

Exploring the Process of Meaning-making after Partner Suicide

by

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for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours), Division of Social Science

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**Approval**

The undersigned recommend the acceptance of this thesis  
“Exploring the Process of Meaning-making after Partner Suicide”

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## Abstract

Meaning-making is increasingly recognized as a fundamental aspect of the grief experience. This study investigated the process of meaning-making in the narratives of individuals whose partners died by suicide, exploring their meaning reconstruction in response to this form of loss. The narratives of users of a public online grief support forum ( $n = 50$ ) were analyzed using the Meaning of Loss Codebook (Gillies, Neimeyer, & Milman, 2014), which consists of core categories of meaning of loss in response to the death of a loved one. The results indicated that these individuals predominantly experienced negative affect, a lack of understanding associated with the loss, and a longing for their partners. The grief experience of participants in this study was marked by substantial psychological distress and an ongoing struggle to make sense of and find meaning in this type of loss. It is clear that grieving the loss of a partner as a result of suicide presents unique challenges to meaning-making in comparison to other types of loss. Given the importance of this aspect of adjustment to loss, these findings deepen the understanding of this component of grief and inform the provision of support for those grieving a loved one who died by suicide.

## **Exploring the Process of Meaning-making after Partner Suicide**

The grief after the suicide death of a loved one often presents unique elements that are not present in the same degree as a result of other causes of death. It is more likely that the course of bereavement will be challenging after this traumatic loss (Neimeyer, 2002). Cognitively processing a loved one's suicide is often characterized by an array of questions and a lack of understanding. Experiencing blame, rejection, and guilt are common for survivors of suicide death (Jordan, 2001; Sveen & Walby, 2008), in addition to distancing social supports as a result of the stigma associated with this type of death and the not infrequent judgement from others (Feigelman, Gorman, Beal, & Jordan, 2008). Those bereft by suicide display more depressive symptoms, more complicated grief, poorer social functioning, and poorer general health than those bereft by natural causes of death (DeGroot, DeKeijser, & Neeleman, 2006; Miyabayashi & Yasuda, 2007). Furthermore, survivors of suicide are less likely than survivors of natural death to make-meaning of the death, and more meaning-making of the death of a loved one is associated with less complicated grief (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Jordan, 2001). It is clear that grief as a result of suicide is complex and multifaceted (Feigelman et al., 2008), this is especially so for those whose partner died by suicide.

The death of a partner by suicide presents challenges above and beyond other types relationships impacted by suicide. The psychosocial consequences of losing a partner to suicide are distinct from the consequences of losing an individual in a different type of relationship, and include an increase in financial and familial responsibilities. Mitchell, Kim, Prigerson, and Mortimer-Stephens (2004) demonstrated that surviving partners after a suicide death reported higher levels of complicated grief, as measured by

*The Inventory of Complicated Grief* (ICG), when compared to surviving in-laws, friends, or coworkers. Additionally, investigating differences in grief outcomes between differing survivor relationships suggest that partners are at higher risk of presenting symptoms of complicated grief when compared to children, and are at higher risk of depression when compared to children and siblings (DeGroot & Kollon, 2013). An exploration of grief in suicide survivors based on different relationships with the deceased revealed that partner survivors felt more anger towards the deceased than parents felt towards a child who died by suicide (McIntosh & Wroblewski, 1988). Further, feelings of guilt and resentment are more likely to occur in spousal survivors of suicide when compared to spousal survivors of natural or accidental death (Demi, 1984). Farberow, Gallagher-Thompson, Gilewski, and Thompson (1992) documented that those grieving the suicide death of a spouse received less emotional support than those grieving a death by natural causes and had less frequent contact with their primary network than a non-bereaved control sample. Moreover, spousal survivors of suicide are at a higher risk for suicide themselves when compared to spousal survivors of other modes of death (Agerbo, 2005). Clearly, grieving the suicide death of a partner presents a range of unique characteristics and challenges.

