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“ALONE IN OUR GRIEF:” EXPLORING HOW SURVIVING SIBLINGS MAKE
MEANING AFTER THE DEATH OF A BROTHER OR SISTER

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A Dissertation Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Education with an emphasis in Counseling

May 2015

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Abstract

Sibling loss is an important, yet often overlooked topic in the literature on grief. The purpose of this study was: (a) to better understand the phenomenon of sibling grief through personal narratives, (b) to explore common meanings made by bereaved siblings, and (c) to investigate strategies used by bereaved siblings to make meaning out of their siblings' deaths. A narrative research design was used to identify core themes with regard to both meaning making outcomes and processes. Seven young adults who lost a sibling in adolescence each completed two in-depth interviews averaging almost 90 minutes each. Sibling profiles were created for each participant in order to give voice to the often silenced stories of bereaved siblings and to provide insight into how contextual and experiential factors impact individual stories of loss. Narrative analysis, including both thematic and structural analysis, was used to explore how surviving siblings structured their experiences of loss through stories. Thematic analysis resulted in three major categories of meanings made by bereaved siblings: (a) identity change, with the themes of changed view of self, changed view of the world, and changed view of others; (b) sense making, with the themes of spiritual or religious understandings, uniqueness of sibling relationship, continued connection to the deceased, and embracing the loss; and (c) benefit finding, with the theme of seeing positives that have come as a result of the loss. Structural analysis resulted in nine themes related to the strategies bereaved siblings use to make meaning out of the loss which included: (a) assimilation and accommodation, (b) the use of metaphor, (c) storytelling, (d) meaning making through action or the pursuit of life purpose, (e) affirmation or restoring a sense of self, (f) comparisons of loss, (g) questioning, (h) negotiation through relationships, and (i) seeing

‘signs’ as messages from deceased siblings. This study lends support to meaning making theories of loss while also adding unique components specific to sibling grief by highlighting important meaning making processes, which are often overlooked in grief research. A preliminary model of sibling grief is proposed. Guidelines for counselors working with grieving siblings are presented.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my sister, Dr. Tracey Parmentar, who was taken from us too soon. Tracey was a wonderful role model and the best big sister I could have asked for. She was a kind spirit who instilled in me the importance of education and living life to the fullest. I did it, Tracey! This one's for you!

Additionally, this dissertation is dedicated to all of the bereaved siblings out there. Thank you to the courageous siblings who participated in this research study. Without you, this dissertation would not have been possible. My hope is that I have done your stories justice. Each of you are truly inspirational. Your stories and your voices are important and deserve to be heard. Thank you!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Approximately two million children and adolescents survive the death of a sibling each year (Charles & Charles, 2006). Often overshadowed by the grief of their parents, bereaved siblings are called the “forgotten mourners” (White, 2006). Many bereaved siblings feel pressure to conceal their grief, perhaps to protect their parents from further heartache or in an attempt to get back to ‘normal’ life. From the outside, it may appear that these children and adolescents are coping effectively, when in fact they are suffering alone. Many times bereaved siblings experience delayed grief reactions later in life when they are more capable of dealing with some of these intense emotions or when another event triggers memories of the loss that has not truly been grieved (Davies, 1991; Moser, Jones, Zaorski, Mirsalimi, & Luchner, 2005).

Although bereaved siblings are often overlooked, research shows that these siblings frequently have lifelong grief reactions, including increased anxiety, increased guilt feelings, and increased feelings of anger and depression. Additionally, research suggests that many bereaved siblings are at increased risk for medical, psychiatric, and behavioral problems (Charles & Charles, 2006; Davies, 1991; Fanos, 1996; Moser et al., 2005). It has been suggested that the death of a brother or sister, particularly in adolescence, can leave siblings more vulnerable to experience more long-term, enduring grief reactions (Davies, 1991; White, 2006). Adolescence is a time of many transitions including developmental, emotional, physical, and cognitive changes as teenagers attempt to become more autonomous and complete normative developmental tasks, indicating a loss during this transitional phase may be more difficult to cope with. Some researchers suggest that adolescents may unconsciously postpone coping with their grief in attempts

to complete normative developmental tasks, leading to longer term effects of grief as bereaved siblings attempt to cope with the loss years after it has occurred (Balk, 2000; Davies, 1991; Noppe & Noppe, 1997; White, 2006). Although this may be true, there has been little empirical research done to support this claim. More research regarding the long term effects of sibling grief in adolescence could help clarify why many siblings experience enduring grief reactions continuing into and throughout adulthood.

As counselors, it is important that we become familiar with research on grief and bereavement since most people will experience grief and loss several times throughout their lives. This essentially means that every client we see could be dealing with grief issues. Although many bereaved individuals are able to effectively cope with these losses on their own, some bereaved individuals experience substantial, long-term difficulties related to bereavement (Worden, 2010). Approximately 10-15% of bereaved individuals experience complicated or prolonged grief reactions. Complicated grief is defined as grief that is marked by high and persistent separation distress, difficulty “moving on,” troubling thoughts about the death, constant yearning for the deceased, a sense of hopelessness, and trouble accepting the loss as real. Many of these symptoms have been linked to various mental health issues such as substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer & Currier, 2009; Neimeyer, Burke, Mackay, & van Dyke Stringer, 2010). Many children and adolescents who experience the death of their sibling have unresolved grief issues that resurface later in life and often spur the griever to seek counseling. Counselors must be able to recognize their client’s unresolved grief to help these siblings process their grief reactions (Demi & Howell, 1991; Moser et al., 2005).

To conceptualize and make use of the most current and appropriate theories of grief and loss, it is important for counselors to understand how theories of grief have progressed over time. The field has seen a shift from traditional theories of grief, which include many stage theories, to postmodern or constructivist theories of grief (Granek, 2010; Hunter, 2007; Krueger, 2006). Earlier grief theories emphasized a medical model of bereavement in which grief tended to be pathologized (Archer, 2008). Stage theories, such as Kubler-Ross's Five Stages of Change (1969), Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1980), and Worden's Task Model (1991), implied that grief which extended past a certain time frame was pathological. The goal in stage theories is to progress through certain stages in order to reach some resolution or endpoint in the grieving process. It is assumed that the bereaved individual will return to some pre-loss level of functioning after completion of their "grief work" (Hunter, 2007; Krueger, 2006).

Even though these traditional stage theories, or grief work theories, have provided a great deal of information to the field of bereavement, many researchers have begun to elaborate and even dispute certain tenets of these models, such as the idea that one must actively 'work through' their grief through emotional expression or the idea that one must relinquish emotional ties with the deceased individual (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Krueger, 2006; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). Much current research in the field stems from a constructivist paradigm that emphasizes the important role of meaning-making throughout the grieving process (Neimeyer & Currier, 2009). Stroebe and Schut's Dual Process Model (2001) was developed as the researchers began to question the lack of empirical support for some of the earlier grief work theories. This model takes into account the importance of finding meaning related to the loss of bereaved individuals

(Archer, 2008). Neimeyer (2001b) suggested that the idea of meaning making in grief was a central construct linking several grief theories together. Neimeyer was critical of stage theories which suggested that working through grief to get to some endpoint where one is restored to his or her pre-loss level of functioning was seen as the goal of the bereaved individual. Thus the field experienced a shift to more postmodern or constructivist frameworks for understanding and conceptualizing grief and bereavement (Krueger, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001b).

The constructivist framework emphasizes how individuals construct meanings about the self and about the world through relationships and narratives. An individual's narrative or story would include beliefs and assumptions both about the self and about the world. Throughout the bereavement literature, there is much inconsistency regarding how meaning making is defined, conceptualized, and measured (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Neimeyer et al., 2010). Meaning making has been assessed in terms of sense making, benefit finding, identity change, and life purpose (Armour, 2003; Neimeyer et al., 2010; Park, 2008). Many researchers have attempted to measure meaning making as an outcome, by asking such questions as, "What benefits have you found that have come from your loss?" or "What sense, if any, have you made out of your loss?" However, fewer researchers have attempted to define and explore meaning making as a process. More research that focuses on meaning making as a process is warranted in order to further clarify and understand the complexities involved in meaning making. It would be helpful to explore the similarities and differences in the individual meaning making process and how it manifests within certain bereaved populations, such as siblings.

Theoretical Framework

The current study will be defined within the framework of a constructivist paradigm, where constructivism is a postmodern approach to psychology and emphasizes an individual's need to impose meaning on life experiences (Neimeyer et al., 2010). Within this framework, self-narratives are created based, in part, on core beliefs and assumptions about the world. According to Janoff-Bulman's (1992) worldview theory, people have general beliefs and assumptions about the world that give them a sense of meaning. Self-narratives are constructed and maintained by individuals in order to organize our self-understanding, determine our range of emotions and goals, and guide our performance. Our self-narratives are established through the different stories we construct about ourselves and share with others. Loss of a loved one can challenge some of the core beliefs and assumptions that we hold about the world and can disrupt our self-narrative. Therefore, grief is defined as a process of reconstructing a world of meaning and reestablishing and/or redefining self-narratives, both of which have been challenged by loss (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Neimeyer et al., 2010).

Park (2008) described an underlying model of meaning making that is common in many theoretical frameworks. According to the general meaning making model, the general beliefs through which individuals view and interpret their world are known as global beliefs. Based on worldview theory, individuals are said to hold certain assumptions or global beliefs about the world that give them a sense of meaning or purpose in their lives (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). When an event happens, such as the death of a loved one, an individual assigns some meaning to that event (appraised meaning). Appraised meaning is an individual's understanding or way of making sense out of a

particular event (Park, 2008).

The loss of a loved one can challenge an individual's worldview or personal narrative and cause distress, which occurs to the extent that an individual's appraised meaning differs from the individual's global meaning. Distress is said to initiate meaning making efforts, as individuals attempt to bring their global and appraised meanings into alignment (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Park, 2008). This model needs to be tested in research to assess how well it holds true for different bereaved populations, individuals, and age groups.

Meaning making, then, involves "making sense" of or coming to understand a given event (i.e. sibling loss). Within the bereavement literature, meaning making is commonly defined as sense making, benefit finding, identity change, and the pursuit of life purpose. Sense making occurs as bereaved individuals attempt to understand the loss experience and integrate new understandings into their current life. The benefit finding component of meaning making involves coming to find something positive as a result of the loss. Identity changes encompass coming to view the world, other, and/or self differently as a result of the death, and the pursuit of life purpose involves assessing priorities or what matters and is significant now in light of the loss (Armour, 2003; Neimeyer et al., 2010; Park, 2008). Further, within this conceptual framework, this study will view meaning making in the context of sibling loss as a more fluid process that can take different forms over time. Meaning making processes might be affected by developmental stages, cognitive abilities, life transitions, major life events, spirituality or religion, context, culture, social support, or family support.

The theoretical framework was also shaped by my own interpretations and

personal experiences, as discussed further in the research methods chapter. As a bereaved sibling myself, the potential for researcher bias was present and was continually addressed throughout the research process. One important way this was done initially was to present my full story (see Appendix A), along with some of my own assumptions (see Chapter 3; Rajendran, 2001).

Research Problem

Although some researchers suggest that losing a sibling in adolescence is a particularly difficult time to experience loss, and is likely to lead to long term repercussions, there is little empirical research to support these claims (Davies, 1991; White, 2006). More research needs to be done examining the long term effects of sibling bereavement in adolescence. Additionally, White (2006) explains that when bereaved siblings were in high school or college at the time of their sibling's death, it is statistically more likely that the sibling died from an accident or suicide, which, as evidenced by other research on parental bereavement, often leads to traumatic or complicated grief because individuals bereaved by violent losses incur more difficulties attempting to make sense out of the loss (Currier et al., 2006). This provides further evidence that bereaved siblings may be at risk for experiencing more intense and enduring effects of grief and highlights the need to better understand the grieving processes of siblings so that counselors and other mental health professionals can more effectively work with these bereaved individuals.

In addition to experiencing enduring grief reactions, it appears that a life crisis, such as the death of a sibling, allows for a unique potential for personal growth (Fanos, 1996; White, 2006). Considering the emphasis on the new wave of constructivist grief

theories focusing on meaning making, there is a lack of research to lend support to the meaning making theories and models in bereaved siblings specifically. If meaning making is truly a process that evolves over time and has the potential to change as individuals enter new developmental stages, it is important to understand how young adult siblings initially experienced grief as adolescents, and how they continue to incorporate that grief into their life and attempt to make sense out of it.

Losing a sibling in adolescence is a traumatic experience that disrupts the normal lives of surviving siblings and their families. Bereaved siblings often describe feeling “forever changed” as their experience of loss continues to impact them for the rest of their lives (White, 2006). Given the information about the uniqueness of the sibling bond, and the enduring impact of adolescent sibling bereavement, research is needed that addresses the long term impact of losing a brother or sister in adolescence (Moser et al., 2005). Examining sibling grief from a constructivist framework in order to examine the grief process as it relates to meaning making as it unfolds over time will add important information to our understanding of grief in general and sibling grief in particular.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to better understand the phenomenon of sibling grief through personal narratives and to explore what strategies bereaved siblings used to make meaning out of their siblings’ deaths. I explored how these now young adult siblings were affected by and made meaning out of their loss. I wanted to give expression to the voices of bereaved siblings who have too often been silenced in various ways. Additionally, I wanted to explore any common themes or patterns with regard to the sibling meaning-making processes. Specifically, my research questions are: (a) How do

young adult siblings describe their experience of losing a brother or sister in adolescence?, (b) What are some of the meanings or understandings that bereaved siblings have made after the loss of their brother or sister?, and (c) How have bereaved siblings made meaning out of the loss over time? Specifically, what strategies have they used to try and make sense of the loss?

Significance of the Study

This research provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of sibling loss. Neimeyer and Currier (2009) explained how qualitative research in the area of bereavement can help us further understand complex processes, such as meaning making. This research can help researchers better define, conceptualize, and measure the construct of meaning making. There is some mixed research about the importance of making meaning after the death of a loved one with regard to the definitions/conceptualizations, importance, and prevalence of certain components of meaning making such as sense making and benefit finding (Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006), and there is a lack of literature available examining the meaning making processes of siblings specifically. By documenting the process of meaning making surrounding sibling loss in adolescence, this research provides a greater understanding of how bereaved siblings make meaning of their loss over time and how meaning making processes may differ based on individual characteristics, cause of death, social support, family functioning, culture, and religion/spirituality. By comparing the data gathered to meaning making models in the literature, this research lends support to postmodern meaning making theories. It also lends support for a stronger emphasis on meaning making processes in all meaning making theories, but particularly in sibling specific models. Additionally, by highlighting

the role and significance of meaning making processes, more effective meaning making interventions for counselors working with bereaved siblings are developed and presented.

Organization of the Dissertation

The remainder of this dissertation will be organized into five more chapters. Chapter 2 is a literature review. After defining important terms, major theoretical perspectives on grief are reviewed, along with how those theories conceptualized and addressed meaning making (or not). I reviewed how meaning making has been defined, measured, and assessed in the literature and meaning making in various bereaved populations was reviewed. Next, literature related to the nature and significance of sibling relationships was reviewed, including research about the uniqueness of sibling relationships. Finally, relevant literature that addressed sibling grief in childhood and adolescence was explored. Further, psychological, behavioral, physiological, long term, and resilient grief reactions were explored during the developmental stage of adolescence. Literature that attempts to explore meaning making with respect to sibling loss in adolescence was summarized and critiqued. Chapter 3 details the methodology of the current study. A qualitative approach is defined through the use of in-depth, narrative interviewing. A narrative approach to data analysis that involves both thematic and structural analysis allowed me to discover patterns and themes regarding meaning making processes across cases and to explore how these patterns related to one another in addition to understanding how stories of bereaved siblings were structured.

Chapter 4 provides sibling profiles or stories for each of the seven participants interviewed in this study. Chapter 5 details the results of the study and includes an analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings. Chapter 6 is a discussion of the

results in regard to how they relate to previous literature and proposed theories of meaning making. Results are discussed along with my conclusions, interpretations, and understandings of what the data are saying. Limitations of the study are addressed along with the significance and application of the results as they relate to counselors.

Suggestions for future research are offered.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to explore the meaning making processes and outcomes (or meanings made) among young adult siblings who lost a brother or sister in adolescence. I will begin by defining important terms within the bereavement field. Next, in order to provide a context for the current study, I will discuss theoretical perspectives on grief, including the progression of grief theories over time leading to more recent constructivist theories of grief. This will be followed by an exploration of meaning making. This complex term will be unpacked and the way it will be defined for the current study will become clear. A review of the literature on meaning making and bereavement will be discussed. Next, siblings will be addressed more specifically. I will begin with an exploration of the nature and characteristics of sibling relationships, emphasizing the uniqueness of the sibling bond and thus providing rationale for the further study of siblings. I will discuss the impact of sibling loss in adolescence through a developmental perspective, including typical grief reactions and responses and long term effects. Finally, a review of relevant literature on sibling loss and meaning making will be presented.

Defining Important Terms

Bereavement is defined as “the objective situation of having lost someone significant through death” whereas grief is understood as “the primarily emotional (affective) reaction to the loss of a loved one through death” (Stroebe , Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe, 2008, pp. 4-5). Grieving includes the individual physiological, cognitive, and socio-behavioral processes that occur after bereavement. Grief may be experienced or expressed differently based on individual differences, culture, or ethnicity. Mourning is

generally referred to as “the public display of grief, the social expressions or acts expressive of grief that are shaped by the (often religious) beliefs and practices of a given society or cultural group” (Stroebe et al., 2008, p. 5). It is important to note that is often difficult to distinguish grief and mourning as these individual and social processes affect one another reciprocally. Additionally, a reaction or expression of feeling may often be classified as grief or mourning or both (Stroebe et al., 2008). As such, grief and mourning will be used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to the individual and/or social processes and expressions that occur after bereavement.

Much of the current research in the field of bereavement indicates that the grief experience is uniquely individual and is affected by a myriad of factors, including the circumstances of death, the relationship of the bereaved to the deceased, individual characteristics of the bereaved (age, coping style, attachment style, life history), perceived social supports, sociocultural factors including customs and traditions, and attitudes toward death and dying (Breen & O’Connor, 2007; Wagner & Maercker, 2010). Paradoxically, a common discourse in the grief literature includes the attempt to define and describe “normal” grief and to distinguish it from “complicated” or “pathological” grief. This debate has been ongoing in the field for almost 100 years. Early conceptualizations of pathological grief were rooted in psychoanalytic theory, which identified grief as pathological when “grief work” was not completed or when there were complications in severing the attachment to the deceased (Breen & O’Connor, 2007). However, newer conceptualizations of grief recognize that continuing bonds, or maintaining psychological or emotional bonds with the deceased individual, is not indicative of problematic grieving as previously hypothesized based on the grief work

hypothesis (Report on Bereavement and Grief Research, 2004).

A majority of research supports the understanding that most individuals will be able to cope effectively with the loss of a loved one. This is not to say that they are not distraught. It is understood that these individuals will experience many symptoms of acute grief, including yearning for the deceased, shock, intrusive thoughts, and a range of emotions including restlessness, anxiety, despair, and guilt. Although grief is never “resolved,” there is a point when intense feelings of grief tend to fade further into the background and the bereaved individuals can focus more on their current life experience (Shear & Shair, 2005). This is generally thought of as a period of “normal grief” for bereaved individuals. However, according to the most recent Report on Bereavement and Grief Research (2004), “the characteristics and course of normal responses to bereavement have not been fully identified, making it more difficult to define problematic responses” (p. 501).

Most researchers agree that about 10-20% of bereaved individuals will experience difficulty integrating the loss into their lives (Neimeyer, 2005-2006; Shear & Shair, 2005). These individuals will continue to experience intense symptoms of acute grief, including symptoms of separation distress (i.e. yearning for the deceased, intrusive thoughts, and disbelief regarding the death) and complicating cognitive, emotional, or behavioral symptoms (i.e. anger and bitterness, ruminating about the loss, avoiding reminders of the loss, and feeling lost; Zisook et al., 2010). These individuals have a difficult time re-engaging in life and feel a sense of meaninglessness for a future without the deceased. Such is the experience of complicated grief (Shear & Shair, 2005; Zhang, El-Jawahri, & Prigerson, 2006; Zisook et al., 2010).

Understanding how trauma and bereavement overlap must also be carefully considered when defining important terms. One camp of researchers contends that bereavement in and of itself is a traumatic event (see Figley, Bride, & Mazza, 1997; Simpson, 1997). On the other hand, many researchers consider traumatic bereavement to occur when a death is considered sudden or horrendous, in which case both the traumatic event and the bereavement interact (Stoebe & Schut, 2005-2006). When an individual experiences a traumatic bereavement, grief reactions more often resemble reactions similar to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Bonnano & Kaltman, 1999).

Whereas past literature has defined loss in terms of the expected or unexpected nature of the loss, newer research is showing that expectedness may have less to do with the traumatic nature of the bereavement experience than the actual cause of death, at least with regard to complicated grief (violent or natural; Bonnano & Kaltman, 1999). Violent losses are considered deaths by suicide, homicide, and accident. Nonviolent losses can further be broken down into anticipated natural deaths (e.g., cancer or long term illness) and sudden natural deaths (e.g., heart attack). Currier et al. (2006) suggested that individuals bereaved by violent deaths had more difficulty making sense out of the loss and endorsed more symptoms of complicated grief than those bereaved by natural deaths, even if the natural death was sudden and unexpected.

Within the newer constructivist models of bereavement the idea of meaning making has received considerable attention. The term, however, has been conceptualized and defined in various ways throughout the literature. Broadly understood, meaning making or meaning reconstruction (the terms will be used interchangeably throughout this paper) is a dynamic process through which bereaved individuals attempt to make,

find, or construct meaning and engage in purposeful activity (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010; Neimeyer, 2001b). Meaning and meaning making are terms that will be further explored and elaborated on later in this chapter.

Historical Perspectives on Western Theories of Grief and Loss

Theories of grief and loss have progressed over time and continue to grow and change. It is important to have a basic understanding of the general progression of theories over time in order to put this research in context. Although a full review of all theories of grief and loss is beyond the scope of this dissertation, a progression of Western theories of grief over time will be summarized. This section of the literature review will review bereavement theories beginning with the medical model of bereavement in which grief work was emphasized and “letting go” of attachments with the deceased was seen as the ultimate goal, moving to stage and task theories, summarizing important contributions from attachment, cognitive, and trauma theories, and concluding with newer constructivist models of bereavement in which the bereaved individuals’ existential struggles with meaning and purpose are emphasized. Seminal works regarding bereavement theory will be presented as examples within each section.

Traditional Models of Mourning

Traditional models of mourning have had a major impact on how grief and loss continue to be conceptualized to this day. These earlier theories within the field of bereavement tended to be representative of the medical model paradigm and therefore often served to pathologize grief reactions. Additionally, many traditional models culminated in ultimate acceptance of the loss on behalf of bereaved individuals so that grief reactions extending beyond a certain time frame after the death occurred were

viewed as pathological (Hunter, 2007; Krueger, 2006). The grief work hypothesis was said to originate within the Freud's psychoanalytic model of bereavement. The grief work hypothesis was accepted by many within the field and further expounded upon in both stage and task models of grief (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999).

Psychoanalytic models. Early psychoanalytic models of grief emphasized the medical model, or grief work hypothesis, of bereavement, wherein mourners were expected to work through grief with the ultimate goal of “letting go” of the lost loved one. Freud's seminal work, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917/1957), wherein he paralleled depression with mourning to show both similarities and differences, would have a major impact on bereavement and grief theory for years to come. Freud believed melancholia and mourning were similar in that they both involved intense longing for something (or someone) that is lost. While melancholia was seen as pathological, Freud saw symptoms of mourning or suffering as a normal part of the grieving process. Freud established the view of grief as a primarily intrapsychic process in which the mourner must come to recognize that the loved one who died no longer exists. According to Freud (1957), the individual's natural instinct is to withdraw from the deceased loved one, to which individuals biologically and instinctually feel opposition because of their strong attachment to and love for the deceased, leaving mourning individuals in a state of suffering in which they long for the deceased loved one. Freud believed that relinquishing this emotional connection and withdrawing or detaching from the deceased is the healthy way to mourn a loss. Freud believed that detaching from the deceased through “the work of mourning”, although it was a slow and difficult process, was necessary in order for grieving individuals to reinvest their emotional energy in other areas of their life. The

work of mourning involved reviewing memories, hopes, thoughts, and longings for the deceased loved one through an often painful and time consuming process with the ultimate goal of breaking the bond with the deceased in order to reinvest that emotional energy (or libido) elsewhere (Bonanno, 2009).

Granek (2010) argued that Freud's work was largely misunderstood and misinterpreted by theorists and others in the field of grief and loss. Western interpretations of Freud's work took it to mean that individuals who were unable to do their "grief work" and relinquish ties with the deceased would experience pathological mourning. Granek argued that Freud never intended to pathologize grief, citing evidence in Freud's seminal work in which Freud stated, "although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment" (Freud, 1917/1963, p. 252, as cited in Granek, 2010, p. 52). Freud did mention the idea of pathological mourning in his work, which he defined as the inability to successfully detach from the deceased person and reinvest that energy/bond with the lost loved one into something more constructive. However, according to Granek (2010), this is something Freud thought happened rarely in bereavement, as he admitted that the process of mourning is long and may never be fully resolved. Subsequent psychoanalytic theorists such as Lindemann (1944) furthered Freud's grief work hypothesis, perpetuating the idea that bereaved individuals must confront the reality of their loss and sever emotional bonds with the deceased in order to reinvest in ongoing relationships with the living.

Stage models. Stemming from Freud's grief work hypothesis, many theorists have proposed stage models of grief wherein individuals move through a series of stages

in which they complete their grief work in order to adapt to the loss (Bowlby, 1980; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Parkes & Weiss, 1983). While each of these stage models vary to some degree, in a general sense each model proposes a path through bereavement that begins with an initial stage of numbness or disbelief, followed by subsequent stages characterized by intense, overwhelming, and painful feelings involving variations of yearning for the deceased, anger or protest, and depression, and culminating in the final stage of acceptance of the loss (Attig, 1996; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010).

Stage models of grief and the idea of working through grief have predominated in the field of grief and bereavement. These stages of grief have been accepted by both clinicians and the general public and have become ingrained in our societal beliefs about grief and loss (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Maciejewski, Zhang, Block, & Prigerson, 2007). Prigerson and Maciejewski (2008) argued that these models have high appeal to grieving individuals, clinicians, and researchers because stage theories attempt to take a complex, multifaceted issue, such as grief, and simplify it to a series of predictable stages one must go through in order to recover from loss.

One of the most prominent and well known examples of stage theory is Kubler-Ross's seminal work *On Death and Dying* (1969). This work, in which the five stages of grief were presented, grew out of the years that Kubler-Ross spent interviewing and working with dying patients. Kubler-Ross would later state that these five stages have often been misunderstood as the "typical" response to grief, but she stated, "there is no typical loss... They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them

or goes in a prescribed order” (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 7). Needless to say, whether intentional or not, the five stages of grief were generally thought of as discrete psychological phases, each one separate from the next. Mourners would progress through the stages in a somewhat linear pattern with resolution of all the stages of grief conditional on reaching the final stage of acceptance (Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2008).

The first stage of Kubler-Ross’s (1969/2005) theory is denial. Denial involves literal or (more likely) symbolic disbelief that a loved one has died or that a loved one will never be seen again. Symbolic disbelief involves literally comprehending that a loved one has died, but still looking for them in public places or expecting them to call for example. It is often accompanied with feelings of shock and numbness. The second stage is anger. This stage occurs once partial acceptance of the reality of the death sets in. Anger can present as rational or irrational and can manifest in many ways, including anger at deceased loved ones, anger at doctors, anger at god, anger that one’s loved one is gone, etc. The third stage is bargaining. Mourners in this stage hope to make deals to escape the intense pain of loss and have their loved ones back. Guilt is a big feeling that often occurs within the bargaining stage as mourners begin to ruminate about the “what ifs” and “if onlys.” For example, “what if” we had not been out driving that night he was killed or “if only” we would have found the tumor sooner. The fourth stage is depression. Depression is accompanied with intense feelings of sadness, despair, and hopelessness. Within this model, depression is seen as a normal and even necessary response to the loss of a loved one. The fifth and final stage is acceptance. Acceptance is not about being okay with the loss of a loved one, but rather about accepting the reality and permanence of the loss. It is during acceptance that individuals begin to feel like healing is possible.

This is a time of readjusting to life roles and finding ways to live with the loss (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005).

Despite wide acceptance and appeal of stage models, many contend that there is a lack of empirical support validating stage theory (Bonanno, 2009; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2008). While Barrett and Schneeweis (1981) conducted a study in which they failed to find support for the stage theory of grief, others have conducted studies in which limited empirical support for stage-like theories of grief was offered (Maciejewski et al., 2007; Meuser & Marwit, 2001). Prigerson and Maciejewski (2008) claimed that stage theories need to be continually reevaluated in order to assess which parts, if any, can be useful when working with bereaved clients. These authors contended that perhaps these stages of grief, such as denial, anger, and depression, should instead be considered as different “grief states” which all represent the single underlying construct of grief, rather than distinct psychological stages. Viewing them as grief states would allow these grief reactions to be viewed as evolving, developing and changing over time versus the stage view in which grief reactions are thought to be more distinct and sequential.

Task models. When stage models were seen as too restrictive and not widely applicable to mourners because of their strict linear fashion, other theorists began to propose task or phase models, wherein it was emphasized that tasks or phases could be completed in any given order and may likely be revisited on multiple occasions by the bereaved over time. Task models were considered by theorists who created them as more in line with the individuality of grief because of their dynamic fluidity (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1995; Worden, 1982, 1991, 1996, 2002). This represented a shift in the field

of grief as less emphasis was placed on the assumption that grief work had to be completed in a series of linear stages in order to relinquish emotional ties with the deceased and effectively move on (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). Additionally, many contended that task models took a different approach to understanding the concept of grieving, in that task models allowed individuals to view the grieving process as more active, rather than something that happens to them (Attig, 1996; Worden, 2002). This gives bereaved individuals a stronger sense of control, power, and choice in their own grieving processes as they actively work to complete the tasks of grieving (Worden, 2002).

Worden (1982, 2002) proposed a task based model of mourning in which bereaved individuals were said to complete a series of four tasks in their grieving process. The task model was seen as more dynamic and fluid and tasks were not necessarily completed in any certain order. Mourning was viewed as a process and the tasks proposed required active effort by bereaved individuals in order to complete the tasks. The first task of mourning posited by Worden (2002) was to *accept the reality of the loss* (p. 27). This task involves an intellectual and emotional understanding that the death has occurred and that the deceased is no longer present on this earth. The second task of mourning is *working through the pain of grief* (p. 30). This task involves the grief work hypothesis that individuals must face, express, and process the painful emotions that result from losing a loved one. The third task of mourning is to *adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing* (p. 32). Worden (2002) argued that multiple adjustments must be made after the death of a loved one, including external adjustments, internal adjustments, and spiritual adjustments. External adjustments include necessary changes

to day to day functioning following the loss of a loved one, such as a shift in life roles. Internal adjustments include changes in one's sense of self after the death; spiritual adjustments include making necessary adjustments to how one views the world after the loss. This might include changes in beliefs, values, and assumptions that were challenged by the loss event. The fourth task of mourning involves the ability of the bereaved to *emotionally relocate the deceased and move on in life* (p. 35). In the earlier version of Worden's model (1982), the fourth task of mourning was to *withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in other relationships*, which is more in line with the traditional grief work hypothesis proposed by Freud. Thus, there was a shift in the fourth task over the years, as newer research on grief began to show the value of continuing bonds with the deceased. It was in these later versions of his model that Worden posited it was important for bereaved individuals to maintain a connection, although changed, with the deceased in important ways that do not prevent them from moving forward in life. Worden (2002) also explained a variety of mediators, or factors that helped explain individual variations in the grieving process. These mediators include personality factors of both the bereaved and the deceased, the relationship and nature of the attachment between bereaved and deceased, the mode of death, history of loss for the bereaved individual, social supports or resources, and other concurrent stressors.

The grief work theory which originated in the works of Freud and Linndeman dominated the field for most of the 20th century. Psychoanalytic, stage, and task models of mourning fall within the modernist framework for understanding grief and bereavement. The modernist understanding of grief involves a process of detaching from the deceased person, gradually recovering from loss through grief work, and returning to

a normal level of pre-loss functioning. Stages or tasks represent the process through which grief can be “resolved” (Neimeyer, 2001a). Bonanno (2001a) cited a lack of empirical evidence to support the grief work hypothesis, ultimately leading to updated or altogether new models and theories. On the other hand, some researchers (see Stroebe, 2001) reported that there may be some validity to the grief work hypothesis and advocated for further research to explore the nature of the grief work theory before it is dismissed. Regardless, as grief theories continue to evolve, theorists from multiple perspectives have increasingly begun to recognize that stage wise progression in a strict sense is not supported by research and continuing a connection with the deceased may be a healthy response to loss (Bowlby, 1980; Neimeyer, 2001a, Wortman & Boerner, 2007). Other important contributions in grief theory include attachment theory, cognitive theory, and trauma and stress theory.

Newer Models of Mourning

Since grief work theories predominated within the field and went unchallenged for a significant period of time despite limited empirical evidence of applicability and effectiveness, few other models of coping with grief and loss have developed over the years (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999). Instead, theories and research in bereavement have been informed by related psychological perspectives and fields such as attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980), cognitive stress theory (Folkman, 2001), and trauma theory (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, 1992).

Contributions from attachment theory. One of the core assumptions in attachment theory is that human beings are biologically driven to seek proximity to significant individuals or attachment figures with whom they have formed emotional

bonds. Through multiple interactions, infants and children become emotionally attached to important people in their lives, thus becoming distressed upon separation from a primary attachment figure (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). The protest responses of infants, including clinging, crying, and even anger, are adaptive reactions which signal the search for or return of the primary attachment figure (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999). While Bowlby's attachment theory (1969, 1973, 1980) originated from an examination of infants' attachments to primary caregivers, Bowlby (1980) later explained that people of any age are capable of forming emotional attachments to significant others in their lives, such as parents, siblings, partners, and friends.

Bowlby applied his theory of attachment to issues of grief and loss through a series of works (1969, 1973, 1980). Bowlby's early work was closely aligned with the grief work hypothesis and he was known for producing a biologically-driven, stage theory of grief in which the original stages were called protest, despair, and detachment (later, reorganization). Later, however, Bowlby (1980) emphasized the importance of and possible benefits from maintaining a continued bond with the deceased loved one, thus distinguishing himself from other grief work theorists such as Freud. Bowlby argued that a continued connection with the deceased can help bereaved individuals define or redefine their sense of selves and also help them live a more meaningful life (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999).

As applied to grief, separation distress is said to occur in bereaved individuals upon the loss of an attachment figure which results in *protest* through searching and yearning for the deceased (Bowlby, 1980). Since proximity to the attachment figure cannot be restored when the figure is deceased, the anxiety of the protest turns into

despair or depression, withdrawal, loneliness, and isolation. The final stage, which Bowlby (1980) preferred to call *reorganization* when referring to adult attachments, involves a process wherein bereaved individuals begin to reorganize their views or mental representations of both self and of the deceased. This is a gradual process of reorganizing the bond with the deceased loved one so that the deceased may continue to serve as a symbolic attachment figure while the bereaved is also able to form new attachments. Reorganization includes acceptance of the loss as bereaved individuals attempt to cope with a new reality without the deceased (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008).

Bowlby (1980) also proposed a theory about working with disordered patterns of mourning. Accordingly, he concluded that when the attachment between the bereaved and deceased was unhealthy in some way, it could lead to complications in the grieving process. For example, individuals with anxious attachment styles may be more likely to experience “chronic mourning,” which is characterized by prolonged, overwhelming feelings of sadness or anxiety, prolonged difficulty re-establishing abilities in regard to daily functioning, and chronic rumination about the deceased. Individuals with avoidant attachment styles may be more likely to experience “prolonged absence of conscious grieving” (Bowlby, 1980, p. 138), characterized by continuation of life after the death without any major disruptions and a suppression of emotional expressions such as sadness or anger in response to the loss. Mikulincer and Shaver (2008) noted that many clinicians agree with these conceptualizations of disordered mourning, although prolonged absence of conscious grieving may be referred to as delayed grief, inhibited mourning, or absent mourning. Mikulincer and Shaver further cautioned that it is important, albeit difficult, to distinguish between an individual with an avoidant attachment style who is

actively suppressing emotional expressions and an individual with an avoidant attachment style who experiences a lack of emotional expressions because there is a true absence of distress in response to the loss. However, other researchers argued that the concept of delayed or inhibited grief is more contentious within the field and many have conducted empirical studies that have failed to validate the concept of delayed grief (see Bonanno & Field, 2001; Wortman & Silver, 1989).

