

Coping Online with Loss: Implications for Offline Clinical Contexts

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Abstract

Death, whether of a family member or a friend, causes a biographical disruption in the life of the individual left behind (Bury, 1982). This article examines the computer-mediated setting of online memorials, which provide expressive freedom for survivors to share their memories of loved ones who have passed away and to communicate their lived experience of loss. The study qualitatively scrutinizes the situated realization of *coping* on the basis of a corpus of 220 memorial entries taken from a high-traffic American memorial website. The methods and insights of computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004) and conversation analysis (Pomerantz, 1986) make it possible to unpack the concept of *coping* in terms of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as well as the interactional and discursive practices used by the survivors. The findings are also discussed in terms of their professional relevance to the work of psychotherapists and counselors helping clients in offline contexts to process their grief (cf. Sarangi, 2002; Roberts & Sarangi, 2003).

Introduction

Death is a tragic, traumatic event that requires the individual who remains to incorporate it into their ongoing narrative (Giddens, 1991; see also Gergen, 1991; Williams, 1984) in order to cope with the loss. Even though psychologists maintain that loss is an inherent part of life, this incorporation turns out to be one of the greatest challenges of life for many survivors, and not all of them are equally successful in the long-term process of gradual acceptance of living without the loved one. Joan Didion's (2005) description of the grief she experienced after the loss of her husband conveys an apt sense of the challenge: "the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaningless itself" (p. 189).

The loss of a loved one can then be conceptualized in terms of "biographical disruption" (Bury, 1982) or a "critical situation" (Giddens, 1979) occasioning the disruption of familiar routines and recognizable patterns of daily life, as well as overwhelming chaos (Williams, 1984). Rosenblatt (2000) has observed that death causes a chasm, a sense of isolation from others. Yet that loss also demands of the survivors that they reorder their experiences (Kleinman, 1988) and reexamine their established future plans and hopes. The loss breaches people's expectations of their biographical continuity and undermines any sense of stability in life. The major challenge for the survivors, then, becomes the redefinition of the experienced loss from its perception as "biographical disruption" to recognition as an aspect of "biographical flow." This emerges as an indispensable task for survivors in order to reconstruct their narrative and *keep it going* (Giddens, 1991; Neimeyer, 1999). This reordering enables them to continue a meaningful existence, and according to Neimeyer (1999), it is a central process faced by bereaved individuals: "[D]eath can shatter the core of one's life purposes, and it is important to discover and invent new meaning in

the face of loss” (Worden, 2009, p. 47). Neimeyer (1999) also emphasizes that the meanings associated with loss are constantly being revised.

It is generally assumed that the grief connected with loss needs to be processed and/or worked through: “[I]f there is one axiom that resonates through the entire field of death and dying, it is that grief and mourning are inescapable. It may be postponed, side-stepped, avoided, or denied; eventually, however, it seeks expression and influences behavior” (<http://www.uic.edu/orgs/convening/grief.htm>; see also Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007). Thus survivors of loss are encouraged to (actively) work through their pain and hurt as an integral stage in reconstructing their biographical narrative.

The process of mourning has been viewed differently by various scholars, who assume either greater or lesser involvement and action on the part of the survivor in the mourning process. Kübler-Ross (1969) proposed five stages through which a mourner passes: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She stressed that these stages are tools to frame and identify what a survivor may be feeling, rather than stops on some linear timeline in grief. A similarly more passive view is offered by Parkers (2006; see also Bowlby, 1980), who talks about four phases of mourning: the period of numbness, yearning, disorganization and despair, and finally the phase of reorganized behavior. These two views posit that the mourner must *pass* through a series of stages/phases before mourning is ultimately resolved. On the contrary, Worden (2009) states that the mourner “needs to take action” (p. 38) and proposes four tasks to be *undertaken* by the survivors. The first of them is to accept the reality of the loss, then to process the pain of grief; the third task is to adjust to a world without the deceased, and lastly s/he must “find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life” (p. 50). Importantly, all three views on the mourning process assume some kind of resolution to the experienced loss, i.e., acceptance, reorganized behavior, or an enduring connection with the deceased.

Nevertheless, the process of grieving and mourning poses a genuine difficulty in contemporary societies, which in general tend to deny free expression of emotion after someone’s death (Mellor, 1993). In fact, around the 1930s there was a major shift in Western societies (particularly the United States) in attitudes towards death, which from then on would become “shameful and forbidden” (Didion, 2005, p. 60). The shift has also been marked by a rejection of public mourning. As Gorer (1965) explains, this change in attitudes was a direct result of the new hedonism underlying the ethical duty to enjoy oneself (see also Giddens, 1991). As a result, the current accepted pattern of mourning entails hiding one’s grief “so fully that no one would guess anything had happened” (Gorer, 1965, p. XIII). Walter (1994) observes that public manifestation of grief can make normal social relationships difficult, while Gorer (1965) and Mulkey (1993) comment on the common experience among the bereaved of sensing that others are avoiding discussing their loss, or even any contact with those in mourning.

