care, depending on the nature of the threat. In a case where the participant expresses a threat of harm to self or others, the participant will be removed from the study.

c. In the case of a participant who opts to postpone the interview or whom is referred for support, I will email or text message the participant (per established preference of the participant) the following day to check in on the participant and offer further assistance with referrals if needed. One week later, I will send the participant an invitation to reschedule the interview. If the participant expresses a desire to discontinue participation in the study, I will send one final email to the participant confirming the self-withdrawal and I will also include the list of available resources on campus but will initiate no further communication with the participant.

7) After each interview, the participant will receive a paper copy of the contact information and support resources available on campus (appendix g). I will also email or text message the participant the day after the interview to check in. If the participant responds back and shares concerns, I will assist the participant with referral and securing appointments at campus support services.

2. How much time will be required of each subject?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60 minutes initial meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>60 – 90 minutes first interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>60 – 90 minutes second interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 minutes (not in scheduled interview setting) to review interview transcripts</td>
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<tr>
<td>60 – 90 minutes third interview</td>
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**POtential Risks**

1. State the potential risks (psychological, social, physical, financial, legal or other) connected with the proposed procedures and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.

The potential risk to the participant is physical or emotional distress that may result from discussion of the grieving experience or reflection on the grieving experience when not in the interview setting. After the initial meeting, the participant will be given a paper handout with the contact information for the support services available on campus. After each interview, I will make contact with the participant by email or text message to verify that the participant reports no undue distress. Additionally, if through my contact with the participant during the interviews or through communications, I observe signs that the participant is in danger of harm to self or others such as making a suicidal statement, I will utilize campus resources (Counseling and Psychological Services, Dean on Call, Duke University Police) to ensure that the student has access to an assessment for health and safety. In this case, the participant will be removed from the study.

Another step to minimize the risk to participants is giving the participant the option to remove himself or herself from the study at any time, for any reason.

2. Will there be a request for information that subjects might consider to be personal or sensitive (e.g. private behavior, economic status, sexual issues, religious beliefs, or other matters that if made public might impair their self-esteem or reputation or could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability)?

Interview questions will be relatively general in nature and open-ended so disclosure of sensitive information will be at the discretion of the participant. As part of the initial meeting, participants will be asked to identify affiliation with faith communities though this will not be used to include or exclude a participant. It is possible that a participant may choose to respond to some of the interview questions in the context of faith. I may elect to ask follow-up
questions to ensure understanding of the perspective of the participant but will not challenge the beliefs of the participant.

In the event that a participant shares information about an experience that would fall into the category of a violation of the Duke Community Standard, no action will be taken and the information will be treated as a confidential expression made during the research process unless the information shared is a threat of harm to self or others. Confidentiality would be broken by the researcher in order to bring the threat to the attention of crisis responders, including Duke Medical Center and/or Duke Police, depending on the immediacy and nature of the threat of harm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. If yes, please describe and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The informed consent document clarifies my obligation to act if I have reason to believe that the health and safety or the participant or others is at risk.</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>3. Could any of the study procedures produce stress or anxiety, or be considered offensive, threatening, or degrading? If yes, please describe why they are important and what arrangements have been made for handling an emotional reaction from the subject.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is possible that the discussion or reflection upon grieving experiences may result in physical or emotional distress. To minimize this, participants will be able to choose the day, time, and location of the meeting in order to make the setting as comfortable as possible. The semi-structured nature of the interview will also allow for pauses in the interview process and to steer the conversation in a different direction if the participant would prefer not to discuss a particular aspect of the grieving experience. Efforts will be made to ensure that participants are aware of support services available on campus and expedited referrals for appointments with these services will be available if needed.</td>
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<th>4. How will data be recorded and stored?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Steps will be taken to secure written and digital data. A roster with contact information for participants will be kept in a file separate from any written or digital data. Handwritten notes from the interviews will be recorded in one notebook and will be secured in a locked storage box at the residence of the researcher when not in use. The data analysis application NVIVO will be used to analyze audio files and transcripts of interviews. An NVIVO data file will actually store all audio files and transcripts of interviews and that data file will be kept on a thumb drive that will be password protected and stored in a locked storage box at the residence of the researcher when not in use. Email and text messaging (per the preference of the participant) will be used to coordinate interview appointments and to check in with participants but will not be used to collect data or share transcripts with participants. Emails to and from participants will be stored in a password protected folder on a thumb drive that will be stored in a locked storage box at the residence of the researcher when not in use. Text messages will be deleted from the researcher’s phone after they have been read and any relevant information (appointment time, participant question) will be handwritten into the notebook referenced earlier. These emails/text messages will be deleted following the completion of the study and acceptance of the dissertation. Data will be stored using filenames based on the pseudonyms selected by the participants. Care will be taken in the writing of the final report to eliminate references that may allow for the identification of the participants. (ex. “leadership position in her sorority” would be substituted for “President of Pi Beta Phi”)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. How will identifiers be used in study notes and other materials?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Each participant will be given a pseudonym that is chosen by the participant himself or herself. Since the number of participants is fairly small, the researcher will not need to keep a written record matching pseudonym with participant identity.</td>
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<tr>
<th>b. How will reports will be written, in aggregate terms, or will individual responses be described?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because the dissertation is qualitative, some direct quotations from participants will be used in the final dissertation as well as longer aggregate examples of themes found through the data analysis. The direct quotations will be limited to a few sentences and care will be taken to ensure that no identifying information is included in the quotations.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
5. If audio or video recordings are collected, will you retain or destroy the recordings? How will recordings be stored during the project and after, as per your destruction/retention plans?