The influence of attachment theory was revolutionary in the field of bereavement and continues to be studied and applied by many theorists today. Bowlby (1980) was one of the earlier researchers to contend that maintaining emotional bonds with the deceased, although reorganized, could provide benefit to the bereaved and be seen as a normal part of the grieving process. Bowlby (1980) challenged the way that theorists before him had conceptualized grief, stating there was an assumption that “a normal, healthy person can and should get over a bereavement, not only rapidly but also completely” (p. 8). He argued about the evolutionary nature of attachments, therefore attempting to normalize the intense and distressing grief reactions that follow when reuniting with an attachment figure is not possible. Bowlby also emphasized individual differences in grief depending on attachment style (Archer, 2008).

Contributions from cognitive theory. Cognitive theories relating to grief and bereavement are often viewed as complimentary to attachment models, but with a different and much stronger emphasis on the role of internal cognitive processes (Archer, 2008). In contrast to grief work theories, which tended to view the loss of a loved one as an event that needed to be confronted, talked about, and worked through, cognitive theories take the view that an event, such as the loss of a loved one, is stressful only to

the extent that an individual appraises or understands it to be (Archer, 2008; Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999).

According to the cognitive theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), a stressful appraisal occurs when the event is “appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (p. 19). Cognitive appraisals involve both primary appraisal, in which individuals ask themselves whether there is threat or benefit (or both) to themselves and how so and secondary appraisal, in which individuals ask themselves how they can cope with the stressful event in order to reduce harm and increase benefit. When an event is perceived as stressful, primary cognitive appraisals include: harm/loss appraisals, in which central commitments are lost, such as the death of a loved one; threat appraisals, in which harms or losses are anticipated but have not yet occurred; and challenge appraisals, in which the event is appraised in such a way that personal gain or growth are seen as potential outcomes. These different types of appraisal are not mutually exclusive so that an event can be appraised both as a loss and as a challenge, for example (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

When an event is appraised as stressful, secondary appraisals occur as an individual questions what can be done to best and most effectively cope with the situation. Appraised meaning, defined as personal significance to the individual, then, plays an important, mediating role in adjustment to the stressful event. When cognitive stress theory is applied to bereavement, the extent to which the loss of a loved one is seen as a stressful depends on the appraisal, or how the loss is understood and evaluated, by the bereaved individual (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Cognitive models began to emphasize the importance of appraised meaning in

how bereaved individuals coped after the death of a loved one. Within cognitive models, meaning was usually conceptualized in terms of personal significance, beliefs, and appraisals. Thus, research stemming from these models has often explored the concept of changed meanings among bereaved individuals (see Park & Folkman, 1997) or meaning as a variable that mediates the effects of the loss on other outcomes (see Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004; Folkman, 1997).

Cognitive stress theory is often viewed as one of the critical guiding frameworks for research in the area of grief and bereavement. Although prior theories of grief and loss had focused on the importance of grief work and the nature of the relationships between the bereaved and deceased, cognitive stress theory emphasized the more active roles of appraisal and cognitive processes. Through the lens of cognitive stress theory, individual responses to loss are understood as dynamic and emotional states that can be viewed as the bereaved individual's effort to understand and cope with the death (Park & Folkman, 1997).

Contributions from trauma theory. Trauma perspectives and theories have been quite influential in the area of grief and bereavement. Trauma theories are similar to and often linked with cognitive stress theory in the sense that both of these frameworks view grief as the response to a stressful event, which in the case of bereavement is the death of a loved one (Stroebe & Schut, 2005-2006). The trauma framework offers a unique way of understanding bereavement by placing an emphasis on violent or unnatural losses, the role of meaning in understanding loss, and the need to talk with others, particularly about the traumatic nature of the loss (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999).

Janoff-Bulman's (1992) assumptive worldview theory is an important

contribution to the field of bereavement and stems from work done with trauma survivors. According to worldview theory, individuals hold certain beliefs or assumptions about the world which are usually fairly stable and positive. Janoff-Bulman identified three primary worldviews that may be challenged when an individual is faced with a traumatic event, such as bereavement. One of these worldviews is *benevolence of the world*, which is the assumption that the world and other people are generally good, kind, compassionate, and caring. The second worldview, *meaningfulness of the world*, involves the assumption that the world is fairly predictable and just. Within this assumption, good and bad outcomes are often seen as tied to particular people. This is the belief that events or occurrences in life happen for a reason and therefore “make sense.” The third worldview, *worthiness of self*, is a view of self as decent, worthy, capable, and moral.

According to trauma theory, these core assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), schemata (Horowitz, 1988), or beliefs held by individuals about the world are often challenged when a traumatic event occurs that does not seem to fit within these global belief structures. Distress is said to occur, then, when the traumatic event is understood or appraised as discrepant from the core assumptions or schemata. Thus, the general framework or ways in which individuals understand the world and themselves cannot be used to process the way they understand the traumatic event. In attempts to resolve the distress that occurs from this discrepancy, individuals must either revise or reconstruct their core assumptions/schemata or they must revise or reconstruct their appraisal or understanding of the traumatic event, in order to find seeds of benevolence, meaning, and self-worth (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park, 2010).

Within trauma theories, an emphasis on meaning is once again seen. Most

researchers agree that the fields of trauma and bereavement can overlap, although there is much debate over exactly how these two areas intersect. One group of researchers reported that bereavement in and of itself is a traumatic life event. They believe that all bereavement should thus be viewed through a trauma framework (see Figley et al., 1997; Simpson, 1997). Another group of researchers holds that trauma and bereavement are two separate phenomena so that responses associated with bereavement require separate consideration, just as phenomena associated with trauma require separate consideration because each is based on a different reactive process (see Pynoos & Nader, 1988; Raphael, 1997; Raphael & Marinek, 1997). A third group of researchers tends to focus more on the overlap of trauma and bereavement. They believe that trauma and grief intersect and the underlying processes and stress responses between the two (after a traumatic event or after a death) are not as separate and distinct as some have previously believed (see Green, 2000; Rando, 2000). A full review of the interactions between trauma and bereavement is beyond the scope of this study however; the fact remains that trauma theories continue to play an important role in both research and practice within the field of bereavement (see Stroebe & Schut, 2005-2006).

Many of these generalized psychological approaches such as attachment theory, cognitive theory, and trauma theory, as applied to the examination of grief and bereavement, have been helpful and even revolutionary within the field. Many of these models continue to be utilized, updated, and expanded upon specifically in relation to grief and bereavement. However, many researchers contend that the mourning process is complex, consisting of a multitude of unique factors and characteristics, and therefore advocate for the development of more bereavement specific research and theories

(Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Stroebe & Schut, 2001).

Constructivist, Bereavement Specific Models

Over time, with contributions from various fields of research, a new wave of bereavement specific models came about as researchers and clinicians in the area became increasingly dissatisfied with traditional, grief work models of mourning (Neimeyer, 1999). In the past 50 years, the field has expanded on the psychodynamic, grief work theory of loss by attempting to define and conceptualize complicated versus uncomplicated (or normal) grief and the various stages, phases, or tasks through which an individual must work through to “resolve” his or her grief. These models of grief remained popular for many years until grief researchers and clinicians began to empirically test some of the popular grief work hypotheses, often resulting in lack of or minimal support (Bonanno, 2001a; Stroebe, 2001). Furthermore, Neimeyer (2001a) argued that “conventional models indirectly disempower both the bereaved person and would-be caregiver by implying that grieving people must passively negotiate a sequence of psychological transitions forced on them by external events” (p. 3). Additionally, critiques of the individualistic nature of traditional grief theories came about as newer conceptualizations involved viewing grief as both as a unique, individual process and as a socially negotiated process often experienced within the context of family, community, society, and relationships (Attig, 1996; Nadeau, 1997; Neimeyer, 1998; 2001a). Others argued that not enough attention was given to meanings, actions, and behaviors because the emphasis in traditional grief theories was on emotional states (Armour, 2003; Davis et al., 1998; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). As the questioning of traditional models of grief grew, a shift in the field began which included updated theories of grief and bereavement viewed

through a postmodern or constructivist lens (Neimeyer, 2001a).

In order to have a better understanding of this “new wave” of postmodern grief theories, some of the common elements will be reviewed prior to giving two specific examples of postmodern theories. One common element in these newer theories is that they involve acceptance of more dynamic, complex post-loss adjustment patterns that do not fit neatly within stage models (Attig, 1996). Newer models also incorporate an increasingly accepted idea that continuing bonds or a continued relationship with the deceased can serve a healthy function in bereaved individuals (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Additionally, newer models emphasize the importance of cognitive processes, including the role of complex meaning making processes, in understanding grief and loss (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Neimeyer, 1999) along with the possibility for posttraumatic growth through positive appraisals (Folkman, 1997). The likelihood of possible identity changes as a result of the loss is given greater awareness as bereaved individuals may struggle to figure out who they are now (Attig, 1996, Neimeyer, 1998). Interpersonal aspects of loss and the importance of relationships are also emphasized in newer theories, along with increased emphasis on “local” understandings of grief and the grieving process by various groups, cultures, and societies (Nadeau, 1997; Neimeyer & Keese, 1998).

Neimeyer (2001a) contended that when a loved one dies, a bereaved individual's sense of personal and interpersonal reality is forever changed. The symptoms of grief, then, can be seen as outward manifestations of the bereaved individual's internal, cognitive struggles to make sense or meaning out of his or her changed sense of values, beliefs, and understandings about the self and about the world. Therefore, Neimeyer

contended that “meaning reconstruction in response to loss is the central process in grieving” (p. 4). Based on this premise, theories of grief, including the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) and the meaning reconstruction model (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006) have been developed highlighting the importance of meaning in response to bereavement.

Dual Process Model. The Dual Process Model (DPM) is a bereavement specific model of coping with loss developed by Stroebe and Schut (1999, 2010). The phase and task models based on the grief work hypothesis were models of coping with bereavement that dominated the field at the time the DPM was developed. While the DPM can be seen as an extension of some of these earlier conceptualizations about coping with loss, the theory does take into account perceived limitations of earlier models rooted in the grief work hypothesis. Namely, it posits that there are other ways of "working through" grief other than confrontation. Also, grief is viewed as an active process in the DPM, whereas it is often described as more passive in stage models of coping with loss. The DPM also takes into account the potential benefits of denial within the grieving process along with an additional emphasis on indirect sources of stress and loss that might result after a death, such as financial concerns, relationship changes, identity struggles, or legal issues (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

The DPM is a dynamic model of coping with loss in which an individual oscillates between loss oriented coping and restoration oriented coping. Loss oriented coping involves coping focused on understanding and processing some aspect of the loss experience. During loss oriented coping, grief work takes place, along with changing continuing bonds with the deceased. Restoration oriented coping involves coping focused

on secondary stressors that occur after a loss in which individuals attempt to reorient themselves in the new, changed world without the deceased. During restoration oriented coping, bereaved individuals form new roles, new identities, new relationships, and may use denial or avoidance of grief to move forward in their life. Both orientations are considered sources of stress and are confronted or avoided in varying degrees so that at times, a bereaved individual will confront a certain aspect of the loss, which may be avoided at other times, just as a bereaved individual will actively work to create and define his or her new identity at some times, and avoid it at other times. Additionally, there is oscillation between positive and negative appraisal and meaning in both the loss and restoration oriented dimensions of the model. Therefore, coping with bereavement is a complex, dynamic, flexible process in which the bereaved individual fluctuates between confrontation and avoidance of both loss oriented and restoration oriented stressors (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

The DPM was created as a bereavement specific model for widows/widowers coping with the loss of a partner. As one can see, the model draws heavily on past theories in the area of grief and bereavement, including grief work theory, attachment theory, and the cognitive stress model of coping. Important aspects of grief work, such as accepting the reality of the loss and experiencing the pain of grief and adjusting to a new life without the deceased, remain paramount within the DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Additionally, aspects of attachment theory are evidenced in the DPM as the potential importance of maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased loved one is emphasized through bereaved individuals' attempts to reorganize their attachment with the deceased in a way that allows for them to move forward. Bereaved individuals begin a process

through which they determine which aspects of the relationship they can keep, which they must let go of, and which they must create, expand, or redefine (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Finally, Stroebe and Schut (2010) paid tribute to cognitive theories as they reported that the DPM is largely rooted in cognitive stress theory, particularly in the ways in which stressors, appraisal processes, coping processes, and outcomes are defined within the model.

Stroebe and Schut (2010) argued that although the DPM has similarities to previous models of coping with loss, it is significantly different from past models in several important ways. First, the DPM provides a basic framework for understanding various forms of complicated grief. For example, in the absence of oscillation or fluctuation between confrontation-avoidance of both loss and restoration oriented coping, bereaved individuals may experience symptoms of chronic grief (focus on loss-oriented ways of coping) or absent grief (focus on restoration oriented ways of coping). Additionally, they argued that individuals who have experienced a traumatic bereavement might have trouble moving back and forth between loss and restoration oriented forms of coping. Secondly, they argued that the DPM, although often labeled as another intrapersonal model, takes into account various ways in which interpersonal coping processes can affect grief while also taking into account various cultural differences in grieving individuals. For example, there is much variation in oscillation between loss and restoration oriented forms of coping and this can be seen in various cultural groups where the emphasis is seen more strongly in one area or the other. Finally, the DPM emphasizes components of cognitive processing through a bereavement specific model in which meaning is emphasized. The DPM provides a framework for understanding both positive

and negative meanings associated with different ways of coping, through elaboration on the process of oscillation between loss and restoration oriented ways of coping (Stroebe & Schut, 2001).

Meaning reconstruction model. Meaning reconstruction is a “linguistic-relational approach” that “articulates with recent and emerging theories of grieving that emphasize the bereaved individual’s unique quest for a personal narrative that ‘makes sense’ of a changed reality and that finds support in the social domain” (Neimeyer, 2001c, p. 261). According to Neimeyer (2001c), previous theories of grief often stemmed from understandings of loss described in symptomatic or pathological terms, and meaning, when mentioned, was often referred to as an individual’s cognitive coping strategies for dealing with the loss rather than a more existential quest for meaning.

Neimeyer’s meaning reconstruction theory (2001c) is rooted in constructivist psychology in which an individual quest for existential meaning in life is emphasized. Within constructivist theory, individual meaning of an event is determined by that individual’s understanding of its significance, rather than objectively “true facts” themselves. Making sense out of one’s life involves creating a story or narrative of important events. Different observers will create different stories for the “same” event, which would be viewed through a constructivist lens as alternative constructions. Individuals struggle to construct meaningful stories of important events in their lives and often have to “revise” or “rewrite” these stories when current understandings are challenged by unexpected or incompatible events.

Significant loss, such as the death of a loved one, is a challenge to a cohesive, coherent “master narrative” and to one’s sense of identity. Thus, individuals must find a

way to reconstruct their personal narrative in a cohesive way that bridges the past together with the future (Neimeyer, 2001c). Narratives or stories people tell are based on a framework of understandings of the world held by the individual that have been generally agreed upon or consensualized by a certain group, culture, community, or family (Gergen, 1991; Neimeyer, 2001c). There are multiple and varied clinical, societal, cultural, and ethnic discourses on grief and the response to loss. Bereaved individuals construct their personal responses to loss based on their individual meaning frameworks, the core set of meaning structures they hold about the world (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001c).

Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) further elaborated a model of meaning reconstruction based on the model proposed by Neimeyer (2001c) and based on an evaluation of empirical research in the area of grief and meaning making. They proposed that each individual has a core set of meaning structures, likened to assumptive worlds (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Parkes, 1996), which inform his or her understanding of the world in six different areas. These six domains were created based on a constructivist integration of previous research in the field and include: day to day activities (see Strobe & Schut, 2001), perceptions of self and personal identities (see Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998), relationships with others (see Bowlby, 1980), future outlook (see Taylor & Armor, 1996), spiritual or philosophic view of world (see Janoff-Bulman, 1992), and behaviors within communities (see Armour, 2003). After the death of a loved one, the loss event is either said to be consistent or inconsistent with these pre-loss meaning structures. If the loss is consistent with an individual's pre-loss meaning structures, it can be distressing, but the pre-loss meaning structures will be reinforced as they help the

bereaved individual explain, understand, and make sense out of the loss. On the other hand, if the loss of a loved one is inconsistent with an individual's pre-loss meaning structures, the resulting distress will initiate meaning making efforts on behalf of the bereaved individual as his or her pre-loss meaning structures are no longer seen as "true" or meaningful (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

The core meaning making processes in the meaning reconstruction model are sense making, benefit finding, and identity change. It is through these processes that individuals attempt to reexamine, redefine, and reconstruct new post-loss meaning structures. The death of a loved one can disrupt one's "taken-for-granted narratives," thus challenging previously held assumptions about one's life, one's world, and one's identity (Neimeyer, 2001c). New post-loss meaning structures that help the bereaved individual make sense of his or her experience of loss become permanent and are integrated into his or her worldview. If these new structures are not found helpful, the process of meaning reconstruction continues. Thus, new meanings can be found in some domains, but not in others (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Neimeyer (2001c) reminded clinicians that it is important to remember that meaning reconstruction theory considers the relational self, which includes "a construction of identity that is multiplistic, shifting, and emergent" (p. 266). There are often many internal tensions within one's self narrative leading to a meaning system that is internally complex and sometimes contradictory. Additionally, self narratives vary across time and across contexts. Individuals seek validation in their self narratives through relationships with significant others, so the loss of a relationship, particularly through death, causes an individual to attempt to redefine a new, changed identity.

Through this process, an individual holds onto certain features of his or her self narrative or meaning structures that remain important or relevant while also experimenting with new post loss identities. Bereaved individuals, then, seek affirmation of their adjusted identity or self narrative through a symbolic relationship with the deceased and through relationships with important others (Neimeyer, 2001c). When a bereaved individual is unable to reconstruct a new self narrative, or new meaning structures which can incorporate the loss event, he or she may be left feeling a sense of incoherence in his or her life story or a sense of meaninglessness as he or she continues to search for a more complete narrative that leads to a more meaningful future (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001c).

Since we are shaped by and form personal narratives on the basis of attachments to people, communities, cultures, or other groups, the loss of a significant other through death disrupts our life narrative and challenges our previously held assumptions both about who we are and about how the world operates. These challenges often leave bereaved individuals searching for meaning as they attempt to redefine unhelpful meaning structures. Meaning reconstruction theory would postulate that bereaved individuals need to understand tensions within their narrative resulting from the loss and learn to understand and develop a new self narrative or new meaning structures characterized by a sense of coherence and connection that promotes and validates a newfound or developing sense of identity and view of the world (Neimeyer, 2001c).

Exploration of Meaning Making

A seminal work in the area of meaning making, *Man's Search for Meaning*, was written by Viktor Frankl (1946/2006). Frankl asserted that individuals are driven by a

psychological need to find or create meaning or a sense of purpose in life. Frankl proposed that meaning can be found even in extreme suffering. Finding meaning can give an individual a sense of purpose and drive him or her forward to continue living a meaningful life.

Meaning, as applied to the experience of bereavement, is not new. How an individual feels and responds after the death of a loved one is a result of the personal meaning given to the loss. When understood this way, meaning can be viewed as a central construct in the experience of bereavement. The problem, however, is that the idea of meaning remains a vague, often ill-defined concept within the literature on grief and loss. Meaning can be understood and defined in multiple and varied ways, making it difficult to operationalize and study in a scientific way (Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Multiple aspects of meaning may be relevant in individual's coping with loss of a loved one. Accordingly, there is much diversity in both conceptual and operational approaches to exploring the concept of meaning in coping with loss (Park & Folkman, 1997).

In the following sections, I intend to give a brief summary highlighting how important theories of grief have addressed the concept of meaning making. This is important because it will help us see how the “new wave” of grief theories utilizes theoretically sound and empirically supported concepts and ideas from previous theories of grief in order to come up with newer understandings that conceptualize grief in a more postmodern way with a stronger emphasis on the idea of meaning making. Additionally, I will clarify how meaning making will be defined and understood within the context of this dissertation. Finally, I will provide a literature review of empirical research on meaning making processes in response to loss. Both qualitative and quantitative research

will be reviewed, synthesized, and evaluated in order to give readers a better understanding about how the idea of meaning making has been defined, conceptualized, and measured in empirical research.

Theories of Grief and Meaning Making

Theories of grief have evolved over the years based on continued research, new insights, and the context and culture in which we live. Many theories and theorists have mentioned or researched the concept of meaning making with regard to the loss of a loved one. In order to better understand how the concept of meaning making will be defined for the purpose of this study, I will briefly review how different theoretical perspectives, as previously defined, have explored the concept of meaning.

Early psychoanalytic and other earlier stage models rooted in grief work theory tended to focus on the importance of meanings associated with the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. Many of these early theorists emphasized that successful mourning involved a detachment from the deceased individual in order to move forward in life. Attachment perspectives, such as that of Bowlby (1980), continued to expound on the importance of the bereaved individual's relationship to the deceased. The nature or meaning of that relationship was highlighted as one of the important ways that bereaved individuals could begin to cope with the loss of a loved one (Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Thus, early on, many theorists contended that one needed to do their grief work in order to let go of their relationship with deceased and move forward in life by forming new, supportive attachments. However, around the 1980's, the field began to see a shift into a different way of thinking about the important relationship between bereaved and deceased as many researchers (see Klass et al., 1996; Rando, 1985; Stroebe, Gergen,

Gergen, & Stroebe, 1992) suggested that perhaps the relationship between bereaved and deceased does not need to be relinquished, but just adjusted, reformulated, and redefined. The meaning of the relationship between bereaved and deceased transformed as the idea of maintaining a supportive, emotional attachment to the deceased was endorsed by many within the field (Attig, 1991; Klass et al., 1996; Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006; Stroebe, 1992). Many earlier psychoanalytic, stage, task, and attachment theorists came to increasingly support the idea that continuing a healthy, although changed, emotional/psychological relationship with the deceased could be an important facet of healthy grieving (Bowlby, 1980; Worden, 1996).

Furthermore, a core tenet of attachment theory was that specific styles of attachment such as secure, anxious, or avoidant attachment, developed in childhood through important relationships. Many posited that an individual's attachment style can affect one's response to the loss of a loved one (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008; Shaver & Tancredy, 2001). Thus, the meaning of the loss was seen as different for each individual, in part because of the individual's pre-existing attachment style (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Trauma theory (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) played a major contributing role to the development of meaning reconstruction theory. Trauma theory provides the backdrop for understanding how the loss of a loved one creates a sense of meaninglessness in the bereaved individual since that loss can shatter one's views about the way the world is (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer et al., 2010). Janoff-Bulman (1992) asserted that focusing on benefits and lessons one has learned as a result of the loss is a way in which individuals can come to find a sense of meaning that was shattered after the traumatic

loss.

Similarly, cognitive stress theorists, such as Folkman (2001), further explored what would later become the benefit finding component of meaning reconstruction theory. Folkman posited that finding benefit, or positive reappraisals of the loss event and its aftermath, is a form of using meaning oriented approaches to coping. Positive reappraisals, or reframing a situation to see the silver lining, provide individuals with a sense of hope, meaning, and purpose about their future. Thus, cognitive stress theories have often conceptualized the concept of meaning as personal significance or the meaning of individual cognitive appraisals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Park & Folkman, 1997; Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Folkman (2001) further argued that future researchers must explore the specific meanings attributed to the stress (or loss) event and how these meanings unfold over time.

Stroebe and Schut (2001) proposed a bereavement specific model of coping with loss in which they contended that a search for meaning or understanding is the central process that motivates a bereaved individual to engage in both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping. Within the DPM, meaning could be defined as "cognitions bereaved people are going through and how these are regulated across the course of time" (p. 56). Where loss-oriented coping involves a grief work component of coping with the death, restoration-oriented coping involves understanding life changes through a process of reorganization and understanding new roles and identities as a result of the loss.

The theories above are some of the more influential theories contributing further insight and advancement in the understanding of the grief experience. Neimeyer (2001a) proposed that while each of these theories contributes something to the understanding of

grief, meaning is the central concept linking the theories together. Based on this assumption, Neimeyer (2001c) proposed a model of meaning reconstruction in response to loss in which important aspects from earlier theories were appropriately integrated.

Defining and Understanding Meaning Making from a Constructivist Perspective

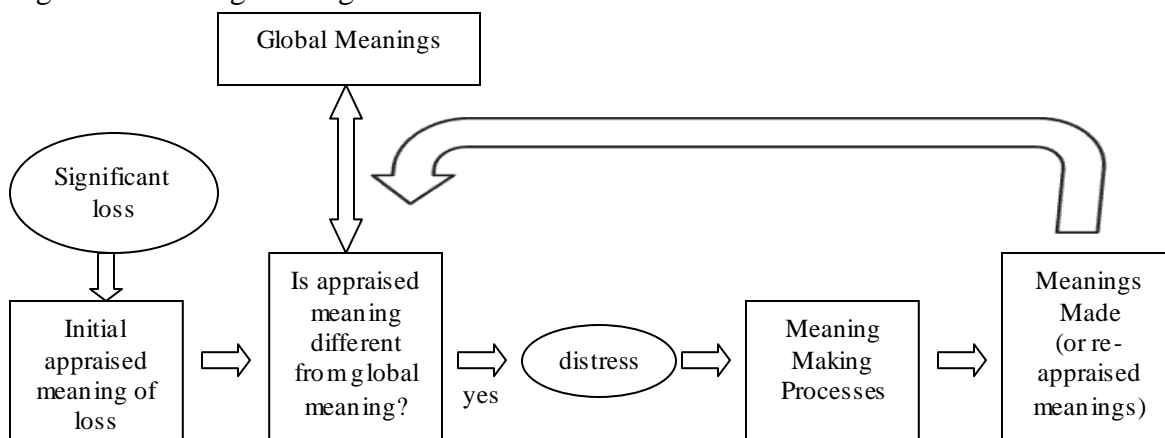
Through an evaluation of previous theories of grief and their contributions to the area of meaning making, along with an evaluation of both qualitative and quantitative empirical research, Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) asserted that meaning making processes, as defined through a constructivist lens, involve: (a) sense making, (b) benefit finding, and (c) identity change. For the purpose of this study, the concept of meaning making will be defined and explored from the constructivist perspective presented within meaning reconstruction theory and Park's (2008/2010) general meaning making model. Therefore, I will further elaborate on the constructivist definition of meaning making before a review of the literature on meaning making processes in bereavement.

Broadly understood, meaning making is a framework for interpreting and making sense of day to day experiences and engaging in purposeful activity (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). According to Park (2008), "Meaning making involves coming to see or understand the situation in a different way and reviewing and reforming one's beliefs and goals in order to regain consistency among them" (Park, 2008, p. 973). Meaning making is a dynamic process that unfolds and changes over time. The pain and distress of losing a loved one initiates a search for meaning. New meanings are found, constructed, or created and then integrated by the bereaved individual to the extent that they reduce distress. If meanings are not found, and often even if some meanings are found, the process of searching for or constructing new meaning continues (Coleman & Neimeyer,

2010).

Park's (2008/2010) model of meaning making draws important distinctions between global meanings, appraised meanings, meaning making processes, and products of meaning making. Global meanings are the core assumptions or beliefs one holds about the world and about the self. It is the meaning system through which an individual understands and makes sense out of the world. Appraised meanings are the understandings or meanings one gives to a certain event (e.g., the loss of a loved one). According to Park's theory, distress results when individual appraised meanings do not fit within their global meanings. This distress, then, initiates meaning making processes, which are efforts to reconcile these differing global and appraised meanings by either assimilation (changing appraised meanings of event) or accommodation (changing global meanings) or both. The products of these meaning making processes, then, involve an exploration of the outcomes or the meanings made. The products are the resulting changes in global or appraised meanings that are retained by the bereaved individual (Park, 2008; 2013). Figure 1 exemplifies Park's general meaning making model. This figure is an adapted version of the one proposed and presented by Park (2013) and this model serves as a theoretical frame for this study.

Figure 1. Meaning Making Model



Meaning making has often been conceptualized based on dual processes such as assimilation and accommodation or another parallel to that, comprehensibility and significance. Meaning as comprehension (sense making) involves understanding of the loss and is often seen in meaning making processes of assimilation in which one integrates the loss into one's life without a fundamental change to personal meaning structures. Meaning as significance, or finding a sense of purpose in the loss, is said to involve the accommodation processes wherein personal meaning structures are changed or reconstructed in order to better fit with the loss event. The meaning as significance component is usually associated with the benefit finding and identity change processes in meaning making (Holland, Currier, Coleman, & Neimeyer, 2010). The pursuit of what matters now would also be characterized as being in the meaning as significance domain.

Meaning making processes are multifaceted and include cognitive processing components as individuals attempt to bring appraised meanings and global meanings into alignment (Park, 2008). Meaning making also involves emotional processing components, which involves a greater emphasis on understanding, exploring, and processing of intense emotions or feelings related to the loss experience. Both cognitive and emotional processing are important and perhaps overlapping components of meaning making (Park, 2010). It is important to keep in mind that individual construction of meaning is situated within personal meaning structures. Therefore, "the 'same' meaning might for one person represent a relatively peripheral construction, whereas for another person (or at a later point in bereavement) it might function as a central, organizing frame for living" (Neimeyer, 2000, p. 552). Meaning making processes are both interpersonal and personal as they are often negotiated within a social context, such as through family,

friends, or important others. Meaning making processes are also deeply rooted in cultural contexts and dominant social discourses in which they occur. These cultural and discursive understandings are then reinterpreted at an interpersonal and individual level (Neimeyer, 2000).

Neimeyer (2000) argued that strictly cognitive conceptualizations of meaning making are often too simplistic as there is an assumption that meaning making processes can or should be a logical process one is able to verbalize, when in fact many individual meanings or constructions of reality are tacit and difficult to express in words. Additionally, strictly cognitive understandings of meaning making have often led researchers to measure meaning making as a product (Neimeyer, 2000). Tacit or preverbal meanings may be too embedded in an individual's life to be overtly stated or understood as a set of beliefs. Therefore, attention should also be paid to unconscious or automatic efforts in the meaning making process, allowing for exploration of meaning making as both a process and a product (Neimeyer, 2000; Park, 2008).

In their model of meaning reconstruction, Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) proposed that the meaning making process in response to loss is comprised of three components which include *sense making*, *benefit finding*, and *identity change* (p. 36). Additionally, Armour (2003) proposed a component of meaning making based on life significance or intentionally pursuing what matters after the loss. Through these processes, it is implied that bereaved individuals construct a new post-loss reality, in which the bereaved individuals' understandings of themselves and their understandings of the world are changed or reconstructed in attempts to make more sense in light of the loss. As can be seen from the previous description of the meaning reconstruction model, the meaning

making process involves changes in assumptive worldviews of bereaved individuals as they attempt to integrate the loss experience into their current life.

Sense making. Rooted in cognitive stress and trauma theories, Janoff-Bulman (1992) and Folkman (2001) proposed that the most challenging losses to make sense out of are the ones that fail to make sense. Often, these are losses that are unexplainable, traumatic, and/or untimely. When such a loss occurs, a bereaved individual experiences distress and may begin to question everything that once made sense. As the bereaved individual attempts to alleviate distress and get back a lost sense of purpose or understanding in life, the individual begins to ask multiple "why" questions. Bereaved individuals wonder why their loved one died, why they must hurt so much, or why people die in such ways. Individuals question what the loss experience means about the world as they previously knew it. These and other questions are asked, explored, pondered, or discussed by bereaved individuals as they seek to restore some sense of security and order in their worlds. Bereaved individuals attempt to understand or make sense of the loss and the post-loss world through these sense making processes of asking questions and finding or constructing new meaning in light of the loss (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, 2000).

Benefit finding. Another component of the meaning making process in bereavement is benefit finding. Finding something positive to come as a result of the loss or positive reappraisal of certain aspects of the loss have been shown to contribute to better adaptation to the loss event (Folkman, 1997; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Finding benefits that come as a result of the death of a loved one usually involves the bereaved individuals creating new meaning structures in order to incorporate the loss event into

their life in a meaningful way (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). It is important to note that bereaved individuals may take months or years before finding benefits or seeing the silver lining by exploring lessons learned as a result of the loss (Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002).

Identity change. A third component of meaning making, informed by cognitive theories and the DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 2001), is identity change or identity reconstruction. Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) posited that when a bereaved individual engages in meaning making processes and begins to find or construct new meanings about the world by making sense of different experiences, in essence, the bereaved individuals are also reconstructing themselves. According to Neimeyer and Anderson (2002), “our identity constrains our experience and expression of grief, and is reciprocally transformed by it” (p. 50). Loss through bereavement can shake a person’s sense of self, thus triggering him or her to reconstruct a new life narrative into which the loss is integrated. Accordingly, many discuss the outcome of identity change as a form of posttraumatic growth (Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002; Tedeschi et al., 1998). Often, bereaved individuals report feeling forever changed as a result of the loss. Many report a changed understanding of who they are as they feel more independent and resilient. Others who experience identity change or posttraumatic growth reported taking on new roles in life, having a greater understanding of the fragility of life, and an increased sense of empathy for others. They may change with regard to social relationships as they have an ability to feel emotionally closer to others through a deeper sense of understanding. Many also experience identity change through spiritual or existential growth (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Tedeschi et al., 1998).

Additionally, although perhaps less often, identity change has been conceptualized in terms of life purpose or life significance (see Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Ulmer, Range, & Smith, 1991). As Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) argued, there are certain goals and beliefs that are challenged in loss and in order for posttraumatic growth to occur something must replace those goals and beliefs. Armour (2003) posited that this is a more performative dimension of meaning making that involves “the intense pursuit of what matters” now to bereaved individuals (p. 525). This component of identity change involves taking action to attempt problem solving or taking action to attain certain goals. Armour (2003) further argued that while behaviors are geared toward achieving certain outcomes, finding meaning in this way is more related to the process of the pursuit rather than the outcomes. This component of identity change refers to the intentional behaviors of bereaved individuals to pursue what matters or is significant now after the loss.

Meaning Making and Post-Loss Adjustment

Many studies indicate that meaning making plays a critical role in adjustment after the death of a loved one. Multiple studies support the idea that a search for meaning is common in bereaved individuals. Davis, Wortman, Lehman, and Silver (2000) suggested that meaning making attempts in the aftermath of a high stress situation are nearly universal. For example, McIntosh, Silver, and Wortman (1993) conducted a study in which 86% of parents who had lost a child to sudden infant death syndrome searched for meaning in that loss. Similarly, Murphy, Johnson, and Lohan (2003) found that even five years after the sudden loss of a child, 80% of bereaved parents continued to search for meaning. A study of bereaved students found that 90% reported searching for

meaning through answers to questions such as, “Why her/him?” (Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991). Additionally, in a study of bereaved family members, nearly all (89%) reported having engaged in a “search for meaning” following the death (Tolstikova, Fleming, & Chartier, 2005).

However, it is important to note that not all studies report these high levels of meaning making attempts following the death of a loved one. For example, in a study of bereaved HIV+ men, a lower number (65%) reported attempts at meaning making, as measured by the extent to which they considered the implications of the loss on their own life and on their future (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 2003). Only 56% of family members bereaved by a car accident responded that they still felt “absorbed in questions about the loss” a year after the death occurred (Cleiren, 1993). Finally, when elderly bereaved spouses were asked about their meaning making attempts 6 months after the death, 71% reported not having searched for meaning within the past 30 days (Bonanno et al., 2004). However, these results could have something to do with the fact that the loss was seen as expected in the elderly population.

Estimates of meaning making attempts after the death of a loved one may vary within the literature for several reasons. First, the way that meaning making is operationally defined and measured within studies varies widely. Perhaps more rigid and narrow definitions of meaning making attempts decreases the estimate for the number of people who attempt to find meaning after a loss. Additionally, different time frames are used across studies so that some explore meaning making attempts weeks, months, or even years after the loss (Park, 2010). Some researchers have suggested that meaning making efforts do not decrease over time (Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008) while

others support the idea that attempts to make meaning do decrease over time (Bonanno et al., 2004; Park, 2008), particularly if distress is decreased through found meanings or through other avenues.

Regardless, evidence abounds that a search for meaning after the death of a loved one is a fairly common experience that plays a role in post-loss adjustment. Thus, researchers began attempts to better define the complicated processes through which individuals make meaning. Based on reviews of the literature and contributions from multiple theories of grief, many proponents of meaning reconstruction theory began operationalizing meaning as sense making (Currier et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2000) or some combination of sense making, benefit finding, and identity change (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer et al., 2006).

There is an abundance of research on meaning making which encompasses various fields of study. The way meaning making is defined, conceptualized, and measured varies widely. The following sections will review the research on the role of meaning making processes and meanings made in post-lost adjustment to bereavement. First, research that explores meaning making processes or outcomes through the sense making construct of meaning making will be reviewed. Next, research that examines the benefit finding component of meaning making after the death of a loved one will be reviewed. Then, research that focuses on the identity change component of meaning making, including the more performative dimension of life purpose or what matters now will be summarized.

Exploration of meaning making through sense making. Often, bereaved individuals struggle to make some sense out of the loss after the death of a loved one.

Bereaved individuals engage in sense making activities through asking questions such as “Why me? Why him/her?” or “What is the purpose of life if things like this can happen?” Researchers have attempted to study the sense making component of meaning making in various ways. Some studies have explored the sense making processes through which meaning is made, while others have focused more on the outcomes or sense made after the loss. Multiple studies have focused on both the sense making processes and outcomes (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Park, 2010). Quantitative studies often assess sense making by asking bereaved individuals if or how they have been able to “make sense of” the loss. On the other hand, qualitative studies often explore the sense making component through narrative by asking individuals to tell their stories of loss in their own words (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010).