Traumatic life events, such as partner suicide, can be difficult to fit into an individual's existing global meaning system (Neimeyer, 2002), which consists of select events of special relevance that are combined into an overall story that has structure and coherence (Bruner, 2003). Traumatic events challenge the existing self-narrative, resulting in personal distress until they are integrated within the meaning system (Park, 2008), a process that is greatly influenced by the nature and circumstances of the loss (Currier et al., 2006). The new identity as a bereft person and their loved one's new

identity as a deceased person must be integrated into the individual's self-narrative. In order to integrate the loss into the self-narrative and global meaning system, a person must consider the circumstances of the loss and how it affects her or him (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014). An individual can make sense of the event by fitting the loss into her or his current understanding of how the world functions (i.e., assimilation) or by adjusting their worldviews to fit the loss (i.e., accommodation) (Park, 2010). Individuals engage in communication with family, friends, and the broader community to reach agreement on their narratives (Neimeyer et al., 2014).

The importance of meaning-making in response to loss has been demonstrated by examining links with various outcomes in the grief process. Currier and colleagues (2006) investigated meaning-making after the death of a loved one and its relationship to complicated grief and found that meaning-making was a significant predictor of complicated grief symptomology. Specifically, more meaning-made of the death by participants led to less complicated grief. Moreover, meaning-making was a better predictor of complicated grief than the nature of the relationship and the type of loss (i.e., natural versus violent). Holland, Currier, and Neimeyer (2006) found similar results in a study with adults who experienced the death of a loved one in the last two years. Participants were administered a modified version of the ICG and items regarding meaning-making and benefit-finding. Participants' success in meaning-making was a predictor of less complicated grief; moreover, meaning-making was the only unique predictor of complicated grief when meaning-making, benefit-finding, and time since loss as were used as predictors. Likewise, in a university sample that had experienced the death of a family member or friend, more meaning-made was predictive of less grief and

less traumatic distress (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006). Clearly, meaning-making has a unique role in grief outcomes and it does not exist in an all-or-none state. That is, making-meaning is a process that occurs within an individual, with survivors of suicide being no exception.

Meaning-making is an important component of grief as a result of suicide death. Dransart (2013) interviewed suicide survivors, in a range of relationships to the deceased, regarding the event and the impact it has had on various life facets. Using the grounded theory method, Dransart concluded that meaning-making exists on a continuum. On one end, survivors successfully found meaning that allowed them to live with a deeper and more coherent understanding of the suicide. On the other end, survivors made little sense of the events, which led to psychological distress when confronting the death. The forms of meaning-making of survivors' was separated into four main categories: dedicating time to help others in society (commitment type), shifting worldview or life priorities (transformation type), interpreting the suicide as a calamity (accident type), and finding no cessation or amelioration in the confusion and pain of the death (vulnerability type). Dransart concluded by explaining that participants spent much time attempting to make-meaning of the death and reflected on and questioned their morals and those believed to be held by the deceased. Meaning-making involved both changing perceptions of the self and the deceased.

The research evidence illustrates the importance of meaning-making in the grief process, however, this research lacks a common language. Gillies, Neimeyer, and Milman (2014) responded to this need for a common language in the meaning-making research and created a more standardized tool to better compare and differentiate themes

of meaning-making. *The Meaning of Loss Codebook* (MLC) provides a new approach to analysing grief across a diverse sample, including various causes of death and relationship types. Furthermore, the MLC is suitable for use in analysing written accounts of the grief experience, such as online narratives in grief forums (Gillies et al., 2014).

Over a relatively short period of time, there has been an exponential increase in the number of individuals using online grief support forums. Some online bereavement support forums contain thousands of users with registered accounts such as Grieving.com ([www.grieving.com](http://www.grieving.com)), with over 52,000 registered users, The Light Beyond ([www.thelightbeyond.com](http://www.thelightbeyond.com)) with over 6,000 registered users, and Grief Healing Discussion Groups ([www.griefhealingdiscussiongroups.com](http://www.griefhealingdiscussiongroups.com)) with over 6,600 registered users. These online forums are a means of communication that is initiated by the user posting a thread (i.e., an initial conversation or topic), in which individuals write information about themselves or ask questions. Other users have the option to reply to the initial post to provide feedback to the initial post. This can continue in a back-and-forth manner that mimics a conversation. Half of new users of these types of forums spend six or more hours on these forums in the first month after joining (Feigelman et al., 2008). The growth in forum usage has been an important topic of investigation in recent research.

