

# Giving Meaning to the Meaningless- Exploring Perceptions of Parents That Have Lost Their Children

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## Abstract

Losing a child is one of the worst and most painful experiences that an individual can experience. Researches have been focused lately on meaning-making processes considering this process as crucial in coping with grief. This study aimed to explore how parents give meaning to the death of their child. The study was conducted in Albania. A convenient sample was used for participants to take part in the study. Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with parents who have lost a child. The parents interviewed have lost their children starting from 2 to 15 years ago. Deaths occurred due to different causes such as car accidents, terminal illnesses, heart attacks etc. After coding the interviews, themes were identified and further explored by the researcher. Several themes and sub-themes were identified including *regrets and guilt*, *God's will and coping through religion*, *continuing bonds and relationship with death*. The study confirmed some of the main findings of the previous studies on meaning making and grief. Parents who lack meaning in the death of their child showed also features of complicated bereavement and a higher tendency toward regrets and guilt. The study suggests that in an attempt to find meaning, often parents get involved in rumination states where regrets and guilt are the most prevalent feelings. The study also explored the relationship of the bereaved parents with death and noted that this relationship changes. In some of the cases of more severe and complicated grief, suicide was seriously considered during the first phases of grief.

**Keywords:** grief; meaning – making; benefits – finding.

## 1. Introduction

Losing a child is one of the most painful, devastating and traumatic events that an individual can experience. Rando defined the loss of the child as “the worst loss” [1].

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Losing a child is an event that contrasts the natural flow of life where parents are supposed to die before children do [2]. The evolutionary theories imply that there is a defensive and protective role that parents have to play and there is a lot of guilt and self-blame to be processed after a child's death for not having been able to fulfil this role. One of the key mediators during parental grief is meaning reconstruction [3]. Meaning reconstruction refers to the psychological and behavioural efforts people make in giving meaning to the loss. According to Neimeyer et. al [3, 4, 5] meaning reconstruction is composed of two main processes: sense-making and benefit-finding. Several important themes compose these two pillars of meaning reconstruction, including but not limited to: continuing bonds, personal growth, sense of peace, meaningless, valuing life etc. Different studies have identified several themes that arise in parents that have lost a child when it comes to sense making and benefit finding. Some of the most recurrent themes related to sense-making in different studies are: death of the child as God's will, fulfilment of purpose in life, afterlife themes, human existence as something fragile and imperfect, fate and destiny, biological and medical explanations, parents role or child behaviour, end of suffering etc [6, 7]. On the other hand, some of the most common themes related to benefit finding are: increased compassion and empathy after the loss, personal improvement, deeper appreciation of life and relationships, improved relationships with others, altruistic behaviours, changed priorities, stronger coping skills, reduced anxiety and stress for everyday challenges, improvement of lifestyle, enhanced spirituality and strengthened religious beliefs [6, 7]. Also sharing stories, feelings, and dreams related to the deceased are all ways to build significance and structure in a world that has been shattered by the loss [8]. The sense of purpose and the meaning associated with the event is a moderating factor on the road to recovery from grief in parents that have lost a child [9]. The lack of sense of purpose is related to high levels of depression among bereaved parents [9]. From the analysis, a higher sense of purpose in life also predicted better health. One important finding of this study was also associated with the fact that couples who had more children after the death of the child showed less marital disruption. According to the authors, having children was one of the ways to give meaning to the death and to find purpose in life. However, parents find it extremely hard to make sense of their loss and are not able to find any benefit from the loss. According to one of the studies mentioned above [6] around 45 % of the sample of the research could not make sense of the loss, and only 21% were able to identify benefits in the death of the child. This study concluded that those who were not able to reconstruct the meaning of the loss or were not able to find benefits in the loss were the ones that experienced higher symptoms of grief and major risks for a complicated bereavement process. Also, different authors suggest that contrary to the Western beliefs about grief as an interior and intrapsychic phenomenon, the process of grieving is largely influenced by how society perceives this process [5]. This makes grieving processes strongly linked to the cultural context of the bereaved person. In this perspective it is interesting to explore deeper the role that different cultural beliefs play in coping with grief including rituals related to the bereavement [10], social support [11], beliefs in afterlife and religious coping and attachment to God [12, 13, 14].

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This study was conducted in the period between May 2019 – November 2019. Twenty parents participated in this study, 13 of them were females and 7 of the interviewed were males. The parents interviewed have lost their children starting from 2 to 15 years ago. A convenient sample was used for participants to take part in the study. Twenty in depth interviews were conducted. Deaths occurred due to different causes such as car accidents,

terminal illnesses, heart attacks etc. Among the accidental deaths, two of them came as a result of drowning (one of the bodies was never found) and two of the deceased died in car accidents. The others died due to illnesses related to cancer or other illnesses and complications of poliomyelitis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings coming from the interviews. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher. This process helped the researcher to initiate the interpretation process from the moment when interviews were transcribed. During the second phase of data processing, all interviews were coded by the researcher. Codes were grouped into categories and then combined into themes and sub-themes. Thematic analysis implies that the researcher can go back and forth between data and themes and this process allowed the researcher to remove certain themes or to re-categorize them into sub-themes.