Historically, one common way in which individuals attempt to make sense of the death of a loved one is through religion or spirituality. Accordingly, McIntosh et al. (1993) conducted a study to explore the importance of religion to multiple variables, including social support, cognitive processing, and meaning making. They studied 124 bereaved parents who lost an infant to SIDS. Participants included 98 women and 20 men, mostly Christian, with a mean age of 25 years. Participants were interviewed at 15-30 days, 3 months, and 18 months post-loss. During these interviews, meaning making was assessed through a single response question, “Have you made any sense or found any meaning in your baby’s death?” (p. 815). Respondents rated their answer on a 5 point likert scale ranging from 1 (no, not at all) to 5 (yes, a great deal). Findings suggested that seeing religion as important was associated with increased ability to find meaning in the death. Additionally, ability to find meaning in the death was associated with decreased

distress and increased well-being three weeks after the loss. McIntosh et al. proposed that religion is one worldview or schema that helps individuals make sense after the loss of a loved one. One limitation to this study is that multiple variables, including importance of religion and meaning making, were assessed with single item measures. Also, although ability to make sense out of a loss was explored with regard to importance of religion, sense making processes and outcomes/meaning made were not specifically explored.

Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) conducted a study to explore the constructs of sense making and benefit finding with regard to the loss of a loved one. This was a longitudinal study where interviews were conducted with 205 participants prior to the loss and at 1, 3, 6, 13, and 18 months post-loss. A majority of the participants (81%) were white and female (74%). The mean age of participants was 51.2 years old and 44% experienced parent loss, 35% experienced partner loss, 9% experienced child loss, 7% experienced sibling loss, and 5% experienced relative or close friend loss. Sense making was assessed through the interview question, “Do you feel that you have been able to make sense of the death?” (p. 565). Answers to the question usually invited open responses from participants indicating they understood the intent. Answers were coded as yes, no, partly, or not interested and then further categorized based on meanings made. Outcomes or meanings made were presented as 8 categories of sense making, including: predictable loss, part of the life cycle, God or fate, deceased accepted impending death, just happens, felt prepared for it, experienced growth, and no elaboration given for affirmative response.

At 6 months post-loss, 68% of the participants reported they had made sense out of the death and 10% had partly made sense of it (Davis et al., 1998). Additionally, 19%

reported being unable to make sense out of the loss and only 2% were uninterested in attempts to make sense out of it. The researchers found several variables that predicted sense making: age of deceased, religion/spirituality, and level of distress prior to the death. Those who were able to make the most sense out of the loss included situations where the deceased was older than the bereaved, where the bereaved had strong religious or spiritual beliefs, and where the bereaved displayed lower levels of distress at the pre-loss interview. Increased ability to make sense out of the loss predicted lower levels of distress at both 6 and 13 months post-loss. Outcomes or specific meaning made did not affect adjustment, leading the researchers to conclude that finding some meaning was more important than the specific meaning found (Davis et al., 1998). The finding that stronger religious beliefs or spirituality led to increased ability to make sense of the loss supports similar findings from McIntosh et al. (1993). Additionally, both of these studies concluded that the ability to make some sense out of the loss, regardless of what those specific meanings were, was associated with decreased post-loss distress.

Davis et al. (1998) stated that at 13 months post-loss, 32% of the participants reported a change as to whether or not they were able to make sense out of the loss, with the total who had made some sense out of the loss remaining close to 68%. Interestingly, those who lost their sense of meaning between 6 and 13 months and those who found a sense of meaning between 6 and 13 months appeared to be similar in post-loss adjustment. Those who reported a change in meaning (in either direction) fared better than those who had never found any sense in the loss but worse than those who were able to make sense out of the loss at both 6 and 13 month follow up. This led researchers to conclude that the meanings made or lost by those at the 13 month follow up were not

especially comforting or helpful (Davis et al., 1998). Similar to the earlier study conducted by McIntosh et al. (1993), single item variables were used to assess both the sense making and benefit finding components of the meaning making process. However, in this study questions elicited open responses from participants so that they were able to elaborate on the topic of sense making. Additionally, since all participants were recruited through hospice organizations, sudden, unexpected, or violent losses were not well represented within the sample. This is important to note since many contend that it is those unexpected or untimely losses that appear to create more difficulties in ability to make meaning for bereaved individuals.

Davis et al. (2000) explored prominent assumptions with regard to meaning making in the field of bereavement. They based their findings on previous studies they conducted using empirical data from 124 parents who suddenly lost an infant (see McIntosh et al., 1993) and from 93 adults who lost either a spouse or child in a car accident (see Lehman, Williams, & Wortman, 1987). The assumptions explored by the researchers included: the idea that most people will search for meaning after the death of a loved one, particularly if the death is sudden or unexpected; the assumption that most people will find some meaning in the loss and thus move forward in their lives; and the assumption that finding meaning is important in order to successfully cope after a loss (Davis et al., 2000).

It is important to note that meaning making in these studies was conceptualized as the ability to explain or make sense out of the death. Upon analysis of the data, Davis and colleagues (2000) proposed that a minority of people do not search for meaning after a significant loss and those individuals often appear to be coping well. Additionally, less

than 50% of individuals from the two studies reported finding any meaning a year after the loss. Those who report finding meaning are coping better than those who search but are unable to find meaning. However, it appears that even those individuals who have found meaning continue the search.

Davis et al. (2000) further hypothesized why some individuals do not search for meaning after the death of a loved one. The researchers speculated that it could be because they were relieved after the death for some reason (e.g., deceased is no longer suffering), or it could be due to the pre-loss attachment style such that those who don't search for meaning use an avoidant style of coping. More importantly, they contended, it could be because the loss, although sudden and unexpected, did not shatter an individual's view of the world or assumptions about the world. It could be that these bereaved individuals who do not search for meaning already hold views of the world that life is unpredictable or that bad things happen that are out of their control. For example, in the sample of bereaved parents, many were from inner city areas in Chicago and Detroit. These authors suggested that perhaps living in poverty, high exposure to crime, and limited opportunities led these bereaved individuals to already hold a view of the world as unpredictable and stressful so that losing a child, although heartbreaking, was something that they were able to incorporate into their pre-existing worldview (Davis et al., 2000).

As a follow up to a study done in 1998, Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) conducted a longitudinal study (participants followed for 18 months) of various ways 205 adult bereaved individuals make meaning after the death of a loved one. Of the participants, 74% were women and 81% were Caucasian with a mean age 51 years. The

participants' losses included loss of a parent (45%), loss of a partner (35%), loss of a child (9%), and loss of a sibling, other relative, or friend (12%). Interviews with participants included questions about the sense making construct of meaning making. Findings suggested that bereaved individuals attempt to make sense out of their loss through existing worldviews, so that if the loss event did not fit into pre-existing worldview, bereaved individuals must change/reconstruct/adapt their worldview or change/reconstruct/adapt their understanding of the loss event. These findings are supportive of the general meaning making model proposed by Park (2008). Additionally, similar to previous findings (see Davis et al., 1998; McIntosh et al., 1993), individuals who reported having religious or spiritual beliefs were more likely to be able to make sense out of the loss. Making sense out of the loss within the first 6 months of the death was related to decreased emotional distress, and individuals who were unable to make sense out of the loss in the first 6 months were unlikely to make sense of it at later points (Davis et al., 2000).

Uren and Wastell (2002) conducted a study in which they assessed meaning making efforts in relation to grief distress. Participants included 108 Australian women with a mean age of 34.5 years who experienced perinatal bereavement, which is defined as a stillbirth or death of their infant within a month after birth. Participants were between 2 and 207 months post-loss at the time they responded to the mail-in questionnaire with several open ended questions. Meaning making by bereaved individuals was assessed on a 5 point scale ranging from never to always. Meaning making was operationalized by asking participants how often they asked "Why me?" and how often they searched for meaning or ways to *make sense* out of their experience of loss. Additional questions

asked participants retrospectively how often they searched for meaning or asked "why me?" at the time of their infants' death. Additionally, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they had made sense out of the loss ranging from not at all to yes, a great deal.

Based on results from the questionnaires, Uren and Wastell (2002) found that with the retrospective questions about meaning making, 81% of participants attempted to make sense out of the death at the time of their child's death very often or always and 61% of participants reported struggling with the question, "why me?". The urge to make sense out of the death seemed to dissipate over time with 58% reporting they were still searching for meaning no more than occasionally at the time of the survey and 72% troubled by the question "why me?" no more than occasionally at the time of the survey. When assessing for meanings found by bereaved mothers, 26% reported they had found a considerable amount of meaning and 33% reported they failed to find any meaning. In line with previous studies (see Davis et al., 1998; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; McIntosh et al., 1993), ability to find meaning in the loss was associated with decreased grief distress; however, searching but finding no meaning was related to increased grief distress (Uren & Wastell, 2002).

Bonanno et al. (2004) explored group differences in bereaved spouses regarding several areas, including meaning making. Data for the study included prospective longitudinal data from the Changing Lives of Older Couples (CLOC) study (see Bonanno et al., 2002). Depressive symptoms were assessed 3 years prior to the death of a spouse and again at 6 and 18 months post-loss. Based on analyses of the 2002 data, individuals were placed into one of five groups according to their grieving patterns: resilient,

depressed-improved, common/normal grief, chronic grief, and chronic depression. Other post-loss measures were used to assess for grief patterns, meaning making, representations of the deceased, context of the loss, and coping. Searching for meaning was measured by a single response question, "During the past month, have you found yourself searching to make sense of or find some meaning in your husband/wife's death?" and finding meaning was also measured by a single response question, "Have you made any sense of or found any meaning in your husband/wife's death?". Both questions were rated on a scale from 1 to 4, ranging from *never to often* and *no to a great deal*, respectively.

Results of a MANOVA revealed that searching for meaning decreased significantly among participants between the 6 and 18 month follow up (Bonanno et al., 2004). This finding is similar to others who found that sense making efforts tend to decrease over time (see Davis et al., 1998; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Uren & Wastell, 2002). Additionally, at 6 months post-loss, 71% of participants reported not searching for meaning, 14% reported searching for meaning without finding any, and 15% reported searching for and finding meaning. These numbers were almost identical at the 18 month follow up. Of the 71% who reported not searching for meaning, a significant portion of those were from the resilient group and the chronic grief group. Interestingly, participants in the chronic grief group were the most likely to engage in a search for meaning at both 6 and 18 months post-loss. At 6 months post-loss, the chronic grief group was also more likely to report grief symptoms of yearning and emotional pain. Additionally, when compared to other groups, participants in the chronic grief group were more likely to report finding meaning at 18 months post-loss. The authors

concluded that individuals who are not depressed prior to an expected death but who experience acute, enduring grief reactions may benefit from interventions that aid in constructing meaning around the loss (Bonanno et al., 2004).

It is possible that the low number of individuals found by Bonanno et al. (2004) to engage in a search for meaning after the death of their spouse has to do with assessing sense making through a single item measure. Alternatively, perhaps it is due to the fact that this study was of elderly bereaved spouses. It is possible that the death of an elderly spouse is more expected as a natural part of the life cycle by many bereaved individuals. Therefore, the loss of a spouse in old age does not necessarily create discrepancy in a bereaved individual's worldview, as the loss event fits within one's expectations that death happens at old age.

Currier et al. (2006) proposed that sense making is a mediator between violent loss (e.g., accident, homicide, suicide) and symptoms of complicated grief. In their study, sense making was conceptualized as "the capacity to construct an understanding of the loss experience" (p. 403). Participants included 1,056 college students bereaved in the past two years with a mean age of 20.9 years. Losses included family members, good friends, and acquaintances. Participants completed the Inventory of Complicated Grief (Prigerson et al., 1995) and other assessments exploring the degree of meaning making. The measure of sense making was a single item question: "How much sense would you say you have made of the loss?" (p. 412). Participants responded on a scale of 1 to 4 ranging from *no sense* to *a good deal of sense*.

Participants were grouped into categories based on the type of loss they experienced so that comparisons could be made (Currier et al., 2006). Participants

experienced a violent loss (by suicide, homicide, or accident), a natural, expected loss (e.g., cancer or long term illness), or a natural, sudden loss (e.g., heart attack). A series of multiple regression analyses were used to analyze the data. Level of perceived closeness to the deceased, age, and gender were controlled in order to better understand how mode of death and sense making ability contributed to symptoms of complicated grief. Findings suggested that those bereaved by violent deaths were less able to make sense out of the loss than those bereaved by natural deaths. Further, sense making ability partially mediated the association between violent or natural losses and complicated grief. Thus, difficulty with sense making may be seen as a factor leading to complicated grief after both natural and violent losses. When those with violent losses were compared to those with sudden, natural losses, findings suggested that violent losses were more associated with complicated grief than natural losses and those bereaved by violent losses had a more difficult time making sense of the loss than those bereaved by sudden, natural losses. Further, sense making ability "perfectly mediated" the association between violent versus sudden, natural loss and complicated grief (Currier et al., 2006).

Thus, overall, the Currier et al. (2006) study offers support for the idea that following a violent loss, sense making ability mediates symptoms of complicated grief. The authors explained one possible explanation for the findings could be that violent or unnatural deaths lead to an inability to make sense out of the loss, which in turn causes greater distress. This explanation would be in support of the general meaning making model proposed by Park (2008). Additionally, traumatic, vivid memories may be more associated with violent deaths and socially, many bereaved individuals find that discussing the horror of the violent loss is difficult as others often find it hard to hear

such horrific stories. Court hearings or other legal matters that may accompany violent deaths may also play a role. All of these things may prevent or inhibit individuals from being able to make sense out of the loss when the death is violent (Currier et al., 2006).

However, it should be noted that the causal inferences between cause of death, sense making, and complicated grief cannot be made due to the cross sectional nature of the Currier et al. (2006) study design. Therefore, one could hypothesize that symptoms of complicated grief cause high levels of distress and therefore make it difficult for bereaved individuals to make sense out of the loss. Additionally, the single response item to assess sense making may limit participants' ability to fully comprehend the sense making variable (Currier et al., 2006).

Holland et al. (2006) attempted to replicate the findings from an earlier study conducted by Davis et al. (1998) in which the researchers found that sense making within the first 6 months after the death lessened post-loss distress. Holland et al. wanted to explore the role of sense making, benefit finding, and time since loss in predicting symptoms of complicated grief. Participants included 1,022 recently (within the past 2 years) bereaved college students with a mean age of 21 years. Within the sample, 75% were women and 25% were men. Additionally, 56% were Caucasian, 38.4% were African American, 1.6% were Asian American, and 4% were of another ethnicity. The losses included a mix of natural expected causes (46%), natural sudden causes (22.5%), fatal accidents (18%), suicide (4.5%), homicide (6%), and other causes (3%). Bereaved individuals reported losing immediate family members (8%), extended family members (58%), friends (27%), or some other relative (7%). Participants completed questionnaires including the Inventory of Complicated Grief, questions regarding demographic

information and the nature of the loss, and two single item questions assessing sense making and benefit finding. Specifically, sense making was measured by the question, "How much sense would you say you have made of the loss?" and the possible answer choices ranged from *no sense* to *a good deal of sense* (Holland et al., 2006).

Findings related to sense making after a series of multiple regression analyses included a negative association between sense making and complicated grief (Holland et al., 2006). Thus, participants who reported low levels of sense making were more likely to show higher levels of complicated grief. This finding held true regardless of the cause of death or the nature of the relationship to the deceased. Further, contrary to the results reported by Davis et al. (1998), the impact of sense making on complicated grief was not significantly associated with time since the loss. Additionally, an interaction between sense making and benefit finding was reported and will be discussed further in the next section on benefit finding. Overall, the researchers reported that sense making appeared to be a stronger predictor of better post-loss adjustment compared to benefit finding (Holland et al., 2006).

Once again, Holland et al. (2006) used a single response item to assess the sense making component of meaning making. In addition, overall findings were in support of the widely held assumption that those who are able to make sense out of the loss of a loved one will adjust better in the grieving process than those who are not able to make any sense. The idea that time since the loss was not associated with sense making, benefit finding, or complicated grief supports the new wave of grief theories which contend that grief does not unfold in predictable patterns or in predictable time frames (Holland et al., 2006).

Among other things, one aim of a study conducted by Keesee, Currier, and Neimeyer (2008) was to explore if/how the meaning making components of sense making and benefit finding affected severity of grief symptoms in bereaved parents. Participants included 157 bereaved parents from the United States, Canada, and Australia with a mean age of 49.41 years. A majority of the participants were women (81%) and Caucasian (93%). Bereaved parents in the sample had lost a child to death through accidents (45%), natural sudden causes (20%), natural anticipated causes (12%), suicide (11%), homicide (6%), and miscarriage or stillbirth (6%). The average age of the child at the time of death was 17 years. Participants completed measures for normal and complicated grief, sense making, benefit finding, and demographic information. Sense making was assessed by one qualitative question in written form: "Have there been any ways in which you have been able to make sense of the loss of your child? If so, please, in a brief paragraph, describe that experience" and one quantitative question in which participants rated the amount of sense they have been able to make of the loss on a 5 point likert scale ranging from *no sense* to *a great deal of sense*.

Keesee et al. (2008) performed a series of univariate analyses to examine the data. Similar to other research (Currier et al., 2006), parents who lost children to violent deaths (homicide, suicide, accidents) reported significantly less ability to make sense out of the loss and higher symptoms of complicated grief than those bereaved by natural deaths. Additionally, bivariate correlations showed that more time since loss, greater sense making, and greater benefit finding were all associated with less symptoms of both normal and complicated grief. Consistent with other research (Holland et al., 2006), sense making and benefit finding were found to be significantly correlated with each other.

However, contrary to Holland et al. (2006), this data showed that time since loss did play a role, in that bereaved parents whose children died longer ago were more likely to have reported ability to make sense out of the loss and find benefit in it. Through a series of multivariate analyses, sense making was found to account for 10% of the unique variance in scores on the measure of normal grief while other risk factors, including parent gender, cause of death, and time since loss only accounted for 3% of the variance. Additionally, sense making was found to account for 15% of the unique variance in scores on the measure of complicated grief while the other risk factors listed above accounted for only 4% of the variance (Keese et al., 2008).

Overall, the ability to make sense out of the loss was the most important predictor of post-loss adjustment in the Keese et al. (2008) study. Within this sample, 30% of parents reported finding no sense in the loss and 17% reported finding very little sense in the loss. Those parents who struggled to make sense out of the loss reported more grief severity and complicated grief. Although this study lends support to the overall contention that difficulty in sense making is associated with increased symptoms of complicated grieving, some limitations should be noted. First, causality cannot be assumed due to the cross sectional design of the study. Second, the sample used in this study was fairly homogeneous (Caucasian participants in the middle to upper SES) and, as is common in studies on bereavement, had an overrepresentation of women. Even though researchers in this study added a qualitative component to the often used single item response to meaning making and benefit finding, it seems that research would benefit from these constructs being further elaborated so that measurement could be improved (Keese et al., 2008).

Coleman and Neimeyer (2010) conducted a study to further explore the role of searching for meaning and sense making in bereaved individuals. Based on data from a previous longitudinal study, the Changing Lives of Older Couples project, the researchers explored the relationship between sense making and post-loss adjustment in older bereaved spouses. In contrast to the study conducted by Bonanno et al. (2004) which used the same data set to explore sense making in relation to depression on a larger scale, this study used the data to explore the effect of sense making on multiple outcomes, including grief, depression, and well-being. Searching for sense and sense making were assessed at 6 and 18 months post-loss. Participants were asked whether they searched for sense or meaning in their spouses' death in the past month with answers on a likert-type scale ranging from *no, never* to *yes, always*. Sense making was measured by the question, "Have you made any sense or found any meaning in your husband's/wife's death?" and respondents again rated their answers on a likert-type scale ranging from *no, not at all* to *yes, a great deal*. Any participant who indicated making any sense at all out of the loss was asked the qualitative question, "How have you done so?" while participants who indicated an inability to make sense were asked, "Can you tell me why you feel that way?" (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010).

Overall findings from the Coleman and Neimeyer (2010) study suggested that searching for sense in the loss was a risk factor for bereavement outcome whereas sense making was more predictive of resilience. The authors believed that due to the nature of the sample (older bereaved spouses), the death did not often challenge a previously held assumption about the world. Therefore, a minority of bereaved spouses (30.5%) indicated searching to make sense of their loss 6 months after the death. Similar to findings from

other studies, the total number of participants who reported finding some meaning in the loss was between 45-50%. Increased searching for sense in the loss at both 6 and 18 months predicted increased levels of current and future grief. Although sense making did not seem to play a major part in relieving grief symptoms in this study, the ability to make sense out of the loss at both 6 and 18 months post-loss predicted subsequent positive affect at 48 months post-loss. The authors purported that perhaps the link between sense making and grief or other negative outcomes may be more likely observed in samples wherein participants lose a loved one to more non-normative losses (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010).

When these studies are considered together, there appears to be support that bereaved individuals who lose a loved one in a violent or traumatic way will have a more difficult time making sense out of the loss (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010; Currier et al., 2006; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008). Additionally, individuals seem to struggle more with sense making when deaths are non-normative (e.g., when a child dies or someone dies at a young age) or "off time" from a developmental perspective (Davis et al., 1998; Keesee et al., 2008). Inability to make sense out of the death of a loved one has often been linked with increased grief distress (Currier et al., 2006; Davis et al., 1998; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008; McIntosh et al., 1993; Uren & Wastell, 2002), increased depression (Bonanno et al., 2004; Davis et al., 1998), and increased symptoms of complicated grief (Currier et al., 2006; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008), whereas the ability to make sense out of a loss has been linked to increased post-loss well-being and positive affect in samples of bereaved individuals (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010; McIntosh et al., 1993). In general, searching

for sense appears to be more common among bereaved individuals, while more people struggle with finding some sense in the loss, particularly if the death was violent or traumatic (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). Overall, it seems difficulty in sense making after loss is a risk factor for increased difficulty in the grieving processes of bereaved individuals.

However, there is still more research to be done regarding the sense making construct of meaning making. Initial results reveal the important role it plays in post-loss adjustment, although the link between sense making and distress may not be unidirectional. For example, implicit causal reasoning in many studies assumes that it is increased distress that drives sense making. Thus, those struggling to make sense out of the loss often show higher levels of distress and this distress decreases as individuals find some sense in the loss. On the other hand, it could be that a lower level of distress, due to any number of different factors, allows individuals to make sense after a loss (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Additionally, searching for sense and sense making have often been assessed quite simply in the bereavement literature. Often, single item questions have been used for each construct in which participants are simply asked whether or not they have engaged in a search to make sense of the loss and if so, to what extent they have made sense. Increased efforts to further expound on the sense making construct could lead to more comprehensive ways to measure the construct in bereaved individuals (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). Further research on the sense making construct will continue to provide further clarity on the above issues.

Exploration of meaning making through benefit finding. Benefit finding is another component of meaning making that refers to a bereaved individual's ability to

identity positive aspects that have come from the loss. It involves finding the “silver linings” in the tragedy of losing a loved one. Often, benefits cited by bereaved individuals include such things as having closer relationships with others or feeling a sense of relief that the deceased loved one is no longer suffering (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010; Davis et al., 1998). There is some evidence that ability to find some benefit in the loss is linked to less intense symptoms of grief (Davis et al., 1998; Neimeyer et al., 2006). Additionally, some argue that the effects of benefit finding on post-loss adjustment may change over time (Davis et al., 1998). Finally, there is disagreement as to whether there are possible interaction effects between benefit finding, sense making, and post-loss adjustment (Davis et al., 1998; Holland et al., 2006). Although benefit finding has been assessed by many researchers, it has often been explored in conjunction with the sense making component of meaning making.

In the seminal work done by Davis et al. (1998) exploring both the sense making and benefit finding components of meaning making among individuals bereaved through natural causes, benefit finding was assessed through interviews in the following way, “Sometimes people who lose a loved one feel some positive aspect in the experience. For example, some people feel they learn something about themselves or others. Have you found anything positive in this experience?” (p. 565). Participants were then encouraged to elaborate on their answers. The researchers found little overlap between the constructs of sense making and benefit finding offering support for each as a unique construct in meaning making. Through a qualitative coding procedure, benefits found by participants in the study were grouped into seven categories: character growth, gained a new perspective, brought family together, saw support from others as positive, benefit to

others, end of suffering, and no elaboration given to an affirmative response.

At 6 months post-loss, Davis et al. (1998) found 73% of participants in the study reported finding some benefit in the loss, 6% reported partly finding something positive, and 21% reported an inability to find something positive to come from the loss at that point in time. Although several variables were found to predict sense making, only one variable was found to predict benefit finding. Those that had a higher level of dispositional optimism were more likely to find benefits following the loss. Finding some benefit in the experience predicted lower levels of distress at both 6 and 13 months post-loss. However, the specific benefits found did not affect adjustment, leading to the conclusion that identifying some benefit was more important than the specific benefit found. Additionally, at 13 months post-loss, 80% of participants reported no change in their ability to find something positive to come from the loss. However, 13% gained some benefit and 6% lost some benefit between the 6 and 13 month follow ups. Finding some positive to come from the loss, even if this was not done until 13 months post-loss, was still associated with better adjustment whereas those who lost their previously found benefit reported higher levels of distress at both 13 and 18 months post-loss. Thus, Davis et al. (1998) concluded that although ability to make sense of the loss was most linked to decreased distress if done in the first 6 months after the loss, the ability to find some benefit in the loss was more related to decreased distress after the initial 6 months since the loss had passed.

Similarly, in the longitudinal study conducted by Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) as a follow up to the Davis et al. (1998) study, 70-80% of bereaved participants reported perceived benefits following the loss of a loved one in hospice. Individuals who

were able to identify these perceived post-loss benefits also showed improvements in emotional adjustment over time. Some of the commonly reported benefits following loss in this study included growth of character, strengthening of relationships, and changes in perspective.

In the longitudinal study of older bereaved spouses conducted by Bonanno et al. (2004), the two components of sense making and benefit finding were explored. Within this study, the benefits found by bereaved spouses were assessed by averaging the results of the following two items: (a) "As a result of having to manage without my husband/wife, I have become more confident" and (b) "I am a stronger person as a result of dealing with the loss of my husband/wife." (pp. 263-264). Participants rated each item on a likert-type scale ranging from *not at all true* to *very true*.

Similar to other findings (Davis et al., 1998), Bonanno and colleagues (2004) found that benefits perceived by bereaved spouses significantly increased in the latter portion of the study, between 6 and 18 months post-loss. Individuals that fell within the depressed-improved and normal grief groups reported significantly higher ability to find some benefit in the loss, with resilient individuals falling in the middle range, and individuals in the chronic grief and chronic depression groups having the most difficult time identifying potential benefits. Although this study provides some useful information about benefit finding, one limitation is the way in which the construct was measured. There were two questions used to assess benefit, both of which were suggestive of a specific benefit found by participants. It is possible that more participants, if given the opportunity, would have reported some other, alternative benefits to come from losing a spouse.

Although the previous studies included a sample of individuals bereaved primarily by natural losses, two additional studies (Keesee et al., 2008; Holland et al., 2006) included a greater variety of sampling regarding cause of death, including those bereaved by sudden or traumatic losses. Past studies have suggested that the benefit finding component alone is predictive of post-loss distress (Davis et al., 1998; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001), whereas these studies have proposed that the sense making component plays a stronger and more prominent role in post-loss adjustment than does the benefit finding component of meaning making regardless of time since the loss (Keesee et al., 2008; Holland et al., 2006).

Within the study conducted by Holland and colleagues (2006), benefit finding was measured by the single response item, "Despite your loss, have you been able to find any benefit from your experience of the loss?" (p. 180). Participants responded to this question on a likert type scale ranging from no benefit to great benefit. Contrary to results reported by Davis et al. (1998), the researchers found that the impact of benefit finding on symptoms of complicated grief did not vary as a function of time since the death. Additionally, an interaction between sense making and benefit finding was found, such that when sense making was low, increased ability to find benefit in the loss was associated with lower levels of complicated grief symptoms. However, when sense making was high, a reported increased ability to find benefit in the loss was actually associated with more intense symptoms of complicated grief. The researchers speculated that this finding could be due to the ways in which bereaved individuals framed the loss experience. For example, viewing the loss through a spiritual or religious lens often led bereaved individuals to discuss a form of "altruistic acceptance" wherein these

individuals took offense to the suggestion that they may have found any personal gain to come from the loss. Although overall, both sense making and benefit finding were both associated with less complications in grieving. Those who fared the worst were individuals who were unable to make any sense of the loss or find any perceived benefit to come from the loss. Those that fared the best were those who were able to make much sense of the loss and reported low (but some) perceived benefit (Holland et al., 2006).

Perhaps these discrepant findings (Holland et al., 2006) are suggestive of the idea that the benefit finding component of meaning making may play more of a role in post-loss adjustment in those bereaved by natural losses versus those bereaved by violent or traumatic loss. This could be because commonly cited benefits by individuals bereaved by natural causes include the positive aspects of bringing families together to be with the dying individual or ending the suffering of the deceased (Davis et al., 1998), neither of which could be cited as benefits in a violent, unexpected death. Additionally, perhaps the results are reflective of the single item response to measure benefit finding wherein many participants took offense to the implication that they would find some personal benefit to come from the tragic loss (Holland et al., 2006).

Keesee et al. (2008) studied a sample of bereaved parents who had lost children to a variety of causes of death with a majority having lost a child through sudden or traumatic causes. The researchers wanted to explore the extent to which meaning making (sense making and benefit finding) affected severity of grief symptoms in a sample of bereaved parents. Similar to the way in which the researchers measured the sense making component of meaning making, benefit finding was assessed with one qualitative question, "Despite your loss, have you been able to find any benefit from your experience

of the loss? If so, please, in a brief paragraph, describe the benefits you have found.” And one quantitative question where participants were asked to rate the amount of benefit they had found in the loss on a 5 point likert type scale ranging from no benefit to great benefit.

Interestingly, Keesee et al. (2008) reported no significant differences in benefit finding regarding those who lost a child due to natural causes and those who lost a child to sudden, violent causes. Benefit finding was negatively correlated with scores on measures of both normal and complicated grief, so that, on average, those who found the most benefit scored lower on measures of normal and complicated grief. Similar to the study conducted by Holland and colleagues (2006), the researchers found that the benefit finding and sense making components of meaning making were moderately correlated. On the other hand, contrary to findings from Holland (2006), but similar to other research conducted in this area (Bonanno et al., 2004; Davis et al., 1998), this study found that the impact of benefit finding on grief symptoms did vary as a function of time since death, so that those parents whose child died longer ago had a greater chance of finding some benefit in the loss. However, the findings did not support the idea that later benefit finding had more of an ameliorative impact on bereaved individuals. Overall, sense making emerged as a stronger predictor of both normal and complicated grief symptoms than benefit finding, though both combined (along with time since loss) appeared to have the greatest impact. Those who reported less ability to find benefit in the loss were more likely to indicate increased symptoms of complicated grief, but not normal grief (Keesee et al., 2008).

In general, there seems to be support for the idea that inability to find some

benefit in the loss experience leads to increased symptoms of post-loss distress or complicated grief (Davis et al., 1998; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008). Although initially, Davis et al. (1998) proposed there was little overlap between the two constructs of sense making and benefit finding, later research suggested a correlation between them (Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008). Many suggest that the sense making component plays a more prominent role in post-loss adjustment than does benefit finding (Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008) however, others found that although this might be true early on in the grieving process, as more time passes since the death, benefit finding plays a greater role in post-loss adjustment (Davis et al., 1998). Both Bonanno and colleagues (2004) and Keesee and colleagues (2008) found that the number of bereaved individuals who report an ability to find some benefit in the loss increases as a function of more time since the death of the loved one. Some speculated that discrepant findings regarding benefit finding might suggest that benefit findings plays differential roles in post-loss adjustment based on different factors, such as natural versus violent cause of death (Holland et al, 2006). However, Keesee et al. (2008) found no significant differences in benefit finding ability between those who were bereaved naturally versus those who were bereaved violently or traumatically.

Additionally, it could be that the measures used to assess for benefit finding lend to discrepancies in findings. Often, a single item measure is used to measure benefit findings in which participants are simply asked what, if any, benefits or positives they have found as a result of the loss. Many researchers reported how participants took offense to the benefit finding question, feeling, for example, that there are no benefits to losing a child (Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008). Additional research that further

explores the possible interactions between cause of death, sense making, and benefit finding will help further clarify some of these relationships. Hopefully, as this is done, more effective, participant friendly measures to better explore motives of searching for benefit, processes used to find benefit, and actual benefits found by participants will be created.

Exploration of meaning making through identity change. As the concept of meaning making is being further explored within the field of bereavement through constructivist theories of grief, the lesser studied component of identity change is beginning to receive more attention in the bereavement literature. Although the idea about identity changes in the face of trauma is not new and has been well studied in the broader arena of social psychology, philosophy, and religion, it has been less studied in response to loss through bereavement (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001). It is important to look at the construct of identity change through a constructivist lens in order to understand the potential implications it has on the grieving process. From a constructivist perspective, individuals come to know and understand themselves through interpersonal interactions and experiences with others. The loss of one of these important "others" through death can challenge the sense of self of the survivor, thus creating a shift in understanding about who one is (Neimeyer et al., 2010). Narratives of bereaved individuals may be divided between "the old me" and "the new me" or "my life before" and "my life since" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001, p. 165). Attig (1996) aptly describes this experience of identity reconstruction as the ways in which bereaved individuals attempt to "relearn the self" and "relearn the world" after a loss. Thus, the loss experience comes to be viewed as an impetus for the bereaved individual to construct a new identity (Calhoun & Tedeschi,

2001).

Many researchers consider shifts in identity after the loss of a loved one to be important coping strategies (Stroebe & Schut, 2001; Thompson & Janigian, 1988). Some of the research on identity change as related to bereavement has operationalized identity change as posttraumatic growth. Within these studies, identity change is often considered as the outcome of the other meaning making processes of sense making and benefit finding (Hogan, Greenfield, & Schmidt, 2001; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). However, a few studies have explored the construct of identity change similar to the constructs of sense making and benefit finding in that it is studied as an active meaning making process bereaved individuals use to attempt to make meaning after a loss (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Richards, 2001). Often, identity change as a process is conceptualized as life purpose or life significance (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Ulmer et al., 1991) or a more performative dimension of identity change conceptualized as the pursuit of what matters now (Armour, 2003).

Early on, Nerken (1993) attempted to explain how loss through bereavement initiated identity changes as bereaved individuals came to view themselves differently. Nerken described the self in terms of both a core self and a reflective self. The core self is the whole of who one is; it is an individual's identity and consists of ideas, dreams, opinions, and feelings, whereas the reflective self involves more thinking and interpretation. This part of the self creates meaning and often affects feelings. It is developed and maintained through relationships or attachments with important others. Thus, the reflective self is affected by the loss of a loved one. In fact, many bereaved individuals cite feeling forever changed or as if a part of themselves is missing or has

died after the loss. Changes in the reflective self then act upon the core self in terms of identity, interpretation of feelings, and creating meaning.

Often, researchers conceptualized the identity change variable more in terms of personal growth or posttraumatic growth. For example, Hogan et al. (2001) constructed a Personal Growth scale within their instrument, the Hogan Grief Reactions Checklist, which may be used to measure identity change as an outcome. Similarly, and perhaps more well-known, measures of identity change include the Stress-Related Growth Scale (Park et al., 1996) and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Based on past studies and reviews of the literature, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) created the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory which explored personal growth in five different areas, including appreciation of life, changes in relationships with others, spiritual/religious changes, new possibilities, and personal strengths or assets.

A later study published by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) suggested that posttraumatic growth includes three components, including changes in sense of self, changes in relationships, and changes in philosophy of life. Often, changes in sense of self included the bereaved individual coming to view himself or herself as stronger for having survived such a tragedy (Aldwin, Levenson, & Spiro, 1994; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) or more self competent, oftentimes in regard to everything that had to be taken care of after the death (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Thomas, DiGiulio, & Sheehan, 1991). Additional changes in sense of self include a realization that life is fragile and an increased sense of vulnerability (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Bereaved individuals who experience posttraumatic growth often report changes in relationships as they feel more connected to others and often cite a deeper sense of empathy, particularly for others who

have experienced loss (Leham et al., 1993; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Another commonly cited change in relationships as a result of the loss includes an increased ability to express emotions or talk openly about oneself and one's experiences. This freedom to express oneself is generally viewed as a positive change by bereaved individuals (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990). The final component of posttraumatic growth as suggested by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) is changes in life philosophies. These changes are commonly reported as changes in religious or spiritual beliefs. While some bereaved individuals report increased cynicism or loss of religious or spiritual beliefs after the loss (Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991), a majority of others report spiritual growth, often through an increase in the importance of spirituality or religion (Chen, 1997; Richards, 2001). Overall, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) postulated that cognitive processing of loss and meaning making processes, including discovering changes in personal identity, lead to posttraumatic growth.