The perspective on death as failure (Bouvard, 1988) extends into the ways in which individuals are likely to mourn and grieve nowadays (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). As the latter authors state, “even in urban, contemporary, 21st century North America, the dead are not irrelevant and grief struggles to find its voice and to find its place in individual lives” (p. 4). Since offline contexts tend to discourage open, public manifestations of grief (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007),

survivors of loss increasingly often turn to computer-mediated settings as outlets for grief expression and memorialization (Sofka, 1997). Indeed, grief therapists claim that one of the crucial prerequisites for grieving is finding a safe place where people can make themselves vulnerable to the pain of grief (Golden, 2006).

The Internet, Emotional Support, and Online Memorials

There is mounting evidence from recent research that the Internet has become not only a crucial source of information for people suffering from various illnesses,¹ but also a site for social, emotional, and psychological support and formation of community (Broom, 2005; Radin, 2006; Ross, 2011). By exchanging information about sickness, individuals are able to make informed choices as well as educate themselves to create a more equal relationship with doctors. Individuals are also turning to the Internet to tell and share their personal experiences of, among others, sickness, healing, recovery, mourning, and survival.

It seems that the anonymity of the medium² is to a great extent responsible for facilitating authentic contact among the participants of various virtual communities and sites. Hardey (1999) states that the anonymity of the Internet enables people to “open up.” Similarly, Radin (2006) claims that the superficiality of online identities in fact enhances connections among individuals. Thus, the social cues which are of such prominent importance in the context of face-to-face interaction often lose their significance when people engage in online communication (see also Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). Even though some scholars are skeptical about the genuine closeness that can be achieved in online interactions (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Wellman & Gulia, 1999), research shows that individuals can feel very comfortable in disclosing their traumas and experiencing understanding from others on the Internet. A dialogic online community is then established on the foundation of mutual support (Hyde, 2006). In their review of literature on online support groups, Jodlowski and associates (2007) point to perceived similarity, removal of certain barriers (physical and emotional), and availability and accessibility of the Internet as important factors contributing to “the ways in which an online environment fosters support” (p. 15).

The aspect of support offered by the new social phenomenon of online groups is of paramount importance to individuals who want to make sense of their daily suffering. Thus, sufferers can reduce their feelings of isolation, alienation, and loneliness when engaged in sharing their experiences with others who are able to recognize and validate the pain and limitations as their own (see also Pawelczyk, 2011). By feeling connected to others, sufferers gain reassurance that they are not alone in their pain. Reduced inhibition leads then to greater intimacy and emotional expression (Broom, 2005). Additionally, by sharing their personal stories with others, the tellers can give some kind of order to their life experiences (Frank, 1995; Kleinman, 1988). In contrast, offline contexts predominantly focused on pleasure-seeking, self-indulgence, and prosperity do not easily facilitate the expression of suffering, distress, and loss (see Gorer, 1965; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007)

Online Memorials

For those who have lost their loved ones, the Internet is becoming an important place by virtue of offering the postmodern opportunity for ritual and remembrance. As a result, many individuals

have recently turned to cyberspace to express their grief, remember the deceased, and create and/or find a community there (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004).

In the mid-1990s, a new forum for writing to and about the dead emerged on the World Wide Web. Since 1995, the bereaved have been posting individual memorials to their loved ones at websites known as virtual cemeteries;³ “like traditional cemeteries, the web cemetery provides a site for memorializing and visiting memorials to the dead” (Roberts & Vidal, 2000, p. 4). Roberts (2012) explains that as long as computers have been interconnected, the bereaved have been creating memorials to the dead in cyberspace. The present article is concerned with one specific function of virtual cemeteries offered to the bereaved, i.e., memorials. These comprise diary entries of differing length, in which survivors express their emotions and/or narrate their intimate experiences concerning their loss.

Roberts (1999) observes that creating and visiting online memorials adheres to Kollar’s (1989) four steps of effective postdeath rituals, i.e., entering into a special time or place, engaging in a symbolic core act, allowing time to absorb what has occurred and is occurring, and taking leave. More recently, Roberts (2012) describes the various psychological benefits of creating an online memorial. Most importantly, it provides a space for accepting death and for emotional release. Since most web memorials are public, they provide a venue for the uninitiated to learn about bereavement and for initiated users to compare their experiences.

As noted by Roberts and Vidal (2000), posting a memorial is an easy and inexpensive task. The memorials are extremely varied in content, purpose, and sentiment, yet they reveal insights into the nature and scripts of grief, and frequently the ongoing tie between the deceased and the bereaved, as well (Neimeyer, 2001). Depending on the website, the contributor’s demographic data may be provided, including his/her gender, age, and geographical location. Information about the deceased, i.e., his/her name or nickname, date/place of birth, and date/place of death is also provided, yet the range of the available data may again vary depending on the site. The possibility to post a photograph of the departed is sometimes also offered.

Although the specific layouts of virtual cemeteries differ,⁴ most of them offer space to commemorate the deceased in the format or type of memorial of one’s choice. One may thus encounter letters to the deceased, poems, diary entries, eulogies, and/or tributes (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). “[L]ike obituaries or gravestone inscriptions, web memorials are primarily text based, although some cemeteries allow for pictures and sounds as well” (Roberts & Vidal, 2000, p. 4). That is, even though online memorials may include visual and auditory aspects, the bereaved predominantly engage in *writing* to and/or about the deceased.