There has been a proliferation in research on users of these forums to better understand this type of grief support. For example, when asked why parent survivors of their children's suicide joined a forum, respondents selected that the users within the online community had similar personalities and they enjoyed the 24/7 availability of the

forum (Feigelman et al., 2008). Furthermore, when these parents were asked to select the most valuable features of the online forum, 85% endorsed the forum as a beneficial coping tool, 84% endorsed the forum as a safe place to discuss suicide, which they considered frowned on in an offline setting, and 84% endorsed the forum as a place to share experiences (Feigelman et al., 2008). Similar findings suggest that users feel there are benefits to safely discussing their grief online, which is perceived as better understood by those in similar circumstances (Hollander, 2001; Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2014). The online support can be beneficial to those who need support above and beyond what is available in their offline surroundings (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2014; Vanderwerker & Prigerson, 2004). Hollander (2001) interviewed users of an online support group for suicide survivors to investigate why this service was used. The results of this qualitative analysis suggested that it was common for the users who availed of online support to attempt to reconstruct their identity to include the suicide death. Kramer and colleagues (2014) investigated the longitudinal benefits of using an online bereavement support forum for suicide survivors. Users filled out the *WHO-Five Well Being Index* and the *Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale* at baseline, six-months, and 12-months intervals. The results indicated that availing of these online supports increased well-being and decreased depression over a 12-month period (Kramer et al., 2014). Based on the current literature, there is a wide range of reasons why individuals seek out online support grief forums.

Not only are there forums for specific types of death, but there are also forums for specific relationships. Varga and Paulus (2014) investigated the use of online bereavement support forums for bereaved spouses. Using qualitative analysis, the

authors sought to understand the initial posts of users on this forum. They discovered that new members' posts contained themes of instability in emotion and physical states. This was represented through the users' ability or inability to function in daily life. Users felt as though their emotions were out of control and that offline supports did not comprehend this confusing affective state (Varga & Paulus, 2014). Furthermore, this investigation suggested that new users created narratives in their opening thread; users attempted to present the uniqueness of the events that had happened to them as well as their relationship to the deceased by story-telling. The details of the loss were generally presented, such as time since death and cause of death. The authors concluded that online narration may be a part of the meaning-making process that is newfound and distinct from that in an offline setting. The retelling the story of the loss in an online grief support forum setting may help users create a sense of coherence and meaning in the death.

The analysis of online data in research is increasing and it has its advantages, including broad and inexpensive sampling (Ahern, 2005; Denissen, Neumann, & van Zalk, 2010) of specific groups of individuals (Cantrell & Lupinacci, 2007; Denissen et al., 2010). Additionally, an online setting can provide the protections of anonymity for users who might otherwise be inhibited from truthful expression but are now willing to share their experiences and reactions online, knowing their identity will remain unknown (Denissen et al., 2010). While recognizing the advantages of online data, it is important for researchers to be aware of ethical considerations.

Ethical practices must be similarly adhered to in an online environment as an offline environment (Knobel, 2003). Considering this, according to the Tri-Council

Policy Statement, *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, online public documents are to be treated as would any public document (e.g., newspapers and books); therefore, viewing public online data does not require review from research ethics boards (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014). While there is no interaction between researcher and participant, it is important to consider how the research may affect those involved. Specifically for online grief research, the fact that personal information is publically available should not negate the consideration that individuals are still sharing an emotional process (Carmack & DeGroot, 2014). Furthermore, even if online content is publically accessible, researchers should consider if members of online sites (e.g., grief support forums) consider their usage of the site to be public or might there be assumptions of privacy (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). A further consideration is the researcher's decision about the level of anonymity to be used in publications (e.g., website names and addresses) (Carmack & DeGroot, 2014). Moreover, due to the global ease of accessing online sites, the potential for cultural differences between the users and researcher must be considered (Knobel, 2003). Finally, as with other types of grief research, online investigation of grief has the potential to psychologically impact the researcher. Carmack and DeGroot (2014) explain that the emotional well-being of online investigators of grief should remain a top priority, and, when necessary, collaboration with other grief researchers on their experiences should begin to prevent potentially psychologically-distressing outcomes.