Richards (2001) conducted a longitudinal study of bereaved gay men whose partners died from AIDS. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected twice a year between 1990 and 1997. The specific study published in 2001 explored participant responses at 1 month and 3-4 years post-loss. The findings suggested that, overall, at one month post-loss, bereaved individuals found rituals and spiritual beliefs helpful in coping with the loss. Interestingly, those who reported higher salience of spiritual beliefs also scored higher on measures of depression and anxiety. However, those who reported increased importance of spiritual beliefs maintained higher levels of positive morale, leaving the authors to conclude that the meaning created through personal/spiritual growth possibly contributed to participants' abilities to maintain higher morale in the face

of greater distress. At 3-4 years post-loss, a majority of the participants reported a deepening of their spiritual beliefs over time as a result of the loss. Spirituality was viewed by participants as a sense of personal purpose and meaning. These results show support for earlier research citing spiritual growth as a component of identity change to come from the trauma of loss (Calhoun et al., 1992; Chen, 1997).

Additional support for Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2001) conceptualization of posttraumatic growth as changes in relationships and changes in sense of self were supported by Richards (2001). For example, bereaved partners in that study reported growth through changes of self in relation to others. Many participants expressed a sense of feeling more closely connected to others and of coming to value family more as a result of the loss. Additionally, many cited changes in identity through an increased sense of self worth, including feeling more mature, stronger, and more competent in the aftermath of the loss.

Frantz, Farrell, and Trolley (2001) wanted to further study the identity change component of meaning making by exploring if anything good came from the loss of a loved one, what individuals learned from loss, and how individuals were changed as a result of the loss. Participants included 397 bereaved adults who were interviewed at 13 months post-loss over an 8 year period of time. The sample consisted of 73% women and 27% men with an average age of approximately 40 years. Of the loved ones lost, 39% died suddenly or unexpectedly and 61% died of natural, expected causes. The bereaved individuals interviewed had lost parents (38%), spouses (17%), grandparents (13%), children (7%), siblings (7%), or another relative or friend (19%). Related to identity changes, 85% of the participants indicated they had changed personally as a result of the

death. A majority of these personal changes ($>3/4$) were reported as positive while about a quarter were reported as negative. The responses to identity changes resulted in the emergence of 64 categories indicating there are a number of ways in which bereaved individuals experience changes in sense of self after the death of a loved one.

Within the study conducted by Frantz et al. (2001), one of the most commonly cited identity changes (endorsed by 32% of the sample) included a sense of feeling stronger, more mature, and more self confident as a result of the loss. Additionally, 17% of bereaved individuals reported a greater appreciation for life and an understanding of the value of living in the present moment. Many bereaved individuals (14%) talked about feeling more compassionate and understanding as a result of the loss and 11% discussed feeling more closely connected to family and friends. A smaller group (3%) reported becoming more spiritual after the loss. On the other hand, some bereaved individuals experienced more negative identity changes as a result of the loss. For example, 10% of participants felt as if a part of them died with the deceased, leaving them feeling lonelier and sadder. Some reported feeling more fragile and more fearful of death (5%) whereas others reported feeling more hardened or bitter as a result of the loss (5%). Additionally, 3% discussed feeling more cautious and endorsed overall difficulty with decision making after the loss.

In a study conducted by Uren and Wastell (2002), changes in identity, along with other forms of meaning making, were explored among 108 women who experienced perinatal bereavement. Sense of identity was measured through a survey question asking about whether their sense of identity had changed as a result of the loss. A majority of participants in the study (87%) agreed that they had experienced some changes in identity

precipitated by the loss, with more than 65% strongly agreeing that they were forever changed due to the loss experience. Additionally, a majority of individuals who endorsed identity changes as a result of the loss viewed those changes positively. Thus, the authors posited that positive changes in identity aid in helping bereaved individuals make meaning out of the loss experience by incorporating the trauma of the loss into their worldview through a new understanding of who they are. However, it should be noted that while the study did include a qualitative component in which bereaved individuals could expound on their answers, the processes through which identity changes may occur were not explicitly explored within this study.

In several studies, identity change is conceptualized and measured in a more existential way though exploring purpose in life or life significance. For example, Ulmer et al. (1991) posited that searching for meaning was thought to create a sense of personal identity and direction in one's life. Identity changes were thus measured through life purpose, which was defined as the working toward life goals which then allow the bereaved individual to organize and express meanings. Participants in this study included 119 bereaved relatives and friends who had lost a loved one in the past two years with a mean age of 48.06 years. Most of the participants were women (83.2%) and all of the participants were white. Causes of death included natural (anticipated and unanticipated), suicide, accident, and homicide.

Ulmer et al. (1991) used packets, including a purpose in life assessment, a reasons for living assessment, an impact of event measure, a social provision measure, and a satisfaction with life assessment which were mailed to participants. Findings supported the idea that, overall, having a high sense of purpose in life led to better bereavement

outcomes, regardless of the cause of death. Specifically, those who had higher purpose in life were less impacted by the loss event and experienced less symptoms of intrusion and avoidance than those who reported lower purpose in life. In addition, those who had high purpose in life scores reported more reasons for living and higher survival and coping beliefs than those with low purpose in life. Those who reported high purpose in life also scored better on social provision measures of social support, social interest, attachments, self worth, advice and guidance, and opportunities for nurturance, in addition to reporting a higher satisfaction with life.

Although Ulmer et al. (1991) suggested that identity changes as measured through life purpose are often associated with greater bereavement recovery, it is important to note that this sample was relatively homogeneous (with much variation in age) and therefore the results may not be generalizable to other populations. Also, it is unknown whether purpose in life was a pre-existing trait prior to bereavement that then served to mitigate the loss experience of participants or if high life purpose was pursued, found, or created by bereaved individuals through engagement in meaning making processes as they attempted to identify what was important in life now in light of the loss (Ulmer et al., 1991).

Edmonds and Hooker (1992) conducted a study to further explore the relationship between the grieving process and existential meaning in life. Participants included 49 college students, a majority of who were female, with an average age of 19 years who had lost an immediate family member through death within the previous three years. Participant losses included parents (46%), siblings (26%), and grandparents who served as primary caretakers (28%). About half of the sample reported knowing ahead of time

that their loved one was going to die. Participants completed an impact of events measure to assess for grief related distress. Identity changes were conceptualized as existential meaning in life, which was measured by a purpose in life inventory in addition to asking two open ended questions which included, "Is your belief in God or some higher power changing as a result of undergoing this experience? If so, how is it changing?" and "Are your goals in life changing as a result of undergoing this experience? If so, how are they changing?" (p. 310). Results from these open ended questions were categorized as positive change, negative change, or no change.

Findings from the Edmonds and Hooker (1992) study suggested that those who reported high existential meaning in life (through previously defined measures) had lower levels of grief related distress, regardless of time since death. With regard to the open ended question about changing religious or spiritual beliefs, about half of the participants reported no change in meaning while the other half reported either positive changes (~24%) or negative changes (~22%). However, with regard to the open ended question about changing life goals as a result of the loss, 71 % of participants reported a positive change while the remainder reported either negative change (~12%) or no change (~12%). Those who reported positive changes in life goals reported higher levels of purpose in life than those who reported negative changes. Interestingly, those who reported positive or negative changes regarding religious or spiritual beliefs had higher levels of grief related distress than those who reported no change. The authors suggested that more certainty in religious or spiritual beliefs (as indicated by no change) may serve as a protective factor from grief related distress. Additionally, it could be indicative that changes in religious or spiritual beliefs, whether positive or negative, lead to increased

distress until such beliefs can be developed and incorporated into an individual's worldview (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992).

Consistent with previous research (Ulmer et al., 1991), Edmonds and Hooker (1992) posited that higher levels of life purpose along with positive changes in life goals as a result of the loss are associated with decreased levels of grief related distress. Additionally, Edmonds and Hooker suggested that identity change (as measured through changes in life goals) appeared in a majority of the sample and could be related to the normative developmental issues of identity and autonomy that arise in adolescence and early adulthood.

Armour (2003) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 38 members of 14 families bereaved by homicide in order to further explore the identity change component of meaning making. In particular, Armour was interested in how the processes of meaning making grounded in action through the pursuit of what matters now impact one's personal identity of self-continuity. Findings suggested that perhaps a more performative dimension of meaning making, wherein individuals take intentional actions in activities that are personally meaningful, is paramount for individuals coping with traumatic or violent losses, particularly when the more traditionally studied cognitive meaning making processes might fail them because the loss simply fails to make sense. Within the study, 83% of participants indicated that they following statement substantially or fully represented their experience, "the intense pursuit of what matters is the meaning in my life" (p. 524).

Armour (2003) viewed the pursuit of what matters now as a form of coping with loss. Individuals intentionally pursued activities or behaviors that they found meaningful

in light of the loss. Over time, she contended, these pursuits led to a newly reconstructed self identity. Thus, both the process of identity change, pursuing meaningful activities as a result of the loss, and the outcome of these processes (changed identities) were studied. It is important to note that Armour suggested it was these meaningful processes that were more important than the specific outcomes obtained.

With regard to homicide survivors, Armour (2003) identified several prominent themes which represented important examples of meaning making grounded in action through the pursuit of what matters now. One theme, declarations of truth, included the subcategories of declarations that exposed hypocrisy and declarations of self-determination. Declarations that exposed hypocrisy had to do with the truth as survivors saw it and often involved scrutiny of the post-homicide events (particular dealings with police, religious leaders, etc.) and whether the motives in those interactions were true and genuine or not. Declarations of self-determination were seen when survivors viewed strong personal moral beliefs as a source of motivation to act or to decide for themselves what they choose to believe. A second theme, fighting for what's right, included the subcategories of fighting for what's mine and fighting to correct what's wrong. Fighting for what's mine was characterized by bereaved individuals fighting for what mattered to them in order to preserve their self and assert their needs to others. Fighting to correct what's wrong was a way that homicide survivors came to understand and share with others situations they recognized as wrong. Fighting for what's right was a way that bereaved individuals began to take back control and re-establish order. For many, this left them feeling stronger and as if they were doing something worthwhile. The final theme, living in ways that give purpose to the loved one's death was made up of two

subcategories: others can benefit from my experience and living life deliberately gives me a sense of purpose. Many bereaved individuals reported feeling more mature and wiser as a result of the loss and thus they felt as if others could benefit from hearing the lessons learned in their experience of loss. Additionally, "choices about how to live become testimonies to the fact that their loved one's life mattered as do the lives of others, including themselves" (p. 532).

Armour (2003) contended that these meaningful behaviors occur in response to initial negative cognitive meanings made by traumatically bereaved individuals. These negative appraisals spur more performative, active meaning making processes as individuals take action to declare the truth, solve problems, fight for their beliefs, and change their life goals. These actions, as they occur over time, provide the basis on which bereaved individuals can begin to reconstruct coherent post-loss narratives or identities.

Identity change as a component of meaning making has been defined, measured, and studied in various ways throughout the literature. Often, it appears that identity change has been measured through the lens of posttraumatic growth. In particular, studies that explore changes in one's sense of self, changes in relationships, and changes in one's philosophy of life after the death of a loved one show us some of the potential for individual growth after a trauma. Individuals report feeling stronger and more competent (Aldwin et al., 1995; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Thomas et al., 1991), more deeply connected to others on an emotional level (Leham et al., 1993; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), more compassionate and empathetic (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001), increased spiritual growth (Chen, 1997; Richards, 2001), and a greater sense of life purpose or significance through the pursuit of

newly reconstructed life goals that are important now (Armour, 2003; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Ulmer et al., 1991).

Overall, research supports the idea that a majority of individuals engage in a search for meaning after the death of a loved one (Davis et al., 2000; McIntosh et al., 1993; Murphy et al., 2003; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991). Findings suggest that religion or spirituality may play a strong role in both the sense making and identity change components of meaning making (Calhoun et al., 1992; Davis et al., 1998; McIntosh et al., 1993; Richards, 2001). It also appears that ability to make sense out of the loss is related to decreased distress and less symptoms of complicated grief in bereaved individuals (Currier et al., 2006; Davis et al., 1998; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee, 2008). Additionally, there is overall support for the idea that those who find meaning in the loss fare better than those who search but are unable to find any meaning. Inability to find the silver lining or see any benefits to come from the loss is associated with increased levels of distress in bereaved individuals (Davis et al., 1998; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008). There also appears to be ample evidence to support the idea that posttraumatic growth is possible and even beneficial after the loss of a loved one (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Frantz et al., 2001; Richards, 2001). As individuals reconstruct new understandings of who they are now in light of the loss, they are able to move forward in a way that feels meaningful, purposeful, and significant. Some suggest that meaning making might look different depending on the cause of death. Violent or traumatic deaths may lead to more difficulty in the meaning making process as currently defined as more individuals search without finding any meaning when traumatically bereaved (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010; Currier

et al., 2006; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008).

Although the research that has been done gives us a lot of important information about meaning making in regards to bereavement, meaning making is still not comprehensively studied within the field. For example, many researchers (e.g., Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Zhang, & Noll, 2005; Cleiren, 1993) have studied meaning making processes but not actual meanings made whereas others (e.g., Currier et al., 2006; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008) have studied meaning made while ignoring the important processes through which this is done. Further emphasis on conducting studies that emphasize both process and outcome (e.g., Bonnao et al., 2004; Davis et al., 2000; Uren & Wastell, 2002) would be beneficial. Longitudinal studies would also be best since meaning making is seen as a dynamic process that evolves over time. However, as many researchers have found, conducting longitudinal studies is often difficult for various reasons and it is hard to evaluate pre-loss factors/functioning such as levels of distress or relationship to deceased. Additionally, there is no consistent way in which meaning making is defined or measured across studies. It is difficult to operationalize since meaning making is a complex, multifaceted, theory enriched term. Importantly, meaning making processes are not always within an individual's conscious awareness and thus more attention should be paid to the subtle, nonverbal, unconscious, or performative ways in which individuals make meaning after the death of a loved one. More research should be done on those who report not searching for meaning in order to better understand what factors are involved in the minority of individuals who do not engage in that existential search for meaning after a loss. Additionally, more research on negative meanings made and their impact on bereaved individuals would be helpful. For example,

with the emphasis on studying identity change as personal growth, there is less exploration of potential negative identity changes and their impacts on bereaved individuals. Finally, exploration of meaning making processes and outcomes among specific groups of bereaved individuals (such as siblings) could help explain unique patterns of grieving within certain bereaved populations. In the next section, I will explore the importance of sibling relationships along with what is known about sibling loss in adolescence and meaning making in sibling loss.

Nature and Characteristics of Sibling Relationships

Research shows that sibling bonds are unique and often last a lifetime. Sibling bonds impact psychological development in the areas of identity development, sibling rivalry, attachment and future relationships, and abuse and loss (Moser et al., 2005; Packman, Horsley, Davies, & Kramer, 2006). Siblings learn a great deal from each other about who they are and who they want to become. Sibling relationships essentially last a lifetime and they are often characterized by a high amount of contact and interaction (Packman et al., 2006). However, there is a lack of attention to bereaved siblings within the literature on grief. Much of the research on meaning making processes in grief that involves siblings includes their data and responses along with other types of losses (parental loss of child, adult loss of grandparent, adult loss of friend, etc.; Armour, 2003; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Demi & Howell, 1991). This makes it difficult to discern a better understanding of what it means to be a bereaved sibling.

In this section, I will discuss what it means to be a sibling and the different roles that siblings can have in their relationships. It is important to fully understand the impact of the sibling relationship in order to comprehend the level of grief and loss one feels

when a brother or sister dies. I plan to review characteristics of sibling relationships that make them unique and different from other relationships in life. Understanding the uniqueness of sibling relationships will help explain the unique grief reactions experienced by siblings.

A study from 2010 indicated that over 82% of youth aged 18 and younger lived with at least one sibling (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012). Despite the large number of children and teenagers who have siblings, research on sibling relationships and their impact on future psychological development has been sparse in the psychology/family literature (McHale et al., 2012; Moser et al., 2005; Noller, 2005). McHale et al. (2012) suggested that sibling relationships have both a direct and indirect impact on child and adolescent development; however, the indirect impacts have been studied less often. Through their day to day interactions, siblings can learn about negotiation, emotional understanding, and problem solving and these traits are often linked to later social competence (Dunn, 2007; McHale et al., 2012). Additionally, studies show that sibling relationships in adolescence are associated with positive developmental outcomes such as empathy and academic efforts (Bouchey, Shoulberg, Jodl, & Eccles, 2010; Tucker, Updegraff, McHale, & Crouter, 1999). The impact of sibling relationships has also been linked to later adjustment problems. However, it is clear that the impact of sibling relationships (whether positive or negative) is strong and has a unique influence on adolescent development even when other important relational influences are accounted for (McHale et al., 2012; Windle, 2000).

Sibling relationships, though varied and complex, inevitably have an impact on the social, cognitive, and emotional development of siblings. Sibling relationships are

often the longest relationships individuals experience over the course of the lifetime (Noller, 2005). Dunn (1992) argued that the nature of sibling relationships changes as children grow and develop. Sibling relationships are characterized by warmth and involvement as well as conflict and rivalry. During childhood, siblings typically spend much time together so emotional ties are strong and intense (usually being both positive and negative). Some major sibling roles at this time include playmates, caretakers, supports, rivals, and competitors (Scharf, Shulman, & Avigad-Spitz, 2005). The sibling relationship begins to shift and become more egalitarian in middle childhood. During adolescent development, siblings begin to search for and define their own identity which may lead to decreased interaction with siblings, characterized by both less companionship and less conflict than seen in younger siblings (Cole & Kerns, 2001; Dunn, 1992; Scharf et al., 2005). However, despite less intensity in the sibling relationship, findings suggest that the emotional attachment or connection between siblings in adolescence remains strong and level of caring or intimacy even tends to increase (Cole & Kerns, 2001; Updegraff, McHale, & Crouter, 2002).

Multiple studies have been done in order to explore the sibling relationship as an attachment relationship based on Bolby's (1980) definition. General findings supported the idea that siblings serve an important role in attachment relationships (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). Characteristics of attachment relationships such as proximity seeking, safe havens in times of distress, and secure base were found in sibling relationships among a group of college students (Noller, 2005). These findings lend further support to the importance the sibling relationship can have on individuals.

Much research supports the assumption that the sibling relationship shapes

adolescent adjustment (Dunn, 2000; McHale et al., 2012; Noller, 2005). Siblings learn from one another and the sibling relationship often influences an adolescent's search for personal identity. For example, the sibling relationship plays a role in identity development through a series of personal exchanges over time in which siblings define each other (Bank & Kahn, 1982). Noller (2005) suggested a potential bidirectional relationship between the sibling relationship and adjustment wherein healthy adjustment likely impacts more positive sibling relationships and positive sibling relationships likely help protect against adjustment problems.

Overall, evidence supports the uniqueness and importance of sibling relationships throughout the lifespan, particularly in childhood and adolescence. Cicirelli stated:

Sibling relationships are the total of the interactions (physical, verbal, and nonverbal communication) of two or more individuals who share knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings regarding each other, from the time that one sibling becomes aware of the other. (p. 4)

Packman et al. (2006) contended that the death of a sibling in childhood or adolescence can mean the loss of a playmate, a friend, a protector, a safe haven, a role model, a rival, a competitor, and so much more. It is an untimely loss for which one can never be fully prepared. Accordingly, Packman argued, "Siblings' identities are intricately connected because they share similar histories, so that when one sibling dies, the survivors essentially lose part of themselves" (p. 820).

Developmental Perspectives on Sibling Loss

Historically, there has been a lack of attention paid to the grief reactions and processes of bereaved siblings. In the 1960's and 1970's, a sparse amount of research was

done examining the purported effects of sibling bereavement. This research tended to focus on clinical populations and the pathology of grief reactions. In the 1980's, there was a shift from focusing on the pathology of grief in siblings to include various factors that might influence the grief of siblings, including grief in families. Although the past 10 years have seen an increase in the literature on sibling bereavement, overall there remain many unanswered questions, particularly regarding some of the long term impacts of bereavement on siblings (Davies & Limbo, 2010).

In this section, I will explore sibling grief in general and address holes in the literature and the importance of exploring sibling bereavement overall. In order to provide context for sibling loss in adolescence, sibling loss in childhood will be briefly reviewed. Then, a more in-depth look at sibling loss in adolescence will be discussed within the context of normative adolescent identity models. Typical grief reactions of bereaved adolescent siblings (including emotional/psychological, behavioral, and physiological) along with resilient or positive symptomatology will be reviewed. The long term effects of losing a sibling in adolescence will be highlighted. Finally, research exploring adolescent sibling loss and meaning making will be presented.

Sibling Loss in Childhood

Research suggests that bereaved children experience a variety of symptoms after the death of a sibling, including emotional, behavioral, and physiological reactions (Birenbaum, 2000). Crehan (2004) suggested that the various grief responses of children are often unconscious and out of the awareness of the grieving child. Studies of siblings bereaved in childhood have supported a myriad of psychological reactions to the loss, including anger, sadness, fear, hopelessness, anxiety, isolation, depression, self-doubt,

and self-blame (Birenbaum, 2000; Davies, 1999). Often, children in the developmental stage of magical thinking (between 1 and 7 years old) feel a sense of responsibility for their brother or sister's death and may feel guilt over having wished they would get hurt or die during an argument (Crehan, 2004).

McCown and Davies (1995) further identified some behavioral responses children commonly exhibit after the death of a sibling. Often, children become more aggressive, demand more attention, are moodier and stubborn, and refuse to reply with parent's requests. Some researchers contend that these acting out behaviors may be attempts to obtain much needed attention from parents or other supportive adults who may not be as present due to their own grief. Additionally, these reactions could be considered part of the normal grieving process as children experience a multitude of overwhelming emotions, leading them to feel confused and frustrated (Davies, 1999; Goldblatt, 2011). Much evidence also suggests a decrease in school performance after the death of a sibling, with increased distress and anxiety leading to an inability to focus (Balk, 1983; Parkes, 1987).

Grief has also been found to manifest in physical ways in children, such as bed wetting, anorexia, headaches (Davies, 1999), and stomach aches (Baker, Sedney, & Gross, 1992). Additionally, children whose brother or sister died from a long term illness may exhibit symptoms similar to that of their deceased sibling (Davies, 1999). Crehan (2004) also suggested that children may begin to fear death and feel that each physical symptom they experience is an indicator that they are going to die.

Although a full review of childhood grief is beyond the scope of this study, interested readers are directed to Crehan (2004) who provided an outline of bereavement

reactions in children ranging in age from 6 months to 12 years, depending on their developmental stage and understanding of death. Overall, it is clear that siblings bereaved in childhood suffer a variety of physical, psychological, and behavior symptoms. However, the effects of a sibling's death within the context of developmental framework have not been fully investigated. Further, many contend that even less research has been conducted regarding the phenomenon of sibling loss in adolescence (Balk, 1990; 2009; Davies, 1991; Hogan & DeSantis, 1996; Goldblatt, 2011; Shipkey, 2008).

Sibling Loss in Adolescence

Research suggests that adolescence is a particularly difficult time to lose a loved one due to all of the developmental tasks that adolescents are attempting to accomplish. Some of the developmental tasks affected by the death of a sibling in adolescence include thinking about future career, becoming more autonomous, and developing intimate friendships and other relationships (Balk, 2000). Additionally, there is some research on the factors that may impact the extent and intensity of the grief experienced by adolescents, including: individual characteristics such as age, gender, or coping style; situation characteristics such as cause of death, involvement in death, or duration of an illness; and environmental characteristics such as how parents and families grieve, the relationship between the adolescent and his or her sibling prior to the death; and family communication (Davies & Limbo, 2010; Fanos, 1996; White, 2006).

A report from the Institute of Medicine in the 1980's called for more research on the topic of adolescent sibling bereavement. At that time, not much research had been done, and when research was done with regard to bereaved siblings, younger adolescents were often grouped in with children and older adolescents were often grouped in with

adults. Not enough credence was given to the unique developmental stage of adolescence and the potential impact or differences in grief response that might present during that time (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996). The field began to see a shift in a realization that adolescence as a developmental stage needed to be further explored in the late 80's continuing up through the present. Increasingly, more and more researchers are suggesting the importance of looking at bereavement within a developmental context (Balk, 2001; Goldblatt, 2011; Noppe & Noppe, 1997).

Noppe and Noppe (1997) suggested it was dangerous to group adolescents in with adults because their understandings of death are often more ambiguous and less mature than that of adults. Despite the fact that adolescents can cognitively begin to understand the concept of universality as it relates to death, adolescents often engage in risky behaviors and appear to have a belief that "it can't happen to me" (Noppe & Noppe, 1997, p. 25). It has been suggested that perhaps the adolescent developmental tasks of separating from parents, asserting independence, and creating intimate relationships with peers are stronger or of more import than an adolescent sense of personal mortality (Corr, 1995; Noppe & Noppe, 1997). Additionally, although adolescents may cognitively be able to explain an understanding of the nonfunctionality and irreversibility of death, it seems at times that these are not serious concerns to adolescents, perhaps because of their increasing grasp and fascination with ideas of faith and spirituality. These intriguing possibilities of an afterlife may prevent some adolescents from fully understanding the gravity of the loss for survivors of bereavement. More specifically, Noppe and Noppe (1997) identified some developmental tasks common in adolescence that may create unique understandings and reactions to death during that time period. For example,

adolescents experience physical changes as they enter into puberty and in some ways, these changes signal to adolescents that they are, in fact, getting older and will eventually die. Additionally, as adolescents begin a cognitive shift into more logical, abstract ways of thinking, they are able to, for the first time, begin to contemplate their own deaths. Developmental tasks within the social realm, such as separating from parents or forming more intimate relationships with peers, combined with the unexpected loss of a loved one, might lead adolescents to feel an increased sense of isolation (Noppe & Noppe, 1997).

Adolescent identity development. In order to better grasp adolescent sibling bereavement within the context of normative development, a brief review of a few theories of adolescent identity development will be discussed prior to exploring the typical grief reactions and long term effects of sibling loss. There are multiple theories of adolescent identity development (e.g., Blos, 1941/1979; Erikson, 1959/1964; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1982) which attempt to explain the normative developmental tasks during that period of time. Blos's theory of adolescent development will be briefly explained so that grief reactions may be clarified in terms of developmental stage. Additionally, contributions from developmental theory will be integrated throughout in order to give an overall picture of adolescent identity development.

Blos (1941, 1979) presented a psychodynamic model of adolescent development that was divided into three different phases: early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence. Each phase is characterized by unique tasks adolescents must accomplish in order to work through developmental challenges. Early adolescence is said

to occur from around age 10 or 11 to the age of 14. A primary focus in early adolescence is on physical changes that are occurring during this phase (puberty). Additionally, early adolescents are learning about sex, social roles, and friendships as they attempt to gain more independence from their parents. They are learning about stereotypes and attempting to take in information in a useful way in order to aid in problem solving (Balk & Corr, 1996; Blos, 1979). As early adolescents begin a process of emotional separation from their parents, they face conflicts of abandonment versus safety and of separation versus reunion (Fleming & Adolph, 1986).

Middle adolescence occurs between the ages of 15 and 17 years and a primary focus in this stage is on becoming more independent (Balk & Corr, 1996). This stage is characterized by identity formation and issues of intimacy (Erikson, 1964). Also, it is during this time that adolescents begin to develop formal operations or the ability to think more abstractly. However, the egocentric thinking of early adolescence is difficult to replace so adolescents often struggle with the tendency to see situations from only their own perspective (Balk & Corr, 1996; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Further, Fowler (1981) proposed that it was during this middle adolescent phase of development that teens began to expand their understandings of the world and consider ideas about faith through deeper exploration of their own beliefs and values. As middle adolescents are attempting to achieve a sense of competence, mastery, and control, they face conflicts of independence versus dependence (Fleming & Adolph, 1986).

The late adolescence phase occurs between the ages of 18 to 22 years. This is the time where many adolescents are transitioning from high school either into college or into the world of work. Thus, developmental tasks during this phase include career

decision making, further developing intimate relationships, and separating from one's parents (Balk & Corr, 1996; Blos, 1979). Becoming autonomous through separating from one's family of origin is seen as a normal developmental task of adolescence and is often referred to as individuation, wherein one has more autonomy over one's own life while still maintaining close relationships with one's parents (Blos, 1979). However, as Balk and Corr (1996) pointed out, there are some times in which adolescents achieve autonomy through emotional detachment from parents or family of origin. As late adolescents are attempting to achieve developmental tasks of intimacy and commitment, they face conflicts of closeness versus distance (Fleming & Adolph, 1986).

When adolescents experience the loss of a sibling, there is interplay between various expressions of grief and the developmental tasks of each phase of adolescence (Balk & Corr, 1996; Balk, 2001; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Goldblatt, 2011). For example, if a developmental task in early adolescence is seen as developing and fostering important friendships, the loss of sibling during this time could have an impact on that task in different ways. The loss could cause these teens to feel different from their peers as a result of the loss and thus isolate themselves, stunting completion of one of the developmental tasks. Similarly, the loss of a sibling during middle adolescence, when teens are working to achieve a sense of personal competency and autonomy, could disrupt one's ability to complete this task by interrupting one's perceived sense of security and control. Finally, in late adolescence, teens are working to achieve separation from their parents and family of origin. However, the death of a sibling during this time could disrupt one's ability to complete this task as the surviving sibling feels a need to stay close to their family of origin or even take on the caretaker role to support their

parents in their grief (Balk & Corr, 1996). Balk (2001) suggested that adolescents often must reexamine issues of grief and loss as they enter into each new developmental phase. For example, bereaved adolescents may re-experience grief reactions as they mature and experience cognitive, behavioral, and developmental changes that allow them to see and process the death in new ways. Similarly, Rosenblatt (1996) discussed why grief often recurs over the course of a lifetime as the loss experience is really more of a process extending over time with new realizations and understandings of the loss. Some of these new realizations can only take place once one has entered into a new developmental stage and therefore come to a new perspective or realization of what has truly been lost. Although it appears that many researchers support the idea of taking a developmental approach to looking at adolescent bereavement, few models exist that link normative adolescent development with adolescent grief responses following a loss.

Much research on sibling bereavement and grief in adolescence has focused on the reactions and emotions involved in the grieving process (Corr, 2000; Davies & Limbo, 2010; Moser et al., 2005). Typical grief reactions in children and adolescents include feelings of sadness, anger, loneliness, irritability, anxiety, behavioral problems, physiological responses such as headaches or stomach aches, social withdrawal, decrease in school performance, nightmares, guilt, fear, and low self-esteem (Davies & Limbo, 2010; Fanos, 1996; Moser et al., 2005; White, 2006). Sibling bereavement in adolescence has been linked with increased medical, social, behavioral, and psychiatric concerns (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996). Research conducted on the psychological, behavioral, and physiological symptoms experienced by siblings bereaved in adolescents will be reviewed below within the context of normative adolescent development.

Psychological grief reactions. Hogan and DeSantis (1996) contended that prior to the 1980's, the limited research that was conducted regarding sibling bereavement was done with a psychiatric population within the medical model focus. It was in the 1980's that more community based samples began to be used within research on adolescent sibling bereavement; the majority of this research focused on the relationship of sibling death to various factors including self-concept, depression, and academic performance (Balk, 1983; Demi & Gilbert, 1987; Hogan, 1987). Research conducted in the 1990's focused on further defining and understanding the process of sibling loss in adolescence through exploration of the characteristics, intensity, and duration of grief reactions (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994; Klass, 1993; Silverman & Worden, 1992).

A seminal work in the area of adolescent sibling bereavement was conducted by Balk (1981/1983). Balk examined the possible effects of bereavement on adolescent self-concept in a community sample of 33 bereaved adolescent siblings between the ages of 14 and 19 years old. An interview was conducted with each participant 4 to 84 months post-loss with the mean time since the death being 23 months. In the interview bereaved siblings were asked to discuss two different time periods, one being after the death and one being the present. Measures of self concept, including the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire, were also given. Interestingly, Balk found that bereaved siblings scored higher than the norm group on the morals sub-section of the self concept measure, indicating that perhaps losing a sibling during this time period allowed adolescents to reassess their values in a positive way. Additionally, Balk found enduring psychological reactions in adolescent bereaved siblings ranging from shock, numbness, fear, guilt, anger, confusion, loneliness, and depression. Further findings suggested that many

adolescents had difficulty adjusting to the intense emotions arising as a result of sibling loss, as about half of the participants reported experiencing one or more intense emotional reactions to the loss approximately 23 months after the death. However, acute grief did appear to decrease in level of intensity over time (Balk, 1983).

Additionally, research conducted with larger sample sizes ranging from 127 to 157 bereaved adolescent siblings further supported the myriad of intense psychological grief reactions reported (Hogan & DeSantis, 1992; 1994; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991). These psychological grief reactions reported by bereaved adolescents often occurred spontaneously as painful, intrusive thoughts or feelings related to the death of their sibling. Some of these grief reactions included feelings of helplessness or powerlessness, depression, poor concentration and restlessness, increased phobias and fears (of dying, of going crazy, of intimacy), intense feelings of loneliness, decreased sense of self-worth, feelings of guilt (e.g., when feeling happy), worry and concern about parents, feeling overprotected by parents, and increased grief reactions during the holidays or other anniversary dates (Hogan, 1987; Hogan & DeSantis, 1992; 1994; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991).

The study done by Hogan and Greenfield (1991) included a sample of 87 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 years old who completed measures of grief reactions, self-concept, and depression between 18 months and 5 years after losing a sibling. Findings suggested a link between grief reactions and self-concept in that those who had a lower intensity of grief reactions had higher scores on self-concept, those who reported moderate intensity of grief reactions had moderate scores on self-concept, and those who reported high intensity of grief reactions had low scores on self-concept.

Furthermore, the researchers were able to identify a group of bereaved adolescents at risk for damaged self-concept and increased levels of depression, those individuals who continued to report high intensity of grief reactions 18 months or more post-loss. For this at-risk group, the passage of time did not seem to alleviate intense feelings of grief or symptoms of depression.

Balmer (1992) further attempted to explore the impact of time since death on bereaved adolescents' adjustment to the loss of a brother or sister. In this study, Balmer used a matched control group (40 non-bereaved adolescents and 40 bereaved adolescents) to explore adolescent adjustment through measures of well-being, self-esteem, depression, and academic performance between 1 and 3 years post-loss. Findings suggested that time since death did seem to predict adjustment to bereavement as adolescents in the first year post-loss reported higher levels of distress and depression as well as lower levels of self-esteem than the matched control group. Additionally, by the second or third year post-loss, scores between the bereaved and non-bereaved groups tended to even out and it became more difficult to distinguish between bereaved and non-bereaved adolescents based on scores of depression, distress, and self-esteem. Similar to previous findings (Hogan & Greenfield, 1991), Balmer suggested a small percentage of participants were considered high risk as evidenced by more intrusive feelings and higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem. This group was considered more vulnerable to long-term adjustment difficulties, was more likely to use drugs as a method of coping with bereavement related distress, and was more likely to indicate insomnia or other physiological complaints as a result of the loss.

A common theme in several studies of adolescent sibling bereavement included

the idea that family environment likely plays a role in post-loss adjustment for bereaved adolescent siblings. The family environment has the potential to both help or hinder adolescent adjustment to loss, although family context is often ignored in studies of adolescent sibling bereavement (Balk, 1983; Balmer, 1992; Fleming & Balmer, 1996; Shipkey, 2008). For example, Balk (1983) contended that when adolescents viewed the family system as less coherent, they were more likely to have increased feelings of confusion and anger after their sibling's death. Additionally, they are more likely to have continued feelings of confusion and guilt months after the loss. Similarly, Balmer (1992) suggested that perceived family cohesiveness plays an important role in adolescent adjustment to sibling loss. A lack of perceived family cohesiveness can occur as the result of the loss of a loved one, which may result in poor communication or a lack of discussion about the death (Balk, 1983; Balmer, 1992). However, Fleming and Balmer (1996) suggested that perhaps withdrawal from parents after a sibling death is a natural response to an adolescent's developmental inability to witness intense psychological pain shown by their parents.

Studies of adolescent sibling bereavement also indicated changes in adolescents' relationships with their parents and other important people in their lives after the loss (Balmer, 1992; Goldblatt, 2011; Hogan & Balk, 1990). Some adolescents reported feeling angry or resentful toward their parents for various reasons, such as letting their sibling die, being left alone while parents cared for the dying child, or perhaps because of normative adolescent development issues (Goldblatt, 2011). Many adolescents reported feeling as if they need to hide their grief from their parents in order to protect them from further pain (Shipkey, 2008). Often, these adolescents reported feeling alone in their grief

and they may feel neglected by important others in that their loss is not viewed as significant (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2005; Shipkey, 2008). Additionally, some adolescents reported feeling resentment when parents were unavailable to attend to the needs of the surviving sibling. They may feel additional loss in the sense that they now feel like they need to care for their parents (Shipkey, 2008).

In the study conducted by Balmer (1992), adolescents perceived their moms to be the most helpful in terms of grief related adjustment in that adolescents felt validated in their own pain by their mothers' willingness to verbalize their own grief reactions. Fathers were found to be less available for grief related concerns and were less likely to express their own grief openly within the family. Peers were viewed as helpful to adolescents, particularly when the friendship was characterized by safety and openness so that the bereaved sibling felt comfortable to talk or not talk about their sibling's death when they needed to. Thus, friends who were supportive, flexible, and available were perceived as helpful.