Expressive Writing

Numerous studies demonstrate that not only talking about (Pawelczyk, 2011) but also writing about traumatic experiences, e.g., the death of a loved one, is beneficial to one’s psychological well-being (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).⁵ Expressive writing (EW) has the potential to help survivors adjust to a dysphoric situation and progressively make sense of the trauma experienced (Margola, Facchin, Revenson, & Molgora, 2010). For instance, a study conducted by Margola and associates (2010) showed how students’ writing on three consecutive days about the trauma they experienced moved “from a factual perspective to the processing of

emotions to an integrated emotional and cognitive restructuring of the event” (p. 250). They conclude that cognitive processing through disclosure entails “meaning-making, gaining insight, integrating the experience into one’s world-view or changing one’s world-view, and reframing the event itself” (p. 251). It may thus be of fundamental importance for those coping with traumatic experiences. Similarly, the studies by Lepore and Smyth (2002), Pennebaker (2004), and Sloan and Marx (2004) prove that written emotional disclosure “can be used as a brief, minimal cost-effective intervention to improve health and psychological well-being through cognitive and emotional processing of stressful or traumatic experiences” (Margola et al., 2010, p. 251).

Roberts and Vidal (2000), who reviewed the literature on the benefits of writing about the deceased, refer to writing in this context as a positive postdeath ritual. Writing to and about the deceased facilitates the expression of emotion and creates a sense of sharing the death (Lattanzi & Hale, 1984-85). Cable (1996) views writing as beneficial for the survivors of sudden death, who can express emotions about their loss as well as address unresolved issues with the dead. According to Worden (2009), expressive writing facilitates the fourth task of mourning, i.e., it emotionally relocates the dead.

Although writing to and about the dead has been described as positive and therapeutic, researchers have thus far had only limited access to personal writings during the period of bereavement. Nowadays, online memorials offer extensive opportunities to access the lived experience of coping with the death of a loved one in order to understand this individual experience for the benefit of the survivor. The qualitative perspective applied in examining grief is of particular importance since this “holistic, necessary, human, relational experience” (Granek, 2013, p. 277) has been recently turned into pathology. Consequently grief as a type of dysfunction is mostly studied from a quantitative perspective, which tends to leave out its depth and complexity (Granek, 2013).

There have been numerous studies on the benefits of online memorials for those coping with loss (e.g., Roberts & Vidal, 2000, p. 4). The current study goes further to investigate online memorials from an in-depth discourse-analytic perspective, thus focusing both on the “what” (the themes of coping) and the “how” (the discursive and linguistic realization of coping) of online memorials.

The Study: Aims, Data and Methodology

This study explores how survivors reflexively engage in working through their grief in a computer-mediated context (online memorials). The results of the study are also considered in terms of their potential professional relevance to the work of therapists and counselors.

Thus the analysis seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the bereaved cope with their loss in the “new” medium?
2. How do they manage their expression of grief?
3. How does the Internet affect the experience of bereavement?

The data for this study comprise 220 “intentional memorials” (created exclusively after the death of a loved one; Roberts, 2012) of differing lengths taken from a larger corpus consisting of about 350 memorials. For a memorial to be included in the dataset, it had to be at least 50 words in length. Entries in the format of a poem to the deceased were excluded. The contributions were taken from one of the oldest publicly-available commemorative websites that let the bereaved write a memorial. The analyzed website allows the bereaved to post individual contributions that can be commented on by others. Compared to the memorial platforms discussed by Roberts (2012), which have a multitude of technological affordances, the platform scrutinized here is relatively modest. The survivors, for instance, do not have templates to express their grief; instead, they are given unlimited space to write about their experience in whatever form they wish, be it a poem or a narrative. In this sense, the survivors have complete control over their contributions. All the memorials scrutinized in the study were posted between 1998 and 2008, thus spanning a period of 10 years. The contributors were of both genders, although the majority of the memorials were written by females (see also the study by Roberts & Vidal, 2000). The youngest contributor was 16, and the oldest was 62 years old.

A typical format for the contributions is illustrated below:⁶

A gift from Heaven
By Anna Wilson

Location: New York New York US
Age:[48] Gender:[F]

This memorial dedication is for my mother that passed on Nov 17, 2005. They say the biggest gift in life is to see your child being born. I also think that they left out to mention that it's also a gift from god when he chooses you on your mother's last days to spend it with her. I am saddened for my mother's death, but am in a way glad she died in the security of my arms. You see all I ever wanted for my mom was health and happiness. I'm sure the day she held me for the first time she hoped the best for me. I know she is watching me from heaven. I just hope she knows that she was safe in my arms when she left. I love you mami. Anna

As illustrated by this example, the contributions to the site are not entirely anonymous. They are always headed by the title and the author's name or nickname, followed by the contributor's location, age, and gender. The memorials are of three main format types, all of them text-based: letter to the deceased, diary entry, and tribute. I refer to them collectively as *grief texts*, since they serve a specific purpose, are organized thematically, and often convey a particular interpretation of reality (Klugman, 2007; Pawelczyk, 2012).