The meaning-making process in grief is increasingly being investigated, elucidating the connections between meaning-made and various grief trajectories (e.g., Dransart, 2013; Neimeyer et al., 2014; Park, 2008). The emergence of the *Meaning of*

*Loss Codebook* (MLC) (Gillies et al., 2014), which serves as a comprehensive guide to core meaning-making themes, supports analysis across a range of grieving individuals. Research suggests that suicide deaths present challenges to grieving loved ones, such as self-blame, guilt, and difficulties with the meaning-making process that are not shared with other types of death (Currier et al., 2006; Jordan, 2001; Sveen & Walby, 2008). Using the MLC, this study investigated meaning-making themes in spontaneous writing samples on a publically accessible suicide grief support forum for grieving partners. This research explored the narratives of users of this forum for the presence of make-meaning and the commonalities across these themes.

## Method

### Participants

The posts of 50 individuals on an online support forum for partner suicide survivors were analyzed for this study (117 total posts). Gender of the participant and deceased was recorded when it was explicitly referenced in the posts (see Table 1). The forum was dedicated to survivors whose partner, spouse, or fiancée died by suicide, and was a part of a broader range of services offered by this website. The forum has been recommended by the American Association of Suicidology, American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, and Canadian Mental Health Association, and was recognized as a top non-profit organization.

Table 1  
*Gender*

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Participant Gender</b>		
Men	2	4
Women	20	40
Not mentioned	28	56
<b>Deceased Gender</b>		
Men	38	76
Women	4	8
Not mentioned	8	16

On a support forum, a thread is a post or set of posts on a specific topic. An individual may create a thread to initiate a new discussion or point at any time. The posts that initiated a new thread were used in this study. The participants started a new thread

within this forum between 1 and 15 times ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 2.72$ ). When participants mentioned time since death ( $n = 36$ , 72%), it ranged from 1 to 96 months ( $M = 10.79$ ,  $SD = 17.59$ ).

## **Materials**

The *Meaning of Loss Codebook* (MLC) (Gillies et al., 2014) was used to analyze the posts for meaning-making categories. The authors explain that the MLC was created using qualitative content analysis on a highly diverse sample of bereaved individuals to investigate sense-making, benefit-finding, and identity shifts. The MLC consists of 30 categories, positive and negative, relevant to meaning-making in response to death of a loved one. The authors indicate that the codebook is suitable for analysis of meaning-making in suicide survivors and is relevant for analyzing online information, thus making the use of the MLC invaluable for furthering the research on meaning-making after loss (Gillies et al., 2014).

## **Procedure**

All posts that initiated a thread within the sub-forum for partners, fiancées, and spouses on the suicide support forum were included in the data file (these posts were created between March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2000 and October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014). The posts were put in a Word document and participants' website usernames were removed and replaced with numbers to ensure there was no identifying information. A random number generator was used to select participants. When a participant was selected, every thread for that participant was also selected for analysis. Each post was analyzed individually and sequentially using thematic coding. Posts were read repeatedly and identifiable meaning-making themes within the posts were coded and recorded. A theme could be identified through words,

sentences, or paragraphs. Themes were analyzed recursively both within and between posts to ensure congruent coding. Frequency of the categories within a post were recorded and entered into an Excel file. The thematic codes identified in the posts by the researcher were reviewed by the thesis supervisor individually and with the researcher for education and training in the application of the method. The researcher used a journal to record personal responses and reactions throughout the analysis. This was used as a tool for self-care, which needs to be a prioritized in this type of research (Carmack & DeGroot, 2014).

## Results

The coding using to the *Meaning of Loss Codebook* (MLC) revealed that participants displayed a variety of meaning-making themes (see Table 2 for the frequency information for each of the categories within the MLC). The most prominent categories displayed by participants were negative affect, lack of understanding, missing the deceased, memories, and coping. Conversely, there were three categories within the MLC with zero instances in this sample: decedent preparation for death, meaning made (nonspecific), and no meaning.