### **3. Results**

From the analysis of the interviews conducted for this study, there were identified several themes and sub-themes.

#### ***3.1 Regrets and guilt***

One of the main themes emerging from interviews is regret. Regrets are centred around two main sub-themes:

- a) what the parent could have done to prevent the child's death and
- b) regrets related to the quality of life of the child.

Regrets related to the way the child lived their life are manifested in two main forms: regrets linked to the interrupted life stages of the deceased or in other words 'how would the person have been if they would have lived long enough' and secondly, regrets related to how the parents fulfilled or did not fulfil the needs of the child.

'I have done everything for my daughter, but I would have felt better if she would have been married and had children – I think I would have felt more complete.'

Another parent remembers not being able to fulfil some of the needs of the child:

...I remember... He used to come from school, he was an excellent student, and he was asking me 'Daddy can you buy me a new coat?'. I was not able to buy it because I did not have enough money at that time. Every time I buy new clothes for myself or for other members of the family, I always remember this moment when I was not able to fulfil his need (weeping). Regrets seems an important part of the grief process. Often when parents are asked about potential regrets, they start crying or weeping during the interviews. Sometimes, regrets take the form of guilt that impedes the parent to live a good life. Guilt also may take two forms: guilt related to the quality of the life of the child, or guilt related to the perceived responsibility of the parent in causing the death of the child. One of the parents says:

‘I can’t forgive myself, she was an angel, but I used to beat her. When life was tough for me, I used to vent on her. She did not deserve this; she was an angel (crying). I have cursed myself: God please send me cancer and take my life. She was a wonderful child, and she did not deserve this. I just could not forgive myself for beating her.’

### **3.2 *God’s will***

Religious beliefs and coping through religion emerge several times during the interviews. Often, bereaved parents turn to religion as comfort that helps them deal with the mystery of the death of their child and the meaningless surrounding this. Other times faith in God is not only a way of explaining and building the meaning of the event but also the only reason to live and maintain mental integrity. One of the participants says:

‘I am amazed that I am still alive... I praise the great Lord who gave me strength... He was the only one to help me, he was keeping me sane, otherwise I could have gone crazy’. Faith and the belief in afterlife is sometimes perceived as the only thing preventing a parent from not committing suicide: ‘I was thinking of committing suicide, but religious people say that you cannot meet your loved ones in the afterlife if you commit suicide. I am not a practicing religious person, but I was thinking what if this is true?’

### **3.3 *Continuing bonds***

Participants in the study find different ways to continue the bonds with their deceased child. Photos, anniversaries, personal items, clothes, rooms etc are only some of the ‘tools’ that help parents continue having their children in their life. One of the parents says:

‘When I was working, I used to keep his photos on the working table, his books on the other side and some chocolates that help me cope with the bitter emotions.’

One of the parents says:

‘His photos are all through the entire house since the first day when the tragedy happened – I have laminated each photo and put them on the frame.’ Another interviewed parent says: ‘If you look at my house there are photos everywhere of my daughter, I have turned my house into a shrine... Maybe somebody will perceive this as not normal, but to me is the most normal thing – I look at the photos and I am content, I speak to them, I meditate and reflect...’ Projecting feelings onto another person that may resemble the deceased child is one of the ways the bonds continue. These feelings are directed toward the survived children, nephews or nieces, or even strangers. One of the parents says ‘I used to work in an office where we used to issue documents and we were in continuous contact with people. When young people came to asks for documents and were at the same age that Arian (the deceased’s child name) was supposed to be or they physically resembled him, I served them immediately and I was trying to be helpful to them’. Other ways bereaved parents continue the bonds is through donating clothes or personal things to other people who resemble the deceased child; caring and showing love to other young people as if they were their deceased child etc.

### **3.4 Relationship with death**

A major theme emerging is also the relationship that parents now have with death after their child is deceased. Often, death is considered as a way to deal or to escape the immense pain they feel. “I said to the gravedigger, ‘open that grave again, open it. I want to go with my child.’ But he did not open it (burst in tears).” Parents also considered suicide. Three interviewed parents thought seriously of suicide after the death of their child. ‘I was thinking of suicide but I was in contact with religious people and they say that if you commit suicide you will go to hell, and I was somehow afraid that this would happen’. In this case the only thing that kept alive this parent was the fear of punishment.