The issue of research ethics must also be raised at this point. The Internet constitutes a unique context which “feels relatively private to the participants yet at the same time it is publicly available” (Clark & Sharf, 2007, p. 408). Since the data used for the study are publicly accessible, I did not seek permission to use them. Still, in accordance with social scientific standards (Androutsopoulos, 2008), all the personal details in the contributions discussed here have been anonymised. Thus the actual logs presented in the study do not include any

information about the contributors themselves, even though such information was available. In this way, the privacy of the contributors is protected.

The analysis is informed by the tenets of computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA)—a set of methods embedded in linguistic discourse analysis (Herring, 2001, 2004). CMDA's constitutive feature is its focus on the analysis of logs of verbal interaction (Herring, 2004, p. 339). Herring explains that “this approach enables a level of empirical rigor, and reflects a heightened linguistic awareness, that sets it apart from other approaches to the study of Internet behavior” (2004, p. 367). CMDA is premised on three main assumptions. The first is that discourse exhibits recurrent patterns; the second relates to the fact that discourse involves speaker choice; and the third assumes that “computer-mediated discourse may be, but is not inevitably, shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems” (Herring, 2004, p. 343). Herring describes the CMDA approach as involving both qualitative and/or quantitative perspectives, depending on the research problem(s).

The present qualitative study combines content-oriented and discourse analytical approaches in investigating people's subjective experiences of grief. Importantly for this study, qualitative research can offer insights into people's experiences that are not accessible through other approaches (Cook, Meade, & Perry, 2001). This language-focused approach aims at identifying the discursive practices and their linguistic realization in order to capture the phenomenological experience of grief as narrated in the online environment. The data used for the study were subjected to methods of discourse analysis (specifically “thematic analysis,” Braun & Clarke, 2006) and selected insights of conversation analysis (cf. Pomerantz, 1986). Thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in the collected corpus of grief texts. In the words of Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis as a method can be used “to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (p. 81). The combined qualitative method allows the analyst to capture the essence of grief texts in the context of their occurrence. The approach adopted is very much data-driven (inductive), i.e., the choice of specific analytical methods followed from extensive familiarization with the data under scrutiny. The proposed macro-topics (themes) and discursive strategies also result from the data-driven approach adopted for the study. No *a priori* categories were applied to the data; rather, the themes and strategies were discovered in the process of in-depth discourse analysis.

In accordance with the tenets of discourse analysis, the collected data were subjected to a recursive process of multiple readings (Barton, Aldridge, Trimble, & Vidovic, 2005), which allowed for the emergence of recurring categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The categories that emerged were then scrutinized for their linguistic patterning and interpreted in terms of their function(s). Discourse analysis also entails discourse participants' verification in the process of functional interpretation (Johnstone, 2000). Although access to the discourse contributors (survivors) was not feasible in the context of the current study, the professional literature on grief and bereavement (e.g., Worden, 2009; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007) was consulted in the last stage of the analysis in order to support the observed discursive practices.

Data Analysis: Coping Online with Loss

The analysis below identifies the survivors' ways of coping with their loss in a twofold manner. Firstly, it identifies six main macro-topics (themes) related to grief and bereavement in online memorials and their linguistic realization. Secondly, it scrutinizes the survivors' discursive and interactional strategies used for expressing grief. These themes and strategies reflect the survivors' lived experience of coping with their loss. The codes in parentheses at the end of each example presented below indicate the gender of the contributor and the number of the memorial entry in the corpus.

Macro-topics (Themes)

Biographical Disruption: Things will never be the same again

The main theme that can be found across the collected corpus frames the experience of loss as an abrupt discontinuation of one's ongoing biographical narrative. That is to say, the survivors perceive the death of a loved one as a biographical disruption (cf. Bury, 1982; Giddens, 1979) that entirely redefines their sense of self and their life.

Let us examine the following examples:

- (1) He died one day after my birthday. July will **never** be the same again. I feel so empty. I feel like I can **never** be happy again. (F45)
- (2) To this day I can not believe this, My family has **never** been the same and life has **never** been the same. (F102)
- (3) **Everything** is different now since he has gone on the 27th of June 2005. (F08)
- (4) I will **never** look at life the same way but I do know that there were so many lessons to be learned from one little boy and one terrible day. (M20)
- (5) My name is Nate, i was a happily married man to a wonderful woman named Carol. This changed on the morning of Sunday October the 13th. I awoke at 10am to discover my wife had slipped away into eternity...completely unexpectedly This day has **forever** changed my life. My soulmate is no-longer with me. I am left with 20 years of photographs and memorys. (M150)

The examples presented above point to losing a loved one as a critical watershed event that divides the survivors' life into "before" and "after" (their loved one's death). This biographical disruption is discursively encoded by means of extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986). Thus the survivors describe their experience in terms of categorical statements (*never, everything, forever*). As Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar (2005) explain, extreme case formulations augment "the speaker's commitment to the importance or significance of the state of affairs they are describing" (p. 190), and they are likely to occur when attempts are made to defend, justify, or rationalize a description or assessment. The survivors rely on them to legitimize their claims of biographical discontinuity. Grieving is not perceived by them at this stage of their bereavement as a process, but rather as a state that will determine the rest of their lives. Morrish and Sauntson (2007, p. 53) observe that linguistic markers of evaluations can be found in

discourse which reflects life-changing events. Examples 1 to 5 evince the evaluation of the trauma in terms of future life consequences. The death of a loved one marks a new, unwelcome reality for them.