Table 2  
*Frequency of MLC Categories*

Categories	Frequency of participants displaying code ( <i>n</i> = 50)	Percentage of participants displaying code
1. Valuing Life	2	4%
2. Live to the Fullest	1	2%
3. Impermanence	3	6%
4. Personal Growth	5	10%
5. Lifestyle Changes	2	4%
6. Family Bonds	3	6%
7. Valuing Relationships	1	2%
8. Compassion	5	10%
9. Coping	22	44%
10. Moving On	5	10%
11. Greater Perspective	1	2%
12. Acceptance	1	2%
13. Decedent Preparation for Death	0	0%

Table 2  
*Frequency of MLC Categories (continued)*

Categories	Frequency of participants displaying code ( <i>n</i> = 50)	Percentage of participants displaying code
14. Memories	22	44%
15. Time Together	10	20%
16. Affirmation of Deceased	10	20%
17. Release from Suffering	2	4%
18. Spirituality	15	30%
19. Identity as Bereaved Person	8	16%
20. Survivor Identity	7	14%
21. Emotionality	3	6%
22. Negative Affect	45	90%
23. Regret	10	10%
24. Missing the Deceased	27	54%
25. Lack of Understanding	30	60%
26. Lost Identity	7	14%
27. Lost Innocence	7	14%
28. Identity Change (Nonspecific)	16	32%
29. Meaning Made (Nonspecific)	0	0%
30. No Meaning	0	0%

Each prominent category for participants in this sample is explored below with verbatim quotes included as exemplars of the category.

## **Negative Affect**

This category represents a wide range of negative responses including emptiness, guilt, depression, or psychological distress (Gillies et al., 2014). Ninety percent of participants displayed one of more of these negative responses, making it the most prominent category. One participant described the emotional toll that walking by her deceased partner's workplace has had:

I have daily meltdowns on my walk to work. I have to park there because its assigned parking and I don't have a choice. Talk about pain and agony. By the time I get to work, I'm ready to go home. I thought it would get better with each passing day, but it doesn't it just gets worse.

Another participant was experiencing an abundance of guilt and self-hatred: "I hate myself and will keep punishing myself i will never allow myself to feel good or ever love or be loved again. I am so depressed. I hate myself and everything about me." Another described the overwhelming pain; "The pain is so heavy, so consuming, it seems never ending."

## **Lack of Understanding**

This category represents not yet finding meaning or giving up attempting to discover meaning and can "refer to confusion, frustration, resignation, or a process of continually asking why the loved one had to die" (Gillies et al., 2014, p. 212). Of the participants, 60% displayed a lack of understanding and a struggle to make-meaning of the death; an expected category given the nature of the death. One participant struggled with questions regarding thoughts of the loved one:

I would like to know what exactly goes into a mind that is suicidal. How come none of us picked up on it. Is he the greatest liar of all times, or was it his condition?? I'm confused. But seriously, what does one with suicidal thoughts

actually think about during their final hours? I guess we or I will never know until its my time to pass on and all of my questions will be answered.

Another participant had numerous unanswered questions regarding the death of the deceased:

Why did he have to do this to us? Why did he have to be so selfish and leave me alone to raise our daughter? I just can't do this anymore. I just wanted a steady life. A husband to love and love me and raise a family and be happy. Why was that to much to ask for that it all came crashing down? What did I do to deserve this?

### **Missing the Deceased**

The third most common theme, expressed by 54% of the participants, involved yearning for or missing the deceased (Gillies et al., 2014). One user repeatedly opened paragraphs with a statement of missing the partner:

So why? I miss him, I want to find him, I lost him. Oh he was...  
I miss him. I can't imagine finding anyone...  
Anyway, I think I am writing here because I am looking for [him]. I want to connect with him. I miss him.

Another participant wrote poetry for the deceased to express this theme:

Dear My Closest Friend  
"I'm writing because  
I miss you so much  
At night I'd always cry  
The stillness reminds me of  
When we first fell in love  
And I miss that so much."

### **Memories**

Many participants (44%) reflected on memories of the deceased, which could be either specific and/or general (Gillies et al., 2014). For one participant, there were reminders of her husband everywhere:

Everywhere I go in town reminds me of him. I would say to myself he was here with me, he was there and I remember us walking to the parking lot over there after a doctor appointment. Simple things like that.