Behavioral grief reactions. In addition to the wide array of psychological reactions, sibling bereaved adolescents also report external, behavioral responses to the loss of a sister or brother. Linked with the commonly reported psychological grief reaction of loneliness, research indicates that bereaved siblings often withdraw from friends and other important relationships, further isolating themselves (Davies, 1991; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991; Shipkey, 2008). For example, Hogan (1987) suggested that bereaved adolescent siblings reported concerns of appearing strange or different in front of their peer group. These surviving siblings felt as if others were watching them to see if they would break down and this often led to difficulty maintaining peer relationships.

Davies (1991) conducted interviews with 12 adults who lost a sibling to death between the ages of 11 and 15 years in order to better understand the phenomenon of sibling loss in adolescence. All of the participants interviewed in the study reported a sense of feeling different from their friends after the death of their sibling. They reported feeling as if no one could understand what they were going through. In response to these feelings, many siblings reported withdrawing from their peers during adolescence. In some ways, this isolation was a response to the way that siblings now viewed the world differently as a result of the loss. They reported an increased sense of maturity and feeling as if certain behaviors of friends were trivial or unimportant considering bigger life and death issues.

Another study conducted by Martinson and Campos (1991) provided further support to the idea that bereaved adolescents have a sense of feeling different after the death of a brother or sister. These adolescent siblings who lost a brother or sister to cancer reported fears of being noticed or called out by peers for being different, which often led them to hide their sadness and avoid talk about their deceased sibling, causing them to further withdraw from friends. As a result of this isolation, adolescent bereaved siblings often reported feeling a sense of loneliness and alienation in their grief, indicating that no one understood what they were going through (Davies, 1991; Shipkey, 2008). Some reported feeling as if they wanted or needed to talk about their bereaved sibling, but not feeling that others wanted or expected them to (Shipkey, 2008). When viewed through a developmental lens, it appears that bereaved adolescents are often withdrawing from peers and isolating themselves at the time when a normative, age-appropriate developmental task would be to engage in closer, more meaningful relationships with peers (Davies, 1991; Fleming & Adolph, 1986). Thus, the further

identity development of these grieving adolescents may be stunted by their isolation, causing them to miss out on learning age appropriate social skills because of their inability to develop intimate relationships with friends. This contributes to increasing feelings of loneliness, isolation, and depression (Davies, 1991). Additionally, these isolated, grieving adolescents may react with increased behaviors that appear aggressive or hostile (Shipkey, 2008). For example, they may be more likely to act out, start fights, test authority, or engage in more risk-taking behavior (Fleming & Balmer, 1996; McCown & Davies, 1995; Raphael, 1983; Shipkey, 2008).

Research suggests that some adolescents may engage in risk-taking behaviors after the death of a loved one (Dowdney, 2005; Hogan, 1987; Martinson & Campos, 1991). As Noppe and Noppe (1997) pointed out, adolescents may be developmentally beginning to understand the universality and irreversibility of death, although it is clearly not solidified yet as they continue to engage in risky behaviors, perhaps feeling an invincibility toward their own death. Some bereaved adolescents engage in risk taking behaviors such as drinking or using drugs, driving recklessly, acting out sexually, or other impulsive behaviors. These behaviors can be viewed as ways to receive additional attention or support from caregivers or attempts to mask some of their hurt and pain.

Decreased academic performance is another behavioral manifestation of grief that is seen in many adolescents (Balk, 1983; Fleming & Balmer, 1996; Hogan, 1987). Balk (1983) studied 33 bereaved sibling teenagers between the ages of 14 and 19 years. Within this sample, approximately 70% of the bereaved adolescents reported changes in study habits after the death, with a majority reporting poor concentration, worse grades, and decreased productivity. However, over time study habits in this sample were reported by

the adolescents to return to normal, though Balk did not specify the average length of time before this occurred. Hogan (1987) and Balmer (1992) also found that bereaved adolescent siblings reported more concentration difficulties in school after the death. However, in Balmer's study, academic concerns of lack of focus and concentration were not evidenced by a drop in school grades on report cards. Fleming and Balmer (1996) suggested that perhaps school grades are not the only indicator of decreased academic functioning. It seems additional research in the area of academic performance, particularly with bereaved adolescents, would be useful to further understand potential changes after the death of a loved one.

Other commonly reported behavioral changes after the death of a sibling in adolescence include shifting roles in the surviving siblings (Balk, 1983; Balmer, 1992; Shipkey, 2008). According to Shipkey (2008) and Balmer (1992), many bereaved adolescents feel pressure to become a role model, similar to the sibling who died. Some teenagers report that this newfound sense of maturity causes them to lose friendships or see themselves as unpopular among their peers. Additionally, adolescents have to cope with shifting roles in family dynamics. Some bereaved adolescents take on more responsibilities within the family (e.g., helping with household chores or caring for younger siblings). Often, bereaved adolescents cited changing roles in order to help support their parents and protect them from further pain (Balk, 1983; Hogan & DeSantis, 1994; Shipkey, 2008).

Physiological grief reactions. In addition to the wide array of both psychological and behavioral symptoms experienced by bereaved adolescents, evidence suggests that grief can also manifest in more somatic ways in surviving siblings. For example,

Birenbaum (2000) used preexisting data collected from 37 bereaved families in order to examine grief reactions of siblings by age group. Findings suggested that 12-18 year old bereaved siblings reported 6 physiological complaints more often than the normative group, including headaches, nausea, stomachaches, general aches and pains, asthma, and skin rashes. Other physiological symptoms of sibling bereaved adolescents included loss of energy, changes in eating habits, insomnia, nightmares, getting sick more often, and general bodily concerns (Balk, 1983; Balmer, 1992; Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2005; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991).

Evidence suggests that there may also be age-related differences regarding how grief is manifested either psychologically, behaviorally, or physiologically (Balk, 1983; Balmer, 1992; Fleming & Balmer, 1996). Given adolescent development theory and the unique developmental tasks for various phases of adolescence (early, middle, and late), it would make sense that adolescents of different ages would experience differential grief reactions based on the developmental conflicts the adolescent is currently facing (Blos, 1979; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Fleming & Balmer, 1996). For example, Balmer (1992) reported some important age-related differences in post-loss adjustment within a sample of sibling bereaved adolescents. The findings suggested that older adolescents reported increased psychological symptoms as measured by increased symptoms of depression, lower self-esteem, and increased bereavement-related distress. On the other hand, younger adolescents reported more physiological symptoms after the death of a sibling as measured by increased physical complaints such as stomachaches, headaches, and insomnia.

When these age-related findings are viewed within the context of adolescent

development models, one hypothesis is that younger adolescents are less sure of themselves and more likely to attempt to fit in with their same age peers. Often, younger adolescents have fears about appearing different or standing out from their friend group. Additionally, these early adolescents experience the loss of a sibling at a time when they are attempting to separate emotionally from their parents. Thus, it could be that younger adolescents are left feeling more isolated as they feel unable to talk to their peers out of fear of being viewed as different and less able to talk to their family of origin as they are attempting to separate and become more independent. If younger adolescents do not have a safe place to discuss difficult bereavement-related emotions, it is likely that these symptoms will manifest in more physical ways such as complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or insomnia (Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Fleming & Balmer, 1996).

On the other hand, older adolescents may have developed more independence and feel more competent in their sense of personal identity. These adolescents have created more intimate relationships with peers and may therefore feel more confident and comfortable sharing bereavement-related distress among friends. Additionally, more mature development and higher cognitive functioning (including greater ability for abstract thinking) may lead to an increase in psychological distress symptoms reported by older adolescents, as they have a greater grasp on the understanding of death and the potential impacts it will have on their lives. Later adolescents may also face struggles related to the developmental conflict of closeness versus distance. As they are preparing to leave home and become more independent, they may struggle with who will take care of their parents when they are gone (Deveau, 1990; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Fleming & Balmer, 1996).

Long term grief reactions of sibling loss in adolescence. Although researchers suggest that losing a sibling in adolescence is a particularly difficult time to experience loss, and it likely has long term repercussions, there is little empirical research to support these claims (Davies, 1991; White, 2006). Bereaved siblings often describe feeling “forever changed” as their experience of loss continues to impact them for the rest of their lives (White, 2006). Many researchers have alluded to the enduring effects of losing a sibling, particularly during the transitional time of adolescence (Balk, 1983; Davies, 1991; Silver & Wortman, 1980).

Davies (1991) conducted a qualitative interview study with 12 adults who lost a sibling in early adolescence in order to further explore the potential long-term effects of losing a sister or brother during that time. Findings suggested that many of the long term effects of losing a sibling during adolescence were positive for a majority of the participants (75%) and were categorized as psychological growth. Participants reported that many of the long-term effects included a change in perspective by realizing the fragility of life, the ability to face death and to be more supportive and compassionate of others who are going through that process, and a greater understanding about the meaning of life. The siblings reported a true understanding that life is a gift and each moment should be treasured. Participants attributed these changes specifically to the loss of a sibling in adolescence.

Davies (1991) also found some less than favorable long term effects related to losing a sibling in adolescence. All of the participants reported a sense of feeling different from others both after the death and continuing up to the present, which for most appeared more problematic when they were adolescents. Interestingly, while all of the

siblings reported feeling different than their peers, the ones who reported withdrawing and isolating themselves from peers following the death are the participants (25%) who reported later problems of sadness and depression which they attributed to the loss. Although the other siblings reported some isolating behaviors due to feeling different, they all reported having at least one friend who they felt they could confide in. Davies reported that the participants who reported long term effects of sadness and depression reported eventually seeking psychological help for their difficulties. The author hypothesized that these siblings experienced normal grief reactions of sadness and loneliness, and this, combined with their views of being different, caused them to isolate themselves during an important developmental time where forming new intimate relationships and learning social roles is a developmental task. Thus, their feelings of loneliness, isolation, and sadness became lasting.

Martinson (1991) conducted a qualitative study wherein semi-structured interviews were done with 31 adolescents 7 to 9 years after the death of a sister or brother from cancer in order to explore, in part, the long term effects of sibling death on the surviving siblings. Similar to previous findings (Davies, 1991), Martinson found most siblings reported personal psychological growth or family growth from the experience. In particular, a supportive family environment characterized by increased communication and safety to talk about the loss were associated with a more positive outlook for surviving siblings. However, Martinson also found that about 17% of the sample reported lasting negative effects resulting from the death of their sibling. Those who reported lasting negative effects described past and current difficulty discussing the loss of their sibling. Additionally, withdrawal from family and friends and a perceived inability to rely

on the family for emotional support were more associated with those participants who reported continued negative effects from the loss.

In attempts to further explore the long term effects of losing a sibling, Davies (1995) used the qualitative method of content analysis in order to code interviews with bereaved siblings from two different data sets. The first data set included interviews with 71 siblings who experienced the death of a brother from cancer between the ages of 3 and 16 years old. These siblings were interviewed multiple times over the course of the study up until 7 to 9 years after the death. The second data set included interviews with 25 siblings who lost a brother or sister in childhood or adolescence from various causes. Findings from the study suggested several lasting effects among surviving siblings years after the death. In particular, adult siblings continued to view the loss of their sibling as a critical event that continued to shape the person they had become.

For example, all of the participants reported that they continued to think about their sister or brother, sometimes daily (Davies, 1995). Participants reported several triggers in particular that brought back memories of the deceased siblings, including pictures, funerals, birthdays, or other important milestones. In line with previous findings (Davies, 1991), Davies (1995) found that many siblings reported that the experience of losing a brother or sister made them 'feel different' and many reported this was a feeling that continued into adulthood. For many, it was a sense that no one could really understand what they had been through with regard to the loss. Nearly all of the siblings interviewed reported feeling alone and this sense of loneliness was something that continued into adulthood for many surviving siblings, often reoccurring during stressful, important, or memorable times where the awareness of a missing sibling is intensified.

Many surviving siblings reported feeling deficits in self-concept reflected in the feeling that they 'weren't enough.' Some felt as if they could never compare to their sister or brother who died or felt a sense of guilt for having survived. Many siblings described feeling invisible as the deep grief of their caretakers may have prevented the emotional support they needed at the time to cope with the loss. All of the siblings interviewed reported continued thoughts about how life may be different had the death not occurred. As they continued to grow and change, they thought about who their sibling would be now or what he or she would be doing. Also, similar to previous findings (Davies, 1991; Martinson, 1991), Davies (1995) found that siblings reported experiencing personal growth as result of having lost their sibling. Many reported realizing the fragility and preciousness of life and a desire to help other individuals who are coping with death or difficult experiences. Most participants, even those who continued to experience lasting negative effects, were able to speak to some of the ways in which they had grown from the experience of loss.

Overall, it is clear that bereaved adolescents experience a variety of symptoms after the death of brother or sister. Bereaved siblings experience multiple psychological symptoms, commonly including anger, guilt, depression and anxiety (Balk, 1983). Additionally, evidence suggests that bereaved adolescent siblings may avoid discussing their grief with others or expressing powerful emotions (Christ, 2000) which could be seen as attempts to protect their parents, fit in with their friends, or control powerful emotions. Bereaved adolescent siblings also experience a variety of behavioral symptoms of grief, including isolation or withdrawal (Davies, 1991; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991; Shipkey, 2008). Grief symptoms can also manifest in physiological ways in bereaved

adolescents, causing increased complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or insomnia (Balmer, 1992). It is evident that losing a sibling in adolescence is a traumatic experience that disrupts the normal lives of surviving siblings and their families. Despite the information about the uniqueness of the sibling bond, and the enduring impact of adolescent sibling bereavement, not much research looks at the long term impacts of losing a brother or sister in adolescence (Moser et al., 2005). Additionally, although there are many negative symptoms of grief, it appears that sibling bereaved adolescents also exhibit some positive responses to loss (Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Davies, 1991; McCown & Davies, 1995; Packman et al., 2006).

Resilient grief reactions. Although the detrimental effects of adolescent sibling bereavement are evident and abundant, much research supports the idea that losing a sister or brother in adolescence also leads to a unique potential for psychological growth or the experience of some positive responses to the loss (Goldblatt, 2011). For example, many bereaved siblings report having an increased sense of maturity (Balk, 1983; Forward & Garlie, 2003; Foster et al., 2012; Packman et al., 2006), hold higher moral values (Balk, 1983; Packman et al., 2006), and have an increased sense of resourcefulness indicated by knowing how to seek out support when needed (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994) or coming up with creative ways of coping with grief (Goldblatt, 2011).

Many sibling bereaved adolescents reported changes in life perspectives as a result of the loss. For example, many surviving siblings reported a greater appreciation for life and not taking things for granted (Foster et al., 2012) and realizing the value of living life to the fullest (Forward & Garlie, 2003). Many surviving siblings identified an overall increase in confidence regarding their ability to handle life difficulties or to cope

with adversity as one positive change that occurred following the death of their sibling (Balk, 1983; Packman et al., 2006). In general, surviving adolescent siblings felt more comfortable with death (Davies, 1991; McCown & Davies, 1995) and indicated an increased sense of compassion and willingness to help others going through difficult experiences (Davies, 1999; Foster et al., 2012).

Additionally, Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) suggested that the death of a sibling during adolescence may serve as a catalyst for surviving siblings to think more about meaning and purpose in life. It appears that the experience of loss may lead to many changed perspectives regarding how the adolescent had previously thought about himself or herself, other, and life and death. Accordingly, some researchers have begun to explore important meaning making processes and outcomes among sibling bereaved adolescents. Prior to a review of the literature that more specifically addresses issues of adolescent sibling loss within the context of meaning making, some important factors that may affect reactions to sibling loss during this time will be reviewed.

Variables that May Impact the Effects of Adolescent Sibling Loss

It appears that certain factors or variables may impact adolescent sibling bereavement. Some of these variables may have a buffering effect, serving to lessen the intensity of grief symptoms whereas others may have an exacerbating, effect serving to intensify or compound grief symptoms. For example, many researchers have purported age and gender-related differences with regard to adolescent sibling bereavement (Balk, 1983; Balmer, 1992; Fleming & Balmer, 1996; Raphael, 1983). Raphael (1983) reported that male adolescents more often responded to loss in aggressive ways, often testing authority figures. Additionally, males were found more likely to use drugs and alcohol in

attempts to cope with loss. On the other hand, female adolescents were more likely to seek out social support and places to share emotional reactions to the loss. Balmer (1992) also suggested that gender served as a predictor variable in measuring grief-related outcomes, where females were likely to show decreased levels of self esteem, higher levels of anxiety, and increased insomnia when compared to adolescent males.

Age-related differences with regard to sibling loss in adolescence, as previously reported, have also been found with older adolescents experiencing more psychological symptoms of grief and younger adolescents reporting more physiological manifestations (Balmer, 1992). From a developmental perspective, age and gender-related differences in grief-related adjustment would make sense. The adolescent's ability to understand death would certainly be influenced by the normative developmental stage and developmental tasks she or he was currently facing. However, when bereaved adolescents are studied, researchers often consider them a homogeneous sample and therefore do not attempt to find any within-group differences, leading to a paucity of research in this area (Fleming & Balmer, 1996; Stephenson, 1986).

Culture has long been recognized as an important variable affecting the processes of bereavement, grief, and mourning (Lopez, 2011; Parkes, Laungani, & Young, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1993). However, there has been much less attention to how the variables of culture, race, and ethnicity impact the grief experience in adolescence (Lopez, 2011). Suarez and McFeaters (2000) explained the importance for counselors and other mental health professionals to understand and be aware of how culture can impact the adolescent grief experience. Further, Walter and McCoyd (2009) suggested the importance of understanding culture as it impacts one's grief. In particular, the authors argued that how

grief is expressed and exhibited is often defined by the culture in which one lives. In general, culture is recognized as an important factor impacting grief reactions; however it has been less studied among the bereaved adolescent population.

In 1994, Hogan and DeSantis explored variables that affected grief-related responses to sibling loss in a community based sample of 140 bereaved adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 years who lost a sister or brother approximately two and a half years prior to the interviews. The researchers coded interviews concerning what helped and hindered the adolescents' ability to cope with the death of their siblings and came up with some general themes through content analysis. Hogan and DeSantis suggested that one's self was something that both helped and hindered post-loss adjustment in bereaved adolescents. In many ways, similar to findings from Stephenson (1986), it appears that Hogan and DeSantis (1994) were suggesting that the adolescent's personality or emotional makeup impacted how he or she responded to the loss. Thus, those who reported stronger beliefs systems, increased abilities to cope, and finding safe places for emotional expression found those to be helpful variables with regard to post-loss grief reactions. However, those who reported intensive, intrusive feelings of guilt and loneliness with a perceived sense of helplessness reported the sense of self as a factor that hindered their ability to cope with loss (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994).

Hogan and DeSantis (1994) further contended that family environment was another variable that impacted the effects of adolescent sibling bereavement. The family environment was defined as parents, other siblings, and extended family, and it was viewed as a variable that was helpful in post-loss adjustment when it was characterized by a sense of understanding and validation where adolescents felt safe to share stories and

memories of their deceased brother or sister. On the other hand, when the family environment was typified by fighting or inability to communicate about the death, it was viewed as a variable that hindered the ability of adolescents to grieve. Several surviving siblings (19%) reported feeling silenced about the loss due to a lack of emotional availability on the part of their parents whose grief and distress was preventing them from being more supportive. Other research supports the variable of family environment as a mediating variable in adjustment to loss within the adolescent population (Balk, 1981; Balmer, 1992; Fleming & Balmer, 1996). Fleming and Balmer (1996) contended that family environments characterized by low conflict, increased cohesiveness, and ability to communicate aid in post-loss adjustment for bereaved adolescents.

Peer relationships are another variable that have been shown to aid adolescents in coping after the death of a sibling (Balmer, 1992; Hogan & DeSantis, 1994). In particular, friend relationships that are characterized by the friend always and unconditionally 'being there' for support when needed are found to be most helpful. Friendships that were viewed as flexible with a freedom to discuss the deceased or remember stories related to the loss were viewed as helpful to sibling bereaved adolescents (Balmer, 1992; Hogan & DeSantis, 1994).

Hogan and DeSantis (1994) defined social support systems as another factor impacting adolescent coping after the death of a sister or brother. Social systems or networks included mental health professionals, church leaders/groups, and grief support groups. These social networks were viewed as helpful in the coping process when they exemplified a connection among bereaved siblings, helping them to feel less alone. However, social networks were viewed as a hindrance in the grieving process of

adolescents when they were characterized by insensitivity or by rumors or gossip about the deceased sibling's life and/or death. Additionally, social systems (such as the police, courts, attorneys) were viewed as unhelpful in the grieving process when bereaved siblings perceived a lack of justice regarding punishment for the individual responsible for their sibling's death.

Research also suggests that time since the loss is a factor impacting the effects of sibling loss on surviving adolescents (Balk, 1983; Balmer, 1992; Hogan & DeSantis, 1994; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991). Hogan and Greenfield (1991) found that although many similar grief reactions were reported by bereaved siblings at various points after the loss, the frequency and intensity of these symptoms lessened as more time passed since the death. Similarly, Hogan and DeSantis (1994) found that some bereaved siblings contended that the biggest factor that helped them grieve the loss of their brother or sister was simply having more time since the death to heal. Balmer (1992) also found that grief symptoms of depression, self esteem, and somatic complaints tended to lessen in frequency and intensity for a majority of bereaved siblings as a result of time since death. Robinson (2001) conducted a study on adult sibling grief reactions after the death of a brother or sister from AIDS. The sample consisted of 87 bereaved adult siblings who ranged in age from 28 to 57 years and a majority of the sample consisted of white females whose brother had died of AIDS. Participants experienced the death between 3 months and 11 years prior to the study. The researchers looked at time since loss and found that although grief reactions were slightly lower among those who were further out from the loss, the difference was not statistically significant, citing further evidence of enduring grief reactions in bereaved siblings. Similar to previous studies conducted with

adolescents, time appears to be a factor that influences grief reactions, but no amount of time will ever "heal" a bereaved sibling. Perhaps grief does not disappear with time, it just changes in character and presents differently.

Many researchers contend that the nature of the surviving sibling's relationship to the deceased sibling will affect the grieving process (Charles & Charles, 2006; Packman et al., 2006; Robinson, 2001; Rosen, 1986; Stephenson, 1986). For example, several researchers (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Rosen, 1986) viewed the sibling relationship as being on a continuum, ranging from fused and extremely close on one end to distant and wrought with hostility on the other end. These authors suggested that a sibling relationship that is described as falling into either one of these extremes would interfere by creating more grief-related adjustment difficulties on the part of the surviving sibling.

The study conducted by Robinson (2001) which explored adult siblings' grief reactions following the death of a sibling from AIDS had participants complete measures of demographic information, sibling attachment relationships, and grief reactions, as the study was rooted in attachment theory. Robinson viewed siblings as potential attachment figures and thus hypothesized that the varying intensity of the attachment relationship that the surviving sibling had with the deceased would affect grief reactions of the survivor. Findings suggested that most siblings characterized their attachment relationship with the bereaved sibling as intimate or congenial and none reported it as apathetic or hostile. Overall, support was found for the hypothesis that perceived level of sibling closeness was positively and significantly related to level of grief reactions. When siblings perceived a high level of closeness with the deceased sibling, they reported more intensity in their grief reactions (Robinson, 2001).

Charles and Charles (2006) agreed that siblings often serve as important attachment figures with one another and thus proposed that sibling relationships characterized by secure attachment would be linked with the most adaptive forms of coping, such as seeking social support, in bereaved siblings. The researchers conducted a quantitative study in which participants included 34 undergraduate students who ranged in age from 0 to 19 years at the time of their siblings death. Participants completed measures of attachment style, coping, grief reactions, and patterns of grief. Findings suggested that siblings with secure attachment style were more likely to use support seeking as a method of coping with the death of their sibling than those with insecure or avoidant attachment. Overall, findings appeared to support previous research that contends that the relationship (level of closeness) or attachment between siblings impacts how surviving siblings cope after the death of a sister or brother.

Additionally, many more recent studies suggested that perhaps it is not only the past relationship with the deceased sibling that impacts the effects of adolescent sibling bereavement. The researchers contended that the current relationship between the bereaved and deceased sibling as evidenced through continuing bonds, or a continued relationship with the deceased, also plays a role in the grief reactions evidenced in the bereaved adolescents (Foster et al., 2011; Hogan & DeSantis, 1994; Klass et al., 1996; Packman et al., 2006). The ideas of continuing bonds will be discussed in further detail within the context of meaning making in the following section.

Another factor that has been found to relate to adolescents' grief reactions after the loss of a sibling is cause of death. Stephenson (1986) explained how different types of deaths would differentially impact the grief of surviving siblings. For example, when a

sibling dies of natural causes, such as terminal illness, surviving siblings may feel neglected or abandoned by their parents both during the course of the illness as the ill sibling requires intense emotional and physical demands, and after the death. Accordingly, Sloper (2000) conducted a needs assessment of siblings of children with cancer and found that many siblings reported multiple and varied losses as a result of the illness diagnosis. For example, these siblings reported necessary (unwanted) changes in family routines, a loss of security, and a loss of friendship with the ill sibling. These siblings also reported a loss of attention from their parents who spent a majority of their time caring for the ill child. Most of these losses reported in the early months after the diagnosis tended to decrease within the first 18 months after the diagnosis. Siblings in this study also reported some positive changes to come from the cancer diagnosis, including an increased sense of closeness with family and an increased sense of maturity and compassion for others.

Bonanno and Kaltman (1999) contended that evidence supports the idea in overall bereavement that cause of death is a factor that impacts grief reactions of bereaved individuals. More specifically, the authors summarized findings from previous studies which suggested that traumatic losses, which they defined as those resulting from violence (such as homicide, suicide, and accidents), were more likely to lead to trauma symptoms similar to that of PTSD. Additionally, Bonanno and Kaltman (1999) found that not only are violent losses more likely to lead to trauma symptoms in bereaved individuals, but that individuals who experienced a violent loss reported increased intensity of depressive symptoms that endured over a much longer period of time (25 months). This finding suggested that traumatically bereaved individuals may be at

heightened risk for trauma symptoms as well as normal symptoms of grief, in addition to an increased risk of enduring or lasting symptoms. On the other hand, participants who experienced the loss of a loved one by natural causes reported symptoms of depression that decreased over time.

Lohan and Murphy (2001-2002) attempted to further explore the impact of traumatic or violent losses on one's responses to loss within the adolescent (age 10-19), sibling bereaved population. It appears that traumatically bereaved adolescents are less studied than are naturally bereaved adolescents. Similar to previous research (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999), bereaved adolescent siblings showed enduring grief reactions and behavioral changes up to two years post-loss, lending further support to the theory that traumatic bereavement may lead to heightened and enduring symptoms of normal grief reactions. However, a limitation of this study could be that grief responses were measured and assessed by parents of the bereaved siblings rather than the siblings themselves. Parents who are experiencing their own grief reactions may not have good insight into the grief of their children.

Cohen and Mannarino (2004) reviewed childhood traumatic grief (CTG), which they defined as "a condition in which a child or adolescent has lost a loved one in circumstances that are objectively or subjectively traumatic and in which trauma symptoms impinge on the child's ability to negotiate the normal grieving process" (p. 819). The researchers contended that the use of the term child referred to both children and adolescents. Symptoms of CTG were reported to be similar to symptoms of PTSD, including re-experiencing the traumatic death, avoidance of reminder of the deceased loved one or of the death, and other symptoms of hyperarousal, including irritability,

sleep disturbances, decreased concentration, and hypervigilance. The authors suggested that CTG usually developed in response to a loss that was objectively traumatic or violent; however, it is considered a non-normative response to loss. Although adolescents who experience traumatic losses are likely to display more symptoms of PTSD, meeting full criteria for CTG is less common.

Dowdney (2005) agreed that cause of death is a factor that influences adolescent sibling bereavement reactions. The author contended that adolescents bereaved by suicide or murder are at an increased risk of reporting more internalized symptoms of grief at the level of clinical severity. Additionally, these adolescents are more likely to indicate trauma symptoms as a result of the loss, including citing more enduring feelings of guilt, shame and anger. Dowdney further differentiated traumatic grief from PTSD, reporting that PTSD often involves trauma symptoms that are brought on by triggers whereas traumatic grief involves persistent trauma symptoms that are enduring for longer periods of time. Additionally, the author suggested that emotional numbing, isolation, and withdrawal are symptoms often stemming from experiencing the increased distress of trauma symptoms over a period of time.

Overall, it appears that many factors may impact the effects of adolescent sibling loss, including age, developmental stage, gender, culture, personality, family environment, relationship to deceased, and cause of death. Additionally, it seems that cause of death is also may be an important factor affecting the meaning making processes of bereaved individuals. Many researchers suggest that being bereaved through a violent or traumatic loss leads to shattered worldviews in bereaved individuals, causing them to challenge previously held beliefs about themselves and the world (Armour, 2003;

Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Neimeyer, 2006). Meaning making processes in these individuals may be hindered by an inability to make sense out of the death. Adolescent sibling loss will be further discussed within the context of meaning making in the subsequent section.

Sibling Loss and Meaning Making

As the research in the area of sibling bereavement has continued to grow, additional studies citing long term effects of losing a sibling began to appear in addition to the studies looking at more immediate effects of loss (Davies, 1999). As such, it seems there is ample evidence that losing a sibling is a life event which may lead to multiple physiological, behavioral, and psychological symptoms. There is also ample evidence to suggest that meaning making plays a major role in post-loss adjustment to bereavement (Neimeyer, 2001b). However, there is little research looking at the meaning making processes and outcomes of bereaved siblings. Based on the uniqueness of the sibling relationship, it seems especially relevant to explore meaning making processes among bereaved siblings.

In a general sense, it would seem that outcomes of meaning making such as benefit finding, posttraumatic growth, or identity change have been explored to an extent by various researchers. For example, bereavement outcomes specific to sibling bereavement have been identified and cited as changes in maturity (Armour, 2003; Balk, 1983; Richards, 2001), changes in self-esteem, self-concept, or self-worth (Balk, 1988; Balmer, 1992; Birenbaum, 2000; Davies, 1995; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991; Richards, 2001), and personal growth (Davies, 1991; 1995; 1999; Martinson, 1991). However, these outcome variables are not always conceptualized in terms of meaning making and

they are often not explored within the context of meaning reconstruction theory. This makes it hard to compare studies of meaning making in sibling grief. Additionally, it would seem that important meaning making processes are less often studied than outcomes.

Meaning making has been somewhat explored within the bereaved sibling population through exploring meaning conceptualized as religion or spirituality (Balk, 1991; Balk & Hogan, 1995; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999). It seems that aspects of meaning making have also been addressed in terms of continuing bonds or exploration of the bereaved siblings continued emotional connection with the deceased (Packman et al., 2006). Some of the research that has been done in this area has tended to focus on creating sibling specific models of grief, which have often emphasized the importance of meaning as a central construct of the proposed theory (Forward & Garlie, 2003). However, there is little follow up research testing the efficacy of the various models of sibling bereavement.

Meaning Making in Terms of Religion/Spirituality

As in previous research presented on the sense making component of meaning making, some researchers suggest that religion or spirituality is one common way in which bereaved adolescent siblings attempt to make meaning after the death of a brother or sister (Balk, 1991; Balk & Hogan, 1995; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999). For example, Balk (1983) conducted interviews with 33 adolescents who had lost a sister or brother approximately 23 months prior to the research. Questions were asked of participants about how they felt at the time of their sibling's death and about how they felt currently. Among other things, the researcher explored the role that religion played in post-loss

adjustment. Many siblings (58%) reported that they initially saw religion as something helpful after the death. However, approximately 42% reported that they did not find religion helpful and in fact felt angry and confused about religion after the death. Balk's report stated that many siblings stated that "the death had shattered their belief in a fair, orderly universe" (p. 16). However, particularly as more time had passed since the loss, approximately 82% of the participants reported that religion helped them accept the reality of the death. These siblings reported trusting in the plan of a higher power and feeling as if religion gave them more meaningful answers about life and death after the loss.

As an extension of earlier findings, Balk (1991) set out to further explore the role that religion plays in adolescents' adjustment to the death of a sister or brother. Participants included 42 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 19 years. All of the participants were white and 60% were female. About 52% of the siblings reported being Protestant, 43% Roman Catholic, and 5% not connected with a religious institution. The siblings were interviewed in depth anywhere between 4 and 84 months after the loss. The participants lost siblings to accidents (60%), illness (30%), and homicide or suicide (10%). Overall, religion appeared to become more important for many adolescents after the death of their sibling and many (~80%) reported using religion to help them cope with the loss at the time of the interview. Balk noted some differences in post-loss bereavement symptoms between those who valued religion in their lives and those who did not. For example, religious adolescents were more likely to report feeling confused and a sense that their grief symptoms would never go away. On the other hand, non-religious adolescents were more likely to report feeling numb, scared, and depressed.

When attempting to assess whether symptoms of grief lessened in intensity over time, Balk found that the religious group of adolescents was more likely to report less intense grief reactions two to three years after the death than the non-religious adolescents. Balk suggested religion is one avenue through which bereaved siblings attempt to find some sort of meaning or significance as for as why their sibling died. Further, Balk hypothesized that perhaps development or increased valuing of religious beliefs is actually brought on through the process of grieving. Perhaps increased religious understanding is a form of personal growth brought about as a result of the loss experience.

Although the above studies have looked at religion as more of a coping response, Balk and Hogan (1995) also explored the concept of spirituality conceptualized as “the possible changes in understanding the meaning of existence that death and bereavement can elicit during adolescence” (p. 63). The authors referenced the work of Fowler who coined the term faith consciousness, which is seen as one outcome in the search for meaning that becomes possible in late adolescence as teenagers are able to engage in higher order levels of cognitive functioning, such as formal operational thinking. Balk and Hogan went on to suggest that the evidence to support these contended changes in understanding the meaning of existence could be found in studies of ongoing attachment, or continuing bonds between the bereaved and deceased. The authors cited studies of continuing bonds (often in samples of bereaved parents) in which these enduring relationships between the bereaved and deceased were characterized by some intense spiritual dimensions. The concept of continuing bonds as related to meaning making in siblings will be further addressed in the following section.

Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) studied adolescent sibling bereavement and spiritual development. The authors suggested that cognitive capacity during the adolescent stage of development serves a unique function and perhaps expands the ability of bereaved siblings to challenge previously held beliefs and assumptions and to search for new meaning as a response to the death of their sister or brother. Within the Batten and Oltjenbruns study, meaning was conceptualized as spirituality, which the authors defined as “the human quest to understand life’s meaning” (p. 530). Of import, the authors contended, is understanding grief in the context of normative developmental stages. Adolescents are beginning to think more abstractly and are more likely to view death as a process rather than an event. Adolescents will be more likely to ask questions related to their own values and beliefs as they begin to consider the meaning in life.

Based on these assumptions, Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) conducted a qualitative exploratory study based on interviews with four bereaved siblings between the ages of 15 and 18 years who lost a sister or brother within the two years prior to the study. Two siblings in the study were bereaved through car accidents and the other two siblings were bereaved through suicide. Grounded theory analysis of the interviews revealed that bereaved sibling adolescents used multiple meaning making strategies in an attempt to understand the meaning of life. Data were categorized into six important themes or meaning making strategies used by participants, including: (a) changed perspective of self as evidenced by an increased sense of maturity and different ways of thinking, (b) changed perspective of others represented by an increased valuing of others and a realization of the fragility of life, (c) changed perspective of the sibling relationship as reported through an ongoing ‘sense of presence’ or emotional bond with the deceased

sibling, (d) changed perspective of life as evidenced by reports that much seems trivial next to death and a commitment to not take things for granted, (e) changed perspective of death as reported by more mature understandings of death and more ability to think about the possibilities of life after death, and (f) changed perspective of a higher power where some participants reported anger at god and turning away from religion whereas others reported a stronger sense of faith and turning to god for support after the loss. In general, the death of a sibling was seen as a catalyst for these adolescents to begin to think more about the meaning of life. The death of a sibling caused many changed perspectives regarding the way these adolescents had previously thought about themselves and others, as well as issues of life and death. Through these meaning making processes, siblings began to change and redefine their previously held roles and identities in order to fit within their new views of the world and of themselves.

Overall, several studies support the idea that religion or spirituality is an important way in which bereaved siblings attempt to cope with the loss of their sister or brother (Balk, 1983; 1991). Other researchers have explored the more existential idea of increased spirituality, or a deeper understanding of life and death, which may be brought on by loss in adolescence (Balk & Hogan, 1995; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999). However, it is important to note that a limitation of these studies may be the homogeneity of the samples, particularly that a majority of participants were mostly white, mostly middle class, and mostly Christian. Additionally, it appears that in many cases, religion was assessed through a single response item, such as asking a bereaved adolescent what role religion or spirituality played after the loss. Further, more in-depth studies regarding the role of religion/spirituality in adolescent sibling loss would be beneficial, especially if

more participants of varying religious/spiritual beliefs could be included.

