

THE ROLE OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN BEREAVED PARENTS ASSOCIATED WITH A SELF-HELP GROUP: COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to explore the relationship of parental bereavement to meaning and purpose in life. Specifically, the study attempted to: 1) investigate the relationship of bereaved parents' perception of purpose in life, and specific parent, child, death, and grief characteristics; and 2) provide descriptive information on the role of meaning in parental bereavement. Two-hundred and three volunteers obtained through Compassionate Friends newsletters in seven cities in various parts of the United States completed a questionnaire consisting of the Purpose in Life Test, the Grief Experience Inventory and questions on meaning. Analysis of the results indicate that lower purpose in life for bereaved parents in this sample is related to less time since the death, loss by suicide, loss of an only child, and loss of more than one child. The descriptive data also indicates that a crisis of meaning may follow the death of a child. Implications for resolution are discussed.

The death of a child is one of the most traumatic events that can strike an individual. Parental bereavement has frequently been described as the most difficult adult bereavement [1, 2]. Studies indicate that parental grief is severe [1], long-lasting [3], and complicated [4]. In fact, some authors question whether or not parental grief can be adequately described by existing bereavement models [5-7]. They suggest that the death of a child presents some particularly difficult challenges to the bereaved parent.

One challenge of parental bereavement is the crisis of meaning that may follow the death of a child [8-10]. In late twentieth century America the death of a child is unnatural and untimely, reversing the expected order of life events. A child holds multiple meanings for a parent: a connection with the past, investment in the future, and an extension of the self. When a child dies the meanings and purposes

associated with the child are often shaken. The bereaved parent may experience a loss of previous assumptions about the meaning and purpose of life.

Existential writers suggest that the loss of meaning may lead to despair [11]. Viktor Frankl believes that the "will to meaning" is central to the experience of being human [12]. According to him, the absence of meaning results in an "existential vacuum," a state of hopelessness and lack of motivation. Frankl suggested that human beings can endure even the worst of conditions as long as they have not lost their sense of purpose or meaning.

A major bereavement may challenge life purpose and meaning. If the dead person was an important part of the structure of meaning, the death may precipitate a collapse of that structure [13]. New purposes and meaning cannot be adopted instantly [13]. Consequently, the bereaved may experience the state of "existential vacuum" described by Frankl [12].

Because the death of a child challenges a basic assumption about the order of things, it can threaten the structure of meaning for the surviving parent. How this crisis is resolved may have important implications for outcomes of the grief process [11, 14]. Silver and Wortman suggest that certain losses are difficult to place in a meaningful perspective [14]. Others believe that the collapse of fundamental meaning structures through bereavement can be a catalyst for positive change [15, 16].

The results of two qualitative studies have suggested that parents of terminally-ill children undergo a search for meaning [8, 9]. Until recently, however, there was no quantitative data on the relationship of purpose and meaning to parental bereavement.

An Israeli study [17] assessed purpose and meaning in two groups of war-bereaved parents using the Purpose of Life Test [18] and Meaning in Life Scale [19]. Scores for the bereaved parents were significantly lower than scores for a control group. However, there was no difference between the scores of the two groups of bereaved parents—one group had been bereaved for two years, the other for eleven years. Florian suggested that the results of the study indicate that parental bereavement leads to a state of meaninglessness and that this state does not change with time [17].

Florian's study used a specific group of bereaved parents, those who had lost a son in active military service. In a recent Israeli study Rubin found more extreme grief symptoms in war-bereaved parents than in parents who had lost a young child from other causes [20]. The present study drew on a different population of bereaved parents. Participants were recruited through newsletters sent out by Compassionate Friends, a self-help organization for bereaved parents. Thus, the participants had some exposure to the philosophy and goals of this organization. Compassionate Friends was founded in England in 1969 to provide a structure through which bereaved parents could offer understanding, friendship, support, and care to other bereaved parents [21]. The first United States chapter was organized in 1972, and since then over 400 chapters have been established

throughout the United States [22]. Two types of services are provided by most local chapters: a newsletter and monthly meetings. These services are available to all parents who have lost a child. There is no formal membership in the organization. Some parents just receive newsletters. Others attend one or more meetings. Still others continue with the group to give support to the newly bereaved.

Antze believes that self-help groups have ideologies—a specialized system of teachings that represents the cumulative wisdom of member experiences and structures the self-help process [23]. Sherman applied the concept of ideologies to Compassionate Friends and suggested that this self-help group has an ideology, represented by a system of teachings and beliefs that is seen as a constructive way for bereaved parents to respond to personal, family, and social problems [24].