Another participant sought refuge in the memories of his partner, “I’ve learned to focus on her smile a lot. Every time I begin to feel down and lonely, I remember happier times.”

### **Coping**

Many participants (44%) displayed a reaction that was understood as “adaptively responding to the loss” (Gillies et al., 2014, p. 212). These were general or specific actions or events that demonstrated an adaptive coping response, with the exception of moving on or acceptance that were not coded under this theme as these have separate codes. One participant displayed signs of coping, without going into specific details; “I can pinpoint now certain things that started the road to healing and I am grateful now because I can see something different ahead. Something like peace and hope.” Other participants stated general statements related to coping, such as “I’ve been doing ok the past couple of months” or “I have been doing well, moving forward on all aspects of my life.”

### **Categories without Instances**

There were categories in the MLC that were not displayed in the sample for this study: decedent preparation for death, meaning made (nonspecific), and no meaning. A suicide death is usually perceived as sudden and unexpected, therefore it is understandable that survivors do not write about the decedent being prepared for his or her death. Furthermore, while the participants in this study struggled with the meaning-

making process, they did not write about themes to fit the no meaning category or the nonspecific meaning made category.

### **Differences in Samples**

The MLC was established using a broad sample of grieving people, consisting of a variety of relationships to the deceased, including partners, a wide age range (17 to 60 years), and numerous modes of death (e.g., natural, unanticipated, perinatal) (Gillies et al., 2014). Due to this, it was a meaningful comparative group to assess meaning of loss processes. Chi-square analyses were conducted using MLC codes as the layer to determine if participants in this study differed from the sample in Gillies and colleagues' codebook study. It should be noted that expected cell counts were calculated prior to analysis and those with expected cell counts less than five were not included in the analysis. Using the Bonferonni correction for multiple comparisons, the alpha level  $\alpha=0.004$  was used. The results are listed in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Results of Chi-Square Analysis*

Code	$\chi^2$	$\Phi^2$
1. Valuing life	6.28	.030
3. Impermanence	2.67	.013
4. Personal growth	10.36 *	.049
5. Lifestyle changes	5.19	.024
6. Family bonds	7.46	.035
7. Valuing relationships	4.94	.023
16. Affirmation of the Deceased	19.04 **	.090
17. Release from Suffering	2.86	.013
18. Spirituality	0.32	.002

Table 3  
*Results of Chi-Square Analysis (continued)*

Code	$\chi^2$	$\Phi^2$
22. Negative Affect	79.65 **	.376
24. Missing the Deceased	81.27 **	.383
25. Lack of Understanding	54.27 **	.256
30. No Meaning	14.29 *	.068

*Note.* Significance at  $p = .001$  is denoted by \*. Significance at  $p < .001$  is denoted by \*\*.

There were 7 categories – 4, 14, 16, 22, 24, 25, and 30 – that were significantly different between the sample used in this study and the Gillies and colleagues' (2014) codebook study. In categories 4 (personal growth) and 30 (no meaning) participants in this study did not display these categories as frequently as those in the codebook study. The opposite was found for categories 14 (memories), 16 (affirmation of deceased), 22 (negative affect), 24 (missing the deceased), and 25 (lack of understanding); the participants in this study were more likely to display these categories than the sample used to create the codebook.

### **Relationship with Time**

Correlational analyses were conducted on posts coded in three most common categories (negative affect, lack of understanding, and missing the deceased) to determine their relationship with time. Time was defined as time of post since join date on the forum. Frequency of coding for negative affect was significantly related with time,  $r = -.21, p = .024, n = 116$  (one post did not have a user join date available). Therefore, as time of post date from the participant's join date increased, he or she wrote less about negative affect, such as distress and emptiness. The categories lack of understanding and

missing the deceased were not significantly related to time. It is important to note that this time measure does not necessarily indicate time since the death; users could have joined at any time after the death of their partners.