Meaning Making in Terms of Continuing Bonds

One common element in the new wave of grief theory is the shift in the perspective of continuing bonds, or a continued emotional connection or “relationship” with the deceased. Where a past goal of successful mourning was to relinquish ties with the deceased, a new understanding allows for and even promotes maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased individual in various ways (Silverman & Klass, 1996). Silverman and Klass suggested the importance of viewing bereavement as both a cognitive and emotional process that occurs within a social context wherein:

The process does not end, but in different ways bereavement affects the mourner for the rest of his or her life. People are changed by the experience; they do not get over it, and part of the change is a transformed but continuing relationship with the deceased. (p. 19)

Therefore, one important way in which the meaning of the loss is negotiated over time for the bereaved individual is through the idea of continuing bonds.

Although the concept of continuing bonds has been increasingly explored by researchers in the area of grief and bereavement, considerably less attention has been given to continuing connections among bereaved siblings. Hogan and DeSantis (1992) were among the first to examine the concept in bereaved adolescent siblings. In this study, qualitative data were collected from a community sample of 157 bereaved adolescent siblings. In order to further investigate the idea of continuing bonds, participants were asked to write about what they would ask or tell their brother or sister who died. Content analysis was used and the central construct that emerged from the data

was the idea of an “ongoing attachment” as evidenced by six categories found from participant responses: (a) regretting, which included wishing the relationship would have been different or missing life with the deceased and hoping for a continued relationship; (b) endeavoring to understand, which included the search to understand why the sibling died; (c) catching up, which involved a desire to let the deceased sibling know how they are doing as well as asking the bereaved sibling what the afterlife was like; (d) reaffirming, which incorporated the personal significance of a perceived continued relationship with the deceased in which the bereaved will always love, miss, and remember them; (e) influencing, which concerned seeking advice from the deceased sibling, living life in a way that would make the deceased proud, and honoring the deceased sibling through positive, meaningful actions; and (f) reuniting, which involved the anticipation that one would be reunited with one’s deceased sibling in the afterlife. Taken together, the authors argued, these findings suggest the importance of a continuing bond between bereaved siblings even when physically separated by death.

Davies (1999) further highlighted the concept of continuing bonds in her study of the long term effects of bereaved siblings. Davies suggested that it is important for bereaved siblings to maintain connections with the deceased sibling even years after the death. Through data analysis of a series of interviews with bereaved siblings, the author proposed various ways in which bereaved siblings work to maintain a continuing bond with the deceased sibling, including: thinking about them often, looking at pictures, physical mementos from deceased, talking to the deceased, praying to the deceased, or just having a general sense that their bereaved sibling is there with them, looking out for them. In fact, as many bereaved siblings get older and enter into new developmental

stages or experience life transitions or events they may have a new or stronger desire to explore a continued relationship with their deceased sibling (Davies, 1999).

Echoing similar findings regarding making meaning through a continued relationship with the deceased, Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) found one way in which sibling bereaved adolescents made meaning after the death of a sister or brother is through a changed perspective on their relationship with the deceased sibling. Many siblings in the study expressed the importance of an ongoing bond with the deceased sibling through a continued, though changed relationship. Bereaved siblings reported sensing, feeling, and experiencing a continuing connection with the deceased, even though the deceased was no longer physically present. Many participants expressed feeling as if a part of their deceased sibling was always with them, watching over them, and comforting them. Additionally, siblings described feeling as if the memory of their deceased sibling will live on because of the great things their sibling did and the good qualities they held.

Packman et al. (2006) discussed the importance of maintaining a continued (though changed) emotional relationship with the deceased sibling. The authors argued that an ongoing relationship between the bereaved and deceased sibling can help the survivors accept their brother or sister's death and find a sense of meaning in their loss. Forming or reconstructing this new relationship with the deceased sibling aids in meaning making efforts by helping siblings redefine their life after the loss and find a new understanding or a new sense of purpose in life. The authors believed that a continuing bond should be promoted with the deceased through understanding, acceptance, permission, shared memories, ongoing communication, and encouragement. Bereaved

siblings can 'go on' with their lives while at the same time having a continued connection with the deceased sibling. This continuing connection the bereaved sibling feels may change, develop, decrease, or increase over time depending on multiple variables, including family environment, age, and developmental stage of the surviving sibling.

Foster et al. (2011) compared how bereaved parents and siblings experienced the phenomenon of continuing bonds after a child's death from cancer. The research was a part of an ongoing longitudinal study following families after the death of a child from cancer. Participants included 41 bereaved families made up of 36 mothers, 24 fathers, and 39 siblings. Sibling participants were mostly white (72%) and female (64%) with an average age of 12.28 years. Participants were interviewed relating to the loss 6 to 19 months after the death. After intensive content analysis and member checks, overall findings suggested that both bereaved parents and siblings engaged in purposeful reminders of the deceased, both experienced some non-intentional reminders of the deceased, and both found the effects of the continuing bond comforting and, for a minority, discomfoting.

More specifically, Foster et al. (2011) found that choosing purposeful reminders of the deceased in order to maintain a sense of continuing connection was something done by 97% of all participants. Nine categories of purposeful reminders or ways in which the bereaved individuals attempted to connect with the deceased emerged from the data, including: (a) viewing visual representations of the deceased such as photographs or videos (endorsed by 53% of bereaved mothers, 50% of bereaved fathers, and 28% of bereaved siblings); (b) communicating to the deceased through talking out loud or silently, writing, or praying (reported by 58% of mothers, 33% of fathers, and 18% of

siblings); (c) being with the deceased child's belongings such as clothes, toys, or jewelry (endorsed by 44% of siblings, 33% of mothers, and 29% of fathers); (d) thinking about the deceased in the past (memories) and in the present (what he or she might be like now if alive and current spiritual existence) (reported by 47% of mothers, 42% of fathers, and 15% of siblings); (e) visiting places important or special to the deceased (endorsed by 33% of fathers, 22% of mothers, and 18% of siblings); (f) participating in activities to honor the deceased, such as fundraisers or memorial events (reported by 29% of fathers, 25% of mothers, and 13% of siblings); (g) doing activities the deceased would have liked (endorsed by 36% of bereaved mothers, 8% of bereaved siblings, and no fathers); (h) visiting cemeteries or other memorialized places (reported by 29% of fathers, 17% of mothers, and 5% of siblings); and (i) a few parents (3% of mother and fathers) reported keeping the ashes of the deceased.

On the other hand, non-purposeful, involuntary reminders of the deceased that occurred unexpectedly was a phenomenon that Foster et al. (2011) concluded was only reported by 14% of all participants, including 22% of mothers, 13% of fathers, and 8% of siblings. These were reported as more unconscious feelings of connection to the deceased such as a sense that the deceased was present or intense dreams about the deceased. Overall, 86% of mothers, 63% of fathers, and 28% of siblings found the continuing bond behaviors with the deceased comforting, positive, and helpful in their grieving process. However, fewer participants (19% of mothers, 8% of fathers, and 3% of siblings) found the idea of a continued relationship with the deceased discomfoting as reminders of the deceased were difficult and sad for them.

In general, Foster et al. (2011) found a majority of participants maintained

continuing connections with the deceased family member through continuing emotional bonds. Significant differences were found between bereaved mothers and bereaved siblings, wherein mothers were more likely to communicate with the deceased, think about the deceased, and engage in activities the deceased child liked more than the surviving siblings. The authors hypothesized that these differences could be rooted in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) due to the fact that the mother-child bond is more likely based on a *caregiving behavioral system* and the sibling bond is more likely based on an *attachment behavioral system*. Additionally, the bereaved siblings in the study had an average age falling in the early adolescent developmental stage, so it is not surprising that many of these siblings endorsed continuing connections with the deceased in less frequent and more concrete ways than adults, such as holding on to special items of the deceased sibling.

Overall, there appears to be evidence that many bereaved individuals engage in meaning making attempts through a continued relationship with the deceased. However, there is a lack of research on continuing bonds within sibling relationships in particular. Additionally, the fact that a small percentage of bereaved participants reported discomforting effects from the continuing bond with the deceased (Foster et al., 2011), which is a finding supported in other continuing bonds research, is suggestive that more research should be done in order to further explore both the positive and negative outcomes of maintaining continuing bonds. Further, research that explores the relationship between continuing bonds and meaning making in bereaved siblings would be beneficial.

Sibling Specific Models of Grief

As stated previously, nearly 2 million children and adolescents under the age of 18 will become bereaved siblings each year in the United States (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996). Additionally, much evidence suggests that adolescence is a particularly difficult time to experience the death of a loved one due to the many normative developmental tasks, changes, and transitions experienced during that time period, including attempts to define oneself. Siblings are said to play an important role in identity formation, particularly in adolescence, so the death of a brother or sister can have effects on the development of the surviving sibling (Davies, 1999; Fanos, 1996; Forward & Garlie, 2003; Hogan & DeSantis, 1996).

Additionally, Balk (1996) cited evidence that the death rates increase from early to late adolescence and the majority of deaths during this time period are caused by accidents, homicides, and suicides. This is important to note because evidence in other bereaved populations (including some with siblings) suggests that deaths marked by violence are associated with more difficulties in meaning making efforts and increased risk for more intense, enduring symptoms of complicated grief. Thus, it would appear that the sibling bereaved adolescent population is at an increased risk for experiencing bereavement related complications. As such, several researchers have attempted to present theories of adolescent sibling bereavement in order to guide health care professionals, counselors, teachers, and others working with bereaved adolescents (Davies, 1999; Hogan & DeSantis, 1996; Forward & Garlie, 2003).

Hogan and DeSantis (1996) presented a theory of adolescent bereavement which was developed based on community data gathered from a national sample of 157

bereaved adolescents which included the three constructs of grief, personal growth, and ongoing attachment. Through a series of intensive data and statistical analyses six categories emerged within the grief construct. The first category is a *permanently changed reality of self and family*. Bereaved siblings reported feeling as if they were forever changed after the death of a sister or brother. Their hopes and dreams of a life that included their sibling were no longer possible and the family was changed and felt incomplete after the loss. Many adolescent siblings cited feeling as if life would never be “normal” again. The second category is *physical effects*. Many bereaved adolescent siblings reported feeling as if they were often sick after the loss. There was a sense of helplessness wherein the surviving siblings reported a general sense of not feeling well.

Within the theory proposed by Hogan and DeSantis (1996, the third category is *increased vulnerability* which was characterized by general anxiety and worry. This category is comprised of four subcategories which include *fear, guilt, depression, and isolation*. The subcategory of fear included feelings of helplessness, perceived loss of control, concerns that another loved one would die, feelings of panic, and worry about ‘going crazy’ due to intense, overwhelming feelings of grief. The subcategory of guilt, often referred to as survivor guilt in the literature, was very common among bereaved adolescent siblings. It was characterized by a sense of feeling uncomfortable when having fun or feeling happy and questioning why he or she lived when his or her sibling died. The third subcategory of depression has also been well described in the literature. This occurred when bereaved adolescent siblings had feelings of sadness and yearning when they thought about the death and missed their sister or brother. Additionally, this subcategory was characterized by sleep disturbances, including difficulty sleeping and

nightmares. Bereaved siblings often felt they had no control over their sadness and some also developed a sense of apathy toward life as they felt a sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness. The fourth subcategory of isolation has also been documented in the sibling bereavement literature. Siblings reported a deep sense of feeling alone, as if no one else could understand the depth and intensity of what they were going through. The fourth category is *cognitive interference* in which bereaved siblings had difficulty concentrating on routine tasks, as coping with intrusive thoughts and feelings related to fear, guilt, and depression required much of their cognitive attention. The fifth category is *desire for reunion with sibling* in which the pain of the loss was so intense that bereaved siblings felt as if they wanted to die so that they could be reunited with their sister or brother. The sixth category is *coping behavior*, which in this case was referring to risk-taking behaviors of bereaved adolescents such as driving too fast or using alcohol or drugs as ways to distract or escape from the pain of the loss.

Hogan and DeSantis (1996) hypothesized a trajectory of the grief construct beginning with the concept that previously held beliefs and hopes for the future are shattered by the death of a sister or brother. Bereaved siblings are left questioning meaning in life as they often feel like life just does not make sense anymore. This often brings about intense feelings of sadness, hopelessness, helplessness, and loneliness and other physical, psychological, social, and cognitive changes/symptoms of grief. Bereaved siblings feel powerless and out of control. It is in this intensity of this grief that bereaved siblings often experience what the authors term a turning point in which bereaved siblings come to two conclusions: (a) the deceased sibling is gone forever and will never return and (b) they must regain a sense of control over their lives. Once

bereaved siblings come to these realizations, grief reactions begin to lessen in severity and bereaved siblings begin the process of reconstructing their lives by reassessing values and beliefs, realizing what is important in life, and searching for the meaning in life, through a renewed hope for the future. Importantly, the authors noted that grief reactions will continue to emerge at important times in the sibling's life such as when he or she enters into a new developmental stage, important anniversary reactions, and important life events (e.g., graduations, weddings, births, deaths).

The second construct of personal growth as presented by Hogan and DeSantis (1996) is comprised of five categories. The first category is a *permanently changed reality*. The loss experience forever changes the way in which bereaved siblings view the world. Bereaved siblings report understanding the fragility and impermanence of life. They see value in others and attempt to not take things for granted. Many siblings express a sense of reevaluating their priorities and realizing what is important and valuable in life. The second category is *increased sense of others* and it is comprised of the subcategories of *attachment* to others and *sensitivity* to others. Bereaved siblings often report feeling a stronger connection to other important people including family. Additionally, they report feeling more accepting of others and more sensitive to the needs of others. Many bereaved siblings report increased feelings of understanding, compassion, and empathy toward others. It appears that the commonly cited egocentric thinking of adolescence is often replaced by ultracentric thinking after the experience of losing a sibling. This involves a greater sense of morality and an increased sense of personal responsibility for the well-being of others. The third category is *increased resiliency* with the three subcategories of *optimism*, *maturity*, and *sense of self*. Bereaved siblings feel stronger

because of all that they have overcome and they have a sense of optimism about their ability to handle future stressors. Additionally, bereaved siblings feel more mature and more confident in their ability to cope with problems that might arise in life. Bereaved siblings often feel an increased sense of competence, self-esteem, and self-worth. These siblings report feeling more tolerant, more creative, and a better person all around. The fourth category is *increased faith*. As cited in previous literature (e.g., Balk & Hogan, 1995; Batten & Oljtenbruns, 1999), bereaved adolescents often experience increased faith consciousness as they get more clarity on their own personal values and beliefs through viewing themselves and their life circumstances in relationship to their sibling's death. The fifth category is *ability to receive and give help* wherein bereaved siblings feel more able to ask for support when needed and more able to provide support to others who are grieving.

Hogan and DeSantis (1996) further hypothesized the trajectory of personal growth in adolescent bereaved siblings. The authors contended that prior to the death, adolescents were in a normative stage of development characterized by egocentrism wherein they were attempting to further define and clarify their sense of personal identity by attempting to answer questions such as "Who am I?", "What is important to me?", or "What are my goals?." This was done through social developmental tasks and dependent upon relationships. After the death of a sibling, survivors realize the fragility of life as they must work to redefine their family, their social network, and their sense of self. The loss seems to bring about a shift in egocentric thinking to more ultracentric thinking as bereaved adolescents attempt to make meaning by answering new, redefined questions such as "Who am I *now* after the loss?", "What is important to me *now*?", or "What are

my goals *now*?.” The authors contended that it is this transcendence of self and others through increased resiliency, faith, and the ability to help others that leads to personal growth in bereaved adolescents.

The third construct in the model of adolescent sibling bereavement proposed by Hogan and DeSantis (1996) is *ongoing attachment*. This construct is based on the study conducted by Hogan and DeSantis (1992) and presented within the previous section on continuing bonds. To summarize, it includes the six categories of *regretting*, or wishing they had had closer relationships with the deceased, *endeavoring to understand*, in which bereaved siblings are plagued by questions of how and why regarding the death, *catching up*, in which the bereaved sibling often talks to the deceased to let them know everyone is ok, *reaffirming*, in which bereaved siblings love, miss, and feel forever connected to the deceased sibling, *influencing*, in which bereaved siblings seek guidance or reassurance from the deceased sibling, and *reuniting*, wherein bereaved siblings think about the day they will join the deceased sibling in afterlife or heaven.

According to Hogan and DeSantis (1996), ongoing attachment is a variable that mediates the constructs of grief and personal growth in a bidirectional fashion. Once bereaved siblings reach that turning point by realizing that the deceased will never come back, they can begin to take some control back by accepting that while they may never see their bereaved sibling again, they can still have an emotional connection or special relationship with them. Often, this continuing relationship is characterized by a sense of hopefulness that one day the siblings will be reunited. A continuing connection with the deceased aids in personal growth as siblings begin to redefine and reconstruct their world and their personal identity.

Hogan and DeSantis (1996) contended that their theory of adolescent sibling grief was a complex, ongoing process through which bereaved siblings searched for the meaning in life *now*, after the death, so that those who found meaning were often viewed as more resilient and those who struggled to find any meaning were viewed as more vulnerable. Based on triangulation of the data and a series of analyses, the constructs of grief and personal growth were found to be independent in nature and were understood as curvilinear (or spiral) trajectories. The authors suggested bereaved adolescents would move through grief in a variety of ways, depending on a multitude of factors, including culture, cause of death, relationship between the bereaved and deceased sibling, and individual/personality characteristics.

Davies (1999) proposed a paradigm model of sibling bereavement based on a comprehensive literature review of sibling grief and bereavement, including much of her own research. The paradigm model is not a model of cause and effect, but rather a conceptual model that attempts to link important phenomena regarding sibling loss together to create a more meaningful whole. Within this model, Davies presented four categories of sibling responses to loss using the siblings' own words: "I hurt inside." "I don't understand." "I don't belong." "I am not enough." These categories are made up of the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and long term symptoms or effects of sibling loss. For example, *I hurt inside*, is a theme that includes emotions commonly experienced in sibling grief, including sadness, fear, anger, loneliness, and guilt. It is important to remember that bereaved siblings will manifest these symptoms in various ways depending on their age and developmental level. Bereaved siblings in adolescence may cry, withdraw, act out through risk-taking behaviors, experience sleep disturbances, or

have changes in appetite. *I don't understand* is a category that is greatly influenced by the sibling's developmental level and ability to understand what the death means. Feelings of grief are overwhelming, intense, and frightening for bereaved siblings, particularly if they feel it is not something they can or should talk about. The category *I don't belong* describes how bereaved siblings often feel in the aftermath of the loss. Siblings describe feeling as if they will never be "normal" again and their families and their lives are forever changed as a result of the loss. Roles and relationships within the family shift and change along with changes in peer relationships as bereaved siblings report a sense of feeling different than other friends their age. The final theme, *I am not enough*, is representative of bereaved siblings experiencing survivor guilt. Some feel a sense of responsibility for the loss and wonder why it was not them who died. Surviving siblings may feel they are not enough to make their parents happy. These feelings can manifest behaviorally as bereaved adolescents begin overachieving in order to prove their worth or through caretaking behaviors as bereaved adolescents feel a responsibility to take care of their parents, other siblings, or peers.

Similar to previous models (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996), Davies (1999) emphasized the importance of taking context into account within a model of sibling bereavement. The author highlights situational, individual, and environmental characteristics that impact the effects of sibling bereavement. Situational characteristics include such variables as the cause and circumstances of the death or the amount of time elapsed since the death. Some individual characteristics that affect sibling grief include gender, age, personality, and coping style. Environmental characteristics that impact sibling bereavement include the pre-loss relationship between siblings, the family environment and level of family

functioning, parental grief responses, and also the larger culture and community in which the family lives. All of these contextual variables, as they are at the time of the sibling's death, have the potential to impact the effects of grief on surviving siblings and should thus be considered within a model of sibling bereavement. Within this dissertation, contextual variables will be considered, in particular, through the first of a series of interviews wherein bereaved siblings are asked about their life before the loss. This is important because it will allow for a better representation of the participants pre-loss conceptualizations of their personality, family environment, culture, and community.

Davies (1999) also proposed that a major influence on how bereaved children and adolescent siblings respond after the death of a brother or sister is related to how parents and other important adults respond and interact with them. The author argued that the responses of bereaved siblings need to be understood within the context of their age and developmental stage. Bereaved siblings need support and validation through a safe place to express their feelings. Bereaved siblings need honest information about death and dying, along with explanations of common thoughts and feelings, to help normalize sibling responses to loss. Within this model, educating parents and caregivers on how to best respond to grief and loss in surviving siblings is a major factor.

Forward and Garlie (2003) conducted a qualitative, grounded theory study in order to create a preliminary model of adolescent sibling bereavement. Participants in the study included 6 bereaved siblings, 3 of which were female and 3 male, currently between the ages of 17 and 23 years who were adolescents (13-19 years) when their sister or brother died. Of the participants, 5 were of Catholic faith and one was of Muslim faith. The authors proposed a fluid and cyclical model of adolescent sibling bereavement

characterized by a guiding desire to search for and find meaning in the aftermath of the loss. The findings illuminate some of the multiple and varied methods of meaning making unique to the sibling bereaved population. A process of searching for meaning was initiated as soon as the siblings found out about their sister or brother's death and continued on until meaning was found, or sometimes indefinitely (even if some meaning was found). Bereaved siblings searched for the meaning in the tragedy, how it fit into their lives, how they were changed because of the experience, and how they could go on living without their sibling.

Within the model proposed by Forward and Garlie (2003) which was characterized by five stages, the authors highlighted several processes through which bereaved siblings attempted to search for meaning in the loss. The first stage of the model, *finding out*, involves many feelings and emotions commonly documented in the adolescent sibling grief experience, including sadness, disbelief, shock, fear, and loneliness. Typically, this is followed by the second stage of adolescent sibling bereavement which the authors term *avoiding reality*. During this stage, many bereaved siblings reported feeling numb, as if they were in a fog just going through the motions of life. Others described avoiding reality by keeping busy with school, work, or other routine activities. Some siblings felt this gave them a sense of control when everything seemed so chaotic and out of control. Many siblings described moving into the third phase, *facing reality*, a few weeks after the death, though this is unique to each sibling. Facing reality is a key phase in which bereaved siblings focus on searching for meaning in the loss experience.

The facing reality stage of the model proposed by Forward and Garlie (2003)

includes three main components: working through the pain, loneliness, and being different. Bereaved siblings worked through the pain of the loss in various ways. Some reported talking to others who 'understood,' including peers who had also experienced a loss, while others reported using methods to escape from the pain such as drugs or alcohol. Many siblings explained that even when their parents were available and present to talk about the loss, they often did not share with parents because they felt doing so would cause their parents further pain. Bereaved siblings felt a sense of responsibility to shield their parents from further suffering because, as one adolescent reported, it already hurt and it just added to the pain to see a parent's further heartache. Siblings reported overwhelming, intense feelings of pain and while they occurred less often over time, they were still as intense when they recurred.

Another main component of the facing reality stage is the deep sense of loneliness described by many bereaved siblings (Forward & Garlie, 2003). Bereaved siblings felt alone in the sense that they would no longer share in the day to day activities and routines with their sibling. They felt a sense of loneliness for a future without their brother or sister as they discussed birthdays, holidays, and special occasions where it always felt like something was missing. To add to their isolation, bereaved siblings reported feeling as if no one could understand the unique pain of losing a sibling. In this loneliness, many bereaved siblings attempted to find some meaning through spiritual beliefs. Siblings discussed a continuing bond or connection with the deceased sibling and purposefully remembering their sibling by carrying pictures or objects of theirs or recalling fond memories (Forward & Garlie, 2003).

This stage of facing reality was also characterized by a sense of being different

(Forward & Garlie, 2003). The authors highlighted a unique paradox experienced by bereaved siblings wherein they felt profoundly different as a result of the loss, but they also had a desire to be and appear "normal." Looking back, many siblings reported changes during this stage that happened more gradually over time. Some reported having to grow up faster, taking on more responsibility, and having an increased sensitivity to their parents needs. These changes were viewed as positive (e.g., more independent) and negative (e.g., wasn't 'normal') by bereaved siblings.

Stage four in the model of adolescent sibling grief proposed by Forward and Garlie (2003) is named *turning the corner*. This stage is termed a turning point for bereaved siblings where things started to feel differently for the adolescents. The turning point stage led bereaved siblings to one of two paths: finding new meaning or ending the search. For those teens who went on the find new meaning, some talked about a specific moment in time or occasion where they realized they were going to be okay whereas others reported it more as a general feeling of having more good days than bad. For most, turning points were not recognized as such in the moment and were only later identified when reflecting on their process. Within the fifth stage, *finding new meaning* or *ending the search*, those who ended the search reported feeling as if they were "giving up." These bereaved siblings endorsed suicidal thoughts and often wished to die in order to end their intense pain.

On the other hand, those siblings who entered into the finding new meaning stage within the model presented by Forward and Garlie (2003) expressed that while the pain was still there, they had accepted the reality of the loss and found ways to go on "living within the loss" (p. 41). Important variables in this stage included accepting the pain they

would carry with them as a result of the loss, maintaining a continuing, though changed, emotional connection with the deceased in order to honor and remember them, and redefining the self as a result of lessons learned, changes accrued, and meanings made since the loss. Often, bereaved siblings were able to cite positive ways in which they redefined themselves, including a sense of feeling more capable and mature, having a greater appreciation for family and important relationships, and not taking life for granted. It is important to note that this stage does not necessarily signal the end of the process. Many will continue searching for new meanings in light of any meanings found. Additionally, it could be possible that siblings will cycle back through certain stages as they enter into new developmental phases and can comprehend the loss on a different level.

Based on the existing models of sibling bereavement, it appears that the death of a sister or brother often spurs an intense search for meaning making, sense making, or other attempts to understand the loss. Bereaved siblings experience multiple changes as a result of the loss experience and they must redefine their sense of self, their roles, and their identities which are so often intertwined with being a brother or sister. These sibling grief models appear to lend support to the contention that meaning making in the aftermath of sibling loss is an important process wherein bereaved siblings can begin to express some of their intense emotions, accept the loss as real, redefine their relationship with the deceased sibling, redefine their sense of self, and even redefine how they view the world, and bigger concepts of life and death (Batten & Ojtjenbruns, 1999; Flesner, 2013; Forward & Garlie, 2003; Packman et al., 2003).

Summary

In addition to experiencing enduring grief reactions, it appears that a life crisis, such as the death of a sibling, allows for a unique possibility for personal growth (Fanos, 1996; White, 2006). Considering the emphasis on the new wave of constructivist grief theories focusing on meaning making, there is a lack of research to lend support to the meaning making theories in bereaved siblings. Because research exists that the cause of death may create different processes or difficulties with regard to meaning making, it would make sense to conduct research with siblings who have experienced both expected and unexpected losses in order to compare similarities and differences. Additionally, if meaning making is truly a process that evolves over time and has the potential to change as individuals enter new developmental stages, it is important to understand how young adult siblings initially experienced grief as adolescents and how they continue to incorporate that grief into their life and attempt to make sense out of it.

Thus, the goals of this dissertation are in line with recommendations from the most recent Report on Bereavement and Grief Research (2004), suggesting that more research on the nature and structure of effective coping with loss, particularly through a better understanding of meaning making, would assist researchers and clinicians alike. Additionally, the report called for more nuanced understandings of the implications of loss based on who has died, including a fuller picture of sibling loss. Finally, the report recommended further research aimed at better understanding the developmental influences on the nature and implications of bereavement across the lifespan by relating critical developmental variables/characteristics/processes to developmental stage at the time of the loss and post-loss. Therefore, this dissertation will attempt to shed light on the

complex meaning making processes common among bereaved adolescent siblings. Additionally, meaning making processes and meanings made (or outcomes) will be explored retrospectively from the time of death up to the present. Meaning making processes and outcomes identified within the study will be linked with developmental stage at that time in order to view meaning making processes used by bereaved siblings within a developmental framework.

When traditional theories of grief and bereavement are used by clinicians in work with grieving clients, a heightened possibility exists that these client's feelings may be medicalized or pathologized. Grieving clients who are *told* how to grieve and educated about the stages of grief may leave therapy feeling isolated, unheard, and unvalidated. Instead, a meaning-oriented approach would emphasize that bereaved individuals who come to therapy are most likely struggling to find any meaning in the loss. Therefore, counselors who utilize this approach would see client stories and client understandings of the loss as vital. Through sharing and reconstructing these stories of loss, bereaved individuals, through the support of clinicians, can begin to make sense out of the loss event and work to create a new life story wherein one accepts the loss and works to integrate it into current life (Flesner, 2013; Neimeyer, 2001c).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Many types of qualitative research designs were reviewed before deciding a narrative analysis research design would be best for this study. While more than 40 approaches to qualitative research design have been cited in the literature, Merriam (2009) presented six of the more commonly used approaches, including ethnography, grounded theory, narrative analysis, critical qualitative research, phenomenology, and basic qualitative research. A narrative research design was chosen based on the research questions and the purpose of the study.

Research Questions

Specifically, the research questions I asked were: (a) How do young adult siblings describe their experience of losing a brother or sister in adolescence? (b) What are some of the meanings or understandings that bereaved siblings have made after the loss of their brother or sister?, and (c) How have bereaved siblings made meaning out of the loss over time, meaning what strategies have they used to try and make sense of the loss?

Study Design

A qualitative design was most appropriate since qualitative designs are commonly used to answer “how” and “why” questions. Since the primary purpose of this study was to understand how bereaved siblings make meaning regarding the death of their siblings over time, it was a good fit. I was not searching for the “truth” about how siblings experienced grief, but rather contended that each person’s experience was unique and the multiple meanings of his or her experiences of loss would be diverse. As Cresswell (2007) explained, “Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed

through interaction with others...and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (pp. 20-21). Additionally, this approach allowed me to explore themes, including similarities and differences in meaning making processes between siblings bereaved by an unexpected loss and siblings bereaved by an expected loss.

More specifically, a qualitative research design was chosen for this study because a deeper understanding of the unique process of sibling grief and meaning making is necessary so that researchers can begin to build and test proposed theories of grief as they relate to bereaved siblings through more quantitative assessments. It is not known what strategies or processes bereaved siblings use over time in order to make meaning of the loss of a sibling in adolescence. A qualitative approach provided an in-depth look at the constructed realities of how adolescently bereaved siblings described adjusting to their siblings death over time, in addition to a more nuanced understanding of how the experience of losing a sister or brother in adolescence has changed the surviving sibling as an individual. This qualitative research design allowed for greater exploration of important themes and factors common across bereaved siblings and also unique to the bereaved sibling population.

This research design was based on in-depth, narrative interviewing. Since the main aim of the study was to understand the meaning derived from one's lost sibling, narrative interviews or sibling 'stories' were relevant as the researcher sought to explore how bereaved siblings make sense out of the loss of their brother or sister over time. Interviews are supported as a strong methodological choice, especially when the research questions aim to find out more about another individual's subjective understanding. Narrative methods were used in order to let the stories of bereaved siblings be heard. The

goal was to have each participant reconstruct his or her experience of losing a sibling.

The dual interview structure that was used is based on the idea that individual behaviors, actions, and thoughts become meaningful when they are placed within the context of their lives and the lives of important others (Seidman, 2006). So, it is only through context that we can better understand the experience of what it means to lose a brother or sister.

Data analysis strategies unique to narrative analysis were used to interpret the interviews and present profiles of each participant (Seidman, 2006). Both thematic and structural forms of narrative analysis were used in order to (a) identify broad patterns and themes across sibling profiles, and (b) identify variation in meanings for individual participants (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, theory-driven analysis was used to explore how results from this study on bereaved siblings related to important, relevant theories of grief and meaning-making found in the literature.

Recruitment

In order to obtain a diverse set of participants to complete the in-depth interviews for this study, a Sibling Grief Survey (see Appendix B) was used to aid in participant selection. The Sibling Grief Survey was completed online by accessing it through the online survey software Qualtrics. Participants invited to complete the online survey included any bereaved sibling aged 18 or older. This was done intentionally in order to create a large pool of potential participants who would meet the criteria for this narrative interview study. Thus, bereaved siblings between the ages of 18 and 39, who were between 11 and 22 when their sibling died, were recruited from the Sibling Grief Survey to complete the narrative interviews.

An email was sent to a contact person representing various grief support

organizations, including the various adult sibling grief support groups, grieving siblings Facebook groups, various hospice organizations, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Bereaved Parents of the USA, Compassionate Friends, The Sibling Connection (online resource for siblings), various funeral homes which provided grief support, hospital grief support programs, and various community bereavement support programs. The email inquired if each organization would be willing to post a recruitment solicitation for this study on the organization's website, Facebook, Twitter, or other social media websites and/or if the organization would be willing to send out an email regarding the study to potentially interested participants. The email that was sent to these various organizations contained recruitment solicitations (including a link to the online survey) for websites, mass emails, and social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter. Each organization's contact person was able to choose whether and how to post or send out the solicitations. Additionally, to try and account for the potential limitation of only reaching bereaved siblings who already had or were in the process of seeking out grief support services, flyers were placed in various locations throughout the Midwestern city and surrounding areas where the research was conducted. Flyers had pull tabs for interested participants which included the link to access the online sibling grief survey.

When potential participants accessed the survey through Qualtrics, they were presented with an informed consent page. After reviewing the informed consent, participants were invited to click on a link to begin the survey which would take between 15 and 30 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the online survey, participants had the option to participate in a raffle for one of ten \$10 gift cards to a major retailer. If the participant chose to participate in the raffle, they were presented with a new link in which

an email address could be entered separate from their previous survey responses. Upon completion of the survey portion of data collection, ten participants were chosen at random to receive the gift cards. The Amazon gift cards were distributed to the ten randomly selected individuals via email in March of 2015. Additionally, once participants completed the online survey they were automatically provided with a listing of national bereavement resources.

After completion of the sibling grief survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to complete individual interviews on the topic of sibling grief. Willing participants were directed to further questions which allowed them to enter their contact information by which they could later be contacted for potential participation in this qualitative study.

Sibling Grief Survey

The Sibling Grief Survey is an assessment tool that includes a variety of demographic questions. Participants were asked to self-report their sex, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, highest level of education attained, current age, religious/spiritual beliefs, and relationship between themselves and their bereaved siblings. Additionally, participants were asked questions specific to bereavement, such as age when their sibling died, sibling's age when he/she died, sex of deceased sibling, time since sibling has died, cause of death, relationship with the deceased sibling, past counseling related to grief, and ability to make meaning out of the loss. As previously stated, participants were also asked if they would be willing to be contacted for future research on the topic of sibling grief, including whether or not they would be willing to complete a series of interviews on the topic.

There were two qualitative response items on the Sibling Grief Survey. The first question asked, “Have you found anything you might describe as positive to come as a result of the death of your sibling? Please explain.” This question was used to further explore the benefit finding component of meaning making in bereaved siblings. The second question was, “Please explain how you have attempted to make sense out of this experience of loss in your life.” This question was used to gain insight into the process of how surviving siblings begin to make meaning after the death of their brother or sister. It also allowed for selection of participants who ranged in ability to make sense out of the loss, from it being really difficult or impossible to make meaning to it being imperative and healing to make meaning.

Information from the Sibling Grief Survey was used to recruit a sample that was diverse in sex, race, ethnicity, use of religious/spiritual beliefs related to coping, and social class. This diversity allowed for a fuller picture of the central or shared experiences of this group of young adult bereaved siblings. There is some research that supports the idea of meaning making across cultures (see Chan et al., 2005; Steffen & Coyle, 2010), and it was important to include variation within the sample in race, ethnicity, and social class in order to seek out commonalities (and differences) that may exist for these bereaved siblings. Additionally, snowball sampling was used and participants were asked to share the survey (if appropriate) with other bereaved siblings who may be interested in participating in the study.

Sampling and Participants

Purposeful sampling, including maximum variation sampling and snowball sampling was used in order to obtain participants. Marshall (1996) described purposeful

sampling as the most common form of sampling in qualitative research. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select a sample based on certain criteria that are likely to provide answers to the research questions. Although any bereaved sibling aged 18 or older could take the Sibling Grief Survey, the criteria for the sample in this study included: (a) bereaved siblings currently between the ages of 18 and 39, (b) who were between the ages of 11 and 22 when their brother or sister died, and (c) at least two years must have passed since the death of their sibling. These criteria were set so that I could examine the long term impact of losing a brother or sister in adolescence (11-22) by talking with young adult siblings (18-39) about the various ways they have (or have not) been able to make meaning out of the loss over time. Additionally, since meaning making was explored as a process, it was necessary to speak with siblings who lost their brother or sister two or more years ago so that processes that evolved over time could be explored.

Maximum variation sampling helped gather participants who represented a wider range of the characteristics of interest for this study (Merriam, 2009). Participants were sought out who varied in age (between 18-39), sex, race, ethnicity, and total number of siblings. This allowed the researcher to better capture the central or shared experiences of this group of young adult bereaved siblings. There is some research that supports the idea of meaning making across cultures (see Chan et al., 2005; Steffen & Coyle, 2010), and it was important to include variation within this sample in race, ethnicity, and culture in order to seek out possible commonalities (and differences) for these bereaved siblings. The researcher inquired about culture/race/ethnicity and its role in understanding and interpreting the loss in the interviews in order to better assess the impact on the meaning

making process. Additionally, snowball sampling was used and participants were asked if they knew of other bereaved siblings who may be interested in participating in the study.