The stated goal of the Compassionate Friends is "to support and aid parents in the positive resolution of the grief experience" [22, p. 1]. Grieving is encouraged, but an attempt is also made to reconceptualize grief and put it in an adaptive perspective [25]. The focus of Compassionate Friends is positive—dealing effectively in the present and opening up to the future [25]. Compassionate Friends offers solutions to concrete problems facing bereaved parents by identifying a body of experiential knowledge [25]. It also offers hope through the example of parents who are successfully coping with their grief and loss [25].

A study by Videka-Sherman explored the relationship between coping, adjustment, and the influence of participation in Compassionate Friends [26]. Those parents who were more involved reported a more positive evaluation of their growth. However, depression scores did not differ according to involvement.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the relationship of meaning and purpose in life to parental bereavement using a group of parents who had an association with Compassionate Friends. A series of Likert-type questions were used to gather descriptive data on the crisis of meaning related to the death of a child. Grief characteristics of the bereaved parents were assessed by a grief inventory. Finally, an instrument designed to measure purpose in life was used to investigate the relationship between bereaved parents' perception of purpose in life and specific parent, child, and death characteristics.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 203 bereaved parents from four different geographic regions of the United States who volunteered to participate in the study. Forty-two percent of the participants were from the Midwest, 21 percent from the West, 20 percent from the South, and 17 percent from the Northeast.

The participants were predominately female (78%). The age range was wide (22 to 83 years), with a mean age of forty-six years. Ninety-eight percent of the

participants were Anglo-White, 76 percent had family incomes of more than \$25,000, and 95 percent were at least high school graduates. Religious preference was as follows: 42 percent Protestant, 32 percent Catholic, 10 percent None, and 7 percent Jewish.

The ages of the children who had died ranged from zero to forty-eight years. Sixty-five percent were male. The time since death ranged from one month to over forty years (35% up to 24 months; 28% from 24 to 48 months; 37% from 48 months up). For 49 percent of the participants the death came without warning. Thirty-three percent had some warning, and 23 percent knew about the possibility disease for a few months or more. Accidents accounted for 45 percent of the deaths, for a few months or more. Accidents accounted for 45 percent of the deaths, for a few months or more. Accidents accounted for 45 percent of the deaths, for a few months or more. Accidents accounted for 45 percent of the deaths,

Measures

Questionnaire on Meaning

The Questionnaire on Meaning was developed specifically for this study in order to gather descriptive data on the crisis of meaning following parental bereavement. The instrument consists of five Likert-type rating questions. Participants are asked to rate statements related to meaning on a five-point scale ranging from "disagree strongly" to "agree strongly." The Questionnaire on Meaning was critiqued by a group of bereaved parents and modified accordingly.

Grief Experience Inventory (GEI)

The GEI is a self-report instrument consisting of 135 True-False items designed to assess experiences, feelings, symptoms, and behaviors of individuals during the grief process. The GEI has nine bereavement scales that measure discrete components of the grief experience: despair, anger, guilt, social isolation, loss of control, rumination, depersonalization, somatization, and death anxiety.

The split-half reliability of the GEI scales ranges from .52 to .84 [27]. Only those scales with adequate reliability were used in this study. The GEI can distinguish mourners from nonmourners on all scales [27]. It also can distinguish among those who have lost a child, parent, and spouse [1].

Purpose of Life Test (PIL)

The PIL is a twenty-point Likert scale based on Frankl's conception of an existential vacuum and designed to measure perceived purpose in life. On each item, position four is designated as "neutral," and different descriptive terms are given positions one and seven. For example, the first item reads: "I am usually . . . ;" and position 1 is defined as "completely bored," while position 7 is "exuberant, enthusiastic." High scores on the PIL reflect a greater experienced purpose.

The reliability of the PIL is strong. Crumbaugh and Maholock [18] reported the split-half reliability to be .90. A test-retest coefficient of .83 was reported by Meirer and Edwards [28]. The validity of the PIL has been assessed in research with a broad range of populations [18]. It has been shown to discriminate levels of occupational meaningfulness [29]; high levels of purpose among applicants to a religious order [30], and low purpose among prison inmates [31] and alcoholics [32].

Procedure

Requests for participants were published in newsletters sent out by chapters of Compassionate Friends in seven cities located in four different geographic regions of the United States. Research packets were sent to parents who responded to the request. The packets consisted of the GEI, the PIL, the Questionnaire on Meaning, a demographic questionnaire, and several open-ended questions related to meaning.