## Discussion

The present study explored the meaning-making process of survivors of partner suicide through the analysis of posts in an online grief support forum. Based on previous research marking the importance of this cognitive aspect of grief, it was anticipated that there would be clear meaning-making themes in these naturally occurring samples of writing and that coding this text using the *Meaning of Loss Codebook* (Gillies et al., 2014) would provide a comprehensive exploration of this aspect of grief in this sample. The results of this study suggest meaning-making is a cognitive component of the grief experience that clearly exists as a natural and active part of individuals' processing of the loss. Furthermore, there were core themes associated with meaning-making after the loss of a partner to suicide that were experienced by this sample at a higher frequency than expected as a result of other forms of loss, with other themes experienced at a significantly lower frequency.

The majority of participants in this study expressed psychological distress associated with the suicide death of their partners. This is consistent with previous literature, which suggests that death of a partner by suicide puts survivors at risk for elevated levels of depression and, sometimes, at risk of a complicated grief process (DeGroot & Kollen, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2004). The distressing experiences of survivors were the most narrated and discussed component of the grief process for the sample in this study. Furthermore, surviving the suicide death of a partner presents unique experiences of negative affect, which were not noted to the same degree in the more diverse sample of grieving individuals used in the creation of the MLC. One component of the negative affect experienced by participants was guilt regarding the

death of their partners. The expressed guilt by users of the online forum in this study may be a reaction to the anger that may be felt towards partners for their perceived choice to leave, as the death by suicide can be a difficult event to understand. Another explanation is that survivors' guilt is engendered by a perception that they did not foresee the suicide or did not stop the chain of events leading to the death. This aligns with the research of Clark and Goldney (1995), which suggested that suicide survivors' guilt stems from the ignorance of signs of suicide ideation displayed by the deceased preceding the suicide. Psychological distress may also be a reaction to survivors' perceptions of not being sufficient as a partner and, therefore, blaming themselves for the suicide. Blame is a common theme in survivors of suicide (Sveen & Walby, 2008).

The current study aligns with previous literature that strongly suggests that successful meaning-making is linked to a more positive grief outcome (e.g., Park, 2008). Much like the research of Currier and colleagues (2006), which suggested that unsuccessful meaning-making is associated with complicated grief (i.e., higher scores on the *Inventory of Complicated Grief*), the participants in this study most strongly demonstrated negative affect concurrent with a struggle to making-meaning of the suicide death of their partners. The survivors of partner suicide who were included in this study resemble Dransart's (2013) description of a *vulnerable type* of survivor with an unrelenting sense of pain and confusion regarding the death. Although the results of this study cannot determine if the negative affect was a result or precedent of the struggle to make sense, it is clear there is a relationship between these two processes within an individual's grief experience after suicide partner loss.

Almost half of the participants wrote about some form of coping in response to the loss. Forum users expressed they were coping or “started the road to healing”, which can also let other forum users know that things can get better. Consequently, the users provided support by explaining their own coping experiences during their grief. Furthermore, using an online support forum can be understood as a method of coping in itself. These participants had sought out information or support on the online forum, which is considered as a method of social support coping (Terhorst & Mitchell, 2012). Regardless, expressing how an individual was coping was a prominent meaning-making theme in the sample used in this study.

Other common categories within the posts of participants in this study revolved around yearning for the deceased and reflecting on memories of the deceased. Although these categories occurred in a more diverse sample of grieving individuals (Gillies et al., 2014), they occurred at a higher frequency in this sample with close to half of the survivors of partner suicide in this study displaying both of these categories. A possible explanation is that survivors use memories as a means to bring about comfort after the death. Additionally, intrusive memories can be expected with a traumatic death (i.e., sudden and potentially violent) and it could be that these types of thoughts are used to replay the events leading up to the suicide. By recreating the self-narrative to include the suicide through processing memories, individuals may attempt to understand the circumstances of the death, thus make-meaning of their loss. Although participants struggled with meaning-making, they may have been actively attempting to lower their confusion about the suicide by replaying memories. Although there are distinct themes within the meaning-making process of survivors of partner suicide used in this sample,

the themes are connected by a challenging grief process; thus, these themes may interact in many ways while individuals continue their grieving.