Based on previous qualitative studies in the area of grief, a sample of 6-12 participants was sought (Armour, 2003; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Begley & Quayle, 2007). According to Lee, Woo, and Mackenzie (2002), a small number of participants are needed to reach saturation in a study when multiple, in-depth interviews are being conducted with the participants because more rich data will be gathered through these interviews. Additionally, because the primary purpose in this study was to give voice to bereaved siblings, a form of multiple phenomenological, narrative, in-depth interviews were used as a way to explore what it means to be a bereaved sibling and how these bereaved siblings make meaning out of the loss over time. Morse (2000) suggested that with multiple in-depth interviews, more information is gathered from each participant, and therefore a smaller sample size is acceptable. Morse contended a sample size between 6 and 10 participants would be adequate when multiple interviews are being conducted with each person.

Based on data collected from the Sibling Grief Survey, 15 participants met all selection requirements for the present study and were initially contacted via email using the information they provided in the online survey. These 15 participants were informed that they were being contacted based on their response to a Sibling Grief Survey they had recently completed. Participants were asked if they would still be interested in completing two interviews (in-person, skype, or over the phone depending on location) with the researcher based on their experience of sibling loss. Participants were informed that they would each receive a \$20 Amazon gift card at the conclusion of the second

interview to compensate them for their voluntary participation in this research study.

Please see Table 1 below for some important comparison data between participants who took the online grief survey and those who completed the narrative interviews.

Table 1

Comparison Data between Participants who Took Sibling Grief Survey and Participants who Completed Narrative Interviews

	Sibling Grief Survey	Narrative Interviews
Participants	231 started survey ~200 completed survey	15 siblings met all criteria 7 responded to invitations
Sex	(a) Male: 19 (8%); (b) Female: 211 (91%)	(a) Male: 1 (14%); (b) Female: 6 (86%)
Race/Ethnicity	(a) Caucasian: 194 (84%); (b) Latina(o): 13 (6%); (c) African American: 6 (3%); (d) Multiracial: 5 (2%); (e) Native-American: 2 (1%); (f) Asian-American: 3 (1%); (g) Other: 7 (3%)	(a) Caucasian: 5 (71.4%); (b) Latina: 1 (14.3%); (c) Multiracial (self identified as Asian Indian/European): 1 (14.3%)
Socioeconomic status	(a) very low income: 10 (4%); (b) working class: 45 (20%); (c) middle class: 96 (42%); (d) upper middle class: 68 (30%); (e) upper class: 6 (3%); (f) other: 3 (1%)	(a) working class: 2 (28.5%); (b) middle class: 3 (43%); (c) upper middle class: 2 (28.5%)
Current age	Mean: 42 Range: 18-79	Mean: 28 Range: 19-37
Age at time of sibling death	Mean: 33 Range: 2-77	Mean: 19 Range: 12-22
Type of loss	Unexpected: 167 (74%) Expected: 60 (26%)	Unexpected: 5 (71%) Expected: 2 (29%)
Time since loss	Mean: 9 Range: <1 month-55 years	Mean: 9 Range: 3-18
Important to make meaning?	Yes: 182 (87%) No: 45 (20%)	Yes: 5 (71%) No: 2 (29%)
Attempted to make meaning?	Yes: 176 (77%) No: 53 (23%)	Yes: 6 (86%) No: 1 (14%)

Of the 15 potential participants emailed, 7 responded stating that they would be willing to complete two 45-120 minute interviews. All seven of these participants were interviewed for this study. Six of the participants were interviewed twice, as planned. However, one participant did not respond after multiple attempts to contact him after the first interview. Therefore, only data from his initial interview could be included in this

study. Also, all participants in this study had to meet the criteria outlined above.

Participants were sought out who lost a brother or sister both expectedly and unexpectedly. For the purpose of this study, expected loss occurred when the deceased sibling and people close to this person were aware that the person would die. In these cases, the surviving siblings knew that their brother or sister was going to die and were able to spend time with the sibling prior to their death. The cause of death in cases of expected loss was a medical condition or a long term illness. For the purpose of this study, unexpected loss occurred when the death was sudden, unexpected, violent, or random. The cause of death in cases of unexpected loss could include accident, homicide, suicide, or sudden/unknown illness. Readers can see below for a table detailing the ideal range of variation in participants that was expected for this study, along with the actual number of interviewed participants (found parenthetically in the table) that fit within each category.

Table 2

Participant Selection

Important Comparison Variables	Proposed Variations in Participant Selection
Type of loss	Expected (5 siblings) Unexpected (2 siblings)
Spiritual/Religious Orientation	Views spirituality/religion as important in coping with loss (5 siblings) Does not view spirituality/religion as important in coping with loss (2 siblings)
Meaning Making	Views meaning making or sense making of the loss as important (5 siblings) Does not view meaning making or sense making of the loss as important (2 siblings)
Time since loss	2-8 years (4 siblings) 9-15 years (2 siblings) 16-23 years (1 sibling)
Participant Demographic Variables	Proposed Variation in Participant Selection
Current age	18-23 years (2 siblings) 24-30 years (3 siblings)

	31-39 years (2 siblings)
Age at time of sibling death	11-14 years (1 sibling) 15-17 years (3 siblings) 18-22 years (3 siblings)
Total number of siblings (pre-loss)	1 sibling (1 sibling) 2-3 siblings (4 siblings) 4 or more siblings (2 siblings)
Sex	Male (1 sibling) Female (6 siblings)
Race/ethnicity	African American/Black (0) Hispanic-American/Latino/Chicano (1 sibling) Native-American/American Indian (0) Asian-American (0) Caucasian/European-American/White (5 siblings) Multiracial (1 sibling-self identified as Asian Indian/European)
Deceased Sibling Demographic Variables	Proposed Variation in Participant Selection
Age of deceased sibling at death	0-5 years (0) 6-10 years (1 sibling) 11-15 years (0) 16-20 years (3 siblings) 21-25 years (0) 26 years and up (3 siblings)
Deceased sibling sex	Male (4 siblings) Female (3 siblings)

Interview Procedures

Two in-depth, narrative interviews were conducted with seven participants gathered from the Sibling Grief Survey. The interviews were all conducted in private, agreed upon locations that were comfortable and familiar to the interviewees. Three of the participants were interviewed in person (at the participant's home, office, and a private room at the library). Four of the participants did not live close enough to be interviewed in person and were therefore interviewed over the phone. Each interview began with a brief introduction, including a standardized section wherein I briefly explained my interest in the research topic because I myself am a bereaved sibling who lost my sister when I was a teenager. After contemplation and review of several dissertations on this topic, I decided it would be beneficial to share that I am a bereaved

sibling in order to make participants feel more at ease with the interview and potentially more open to share. After that, I reviewed the current research project and the informed consent forms for the current project (see Appendix C for the informed consent). Those who were interviewed over the phone had already signed and returned the informed consent form prior to their first interview. Those who were interviewed in person were given time to review and sign the form before beginning the interview. All participants were given a chance to ask any questions they might have had with regard to the informed consent or the research project as a whole. At the conclusion of the first interview, each research participant received a list of resources that included both local and national grief support agencies, support groups, counselors, and help lines (see Appendix D for a list of resources given to each participant).

All of the interviews were audio recorded and may ranged in length from 54 minutes to 136 minutes, depending on how open and talkative the interviewees were. The average length of each interview was 83 minutes. Confidentiality was clearly explained to the participants in the discussion of the informed consent. Additionally, all interviewees were given pseudonyms and measures were taken to conceal their identity to readers, including disguising any potentially identifying information. All paperwork, files, and audio files were kept on a password protected computer and/or in a locked file cabinet to further ensure confidentiality. Participants were all given a copy of the informed consent forms and it was emphasized that the participant could refuse to answer any questions or make a decision to stop the interview at any point if desired.

Merriam (2009) and Riessman (2008) were consulted in order to decide which type of interviews would be most beneficial. Merriam (2009) organized types of

qualitative interviews by the amount of structure they provide. These interviews range from highly structured or standardized, to semi-structured, to unstructured or informal. An unstructured interview with open-ended questions was chosen for the first narrative interview due to the exploratory nature of the study because not much research exists in the area of sibling bereavement. In accordance with Riessman (2008), participants were viewed as equals as the interviewer worked to create a comfortable, conversational interview tone that was more interactive and collaborative.

These first interviews all began with an open-ended question that invited interviewees to tell their story related to the loss of their sibling. The intention of the initial open-ended question was to allow each interviewee to feel heard and tell the story of his or her loss and grieving process in his or her own words. Based on the story and length of response, I followed up with questions, prompts, and/or empathic responses as appropriate. A general interview guide with questions aimed at understanding the experience of bereaved siblings was used (see Appendix E for the first interview guide). However, following the methods of narrative interviewing, these questions were often altered, used out of order, or not used at all, depending on the stories told by the participants. The interviews were more conversational in tone, inviting participants to generate longer narratives (Riessman, 2008).

After completion of the first interview, participants were given prompts for optional journal writings that could be done in the 1-2 weeks before the second interview. Journal prompts were emailed to each participant that was interviewed over the phone. Optional journal writings included prompts such as, "To me, being a bereaved sibling means..." Additionally, participants were told that they could journal freely about their

experience of being a bereaved sibling. These journals were meant to serve as a way for participants to reflect on their experiences after the first interview, however, none of the participants in the study decided to complete any sort of journaling between interviews.

A semi-structured interview format was chosen for the second interviews with participants because I had some insight about the phenomenon of sibling grief and some hypotheses regarding the meaning making processes of bereaved siblings based on previous literature and analyses of the first interviews. The semi-structured, narrative interview allowed for the use of questions flexibly in order to explore issues or areas that were unclear or missed based on the first interview. This style of interview also allowed for follow-up questions, paraphrasing, and probing, which was sometimes necessary when discussing an emotional topic such as grief (Merriam, 2009).

All of the interviews were conducted in the months of June and July in the year 2014. The second interviews were each conducted approximately 1-2 weeks after the first interview. This was a time frame that was long enough for participants to reflect on the interview, but not so long that they lost the connection between interviews (Seidman, 2006). Each second interview began by asking the participant what it was like to tell their story during the first interview. Follow up questions were used based on notes and transcripts from the each first interview to again invite lengthy narration about parts of their story they felt were missing, which were most important, and what they might want others to know about bereaved siblings. Questions in the second narrative interview were based on analysis from the first interviews and previous literature in the area of meaning making in bereavement. Questions were asked in several areas rooted in theories on grief and loss, including questions about: (a) sense making, (b) benefit finding, (c) identity

change, (d) developmental perspectives of the loss, and (e) sibling specific literature on grief and meaning making (see Appendix F for the full second interview protocol). Due to the nature of the semi-structured interview, the questions were not necessarily asked in any particular order and I could instead stay with the client rather than transitioning between topics. I asked questions as appropriate based on missing information or clarification from the first interview. I asked one at a time and allowed the participant to take as much time as needed to provide an answer. Upon completion of the second interview, each participant was given or emailed a \$20 gift card to a major retailer as a thank you for taking the time to participate in this study.

Methods of Data Analysis

Consistent with recommendations from Merriam (2009), data analysis began early in the process of data collection. Each first interview was transcribed verbatim within two weeks after they were conducted. When possible, first interviews were transcribed before conducting the second interview. A few simple transcription rules were developed ahead of time in order to increase consistency across transcriptions (McLellan, MacQueen, & Neidig, 2003). The rules included how to show when a word or phrase is not intelligible, along with how to account for pauses, flow, and intonation (see Appendix G for a list of transcription rules). All interviews were transcribed on Microsoft Word templates and coding and memos were done through the use of text boxes on the right hand side. Brief notes or memos that explained client posture and nonverbal behavior were also included in the transcription. Line numbers were added to each transcription in order to allow for more ease in the data analysis process. Due to time constraints and the large amount of data collected for this study, two transcriptionists were contacted to complete the

verbatim transcriptions of each audio recorded interview. The transcriptionists each agreed to follow the transcription rules and each signed confidentiality agreements prior to being given any audio recordings. Each transcription was checked for accuracy against the audio recording by the researcher. During this process of listening to the audio recordings while reading through the typed transcriptions, I also compared my field notes to the recordings and added comments on emotional state, inflection, tone, etc. as appropriate throughout the process.

The data collected for this study, including interview transcripts (494 pages), qualitative responses from questions on the Sibling Grief Survey (7 pages), and field notes and reflective memos (50 pages) were analyzed using multiple forms of narrative analysis, including thematic analysis and structural analysis. Additionally, the researcher conducted a theory-driven analysis of the data in which data from bereaved siblings' stories was tied back to existing literature and pertinent theories of grief. It has been argued that narrative, or storytelling, is a way in which individuals make sense out of life events, particularly when life events, such as the death of a sibling, disrupt the continuity of the life story (Riessman, 2008). Narrative analysis helps researchers understand "intention and language—*how* and *why* incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers" (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). Thus, extended accounts from participants are used as analytical units so they can be analyzed for sequential and structural features along with what the stories mean (Riessman, 2008).

Each of the interviews, along with the qualitative response questions from the online survey, and the intensive field notes and memos were analyzed first by an intensive process of thematic analysis. This began with a reading of the transcripts while

listening to the audio recordings from the interview, followed by an additional re-reading of the transcripts to focus on content and any overall themes. In thematic analysis, the focus is on content and meaning of the narrative (the ‘what’ of the story) rather than how the story is told. Thematic analysis is similar to grounded theory analysis in some ways as the researcher attempted to discover and categorize themes from the data. Grounded theory achieves this by breaking down data into smaller meaning units and comparing across cases whereas thematic analysis accomplishes this by keeping stories intact in order to preserve the sequence of the story. Based on the narrative reconstruction methods of Williams (1984), the researcher believed that the untimely death of a sibling led to a “process of cognitive reorganization—meaning-making” (as cited in Riessman, 2008, p. 55) which thematic analysis would help us to identify. Based on previous literature, the “what” of sibling stories may include what sense siblings have made out of the loss, what benefits they have found, and what changes they have gone through as an individual, in various relationships, and their view of the world. Thus, thematic analysis gave us a clearer picture of the outcomes of meaning making efforts as presented by bereaved siblings.

Initial coding during the thematic analysis included isolating and ordering mini-stories within each interview. These mini-stories were placed in chronological order and the researcher began to identify underlying assumptions within each story through a process of open coding. Words or phrases that best represented the data segment were recorded. This allowed the researcher to identify broad patterns/themes and the range and variation within an individual’s narrative along with comparison between multiple interviews (Riessman, 2008).

Concurrently, axial coding was used, in order to compare, contrast, and refine categories based on the data. Categories and subcategories were located along a continuum and properties and dimensions were identified for subcategories. The development of subcategories occurred by asking questions of the emerging categories, such as “when, where, why, and how a phenomenon is likely to occur” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 119). This was done in order to determine patterns in the meaning making processes of bereaved siblings. This type of data analysis allowed for comparison on an individual basis in addition to comparison of meaning making processes of siblings bereaved by expected and unexpected loss. This analysis helped answer the “what” of sibling meaning making by highlighting what meanings bereaved siblings in this study made after the loss of a sister or brother.

Structural analysis was also used in order to identify variation in meanings for individual participants. Structural analysis allowed the researcher to pay close attention to narrative form, structures of speech, and context. It was analysis of how siblings composed their stories, which allowed the researcher to observe the meaning making processes over time by identifying turning points, high points, and low points, in order to identify patterns (Riessman, 2008). Thus, based on previous theory on meaning making and grief, structural analysis of the data allowed for a deeper understanding of the processes and strategies through which bereaved siblings attempted to make sense out of the loss, the processes through which they searched for benefits in the loss, and the processes through which they changed as a person or how their values and beliefs or view of the world changed. Structural analysis helped the researcher identify ‘stories’ within each interview. Each mini-story involved some or all of the following six elements,

including: (a) abstract or the point of the story; (b) orientation or information about characters, time, and place; (c) complicating action or plot actions that carry a story forward; (d) evaluation or what the meaning of the event is to the narrator; (e) resolution or outcome of a story; and (f) coda or the end of a story by bringing it back to the present. Important stories within each interview were identified and further broken down and coded based on these six elements (Labov, 1972). Structural analysis added another level to thematic analysis by allowing the researcher to identify “important differences in meaning of the ‘same’ event for different participants” (Riessman, 2008, p. 90). The examination of the ordering and structuring of these mini-stories helped shed light on the important meaning making strategies used by bereaved siblings. This helped answer the “how” of meaning making by shedding light on important processes through which bereaved siblings commonly attempt to make some sort of meaning as it related to the death of his or her sibling.

Additionally, analysis of the data through the lens of previous literature and constructivist theories of grief allowed the researcher to present the natural connection between sibling stories and existing literature on grief and loss. In qualitative research, the researcher is a main tool in both data collection and analysis. Who I am, the literature I have read, the research questions I have chosen, all impacted data analysis by coloring the lens through which data collection and analysis was done. In this sense, data analysis in this study was driven by extensive theory on grief and meaning making. Based on theoretical literature in this area, and intensive analysis of the data, I found information and stories about both sense making processes (through structural analysis) and outcomes (through thematic analysis). Not only what sense bereaved siblings have been able to

make out of their experience of loss, but more about how, why, and when these sense making processes occurred and how they helped or hindered bereaved siblings in their grieving process. Additionally, I explored what benefits bereaved siblings identified as a result of their loss, and I got a deeper understanding of how, when, and possibly why these benefits occurred or were sought out. Based on theory about post traumatic growth and identity change, I explored the data to assess not only how bereaved siblings saw themselves differently after the loss of their siblings, but how they saw the world, life, and their sense of purpose or meaning through a different lens after the loss. I got a deeper sense of what purpose this played in their lives and what it meant to them to feel “different.” A thorough review of the literature in this area allowed me to tie data found in this study to a broader understanding of meaning making in grief and loss. In essence, I was able to provide a richer understanding of what it really means to be a bereaved sibling and how these experiences relate to existing theory on meaning making.

An audit trail, which is basically a running log that describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made, was kept throughout the occurrence of this research project. An audit trail can serve as a researcher’s record of interaction with the data and can serve to increase reliability of the study. Memoing was also used throughout the research as one way to provide a critical link between interview data and the creation of codes and categories (Merriam, 2009). Memos were created about codes and categories and how they might relate, thoughts about what the data was saying, and thoughts about what data segments meant. Also, I kept a journal regarding my own thoughts and feelings as they related to this emotional topic. I recorded feelings that occurred before, during, and after the interviews as a way

to separate how I was feeling from the data collected. Additional measures were also taken to increase the quality and trustworthiness of the study.

Quality, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

Many authors in the area of qualitative research argue for the use of considering issues of reliability and validity based on the philosophical paradigm that is guiding the study at hand (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005). Since my research on sibling grief was rooted in the postpositivistic/constructivist paradigm previously described, I addressed issues of trustworthiness and quality according to Morrow's (2005) criteria for assessing trustworthiness in postpositivist and constructivist research. Therefore, many steps were taken to ensure the credibility, transferability, and dependability of this study.

I took several steps to ensure that the research findings presented were credible, given the data used. According to Merriam (2009), when we address issues of credibility in qualitative research, we are attempting to understand how congruent our findings are with reality. Operating under the constructivist paradigm, I believe that "reality" is socially constructed by individuals through their interpretations, understandings, conversations with others, etc. Therefore, when I asked bereaved siblings about their experiences about what it means to be a bereaved sibling and what sense they have made out of their experience of loss, these bereaved siblings, along with myself as the researcher and a bereaved sibling, are seen as the primary instruments of data collection. Thus, Merriam (2009) argued, we are "'closer' to reality than if a data collection instrument had been interjected between us and the participants" (p. 214).

Additionally, triangulation was used in order to further increase credibility of this study. Triangulation through multiple sources of data and multiple methods of data

collection was used by conducting follow up interviews with the same bereaved siblings. In this way, I was able to compare what was said by the bereaved siblings in the first interview to what was said in the second interview. Findings from these interviews were also compared to current literature on sibling grief and theories of meaning making. By comparing data collected at the first interview, second interview, qualitative response questions, pertinent field notes, and relevant literature I was able to check and compare data in order to better ensure that my findings were representative of what was really there, or what it really means to be a bereaved sibling (Merriam, 2009; Morrow, 2005).

Additionally, researcher reflexivity has also been cited as a strategy to increase credibility in qualitative research (Morrow, 2005). Reflexivity involved explaining my potential biases and assumptions up front so that readers may decide for themselves how my biases might have colored my interpretation of the results (Merriam, 2009). This is why I chose to include my personal story of loss in an appendix of this study, along with an exploration of my potential biases and assumptions here. By voicing these assumptions, I intend to raise awareness (both on a personal level and for the audience) of my personal stance on sibling loss and the impact my view may have on this particular research project. Thus, addressing these assumptions in an open and curious way will further aid me in openly challenging bias.

One assumption I make is that all bereaved siblings engage in some sort of meaning making or sense making processes, even if they do not label them as such. Perhaps these individuals do not have insight into the meaning making process until they are able to reflect on their grief process over time as it relates to meaning making. Perhaps negative meaning or deciding that death has no meaning at all (which in itself is

meaningful) is enough for some individuals, while others must find some positive meaning to come from the loss in order to begin to heal. Grieving or meaning making for these siblings is the ability to think about, reprocess, and conceptualize the loss and the ways that it impacts them at various times in their life. So, while one part of this study focused on giving voice to these bereaved siblings through a narrative interview process, a second part of this study focused on interpretations of the data. In this way, I was able to analyze and speak to patterns or themes in the sibling meaning making process that presented themselves within the data.

In order to gain more experience in the field of grief and loss, I worked as a bereavement specialist with a local hospice organization in both a doctoral intern and volunteer capacity. During this time, I worked with bereaved spouses and partners, bereaved parents, bereaved siblings, parentally bereaved children, and bereaved families. I heard countless stories of pain, loss, and suffering. It was also during this time that I heard countless stories of renewal, faith, and hope. I began to see ways in which individual grievers had similarities or threads that tied them all together, united in a group of grievers that no one wishes to be a part of. I also saw how these individuals experienced grief in their own unique ways; I began to see how each person processed their loss, and how (because of their relationship with the deceased, their personality, their worldview, their culture, their social supports, etc.) the grief of that individual was so personal and so different from how others experienced loss. I think these dichotomies between the perceived negative or difficult aspects of grief versus the more hopeful positive aspects and between a focus on the universal or shared characteristics of grief versus a focus on the unique individual aspects and variations of grief are important to

understand, and I do think that they color my view of bereaved individuals. I seek to learn and understand the common threads that tie grieving individuals together while also looking for the unique factors that make grief feel so personal and individual. I want to explore how griever process the pain and sadness, while also looking at how loss can lead to more positive feelings of faith and hope.

Continued introspection on my own experience occurred throughout the study as I kept a personal journal where I recorded how I was feeling before each interview and then, once completed, how I felt during and after each interview. Since I am a bereaved sibling and I have my own ideas and beliefs about what that means, I used continual reflexivity to decrease the likelihood that my personal assumptions and beliefs would color or unduly influence my research. I used a technique commonly used in phenomenological research called “bracketing” in order to reduce my bias. In order to do this, I had a colleague interview me using my own interview protocol before conducting any other interviews (Moustakas, 1994). This allowed me to more fully understand and process my own experiences so that I could be more objective in my analysis of the data. Additionally, I transcribed and coded my own interview using the data analysis methods detailed in this chapter. This allowed me to practice the detailed attention to transcription that was necessary for the current project. Also, I was able to put into practice the narrative coding procedures outlined in the data analysis section which served as a trial run before I began data analysis of sibling interviews.

Another measure used to increase credibility of the study involved the use of research assistants who reviewed sections of interview transcripts in order to assure that I was on the right track as far as coding and data analysis. Since I was the primary

researcher and because I have personal experience with sibling loss, it was important to pull in others to ensure my understandings of the data matched with other reviewers. I had three research assistants who consisted of doctoral level counseling students and counseling professionals within the field of grief and bereavement who each reviewed the same three sections of three participant transcripts. Each reviewer was given three sections of interview transcript along with a form asking them to read the presented transcript and provide a brief summary of what they saw as the main points or big themes within the section. Additionally, each form included six pointed questions about the transcript based on my analysis of the data up to that point. Some examples of the follow up questions answered by research assistants included, "Please explain how you interpret Allison's views on religion or spirituality," "Based on what you read, how would you describe the ways in which you see Allison as changed or different after her sister's death?," "What are your understandings or interpretations on the way that Anna discusses the sibling bond?," "What (if any) sense do you feel that Maya has made with regard to the death of her brother? Please explain," and "How do you understand culture as important in Maya's story?" The responses from research assistants were then compared and analyzed with the other research assistant's responses and with my own interpretations and analyses up to that point. When discrepancies were found, I communicated with the research assistant in order to help clarify their understanding of the excerpt and adjusted my own understanding as appropriate. This process helped provide a structured, uniformed way in which I was able to assess the accuracy and credibility of coding procedures and data analysis.

In addition to these coding checks by research assistants, member checks were

also utilized after some core themes and categories were identified (Morrow, 2005). This process involved following up, via email, with all seven bereaved siblings interviewed in order to ascertain how true each category or theme was for them personally and to elaborate or explain what seemed to fit and what did not in terms of the findings. I sent each participant a two page form which included a few open ended questions along with more direct questions about how and whether the findings seemed to fit with their own experience. I received feedback from four bereaved siblings, which provided me with a better understanding of how I did in terms of data analysis. It also served as another way to reduce my potential bias as a bereaved sibling myself as I returned to the participants to confirm, disconfirm, or clarify my understandings of the data.

Consistent with researcher recommendations, the researcher also used negative or discrepant case analysis in order to lend to the credibility of findings (Merriam, 2009; Morrow, 2005). Throughout data collection and analysis, I continued to purposely look for data or participants that seemed to support alternative explanations than others or have a different or unique understanding of what it meant to be a bereaved sibling.

One of the goals of this qualitative research was to gain more in-depth information on the particulars about the questions being asked. The goal in this study was to explore and better understand what it means to be a bereaved sibling according to how bereaved siblings interpreted and understood this phenomenon. A secondary goal was to begin to build theory about the process of meaning making as it relates to bereaved siblings. In order to increase the transferability of this study, I provided enough descriptive data and direct quotations from siblings themselves so that readers would be better able to discern whether and how this theory might be applicable elsewhere

(Merriam, 2009). Rich, thick description, including lots of quotes and data from the interviews was used to support all conclusions. Information was gathered about the culture and context in which these experiences of bereaved siblings were described. Parallels were drawn and differences highlighted between findings from this study and other theories of grief and meaning making as they relate specifically to sibling loss in order to further increase transferability of this study.

In qualitative research, dependability deals with “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). It deals with the ways in which a study is conducted and how a researcher got the findings he or she is presenting. In order to increase dependability, the data collection and analysis processes were made transparent to readers (Morrow, 2005). I kept a detailed audit trail, which is basically a journal that details “how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). I also used memos extensively throughout the data analysis process in order to keep track of difficulties that I ran into during data collection and analysis, preliminary themes I saw emerging, ideas I had during data analysis, how I could conceptualize ideas and how I saw different categories or themes relating to one another.

Qualitative research that is trustworthy and credible also depends in many ways on the ethics of the researcher (Merriam, 2009). I carried out this research with integrity and took steps to protect participants from harm. I created informed consents in order to explain to participants what type of research I was conducting and what they would be asked to do. I reviewed the informed consents with each participant in person or over the phone and gave all siblings a copy of the document and time to ask questions about the

research. I ensured that the transcriptionists understood the importance of participant confidentiality and had them sign confidentiality agreements, and I kept all personal data, transcriptions, and documents on a password protected computer in order to ensure privacy. Although I took many steps to protect the bereaved siblings who participated in this study, a possibility existed of a potential threat to participants by describing and exploring their meaning making processes regarding grief. Interviewing siblings whose brother or sister died at least two years prior to the study helped limit the possibility that a participant would be in an intense grief reaction often found in the first year after the death. Also, I processed with each participant how it was to do the interview and what feelings and emotions may have been brought up due to discussing their grief. A list of resources was provided for each participant, which included support groups, counselors, hotline numbers, and other helpful information in case the bereaved siblings wished to get assistance in their grieving processes.

Conclusion of Methods Discussion

By using a narrative method of data analysis, this qualitative study answered the following research questions: (a) How do young adult siblings describe their experience of losing a brother or sister in adolescence?, (b) What are some of the meanings or understandings that bereaved siblings have made after the loss of their brother or sister?, and (c) How have bereaved siblings made meaning out of the loss over time, meaning what strategies have they used to try and make sense of the loss? Thematic analysis was used to understand the content and meaning of the ‘stories’ identified in each participant’s narrative. Structural analysis was used to gain a better understanding of narrative form, structures of speech, and context. The data documented the strategies or

processes that bereaved siblings have used over time in order to make sense out of the loss of their brother or sister in their life, with the goal of helping counselors and other mental health professionals gain a better understanding of and work more effectively with this population.

This research provided a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of sibling loss. Although the concept of meaning making continues to be explored within the literature on grief, bereaved siblings have not received much attention (White, 2006). This increases our current understanding regarding the varied and complex meaning making processes used by bereaved siblings. It can help counselors understand what some of the common meanings made by bereaved siblings are and how meaning making processes might unfold for bereaved siblings over time. Neimeyer and Currier (2009) explained how qualitative research in the area of bereavement can help us further understand complex processes such as meaning making. Additionally, this study highlighted some similarities and differences in meaning making processes on a more individual level, mirroring an important postmodern conceptualization of grief which emphasizes the unique experience of each individual griever. A better understanding of the role and significance of meaning making processes could lead to more effective meaning making interventions for counselors working with bereaved siblings.

CHAPTER 4: SIBLING PROFILES

In the following pages I will present sibling profiles for each of the seven siblings who participated in this study by sharing their stories of loss through multiple interviews. These profiles contain some of the important information about participants which will help readers gain more insight into how certain contextual and experiential factors can influence and impact individual stories of loss. Following these profiles, Chapter 5 will highlight and further explore important themes identified in the data through a rigorous process of narrative analysis. A discussion of results, along with a closer examination of how these results relate to previous theories of sibling grief and meaning making, will be presented in Chapter 6.

Each initial interview with participants began with the same request: Please share with me your story of loss regarding your brother or sister. Participant profiles will be presented mostly in the participants' own words as a response to this initial interview question. The profiles are presented in this way as an additional means to highlight that there is no one 'typical' response to losing a sibling. It will help readers come to more fully understand each participant's experience with losing his or her sibling. Each sibling's story is important and these profiles are a way to let each sibling's unique voice be heard when they have so often felt silenced in their grief. Seidman (2006) argued that profiles are a compelling way "to find and display coherence in the constitutive events of a participant's experience, to share the coherence the participant has expressed, and to link the individual's experience to the social and organizational context within which he or she operates" (p. 120).

These sibling profiles were created through an intensive process of reading and reviewing transcripts while listening to the audio recording of the interview. First, I listened to each recording all the way through while jotting down notes or observations in order to increase familiarity with the data. Then, I listened to each recording again to begin the creation of the individual profile. I would pause and rewind the audio as necessary. Additionally, field notes were used to compare what I was hearing in the audio to my written understandings from the day of the interview. This process allowed me to better capture the intention of each sibling's story, along with the emotion expressed, and present the story more fully in the siblings own words.

Additionally, introduction paragraphs that describe each participant were composed from field notes taken during the interview process. In order to present each sibling's story in a coherent manner, certain hesitations and repetitions in speech were removed. Some grammatical corrections were also made if they could be done so in a way that would not compromise the intended meaning of a sibling's words. Any transitional or clarifying words or phrases that were added to the transcript are bracketed and ellipses are used when omitting certain material. Interviewer encouragers, such as uh-huh's and yeah's, were also omitted. If interviewer words are necessary to the coherence of the participant story, they will be labeled as such and included in double parentheses throughout the profiles. It is important to keep in mind that pseudonyms will be used throughout the document and were given to each sibling participant, as well as to family members, friends, places, and even dates, in an effort to protect the identities of those involved. Important demographic information gathered through the Sibling Grief Survey is presented below in Table 3.

Table 3

Participant Data

Participant Pseudonym	Maya	Samantha	Melanie	Anna	Jon	Bella	Allison
Current Age	35	19	30	26	21	37	25
Age at Sibling Death	21	17	19	22	12	19	22
Race or Ethnicity	Hispanic American, Latino, Chicano	Caucasian, European American, White	Caucasian, European American, White	Asian Indian, European	Caucasian, European American, White	Caucasian, European American, White	Caucasian, European American, White
Current SES	Working Class	Middle Class	Middle Class	Upper Middle Class	Middle Class	Working Class	Upper Middle Class
Level of Education	Completed advanced degree	Working toward 2 or 4 year degree	Completed 2 or 4 year college degree	Working toward advanced degree	Working toward 2 or 4 year degree	Completed high school or GED	Completed high school or GED
Current Geographic Region	West Coast United States	Mid Atlantic United States	Midwest United States	Pacific Northwest United States	Midwest United States	Midwest United States	Northeast United States
Spiritual or Religious Orientation	“spiritual with belief in afterlife”	“spiritual rather than religious”	“I am a practicing Catholic.”	“raised Catholic but more agnostic since her passing”	“Both spiritual and religious. Christian.”	“Catholic”	“Catholic. I believe in Heaven and mediums.”
Total Number of Siblings	2	1	6	2	2	5	2
Deceased Sibling Pseudonym and Age at Death	Older brother: Ramon (died at age 27)	Older brother: Ben (died at age 19)	Twin brother: Jim (died at age 19)	Older sister: Cleo (died at age 26)	Younger brother: Jason (died at age 6)	Twin sister: Jen (died at age 19)	Older sister: Tina (died at age 34)
Cause of Death	Car accident	Accident	Car accident	Accidental overdose	Long term illness or medical condition	Cancer	Long term illness or medical condition

Maya’s Story

Maya’s initial interview was conducted over the phone on June 25th of 2014.

Maya was talkative, personable, and well-spoken. She was emotional throughout her interview, particularly when recounting the details surrounding her brother's death and the weeks, months, and years of grief that followed. Maya was detail oriented and able to paint a clear picture of her family history prior to the loss, details of the loss event itself, and Maya's journey of grief after the loss. Maya's response to the interviewer's initial statement, "Please tell me your story of loss regarding your brother," is presented below. Following Maya's story, some reflections and important understandings will be reviewed so that comparisons can be made between multiple sibling profiles presented.

Well, I guess I'll start from the beginning cause I really don't know exactly where to start. So, me and my family, we're all from Puerto Rico. I'm Puerto Rican and I was the only sister. I have two older brothers. We were all born in Puerto Rico so we came from a very different culture than here in the states. My oldest brother, his name is Noah, and he's twelve years older than me. So in the middle was my middle brother who was six years older than me and six years younger than my oldest, and that's Ramon. And then it was me and I was born in '78. So, we were very close as a family. We were a traditional, very collective Hispanic family. We moved to the states probably around '79 or '80. I was very, very young. I acculturated at such a young age. I was bi-cultural by the time I was three. So I was able to learn English easier and everything. So when we moved to the U.S. in the eighties, it was a very, very different time for Hispanics then. It was not as accepting. Well, it's not always accepting all the time now, but then it was much, much harder. And my family didn't know English and when we moved here, I think we were so close because we had no

support. And my brothers became, they were my best friends. They looked out after me. They didn't know much English when we moved here and especially, Ramon was targeted a lot with bullying at school. The kids didn't like foreigners and so he would take on a lot. Ramon was always targeted and so he and I became very, very close, as well as my oldest brother. We had hardly anybody here and so that really developed our bond.

[Meanwhile] my parents were so busy trying to learn the language and adapt to the culture that they didn't even know what to make of it. I mean parenting was very hard. We had to help our parents. We were their translators. We had to explain to them a lot of the stuff here in the states. So my brothers and I grew up very quickly. And the older I got, the more close we got. My [brothers] became like father-figures for me. And eventually my parents, through all that craziness of trying to adapt to this culture and not even being in an emotionally mature relationship themselves before moving to the states, it just caused so much strain on them, and they divorced. They divorced when I was around age five. And it was an ugly divorce. It was a very, very ugly divorce. And my dad, just to piss off my mom, took a job in [the far Northwest] because it would be so far from where we were living in [the Midwest]. And he knew my mom couldn't handle moving there and she wouldn't go. Even though he tested her and said if she wanted the family to stay together, she would do this. And she's like screw it, I'm not going. So my brother Ramon got pressured by my dad to move with him. And then my brother Noah got pressured by my mom to stay with her. So my parents really split up the family on purpose, I think, through their own pain and I

was left in the middle. I didn't know what to do.