Idealization of the Deceased

Another theme found in the grief texts refers to the process of idealizing the deceased:

- (6) **She was the light** for so many people. **She had a special aura** about her that anyone that ever knew her could tell you. (F12)
- (7) She was **a strong woman who fought a seven year battle** with cancer. She was my inspiration for everything I do. (M129)
- (8) Carol lived as a free spirit all of her life and we knew she was **so special** from the time she was born. She was always doing silly things to make people laugh and enjoy life around her. (F90)
- (9) Chris was **the most special** and **individualistic** person one could meet and I feel so blessed to have known him during the short time he was here. The one thing I regret the most is not really realizing how **incredible** he was until it was too late. His presence was **incomparable** to anyone else's. Chris could make you feel enraged, cheerful, and completely flattered at any given moment and even all at the same time. He had this **inconceivable charm** and charisma that was noticed by all who were in his presence. (F72)

As projected in the examples above, the deceased emerge as role models to follow. They have become a source of strength and inspiration for the survivors. Their idealization is linguistically realized by a set of positive, emotional adjectives used in the superlative form, e.g., *the most special*; intensifiers, e.g., *so special*; or metaphors, e.g., *she was the light for so many people*. Of these memorials, example (9) best exemplifies this particular theme. On the one hand, the deceased is idealized (*the most special, individualistic, incredible*), and on the other, his (mostly) positive impact on others is detailed (*Chris could make you feel enraged, cheerful, completely flattered; he had this inconceivable charm and charisma*). The bereavement literature comments on how people tend to “change reality to fantasy” after experiencing the death of a close person (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007). They therefore tend to refrain from a negative reference to the deceased and refer to him/her as an exceptional, even unique individual. Thus even though the anonymity of the online context enables the bereaved to address their authentic (both positive and negative) experiences with the deceased, the dataset overwhelmingly evidences positive ones. Example 9 in this sense constitutes an interesting exception, as the bereaved in her disclosure mentions a negative characteristic of the deceased (*could make you feel enraged*), although she immediately follows it with a positive quality.

Missed Goodbye

The overarching theme of a proper goodbye to the deceased constitutes another prominent aspect of the collected grief texts. The examples below demonstrate the pain linked to the missed opportunity for farewell:

- (10) I never got to say "Good-bye." and **that really hurts** but you do know that I loved you so much and you were like my sister. (F88)
- (11) The morning of the accident, Chris had called me while I was still asleep. **Nothing has ever festered inside of me more than the regret** of not being up that morning. If I had only been awake I would have been able to tell him goodbye, even if I would not have known it would be the last time. There are so many things left unsaid between me and Chris and **so many things I regret**. (F74)
- (12) **I'm sorry I wasn't there that morning you left**. I know you were holding on and waiting for me to get there. Guess I showed up one day too late. (F86)

As the extracts above illustrate, the survivors in their online grief texts tend to elaborate on the importance of finding time and space to say a final goodbye to their loved ones. The comments relating to the chance to say a proper goodbye, or the lack thereof, point to the salience of this final act for the survivors. The expression of failing to say goodbye is constructed in highly emotional terms (e.g., *that really hurts*; *nothing has festered inside of me more than the regret*). Yet the online memorials provide some space for survivors to reassure their loved ones about their feelings (example 10) and indirectly attend to issues that had not been articulated before they passed away (example 11). Thus the important act of farewell can be completed in the online context and provide the survivors with some sort of emotional relief.

The Presence of the Deceased in the Lives of the Bereaved

"Death ends a life—it does not necessarily end a relationship" (Anderson, 1974, p. 77). Indeed, as the examples below demonstrate, the survivors underline their continuing relationship with the deceased:

- (13) **I still talk to** my brother. **He's one of my seven spirit guides**. I know some think it's crazy to talk to the deceased, but **they are people too**. (F26)
- (14) It has been three years now and I am doing better only because **I know that My Butterfly Sister is still around**. (F114)
- (15) Jonathan **was a part of my life and will always be**. (F54)
- (16) Hannan **is, was and will always be** my wonderful son, cause **I still feel he is with us** as he always wanted to be involved in all parts of the family life. (M108)
- (17) My daddy was killed in an auto crash when I was 5 years old. **I had a memory of talking to him**. I tried to convince myself that it was just my imagination or something else that caused the memory to stay with me throughout the years. **I tried to talk about it on occasion, but always met with snickers or worried expressions**. (F19)

The contributors openly admit to talking to the deceased (examples 13, 17), feeling their daily presence (examples 14, 16), being guided by them (example 13), and generally keeping them in their lives (example 15). The survivors also express their reassurance about the continuing bonds between them and their loved ones. In other words, they admit to a symbolic relationship with

the one who is lost (cf. Worden, 2009). This symbolic continuation is marked by the adverbial expressions *still* and *always*, as well as by the use of the present, past, and future tenses. Example (14) indicates that the survivor is able to get through the loss knowing that the lost one is continuously present in her life. The theme of continuing bonds with the deceased may constitute a source of discomfort in offline contexts. This fear is expressed in example (13): *I know some think it's crazy*. Similarly, contribution (17) illustrates how admitting to continuing bonds with the deceased is commonly perceived (*always met with snickers or worried expressions*). The online, more anonymous setting provides the survivors with more space, as well as the psychological and emotional latitude, to admit their enduring relationship with lost loved ones.