Another parent almost tried committing suicide during her first month of grief:

“The sedentary life, the poison within me pushed me once to go to the balcony and think of jumping from there. I was in a dark place. I was in full desperation. I had an unyielding wish to jump and disappear.” Usually, the wish to commit suicide is present during the first period after the death of the child. Later, parents usually find some balance that allows them to continue living and integrate the terrible experience of losing a child into their life.

#### **3.4.1 Fatality of death**

Many of the participants in the study perceive death as a phenomenon that is inevitable even if not meaningful. They see death as an unavoidable fact and often this helps them find some peace within a turbulent world. One of the parents interviewed after remembering the event of the death of her eleven years old son says ‘he was the most beautiful human being for me, he was the sun of my sun and even though I would prefer not to use this expression, we came from the earth and we will return to it’.

#### **3.4.2 Being alive, feeling guilty**

Other times parents feel guilty for the mere fact that they are continuing to live while their child is dead. They see this as unfair and they would give everything to replace the death of the child with their own death. One of the parents says during the interview:

‘Oh my poor son: I sleep in a comfortable bed and you are in the grave’

## **4. Conclusions**

This study explored the way parents build meaning after the loss of a child. Several themes emerged during the interviews, including regrets and guilt, continuing bonds, God’s will and religion coping, relationship with death and suicide. One of the main issues emerging is the role that regrets and guilt play in dealing with the death of the child. The role of religion, God and death acceptance emerges often in the studies. Often people turn to God and religion after the death of a significant one because it refers to something beyond the limits of life and as such beyond the limits of mortality [12, 13]. Even the results of this study reflect this tendency. Often religion

and God appear in moments when participants could not find meaning in the death of the person, so in a sense they 'leave this to God'. Furthermore, believing in afterlife and God give them hope and help parents cope with the hopelessness and senseless experienced after the death of their child. This goes in line with other researches that mention the role of attachment to God as a way to get consolation and cope with the pain of grief [14]. It also seems significant to notice how death is perceived among participants. Death for the parent is often perceived as a kind of 'liberation' from the pain that is caused by the death of the child. This feeling can go to the extreme when parents in full desperation seriously consider suicide or even attempt suicide. Other times, the inevitability of death is somehow a reason to experience some comfort since 'death does not spare anyone'. The role of regrets in influencing the grieving process has been investigated in different studies [15]. In this study regret and guilt seems to be strongly related to the way that parents deal with grief. Usually parents experience regrets related both to actions done or not done when the child was living: how they behaved toward the deceased child, how they fulfilled their needs and desires, did they do anything that hurt them etc. Also, they express regrets related to the death of the child. In this case these regrets take the form of constant ruminations regarding what the parents could have done to avoid the death of the child. Usually this is accompanied by strong feelings of guilt that is often an indicator of a form of complicated grief. Sometimes, the parent experiences guilt for the mere fact that they continue to live while their child has died. Often the continuing bonds are a way to continue the relationship with the child even beyond death. Physical connection, linking objects and symbolic representations are some of the ways parents continue to maintain bonds with the deceased children [16]. In this study, continuing bonds are often related to the symbolic representation of the deceased that remind the bereaved parent of the child, including photos, relics, clothes, anniversaries etc. Another way to continue the bonds with the deceased child is through transferring certain parental feelings of care, interest and involvement from the deceased child to other people, such as nephews or nieces, friends of the deceased child or even strangers that may physically resemble the departed. As indicated in the study of Lichtenthal, Currier, Neimeyer, Keesee [6] the inability to find purpose or meaning of the death of the child is highly related to complicated bereavement. Even in this study, it was noticed that parents who failed to give a meaning to the loss had a more complicated bereavement process and an increased tendency toward guilt and self-blame.

#### ***4.1 Limitations of the study***

The study reflects several limitations. The first and most important limitation is related to the sample of the study, including both the size and the method of selecting participants for the study. The relatively small size and the convenient sample makes it difficult for the findings of the study to be applied to the wider population. Further studies also using quantitative methods are needed in order to better understand the influence of meaning making processes on the ongoing process of grief. Another limitation to be addressed by other studies in the future is the fact that grieving processes are strongly related to specific cultural contexts and how meaning-making, coping and other psychological mechanisms related to grief are perceived in specific cultural contexts. Having this in mind, it seems crucial to try to understand, in depth, these processes within the cultural context where parents grieve.

## **5. Recommendations**

- Practitioners and clinicians should always take into account meaning making processes when working with grieving parents.
- Practitioners, clinicians and researchers should further explore the role of regrets and guilt in meaning making processes after the death of a child as well as better understand the role that these two emotions play in complicated forms of bereavement.
- Researchers should ‘acculturate’ the concepts related to meaning making during grief by adjusting these processes to the specific cultural contexts of the bereaved parents.
- In order to draw conclusions on the role of meaning making processes on parental grief, larger samples of participants need to be included in the studies as well as random sampled techniques be used to allow generalization of data for the wider population of bereaved parents.

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