Requests were received for 364 questionnaires and 233 parents returned the completed materials. Three questionnaires could not be used. To avoid a confounding variable, twenty-seven spouses of those who had already returned the materials were not included in the data analysis. The 64 percent response rate for this study compares favorably with other studies of parental bereavement: Rando [4], 70 percent; Sanders [1], 61 percent; Shanfield, Swain and Benjamin [33], 53 percent; and Lehman and colleagues [3], 45 percent.

RESULTS

The Questionnaire on Meaning—the results were as follows: "When my child died I felt that my life was no longer worth living." (Agree: 58%, Neutral: 13%, Disagree: 29%); "At this point in time my life is worth living." (Agree: 74%, Neutral: 20%, Disagree: 6%); "My child's death changed what I believe to be the meaning of life." (Agree: 77%, Neutral: 11%, Disagree: 12%); "In spite of the pain and grief of my child's death, I find that I have, in some sense, "reinvested" in life." (Agree: 57%, Neutral: 22%, Disagree: 21%); and "From my personal struggles with my child's death I have grown in some ways." (Agree: 85%, Neutral: 7%, Disagree: 8%).

A Pearson product-moment correlation was used to assess the relationship between the scores on the PIL and the scales of the GEI. The results show moderate and moderately high negative correlations between PIL scores and GEI scales (Table 1).

A series of *t* tests compared the GEI scores of mothers and fathers. Significant differences were found for all grief scales used in the study. Mean scores of mothers on the GEI were higher than the mean scores of fathers on the following scales: despair, anger, control, ruminate, depersonalization, and somatic.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Between the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and Scales of the Grief Experience Inventory (GEI)

GEI Scale	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Despair	-0.57	.0001
Depersonalization	-0.40	.0001
Anger	-0.38	.0001
Ruminate	-0.32	.0001
Somatic	-0.32	.0001
Control	-0.27	.0001

A series of *t* tests and analyses of variance were used to compare the scores on cause of death, length of warning, sex of the child, sex of the parent, previous loss of a child, surviving children, and religious preference.

Significant differences were found for the time since the death of the child. Time since death was classified into three time periods: the first included time up to two years, the second two to four years, and the third four years or more. The time periods were chosen because studies by Rando [4] and Fish [34] have suggested that critical differences in grief may be found in the three time periods. A two-way analysis of variance yielded a significant difference for time since death ($F = 7.15, p < .001$), but no significant differences between male and female parents or interaction between sex of parent and time since death. A follow up procedure for adjusted means indicated a significant difference between the PIL scores in the first time period and those in the third time period. There was also a significant difference between the second and the third time period. The difference between the first and second time period was not significant at the .05 level. PIL scores were lower in the first and second time period than they were in the third, indicating less purpose in life for bereaved parents in the first four years of bereavement.

A significant difference was found for PIL scores and the cause of the child's death. Three categories of cause were used: accident, disease, and suicide. A one-way analysis of variance for the cause of death was significant ($F = 4.03, p < .02$). The follow up procedure indicated a significant difference between the disease and suicide categories at the .05 level. The difference between the other categories was not significant. The scores of parents whose children had died by means of suicide were lower than the scores of parents whose children died from disease, indicating less purpose in life for suicide-bereaved parents than for parents whose children had died from disease.

Two other death characteristics yielded significant results: the death of an only child and the death of more than one child. The results of a *t* test indicated a

significant difference ($t = 2.26, p < .03$) in the scores of parents who had experienced the death of an only child. The scores of parents who lost an only child were lower than those of parents with surviving children. The results of a *t* test comparing score of parents who experienced a multiple loss and those who had lost one child was also significant ($t = 2.13, p < .05$). Parents who had lost more than one child had lower scores than parents who had lost one child. The results indicate less purpose in life for parents who lose an only child and more than one child.

No significant differences were found for PIL scores of bereaved parents on the following variables: sex of the child, sex of the parent, length of warning of death (none, some, and a few months or more), religious preference (a particular religious preference indicated vs none indicated), and number of meetings of Compassionate Friends attended (0, 1 through 6, and more than 6).

DISCUSSION

The present study drew on a specific population of bereaved parents, those with some association to Compassionate Friends, and thus can not be generalized to all bereaved parents. The study is also limited by the method of data collection. Volunteers for research in parental bereavement probably exclude two extremes—those who are experiencing difficulty coping, and those who have put the loss behind them [20]. In addition, the sample includes a disproportionate number of mothers, and parents in high income levels. The sample obtained by Videka-Sherman had similar characteristics, and may reflect the association with Compassionate Friends [26]. Another interesting, although unexplained, characteristic of the sample is the high percentage of parents who had lost sons (65%). In spite of the limitations of the sample, however, the results do affirm the existence of a relationship between parental bereavement and meaning and purpose in life. Fifty-eight percent of the parents in the study reported feeling that their life was not worth living at the time their child died. Seventy-seven percent said that their child's death changed what they believed to be the meaning of life. Significant negative correlations were found between purpose in life and grief scales of the GEI. Lower levels of purpose in life were associated with less time since bereavement, death by suicide, loss of more than one child, and death of an only child.