The sessions will be digitally recorded (audio only) using a digital recorder. These digital files will be transferred in a password protected file on a thumb drive and stored in a locked storage box at the residence of the researcher when not in use. After transfer, the digital file will be removed from the digital recorder. The recordings will be kept in the file until the completion of the study and the acceptance of the dissertation. Afterward, the recordings will be deleted from the thumb drive.

6. Is there any deception of the human subjects involved in this study? If yes, please describe why it is necessary and describe the debriefing procedures that have been arranged.

No

E. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

This does not include any form of compensation for participation.

1. What, if any, direct benefit is to be gained by the subject? If no direct benefit is expected, but indirect benefit may be expected (knowledge may be gained that could help others), please explain.

The indirect benefit of this study is that the information obtained in this study will add to what is known about grieving experiences of undergraduates. The findings in this study may inform university administrators as they work to develop support services and policies on campus that better serve the needs of grieving students. For the participant, the benefit of participating in the study may be the opportunity to talk openly, candidly, and reflectively about the grieving experience. For some individuals, this dialogue may offer some level of support and personal development as they work through their grieving experiences.

F. COMPENSATION

Please keep in mind that the logistics of providing compensation to your subjects (e.g., if your business office requires names of subjects who received compensation) may compromise anonymity or complicate confidentiality protections. If, while arranging for subject compensation, you must make changes to the anonymity or confidentiality provisions for your research, you must contact the IRB office prior to implementing those changes.

1. Describe compensation

Participants who complete the study through the end of the third interview will receive a $50 giftcard toward the merchant of the participant’s choice. The giftcard will be sent through campus mail to the participant within two days of the completion of the third interview. Participants who participate in the initial meeting and complete the first two interviews but do not participate in the final interview will receive a $20 giftcard toward the merchant of the participant’s choice. The funding for the giftcard will be an out-of-pocket expense to the researcher therefore no identifying information will be collected from the participants.

2. Explain compensation provisions if the subject withdraws prior to completion of the study.

Participants who participate in the initial meeting and complete the first two interviews but do not participate in the final interview will receive a $20 giftcard toward the merchant of the participant’s choice. Participants who withdraw prior to the end of the second interview will not receive compensation. This will be clearly outlined in the informed consent document.

3. If class credit will be given, list the amount and alternative ways to earn the same amount of credit.

No course credit is given

G. COLLABORATORS

1. If you anticipate that additional investigators (other than those named on Cover Page) may be involved in this research, list them here indicating their institution, department and phone number.

None

2. Will anyone besides the PI or the research team have access to the data (including completed surveys) from the moment they are collected until they are destroyed.
Dissertation committee chair and committee members may be allowed to review some portions of interview transcripts as part of the dissertation advising process.

H. CONFLICT OF INTEREST
1. Do you have a significant financial interest or other conflict of interest in the sponsor of this project? No
2. Does your current conflicts of interest management plan include this relationship and is it being properly followed? N/A

I. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
1. If a questionnaire, survey or interview instrument is to be used, attach a copy to this proposal.
2. Attach a copy of the informed consent form to this proposal.
3. Please provide any additional materials that may aid the IRB in making its decision.

J. HUMAN SUBJECT ETHICS TRAINING
*Please consider taking the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), a free, comprehensive ethics training program for researchers conducting research with human subjects. Just click on the underlined link.