The examples presented above demonstrate that the deceased continue to occupy an important place in the lives of the survivors. The online memorials enable the grievors to maintain a symbolic relationship with the deceased by, for instance, keeping the deceased informed about daily events. These observations are consistent with the current literature on grieving and bereavement, which positions loss as a unique and intersubjective process in which the survivor maintains connections with the deceased (Florczak, 2008; cf. Attig, 2004; Neimeyer, 2001).

Fantasy Sequence

The macro-topic labeled “fantasy sequence” (cf. Holmes, 2000) refers to the survivors’ imaginary projection of being given an extraordinary chance to spend some more time with the deceased. They become involved in an unreal scenario which enables them to experience the presence of the lost ones, to complete certain unfinished matters with them, or just to feel their closeness:

- (18) You **long for** one last chance to tell them all the things unsaid and undone. You **yearn for** that one last moment to hold them close. (F41)
- (19) **If I had one wish?** It would be for her to have one more day here to hold and run with her grandchildren (which she never got to do), go shopping with me, to make love to Dad one more time, one more day to just hold me and remind me that she IS here. (F65)
- (20) It's been 10 years since you passed away and there is still **a small part of me that believes you are on vacation and will come back**. (F02)

The survivors’ wishing for the deceased to return is marked by verbs encoding emotions: *long for*, *yearn for*. This macro-topic is linked to the previous theme of “the presence of the deceased in the lives of the bereaved,” as both of them strongly orient the survivors’ narratives toward highlighting the continuing presence of the lost ones in their lives (*she IS here; will come back*). The online context facilitates the survivors’ free expression of their deepest wishes and regrets concerning their loved ones without confronting the survivors with the disbelief or even shame they might encounter in offline contexts.

Wisdom-sharing

The macro-topic of “wisdom-sharing” is based on the discursive strategy of “us” vs. “them” (Wodak, 2011). In other words, a stark contrast is drawn between the experience of the survivors

(“us”), who intimately know the feeling of losing a loved one, and other people (“them”) who lack this painful, life-changing experience:

- (21) **They say** the biggest gift in life is to see your child being born. **I also think that they left out to mention** that it's also a gift from god when he chooses you on your mother's last days to spend it with her. (F49)
- (22) **I've learned** through this that tomorrow is not promised and it all can be taken away in a wink of an eye. **As each of you live your lives remember**, life is brief, live hard, play hard, love hard. (F29)
- (23) It hurts. **Everyone says time heals all...what do they know?** As time goes on it hurts more. (F195)

Example (21) demonstrates a clear contrast between the life experience and knowledge of unbereaved individuals (*They say...*) and the individual who lost her mother. The survivor feels entitled to contribute to the general assumptions and opinions concerning the loss of a loved one (*I also think that they left out to mention...*). The survivor in example (22), by relying on her own experience, offers advice and guidance. The contribution takes on a strong counseling tone by instructing people how to live their lives (*As each of you live your lives remember...*). Example (23) features a challenge to the commonly held assumptions regarding the process of bereavement. In fact, the contributor disputes the widespread belief that *time heals all*, and makes the opposite view (*As time goes on it hurts more*) seem more credible by referring to her own personal experience. Again, a strong opposition between “us” and “them” can be observed (*What do they know?*). In this way, those who are “inexperienced by loss” are *othered* in terms of their general life experience. The survivors project themselves as experts who have been empowered by the aversive life events to share their experiences and correct widespread yet false truths.

The macro-topics (themes) discussed above feature strongly in the collected corpus of online grief texts. The survivors describe their loss predominantly in terms of biographical disruption. They also idealize the deceased and tend to underline the continuing bonds with him or her in their lives. The bereaved also underline their missed chance to say goodbye or conversely, highlight the value of this act. Finally, as those who have experienced loss, the survivors feel obliged and entitled to share their life lessons by challenging commonly held beliefs regarding life and death. The qualitative scrutiny of the collected corpus also revealed a number of other less common macro-topics, such as lack of acceptance of the loss, feeling guilty for leading a happy life, future reunion with the deceased, the deceased as guardian angel, and positive life transformation (cf. “life review,” Candlin, 2008).

Discursive and Interactional Practices

The second part of the data analysis examines the discursive and interactional strategies used by the survivors in narrating their grief.

Account-making

One of the dominant strategies found in the grief texts relates to the survivors' recollection of the circumstances of the death of a loved one. The strategy of account-making enables the individuals to present a version of the event from their own perspective (cf. Buttny, 1993). In other words, they tend to contextualize and thus personalize the loss in terms of their own perception.