The lower levels of purpose in life in first four years of bereavement, as compared to later years of bereavement, found in this study contradict the findings on the Florian study [17]. In that study two groups of parents—two and eleven years after the death—received similar scores of the Purpose in Life Test. Differences in the bereaved parents who participated in the two studies may help explain the contradictory results.

Florian's participants had lost their sons in active military service. This type of death may be particularly difficult to resolve. Another Israeli study by Rubin

reported more extreme grief symptoms in war-bereaved parents than in parents of young children who had died from other causes [20]. The lack of differences in purpose in life at different stages of bereavement found by Florian may be related to the nature of the grief experience for this population of bereaved parents.

The bereaved parents in the present study were recruited through Compassionate Friends newsletters. Seventy-six percent of the participants had attended meetings of Compassionate Friends. The rest had received and read Compassionate Friends newsletters. Thus, the parents in this study had been exposed to the ideology of Compassionate Friends, focusing on the possibility of a positive resolution of the grief process. It is possible that their grief process had been affected by their contact with Compassionate Friends. Alternatively, it is possible that parents who find themselves in agreement with the Compassionate Friends view of the grief process continue to receive and read the newsletters.

The lower purpose in life for suicide bereaved parents, parents who lost more than one child, and parents who lost an only child would suggest that certain types of child deaths may be more difficult to place in a meaningful perspective. Suicide has been considered to be the most traumatic form of death [35]. The suicide of a child may present special challenges to the parental role of protector.

Parents in the study, when asked what gave their life meaning after the death of their child, frequently mentioned surviving children. Thus, the death of a second child could create another crisis of meaning. Also, if the parent had lost an only child, an important focus of meaning would not be available to him or her.

The results of the present study suggest that the death of a child can create an intense and long-lasting crisis of meaning for the bereaved parent. However, the results also indicate that recovery from the crisis may be a possibility. Florian's study of Israeli war-bereaved parents had presented a grim picture of the effect of parental bereavement on purpose in life: a "sense of overwhelming life meaninglessness" [17, p. 110], unmitigated by time. The results of this study hold out more hope for the future of bereaved parents. Fifty-seven percent of the participants reported that they had in some sense "reinvested" in life. Seventy-four percent reported that their life was worth living.

Although the present study points to the possibility of a regained sense of purpose, it also suggests some obstacles. The higher levels of purpose in life only surfaced in parents who had been bereaved for four years or more. Thus, resolution needs to be viewed as a possibility, but one involving time. The results also suggest that resolution may be more difficult for certain types of parental bereavement: loss through suicide, loss of an only child, and loss of more than one child.

Both aspects of the crisis of meaning—the crisis and the opportunity for reinvestment—need to be considered when dealing with parental bereavement. Those helping bereaved parents, whether friends or professionals, need to aware of both the magnitude of the crisis and the possibility of resolution. The very real

and heart-breaking trauma of the death needs to be validated and acknowledged, as does time necessary for healing. At the same time, the possibility of resolution should be affirmed and explored.

The results of the study seem to reflect the ideology of Compassionate Friends—both the validation of the difficulty of the grief process and the possibility of resolution. However, the effect of the association with Compassionate Friends on purpose in life needs to be investigated further. Although significant differences were not found between the levels of purpose in life and number of meetings of Compassionate Friends attended, there may be other variables, such as degree of involvement in the organization and intensity of affiliation, that are related to purpose in life. There is also a need for a study of the purpose in life of bereaved parents wider than the population used by Florian [17] but not associated with Compassionate Friends.

The present study did not find any differences between the purpose in life of mothers and fathers. Florian also found no gender differences for his bereaved parents [17]. However, there was a significant difference between the grief scores of the males and females in this study. Thus, fathers, when dealing with the death of a child, report less expressions of grief than mothers but similar levels of purpose in life.

The absence of differences between fathers and mothers on purpose in life raises an interesting question. There has been an assumption in bereavement research that mothers are more vulnerable to the death of a child than fathers [36]. Is it possible that this assumption only holds for the traditional bereavement outcome measures—measures of grief and psychiatric symptoms? The results of this study suggest that bereaved fathers may be as susceptible to a loss of purpose in life as bereaved mothers. Research using different outcome measures might give us new insight into fathers' reaction to the death of their child.

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