Interestingly, the category negative affect was negatively related to time; participants wrote about their distress less as time since joining the support forum for survivors of partner suicide increased. Although it is possible that the participants were experiencing less distress, it is also possible that they did not feel as though it was as necessary to express it in their writings. It could be that the potency of negative affect eased as time progressed. Contrasting with negative affect's relationship with time, the categories lack of understanding and missing the deceased were not correlated with time. This peculiar finding seemingly contradicts previous links with successful meaning-making and psychological distress (Neimeyer et al., 2006); this study demonstrated that negative affect lessened with time and lack of understanding did not, which demonstrates an intricate link between these meaning-making themes.

It is clear that meaning-making is a spontaneous and active process; participants freely sought out online forums and wrote posts that were abundant with meaning-making themes. The suicide death of a partner is an event that has special relevance to survivors, and must be combined with existing meaning systems and self-narratives to be coherent (Bruner, 2003) and provide context for future events (Neimeyer & Stewart, 1996). Based on this research, and consistent with the notions of Neimeyer (2002), suicide is an event that presents unique difficulties relevant to integration of the incident into existing meaning systems.

The MLC (Gillies et al., 2014) is a framework for identifying meaning-making themes that can effectively be implemented for data analysis. This is especially true for

first-hand narrative accounts of grief, such as the posts of survivors of partner suicide in this study. The MLC proved to be comprehensive, as no new meaning-making themes emerged in this study. Furthermore, the MLC effectively identified prominent themes within this specific sample (e.g., negative affect, lack of understanding, missing the deceased, memories, affirmation of the deceased); these were categories that were more common in this sample when compared to a broader grieving cohort. Conversely, two categories, personal growth and no meaning, were less frequent in the sample used in this study compared to that used in the MLC's creation. Grief after partner suicide death presents challenges that may not easily facilitate personal growth. In the face of this adversity, maturation of character may be more difficult when compared to other types of loss, especially given the unexpected and potentially violent or traumatic nature of the death. While participants struggled to make-meaning of the death, they did not directly state that they had made no meaning, signifying that they were no longer engaged in the process. Another category that was absent from the sample used in this study was decedent preparation for death, which was not unexpected as suicide is most often experienced as an unexpected death.

There were limitations in this study. The posts used for analysis in this study were those that initiated a thread. The majority of threads in this analysis did have responses to the participants' initial writing and the original poster had the option to, and at times did, post in response to what other forum users wrote within a thread. An analysis that includes these additional posts by participants may provide more insight into the process of meaning-making that occurs in response to others in these survivors of partner suicide. A second limitation is the possibility of selection bias, as differences

may exist for those who seek a support forum for survivors of partner suicide from those who do not seek this form of support. A generational technology gap may also exist in those who sought online support for their grief and those who do not. As younger generations become adeptly involved in the online world, using online grief support, such as the one used in this study, will likely continue to increase in popularity.

Meaning-making plays a vital role in grief and effective meaning-making is linked to less complicated grief and lowered risk of depression (Currier et al., 2006). Although survivors of suicide display various meaning-making responses to grief (Dransart, 2013), the survivors of partner suicide in this sample struggled to make-meaning. Based on the role of meaning-making in adaptive functioning within grief and the struggle the participants in this study displayed, provision of resources to facilitate meaning-making may prove useful. There is potential for information online to be unhelpful and sometimes harmful; thus, moderators exist on online support forums, such as the one used in this study, to ensure users are involved in a safe online environment. This is important, as survivors of partner suicide already struggle with psychological distress in response to the death. Due to the challenges in the grief experience of survivors of partner suicide, psychoeducation regarding the integral component of meaning-making within grief should be a focus for grief counsellors, especially those working with suicide survivors.

Future research could investigate other online forms of spontaneous writing by survivors of partner suicide. With the growth of online videos, such as those on YouTube and other social media outlets, analysing public video accounts of the grief experience could provide a modern analysis of the range of experiences and expressions

of grief. By using video data, researchers may be able to use non-verbal cues to enrich the analysis.

Meaning-making can be understood as a spontaneous and active cognitive process that is a primary component of grief. The challenges associated with grief as a result of partner suicide loss, such as lack of understanding and psychological distress were common among participants in this study and were evidence of their struggle to make meaning of their loss. Given the importance of this aspect of adjustment to loss, these findings deepen the understanding of this component of grief and inform the provision of support for those grieving a partner who died by suicide.

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