Consider example 24:

- (24) On November 4th 2005, my brother, Robert, was driving home from a party, when he decided to pass the car of another High School student. This happened on a blacktop, it's a two-lane tarred road, which was less than a mile from our house. **The person whose car he had passed went back to the party for help. I can't imagine what he sees in his nightmares, and frankly, I don't want to. I pity that poor guy, he saw my brother all cut up and everything.** One of the First Responders there was one of my brother's many friends. As soon as he recognized the car, he went from a First Responder to an anxious friend. They rushed my brother to the hospital and cleaned him up. The next day, November 5th, he passed away in the hospital. He was sixteen....(F38)

In the contribution presented above, the sibling recounts the context of her brother's death and in this way reveals her own account of the traumatic event. Interestingly, the emotional load of the situation is projected by focusing solely on the first responder's hypothetical reactions to witnessing the car accident. The survivor thus underlines the trauma of the accident by referring to the first respondent's imaginary response at the scene: *I can't imagine what he sees in his nightmares*. The emotional evaluation of the loss is marked by the use of *I can't imagine* and *nightmares*, as well as by *I pity that poor guy*, which indexes the emotional trauma the eyewitness must have experienced. Such recounting of the events enables the bereaved to create stories to be shared with others. Harvey, Orbuch, and Weber (1992) observe that such recounting permits the bereaved to process their loss and ultimately gain some closure. The strategy of account-making also enables the survivors to address the painful aspects of death and dying that mainstream contexts tend to reject. They can go over the traumatic circumstances of death numerous times without causing discomfort or distress to others.

Painful Disclosure

The disembodied context of online memorials facilitates the survivors' unrestrained expression of emotional anguish. The strategy of self-disclosure allows the bereaved to address various emotional aspects of the experienced loss openly:

- (25) I sometimes feel I can't go another day without her by my side. I wonder how long the pain of losing her will last. Will I ever be happy again? (M43)
- (26) I'm at the corner I do not know what direction to turn in. (F213)
- (27) It hurts **soo** bad, I feel **so** empty inside. (F10)

(28) **Oh!** This loneliness, this sadness! (F59)

Self-disclosure as a discursive strategy must include an aspect of personal information, be significant in the local circumstances of the interactional event, and be volunteered (Antaki et al., 2005; cf. Pawelczyk, 2011). These three criteria are met in the context of the analyzed online grief texts, in that the survivors describe their personal loss; their contributions fit the setting of online memorials; and finally they are indeed volunteered. In example (25), the survivor discloses his intimate feelings concerning the loss of a loved one, disclosing the difficulty of living without the deceased and admitting to unrelenting pain. Contribution (26) relies on metaphors, commonly used to convey affect (Erjavec & Volčič, 2010), to address the feeling of being lost. Examples (27) and (28) illustrate the use of intensifiers (*soo, so*), exclamations (*oh!*), and repetitions (*this*) to convey a sense of pain and misery following the death of a loved one.

Reflexive Questioning

The strategy of reflexive questioning refers to the survivors' use of existential questions regarding the issues of life and death:

- (29) **Why do people like me already know at a young age that we will never see a parent again?** Take it from me, it is the worst. (F60)
- (30) And then there are some days like today, which I do nothing but think about him, at work, in the streetcars, everywhere, and I just want to cry and cry and ask God **why?** (F68)
- (31) But now, what are we to make of the last two years? One's filled with such great expectations and profound disappointments. We ask ourselves a question that has no answer: **Why?** (F16)

In example (29), the survivor attempts to confront the loss of a parent at a very young age, while the contributor in example (30) refers to her experience of missing a loved one, ending with a question to which there is no answer. In example (31), the survivor admits to the inability to find answers to the issue of death and loss. In all three of these examples, the survivors' existential questioning expresses their profound sense of personal loss. The question "why" concerning the death of a loved one is posed in all three contributions presented above. The question shows the survivors' perception of loss as a biographical disruption rather than as a "lifelong human condition" (Viorst, 1986, p. 237). That is to say that they still work through their losses but in a context that allows for the expression of endless doubts, fears, and reconsiderations.

Conclusions

It has been found that all people grieve a loss to one extent or another (Worden, 2009). Since the death of a loved one can seemingly obliterate one's life purposes, it is of crucial importance to find a new meaning in the face of loss (Attig, 1996).

The present study examined the process of grieving on a commemoration platform which allows mourners to post individual text-based memorials. The analysis conducted here revealed multiple

subjective experiences of grief and demonstrated how the survivors make sense (or not) of it. Importantly, how they manage their expression of grief is to a great extent facilitated by the affordances of this particular online setting and the features of communication on the Internet in general. The non-judgmental setting of the website in question allows the survivors to grieve in their own individual ways, rather than as the wider society expects them to, and to process their grief at their own pace. The disembodied online practices make it possible for the survivors to continue the (symbolic) relationship with the deceased. The survivors can disengage from any socially problematic categories (Dery, 1995) that would prevent them in an offline setting from manifesting their continuing bonds with the deceased. This sense of ongoing continuity with the deceased significantly diverges from the dominant, offline discourse on grief. The safety and security of the online context enables the survivors to touch upon any aspects of their grief without being potentially classified as a pathological case (Granek, 2013). Additionally, the accessibility and availability of the Internet makes it possible to engage in writing about loss, thus *coping* at practically any time of the day or night. In the case of the commemorative platform scrutinized here, the mourners posting their memorials are able to receive comments from others, and thus the pain of losing the loved one is acknowledged and possibly normalized.

The presented contributions tell very personal stories about the survivor and the deceased and create a dialogic impression. This is for instance evident in the macro-topics of wisdom-sharing and the strategy of reflexive questioning, where the (imagined) reader is offered heartfelt advice and challenged with questions about life and death. Dialogism allows for the creation of a kind of intimate relationship with the reader. Online memorials seem to have replaced traditional diaries in which one could engage in the process of expressive writing (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005) and thereby communicate and process the loss.

The Internet is thus affecting the experience of grieving by enabling survivors to voice their fragmented, unrehearsed, emotionally overwhelming reactions to loss and gradually incorporate them into their own biographical narrative. The survivors do not need to stick to a certain prescribed pattern of mourning (cf. Kübler-Ross, 1969; Parkers, 2006; Worden, 2009) but can follow their own paths by addressing their individual painful issues. Grief must always be given voice (cf. the “grief work” hypothesis; Stroebe, 1997; see also Granek, 2013), however chaotic and/or complicated that might be, and the online context provides the space to verbalize a diversity of individual grief reactions. The affordances of online memorials enable survivors to learn and progressively accept that the pain of losing a loved one is a universal, human experience. Online memorials may therefore be of crucial importance and use in the practice of grief therapists and counselors helping their clients to work through their grief.

Implications for Practitioners

William J. Worden (2009) makes a distinction between grief counseling and grief therapy. The aim of the first intervention is to “help people to facilitate uncomplicated, normal grief” (Worden, 2009, p. 83), while grief therapy entails “specialized techniques that are used to help people with abnormal or complicated grief reactions” (p. 83).

It seems that posting an online memorial in which one’s thoughts and emotions are expressed fits the purposes of grief counseling. That is, the act of involvement in *writing* about one’s

troublesome experiences (i.e., expressive writing) is already therapeutic by virtue of allowing one to verbalize his/her emotional states and experiences (Neimeyer, 1999; Pawelczyk, 2011; Pennebaker, 2004). Online memorials facilitate the survivors' emotional disclosure, allowing them an unrestrained verbalization of grief. Thus, posting online memorials in a safe and non-judgmental setting should be recommended as a regular task in working through one's grief and giving voice to one's lived experience. Even today, not many mourners are aware of the availability of such resources.

As the current analysis has shown, online memorials testify to the survivors' continuing bonds with the deceased, which may be crucial in the process of changing their life narratives. The survivors can gradually redefine the role of the deceased in their lives and progressively accept their new life scenario. The new type of (symbolic) relationship with the deceased can be maintained in a new space of online memorials where both old and new individual troublesome material can be dealt with. Online memorials consistently revolve around certain themes which should be taken up by grief counselors or therapists. In the case of emotionally withdrawn and resistant clients, this finding is of particular value, offering practitioners an initial set of topical areas to approach during therapy. Client's "reporting" on the content of online memorials will also enable the therapist to identify the most salient aspects of the loss to be taken up during the therapy hour. For example, the therapist will have a chance to identify whether the continuing bonds with the deceased can be classified as of the healthy (internalized) or unhealthy (externalized) type (cf. Field & Filanosky, 2010).

Grief texts allow the therapist to monitor the state of grief, i.e., whether and how the bereaved is progressing toward completion in the mourning process. Through such personalized accounts of survivors' experiences, grief counselors and therapists can get a strong sense of what the lives of their clients are really like (cf. Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1999). This is a unique set of data (and insights) compared to the traditional quantitative measures or self-reports used in assessing type of grief. To quote Granek (2013), it is "the range, depth, and complexity of their phenomenological experiences and their existential understanding of the necessity of their pain that modern psychology misses" (p. 282).

In closing, people are increasingly relying on the Internet to manage their aversive life experiences, including the trauma of losing a loved one. Online memorials constitute an important resource for the bereaved, not only by enabling them to "talk" about the deceased, but first and foremost as a vital tool to help them incorporate the loss into their biographical narrative. The loss can then come to be perceived not as an aspect of biographical disruption, but rather as an element of biographical flow.

Notes

1. A special issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association* devoted exclusively to health information on the Internet and other computer applications suggested that the Internet is the "next wave" in health communication (Jodlowski et al., 2007; see also Eng et al., 1998).
2. But cf. Kapidzic and Herring (2011).

3. For an overview of early research on online memorials, see de Vries and Rutherford (2004) and Roberts and Vidal (2000).
4. Roberts (2012) reports that memorials to the dead on the World Wide Web are increasing in number and variety.
5. Cf. “the writing turn” in patient communication.
6. All personal data concerning the contributions presented in this article have been changed.

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