So, being younger, I was closer to Ramon. So I moved with my dad to [the far Northwest] to be with Ramon. To me, my decision didn't even have to do with my parents. I just wanted to be with my siblings. That's how close we were. So, we moved to [the far Northwest] and, again, we didn't know anybody. And I was picked on this time. It was just kids being kids and not understanding culture, but my brother was there to look out after me and helped raise me. Cause my dad was working. He was *never* home and so my brother and I hung out all the time. He was supposed to watch me after school and, honestly, we were bad kids. We skipped school and we would just go hiking in the trails and we would sneak out our windows and go and get ice cream at three in the morning (laughing) and those kinds of things. We just hated going to school but we loved exploring. We loved learning about stuff. We were adventurers at heart. So, my brother was, uh, considered defiant, I guess. And so he got in a lot of trouble and he got in fights and it was as if we had no parental-there was nobody looking over us. We really had to take care of ourselves. Even at age six, if my brother wasn't home, I was by myself for hours at end. So that's why he and I were so close because I relied on him.

[Growing up] we were very, very poor. My dad eventually lost his job and he had no savings and honestly I don't think he thought he was going to lose his job. It was just very abrupt and we ended up losing everything, so we became homeless and we lived in the car. So the three of us lived about three months in the car and we drove all around [the United States] and we made our way all the

way down to [the South]. I wasn't in school so that was something I had to make sure to keep my mouth shut about. My dad didn't want people knowing we were homeless cause he didn't want the state taking my brother and I away. But during that time I actually had a really good time because my brother and I would just hang out all day. We would play. We would, depending what campsite we were staying at, we would just hang out by the lake. We hit so many cities and so many places on our journey and the whole way my dad was so stressed. He's looking for work doing his thing and my brother and I, we had no friends. We had no friends. No family. It was just us in a car. So we became incredibly close. And if we couldn't get any food at all, my brother was the one to steal so we could sell something or somehow get food. And he knew I liked to read cause I never had many toys cause we were so poor so he would steal books for me and those kind of things. And, again, I didn't care if it was defiant; I saw it as survival. But my brother got caught a few times and he was seen as a bad kid. But honestly, he was just doing what he thought was right. That's how I viewed it. I never saw him as a troublemaker, but as the middle child, he was seen as a troublemaker. He was just really trying to do the most he can considering the situation. He just saw it as, "I'm helping my sister out" and I saw it as a sign of his love, helping us and sacrificing to get in trouble for us.

So we eventually (deep breath) made our way to [Southern state] and that didn't last. Then we continued our journey to [the Southwest] where my dad finally got a house for us and a place to live. He got a job. So my brother and I finally were living in a house again and we were enrolled in school again and

that's when things started to change because he found friends his own age and I found friends my own age. But things were getting harder within the family and because, again, my father's absence, my brother started to lean towards getting involved in a gang. So he started to change around 13 hanging out with these guys who he thought were his family and I saw him less and less. Things got so bad, my dad was just not doing too good, and my brother was starting to get involved in a gang, so my brother actually asked my mom to take me back because we were about to lose the house again and I think he knew at that time it's not good for me to be homeless.

My mom was so glad to get me back and so I moved back with my mom probably about the age of 9. And then my brother Ramon and I didn't live together anymore after that, but we kept in touch a lot. We were still incredibly close. He eventually got out of the gang but he had to relocate because of the gang. The way it was is if you get out, they kill you, so my brother ended up moving to the west coast once he was a teenager and just pretty much started his life over. And my dad, they had a horrible relationship. So he moved out on his own at 18 and he and I stayed close the whole time and he really re-defined himself and became really involved in helping kids in the system. He did a lot of work, like *he* was the one who introduced me to the profession of counseling and social work. He went to social workers and he was working with kids who are homeless and working with kids without decent families cause he really connected with that population and kids that were considered defiant. At that time, I didn't know what I wanted to do and he's like, "Oh, you should look into

counseling or social work.” And he explained it to me and he put the idea in my head because he’s like, “Hey maybe down the road, you and I can own a place or have our own practice and we can work with kids and teenagers that went through some of the stuff we went through.” And I was like, “yeah, that’d be awesome.” But I had to grow up too. I had to go to college and do my thing.

So, my mom and I ended up moving to [the Southeast] and my mom didn’t see my brother that much but they talked every day; every Sunday afternoon. Then my brother and I would talk every Sunday night and I think by the time I was a teenager, he was really big about trying to give me advice on guys, and relationships, and friends, and he was still very instrumental, both my brothers were actually very instrumental, in trying to mentor me. Cause at that time my dad was homeless, and I didn’t know where he was at. I hadn’t heard from him in years. So, my brother stepped in and always helped raise me, like I’ve said, from the start. And so I talked to him every week. [One day] my brother Ramon, my brother Noah, and I decided to meet up and have a vacation so we met in [the Midwest] and it was like a day didn’t pass. We all just looked older and taller, but we were all so very close and Ramon was trying to go to college. My parents didn’t finish college. I was actually the first in my family to finish, but Ramon was trying to go to college. He wanted to be a social worker and so he was talking to me about mental health and I went to community college when I first started and he was able to help guide me so I’d take college very serious. Even though I didn’t take school, in general, very serious cause I spent so much time just trying to, my motto was always on how we going to get from day to day to

day, so school was never a priority to me. But once I got to college, it became a priority to me cause Ramon made it very clear that if I didn't want to end up like my parents that education was the only way it was going to help me. So, I was a geek in college when I started out. In fact, my mom begged me just to finish high school (laughing) and so Ramon was like, "No, you have to go to college. You have to. You have to figure out how to. You have to get a career and figure out how to live with financial stability. It's not normal to be homeless throughout your life." So, he was able to help me understand that that shouldn't be the norm. The way we grew up. We need to break this pattern. He was very emotionally mature. He was very good at being a mentor for me. And he really straightened out his life. This guy who came through being homeless, getting out of a gang, the way he changed his life so he could start over, and he did it all on his own in many ways.

And so, around the age of twenty, I was twenty-one. He was twenty-six. He had a lot of back pain. So he went to the doctor and he was diagnosed with MS, which is a muscular disease. It's genetic but we didn't know anybody in the family who had MS. And when they diagnosed my brother, it was pretty advanced, apparently. And it was a blow. It was a huge blow to him and my family was in shock. And he was in a lot of pain already. So they started him right away on this steroid treatment to help him keep up his strength. A lot of times people with MS, when it progresses really fast in an advanced stage, a lot of times you end up in a wheelchair. You have a short lifespan. You can't do a lot of stuff for yourself, like raise your arms and things like that. You tend to also lose your

vision. I forgot the connection to the eyes, but they think he started losing vision in one of his eyes and this is a guy who was so independent and he never had been taken care of. He was going to lose his independence physically. And he wasn't married. He had no kids. He was single at that time. So, he was really bummed. We were all bummed. And so the doctor told him it's pretty progressed and you're going to go downhill from here. So at that time, my family and I feared, and it made sense that I be the one to move to [the West Coast] to help him in the meantime until we can figure out what we're going to do. He didn't like that idea, but we didn't know what else to do and we were like dude, this is the way it is. You can't do this by yourself and you shouldn't have to do it by yourself. And honestly, I remember thinking at that time that that was going to be how he died was MS. Because the doctor made it seem like it is. He wasn't going to last, but maybe 10 years at the most, but that's not how it happened (pause).

I remember, at that time, we didn't have cell phones. I had a pager. And I was on my way to a night class and my pager went off, but (deep breath) it was just a phone number. There were no messages or anything like that. I went to class and class was canceled so I went home. When I went home there were a bunch of messages on the answering machine from Noah. And I couldn't get a hold of Noah. I was calling him back and he wasn't answering. And my mom was home and I was like, "Mom, you know, is something wrong? Noah called." And I just remembered it was-I was like-it was a very strong intuition, and then I was having dreams as well in the couple weeks prior to that about Ramon. And I said, "Mom, I think Ramon, I think something happened. I hate to say this, but I think

he might be dead.” And my mom just started yelling at me like you don’t say that (Maya begins crying). So I said, “No, I think Ramon’s gone.” And she just was so mad at me for saying that, but I just knew (long pause) and (sniffing) my brother, Noah, finally called back and said, “I need to talk to you.” And I was like, “Listen, I think I know what you’re going to say. And I just need to make sure mom is sitting down.” So I put her in her bed and I said, “Mom, I want you to listen to what Noah’s going to say” and she’s looking at me like I’m overreacting. And so she sits down and I sit down, cause I knew, I just knew. And Noah said, “Ramon was killed in a car accident this morning” (crying). And I said, “Okay. I thought that’s what it was.” And I was so calm. It was like I was in shock. And then my mom lost it. She was screaming saying no! And then Noah said, “Yeah. He pulled out of a McDonald’s and he was losing his vision and he was still driving and stuff and he didn’t see the car coming and the car hit him. He died on impact.” And I said okay and I said, hey mom is hysterical at that point. I said, “Listen, I got to let you go.” And he’s like, “I’m going to call dad” cause he knew where my father was and he kept up with my father so he knew how to get a hold of him. And so my mom and I, we called her best friends to come over and help her cause she was losing it and then spontaneously I was on the phone trying to get plane tickets to [the West Coast]. We had a family friend who was in the airline industry who was helping us, and so I went into the mode of okay, let’s get the plane tickets, get the hotel. We got to get going. We got to pack. We need to leave the next day because my dad would have been in [West Coast] at that time and he was going to drive down and identify the body. So I needed to fly out there

and my brother Noah said he can't go in there. So I told him, I'll do it. So we flew out the next day and we met up with my brother. So then I'm with my dad. First time I've seen my dad in many years. Many, many years. And my dad said he would go in there with me to identify the body. My mom couldn't do it. She was a mess. She was a huge mess. And I walk in and they had cleaned him up, but not all of it. So that shocked me and I just remembered I kind of passed out a little bit. And I'm like, "oh my god." I woke up and it was like they could've prepared us or said something, but it was a horrible experience.

It was also horrible because my parents hated one another at the time. So the whole entire funeral was about them-them fighting, them blaming one another for Ramon having a horrible life, and they didn't care about how my brother and I were doing. I was a mess. I wouldn't eat. I was weak. I spoke at the funeral because my parents were mad if one parent spoke and not the other, but neither one of them wanted to say anything. It just was *so petty*. It was like their divorce, bringing the kids up and not thinking about the family as a whole, and the same thing happened at the funeral. They got into a really big fight in front of the priest (laughing). We didn't know the priest. We didn't know anybody in [the West Coast]. We flew there and we put this together in no time and I talked to his employer and his employer allowed people off of work for two hours to come to the funeral. There was this huge room and all these people standing and they were telling their stories with him. Him working with kids and all these *great* stories! And my parents wouldn't say anything. They didn't say anything at all. So I went up there and I spoke on behalf of the family. And I picked out what he was going

to wear for the funeral and I picked out the music for the funeral. My brother Noah paid for the funeral. It was like we did all the leg work and my parents, the whole freaking time, were just arguing. It was horrible. It just totally took away from having the funeral being about Ramon. It was a horrible experience all around. And I remember thinking, in my own head, while all this shit's going on, that (exhale) at least he didn't have to deal with MS (crying, long pause) and he went out quickly. And it was neat to meet his friends. They're all mental health people in the profession and (pause) and hear all the good things (crying) he'd done for the kids. That he did for me and it was really neat to go into his apartment and see that he didn't have many pictures up, but the pictures he had were mostly of me and my brother (crying). And he had, he never mailed me my Christmas card and it was sitting on his desk. So I was able to look at them. He bought two Christmas cards for me. And I could tell he didn't know which one to send and then he had decided on one, the one with the stamp on it. Cause they both said Merry Christmas. One said sis, one said sister. They both were written out to me, but I could tell he was going to mail one and not the other, but I kept those. And I kept his little tape for the answering machine. I kept that cause I just wanted to keep his voice, but I haven't been able to play it. It's just too hard.

When, when the funeral was done, we had him cremated. My mom wanted his ashes and then I had a little bit of his ashes. Then, two weeks later, I went to a place that I knew he really liked. He liked hiking there and it was one of his favorite spots. He took me to it once. I spread his ashes there. And that was to me what I thought he would've wanted instead of the shit that happened at the

funeral. I wanted something to be in peace. And I was the one who had to call his ex-girlfriend and tell her what happened and it was just horrible. I had to call some of his friends and tell them and it was just hard and hearing their reactions – cause my mom was the whole time just a mess. And then my dad was just angry and Ramon and my dad had just reconnected before that, but they didn't have a good relationship...I think my dad felt guilty for not probably being a good dad for him. He was really mean to him a lot and put him down a lot until we were grown up. He was just very childish at times, I think. It was weird. It was like a love-hate relationship with them. It's just all that came up at the funeral and that's when also I met my new stepmom at the funeral. So this was the first time we're meeting her and she's seeing the family dynamic (laughing). I'm still very close to her now. And I laugh and it's like I can't believe she's still with my dad after all that drama (laughing). But she had met my brother a few times, once or twice, but she really liked him.

So after the funeral my brother Noah and I sat down and kind of (exhale) evaluated what happened and what was going on and we got rid of a lot of my brother's stuff. We had to pack up his apartment and take care of all that stuff. And then I was like, well I'll go back to [the Southeast]. I had dropped out of school, even though I went to that one night class, that was going to be it. I dropped out because I was going to move to [the West Coast] and take care of Ramon. So I wasn't in school at that time. So I was like, yeah, I guess I'll go back to [the Southeast] and stay there for a couple months of work and save up some money and then I'll figure out what I'll do later. I had no clue. I was totally lost at

that point. Because I thought my future consisted of being with Ramon and now he was gone and I was lost. I was very lost cause that was such a huge part of my identity and such a huge part of my family system and my life. And to know that one day you're getting ready to move in with somebody and you're going to go through stuff together and you've been through hell and back together anyway and you're so close, to it just being completely changed overnight, literally. So I was a hot mess for a couple of years actually after that. My brother, Noah, eventually came down to [the Southeast] and said, "Okay, you're moving to [the Midwest] with me" because my mom went through such a depression after my brother died that I was just taking care of her most of the time anyway. And I wasn't in school and my brother got to this point that my mom wasn't going to help me out to go to college or anything like that. So he came down and I moved in with him and then eventually I started going to [a college in the Midwest]. And I went into that [mental health] degree that Ramon had always talked about. I thought, "Let me try it" and it worked out, so (pause) it was- it's all connected for sure. And I didn't go to counseling for the first couple years for it because one, I didn't have insurance and two, I didn't have time. I was working two jobs and taking care of my mom and at that point I didn't even think of taking care of me. And then when I moved to [the Midwest] I was still a mess. And said to my brother Noah, "I think I might try counseling." And he's like, "No, don't do that." It was this keep it in the family mentality, you know? He couldn't talk about him either. It was hard.

My dad and I, we built our relationship after that. My dad lost one child.

He didn't want to lose another. So my dad and I started becoming very close. And my dad started being there more for me. He was like, "Hey, you can talk about it if you want." So I would talk to him about it, but I had to be careful what I said. I was still getting to learn more about my dad and learning to trust him also. But I just was like, well, I can talk to him about some of it, but it was like I couldn't just freely speak my mind and because also my dad was part of one of my brother's problems. So, eventually I found some support groups and I just started going to that one with the older people [who lost a spouse] and it was helpful. I would've liked people that were my age and similar issues, but at least it was something. And so [there] I had permission to talk about things or permission to be angry, you know? And permission to talk about my parents. But I didn't talk about them too much in the groups just cause it was such a large group that you only had like a few minutes to even to say stuff. It was too big. And so then I was like I'll try individual counseling. And so I went to this lady (exhale) and I didn't like her so I didn't go back. She talked so much about herself that I felt like I hardly said anything (laughing) in the first two sessions. And I was like, yeah, this was like being in that group (laughing), you know. It was like hearing their stories. So I just stopped going.

Then eventually a couple of years later, I lost my father and so I was like, okay, well this is definitely an opportunity and I knew and I found a good therapist, a good counselor. I went in originally for my father's death, but I told her I was still on my brother's grief. So, I went to her for like three years. And that, that allowed me finally an opportunity to keep talking about things. But it

was years and years there. I mean, by the time I found her, I was thirty-one, so ten years later I found a counselor to talk about my grief (laugh).

And, I guess it wasn't really helpful early in the process because I was in such a place at twenty-one that I did a lot of drinking, cause that's what you do. Well I was drinking before tha, but I was working so much that I didn't have to deal with it. I was working non-stop day after day. I had two jobs and I did not want a day off. I was just a workaholic for a while because I didn't want to deal with the grief. And then when I wasn't working, I was out with my friends drinking and partying and trying to not deal with it. And it looked like I was in a typical twenty-one year old who's enjoying life and having fun and drinking, but I was really trying to not deal with my pain. So I was overdrinking and I even started using drugs for a while. And my mom knew it, I think, and she didn't-She was so in pain that she did not help me. I think that's why [my brother Noah] was like, okay, you need to come to [the Midwest], but even when I got there I was a hot mess. I was an undergrad and I'm trying to go to school and my grades had dropped after he died, so I had to repeat some classes and so it took longer for me to finish college. It was nice to have resources then [in the Midwest] because I really felt like I wasted a couple of years. But I eventually got on track and now I don't drink and I haven't used drugs in a long time and I was just so glad that I was able to do this and not get addicted. I could totally see how that would work. I can completely see why that that would be an option cause it was an easy option for me at twenty-one, but eventually I just did not care. I mean I thought to myself, how does life work this way? You know, after he's worked and busted

his ass throughout his life to make sure that I would grow up to be this educated person and do something with my life. I just didn't want to hurt (crying, long pause) but it was a very lonely, lonely time. And even if I was a relationship with someone, you know, I was constantly thinking of Ramon and I wouldn't talk about him to them because I just was still a hot mess about it and I just realized I couldn't date for a while.

I needed just to be by myself and I got all spiritual and I think I went searching for answers. I've read lots of books, I took all these philosophy classes, and I went and met with these Buddhist people and tried to get their philosophy on life, and met with some Hindu people and tried to get their philosophy on life, and I talked to our Catholic priest about his philosophy on life. I was reading all kinds of books. I mean all kinds. I tried to learn how to meditate (laughing) so I could try to feel a connection. I was reading in books that people can feel closer to [deceased loved ones] when they meditated, or when they did this, or when they did that. So, I was trying to do all that stuff, but it didn't really work because I don't think I was doing it right or something. I don't know. But, I think I was so desperate to connect with him that I didn't realize that that's just not how (pause) it works (sounding choked up). The books don't provide that. I went on a search and I went on a quest for a couple years and, cause I often went back to Puerto Rico, I went and met with some religious people there, talked to them, and asked them about the afterlife and (pause, exhale) just tried to learn how to do yoga and meditation there and I found some peace there. So I was at peace and it was the first time in a long time. I guess that really helped. That trip actually really, really

helped me. It was clearly just to get away and try to allow myself some space and time to think about things and it was nice to be away. I didn't feel like I had to pull myself together for anyone. I didn't feel like I had to look out after anyone. It was the first time I had that privacy. And that was a huge help for me. It was great to have that distance cause I needed that. That's when, I think, I feel some of my healing started at that point but it was like (laughing), it was so weird, cause I mean, I'd read these books and I would try all these different things (laughing) and finally I went out on this trip like, oh my god, what I am doing? I can't keep doing this. I'm going to drive myself insane! I realized that we just don't get the answers. That is why-that's how I just had to learn to accept what happened and to accept the fact that I won't know about the afterlife. There were so many different versions of things I read, and heard, and talked to people about and it was great cause it gave me that exposure, but then it just confused me even more. I went and saw a psychic (laughing) and the psychic I saw was pretty damn good. I mean, of course, I was in a very vulnerable place in my life, but damn she was good! And she provided me a little bit of a sense of peace also. And I was in shock cause I was on the way to see her and I didn't want to tell her too much cause I didn't want to be like oh, of course she got all this. So I didn't tell her about my brother. I went in and talked to her about my spiritual quest, like I said I was going through this phase, and she did a lot of spiritual coaching and spiritual awareness work with people. And that's what I was going to see her for more than anything. I really wanted her to help me with that. And she said, "There is someone in the room with us. He says he's your brother." My heart stopped and I

was like, “What?” She was like, “Yeah. I can see that his head and his chest... I’m assuming it was a car accident.” And she just started describing him and it was amazing! It was insane considering that I hadn’t said anything to her. And she seemed so adamant. She wasn’t asking me those things. She was telling me this shit and I’m thinking damn, she’s good and of course, I’m like, “Does he have anything to say?” I mean it was finally the connection I wanted to the other side. And she was just like he’s fine and he was an old soul and just started telling me all these things. And I just was like, okay! That’s what I needed to hear and I felt a lot better after that. That was better than even the counseling (laughing) cause the counseling was great and all, but hearing her say that, the psychic that I met only twice, really gave me enough peace that it made me feel like I was on the right track and everything was going to be okay. She was able to, not provide me answers, but provide me a little bit of a sense of peace like he’s okay. And that’s what held me over (pause). I was able to relax more and focus more of myself.

So this is (pause) an ongoing process I think and it’s weird because there’s time in life when things happen and it’s a trigger (starting to cry) to your grief. Because when I graduated college, I just remember thinking (crying) he should’ve been here. He should’ve been the one to graduate college or (pause) he wanted a [social work] degree. And he would’ve been great. I always said he should’ve been the one with a PhD and so a part of me always felt a little guilty, you know. I thought he should’ve been rewarded to do, or had the opportunity to do [these things] after the tough life he had. Everything was a struggle. I always felt, why did everything have to be so hard for him? He got to experience a little bit of

living a life of doing things he wanted to do, but not too long, you know. We started so low financially, I mean, oh my gosh, we saw a lot of things in life and I just thought he got a bad deal to a degree, but he made the best out of it. So that car accident (exhale) – the guy who hit him, my older brother and I were like at least he's not in pain anymore. At least he's not struggling anymore cause we always say he had a dark cloud or a bubble. It was just one thing after another, but it's just sad regardless.

But what came out of it is my dad and I reconnected and my dad and I and my oldest brother got much closer. And my dad was diagnosed with cancer but he lived with it for a while. I was getting my PhD and I moved in with him and became his full-time caretaker. I took a year off of school and I would've never imagined that (laughing) years before. Then it became a place in our life where my dad and I ended up having a really good father-daughter relationship and got to know one another as adults and were able to talk better, were able to finally tell stories about Ramon and kind of, not laugh at the funeral, but like, "Oh my god dad, you are insane. You are so insane (laughing)!" And just kind of allow my dad to finally learn to forgive himself too because when he got sick and at that end, that was something that he acknowledged. That was something he carried a lot with him, and to [acknowledge] the grief. To either cry or talk about things that are too upsetting to you, feeling he's supposed to be the strong one. It's a lot of pride. And what he was able to do at the end was finally acknowledge my brother's death and we were able to finally talk about things. We looked at pictures and it was good for *me* because in my family nobody talks about him,

Ramon. It's too hard for anybody. So it's like it never happened, like he didn't exist and I *hated* that! We're going to talk about it. I'm not one who hid him in my house. My brother's dead. And so for me I wanted to talk about him. My nieces had met him at a certain young age, but they couldn't remember. They were too young to really know him. So, we share stories about him. So my dad and I would tell them stories and so for a while it was nice. I was able to hear new stories about him from my dad. So that was important for me. And after my dad passed, I don't really have that because it's still very hard for my mom. So I try not to go there with her because she still, she's better now, but for the first ten years, I mean, it was really hard for her. She didn't really talk about him, so I try to be careful. If she wants to talk about him, I'm totally for it. But I don't want to bring it up on her if she's having a good day and get her crying or something and make her feel sad or depressed cause she was diagnosed with depression after Ramon died and I moved away. But she's doing better now. And now that we're older, we're hoping that she needs to move forward and we can all talk about him without it coming back, but we're praying for this...but I have a book that I put together. Ramon wrote a lot of poetry. So I put a book together of all of his poetry and made a copy of it for my brother and my dad and my mom when I was younger. So they have that. And then I have pictures of him around the house and that's how I turned to my nieces as they've gotten older, I'm like, you know, he did things like that or I just try to incorporate stories there so they don't – their dad doesn't talk about him at all, so I want to still continue those conversations with them so they know that their uncle was a pretty cool guy. And even though

they didn't know him that well, there are still some traits that they have that remind me of him a little bit. I just wanted them to know those connections. And my partner now, I told him stories about Ramon and pictures and shared quite a bit about him, actually. And we're on the west coast now and I feel closer to Ramon out here on the west coast. We're moving [closer to where Ramon lived] soon (exhale), so I'm hoping to go to that trail, you know, next year and kind of re-visit some of the places I know that used to go to. So to me, I think that a part of me is still connected to the west coast because that's where my dad lived for many years and I feel closest to Ramon out here. I don't know what else to say (Maya, Interview 1).

When asked to share her story of loss, Maya began by providing a family history that is more comprehensive than any background or history given by other participants. Maya emphasized the importance of family and culture on her identity as an individual, as a daughter, and as a sibling. This strong emphasis on culture and the way that it impacted Maya's experience of losing her brother, both within her family and within her larger community, is clearly seen throughout her story.

Maya also emphasized the importance of the sibling bond from a young age, continuing into adulthood. She discussed what an important role her siblings played on her identity development and her day to day activities growing up. Maya saw both of her older brothers as "father figures" who always loved her, looked out for her, and mentored her. It could be that emphasizing the strength of the sibling connection that she shared with Ramon helps to validate Maya's intense feelings of shock, sadness, anger, and grief after his death. This is important because many times a sibling feels forgotten in his or

her grief, or is otherwise made to feel that his or her grief should not be as strong or painful as it is and, in fact, he or she should be able to ‘get over it’ because ‘it was just your sibling.’ Receiving these messages after the loss of a brother or sister could certainly lead to incorporating the closeness of the sibling relationship into one’s narrative so that it becomes abundantly clear to others how much of an impact this sibling loss would have. One important story exemplifying the closeness between Maya and Ramon is represented when she discussed having a strange feeling that something was going to happen to her brother. She had dreams related to losing her brother in the weeks before his death and on the day of his death, she “just knew” that he had died before anyone had told her. This strong connection to her brother gave Maya a sense of intuitively knowing her brother had died before actually hearing the news of his death.

Ramon’s cause of death was an unexpected car accident. Maya’s story is a bit unique here because she reports feeling as if her brother’s ultimate death would be caused by his recent diagnosis of MS. This diagnosis was difficult for him because it would mean a loss of his independence and a slow deterioration of his body and his capabilities. Thus, Maya discussed finding some comfort in the fact that her brother died quickly and did not have to deal with the effects and repercussions of MS. Maya remembers having this insight at her brother’s funeral. It seems that early on, Maya was already searching for something that would ease her pain a little or provide her with a bit of comfort during that painful time.

After Ramon’s death, Maya emphasizes three major themes in her story of loss. The first is the distress of seeing her mother so upset, including taking on a caretaker role for her mother. This type of role reversal is something that other siblings discussed in

their stories of loss and can lead to siblings feeling as if they have to postpone their own grief in order to care for parents or other important adults who are in a pain that the siblings have not seen before this point in their lives. A second major theme is hiding her pain. Maya reports hiding the pain, sadness, and anger she experienced after losing her brother in multiple ways, including working a lot to fill up her days as a way to stay distracted and try to avoid feeling the pain and drinking and using drugs as ways to mask the pain she was feeling. When Maya did attempt to reach out for help in processing some of her difficult feelings through seeing a counselor, her oldest brother discouraged her to do so because in his understanding of their culture, Ramon's death was something that should be dealt with within the family. The third theme is feeling lost. Maya reported feeling a sense of loneliness and isolation, even when she was with other people. Others did not understand her experience of the loss and the multiple ways in which it was impacting her life. Her plans for her future included her brother and she felt as if she did not know what to do with her life or how to keep moving forward without him.

Maya eloquently discussed her own personal "search for answers." Maya's search stemmed from her feeling "lost" and led her on what she calls a "journey" toward "acceptance." Maya was desperately trying to understand why her brother had to die and also where he was now and what the afterlife was like. She discusses reading philosophy and religion books, traveling the world to discuss spirituality with others, and attempts to "connect" with her brother through meditation and psychics. Ultimately, many of the things Maya described in her search for answers and understanding reportedly brought her a sense of comfort and peace. One big conclusion Maya reached is that she had to accept that she would never get the answers she wanted. She would never be sure about

why her brother died or what the afterlife was really like. Acceptance of this discovery was helpful in Maya's healing process and, as she stated, it is an "ongoing process."

Maya ends her story by discussing some things that she sees as a positive that came as a result of her brother's death. She talked about how she was able to reconnect with her dad after the loss and how she found some healing in being able to openly discuss her grief with him, as well as to remember and share stories about Ramon. Maya concludes her story by sharing how important it is for her to remember Ramon and find ways in which she can continue to feel connected to him in order to honor the impact that his life has had and continues to have on her own.

Samantha's Story

Samantha's initial interview was conducted over the phone on June 26th of 2014. Samantha was soft-spoken and admittedly nervous about sharing her story of loss, yet she exuded a confidence that she had something important to share with the world. She spoke slowly and methodically. She was well-spoken and became emotional a few times during the telling of her story. Samantha did not share as much as Maya up front, although she was open to answering many questions about her personal experience of loss after her initial sharing and in future interviews. Samantha's response to the interviewer's initial statement, "Please tell me your story of loss regarding your brother," is presented below. Some reflections and important understandings are presented at the conclusion of her story.

Let's see. I guess I will start at the beginning growing up. My brother and I were both adopted. We were both adopted from different families. My brother's adoption was a closed one and mine was an open one so I knew a lot more about

my background, my birth mother, etcetera than he did. He never really cared in knowing. Growing up we were like the best of friends. He would beat me up or I would like push him around and he'd push me around and we were just best friends. [We] never really fought too much. He always let me hang out with his big, older friends and never even got annoyed with me being around and the pesky little sister that I was. We had a really, really great relationship even through high school and teenage years and what not.

And (pause) alright well anyway, more towards the actual events I guess. In March of 2010, I had just turned seventeen. It was the week of my seventeenth birthday. My brother, my dad, and a bunch of my brother's friends went to a concert that was at a local sporting event arena thing and I don't really know if they all went together or if my dad went with them or what. But I know that they were all there. I guess they did go together, but I don't know. Or they met up or something like that and I guess that prior to them going I knew that my brother and his friends were planning on taking some sort of substance or drug something or other. And that really bothered me because I physically saw what they were going to take and I think that had a huge impact on the way I felt *after* the event. But anyway, I didn't even see my brother that day which was really bizarre because we at least cross paths every day. I even had a weird feeling all day that something wasn't right. I didn't know what it was, but I knew that something was off.

Anyway, I remember sitting with my mom watching a show and getting a call from a social worker from the hospital and I immediately thought my

grandma had fallen or something happened with my grandfather. Something like that. Never in a million years did I think it would be my big brother. What happened was they said that he had some reaction to the drug that made him entirely unaware of what he was doing and I don't even know myself the complete specifics of it, but I guess he somehow fell out of a window. He broke some glass at the event and he fell seventy feet onto cement or concrete or something like that. The event where the arena was was literally next door or on the same block as the hospital downtown so they immediately rushed him to the hospital and by that point my mother and I were on our way there. And I remember calling (pause) I wish I didn't now, but I remember calling his friend who he was with a few days prior who was there when they talked about taking the drugs with me. And I remember just screaming at the top of my lungs at him. I immediately blamed him which was, I understand now, completely idiotic and stupid. But I remember that was my first reaction and, at this point, my brother was in surgery and he was in surgery for a long time, it felt like. And I remember getting to the hospital and immediately being taken upstairs to this room that you would see on TV. You know, it's just like a living room for the family. No one's talking. Everyone's just waiting for a doctor to come in and tell you something. I remember, I still, it's like a movie scene when I think about it. But I remember just waiting, and waiting, and waiting what seemed like hours and I think it may have actually been hours and when the doctor finally came in, he told us that my brother didn't make it and (starting to cry, pause) and I remember immediately collapsing to the floor and throwing up from being so, so sick (pause).

And after that point I knew that I had to be the one to tell my friend, my brother's friend who I just screamed on the phone with. I felt like it was my responsibility to tell him and tell him sorry and all of that and I can't believe to this day that I did that actually. I had the guts to tell him but I remember just family coming and just informing everyone what had happened. And I remember immediately leaving the hospital and going to my grandparents' house and waking them up in the middle of the night to tell them because I knew, we knew that my grandparents woke up really early and watched the news and we did not want them to see on the news so we knew that we had to wake them up and tell them. I remember my grandfather being so upset. I don't even think I've ever seen that emotion, that much emotion, come from anyone ever. And it was so sad to see, but after that, the next thing I remember, it's funny because how little you remember when all of this is going on. It's really hard to remember so much. But I remember, I guess the events after. You know doing visitations and with something like that, where everyone knows in so quick amount of time and to someone so young, so many people in pain. People I don't even, or I don't remember seeing many people, which is really weird cause I saw everyone, literally, but I didn't really see them. And I don't really remember their faces or who actually spoke to me, but (pause) I remember that was a super, super long day (crying). I know that my family from all over the country came in for those few days and then, (pause) let me think. Oh, and then I guess the next thing I remember would be the funeral and that's when I think, after immediately finding out the news, and then at that point I think I just didn't have emotion. I was so

shocked I was unable to feel much. But until that point that's when the emotion was at an all-time high, I think. Other than that, I don't remember much of that day either.

But I guess after the events, I was in high school, so I (pause) didn't go back to school for probably two or three weeks after that. I remember going back to school after that time and it was like a twilight zone. It was like I was not in my body. I was so afraid of everyone because I live in a very, very small community and my brother's accident ended up making national news. So I knew that everyone, no matter if I went to the store or I went to school or I went to work, but wherever I went, I knew that most people would know my story and unfortunately what was depicted on the news was entirely incorrect. The media needed a glamorized entertainment segment so I knew that that was really tough, but nobody really knew (pause) the truth and it was spun in a direction that everyone wishes it wasn't spun. And so that was really a trend right after.

The only other thing that I can think of that would be useful to know would be I remember having to go to a, what would you call it, like a support group for grieving families. I think a non-profit organization, the way they run their program is splitting the children up into age groups and then splitting the adults into categories of what the relationship to the person who they lost and whether it was like an accident or terminal illness. Things like that. And so there were programs for the parents or the brother or sister – you know, adults, I guess, who choose to go. I found it extremely unhelpful. That's why I think it's important to say because I think I was the oldest person in my group of, I think

there were seven of us, and I was the oldest by over a year and maybe a year and a half. My situation was unlike anyone else's. So I found not only that I couldn't really relate to anyone else, I just really had the idea that nobody understood what I understood at that point, even though I realized that everyone did lose someone. So it was tough for me to find it beneficial [because] I felt myself [that I] couldn't relate. And it was a program that was based on the kids speaking up and saying what they thought they wanted to do that day. So, for example, we had the ability to make crafts, or memory boxes, or write on dry erase boards memories or words, or different activities. But it was completely open to us and I'm aware that no one, let alone a group of teenagers, will come up front and talk about nearly anything, let alone something as difficult as losing a loved one. So I just found we were sitting around and twiddling our thumbs for most of the time. So I didn't really find it beneficial. Luckily though, I found this, what I shouldn't call a problem, but something that was not beneficial for me, and that's actually starting to shape what I want to do. I'm actually a psychology major myself and I wasn't originally. So the events that I've been through have helped me see potential things that I want to do and help others in the field and so, (pause) that's a lot of my story (Samantha, Interview 1).

Compared to Maya, Samantha does not discuss a lot of family history, at least initially, as she only stated that both she and her brother were each adopted by their parents from different families. However, Samantha also seemed to emphasize the importance of the sibling bond. She discussed a close, positive, playful relationship with her brother. It could be that emphasizing the sibling bond helps validate Samantha's story

of loss and the accompanying intense feelings in relation to that loss. To emphasize a type of unexplainable connection with her brother, Samantha discussed having “a weird feeling all day...that something was off” on the day that her brother ultimately died. Multiple siblings in this study report having this intense closeness or connection with their sibling which allowed them to feel that something was off or otherwise have a sense that their sibling had died before being told.

Both Maya and Samantha presented detailed stories of the moments when they actually found out about their siblings’ deaths. Each sibling recounted where they were when it happened, who was with them, and the phone calls in which they each found out about their brothers’ deaths. Samantha did become emotional during the telling of her finding out story and it seems as if the details of finding out are important to the understanding of her bigger story of loss. Even though Samantha had a feeling that something was “off” or that something bad might happen that day, she was very shocked by the sudden nature of her brother’s death and losing her brother was not something she ever anticipated would happen. Samantha also emphasized how difficult it was to see important adults in her life, particularly her grandparents, showing so much pain and emotion. Her brother Ben’s death was a sudden, violent accident and Samantha emphasized that that was one thing that made coping with her loss particularly difficult. She discussed how the media sensationalized the story, leading to almost everyone knowing about what happened to her brother, but no one really having the facts correct as far as what actually transpired the day of his death.

Samantha, similar to Maya, concluded her story of loss by highlighting something positive that came out her brother’s death. Samantha attended a grief support group for

teenagers, which she found particularly unhelpful for several reasons, and this led Samantha to thinking about how she might want to enter into the helping professions so that she could help design better programs to help other children and teenagers who had experienced grief or loss. Samantha believes that the events that she has been through regarding losing her brother have shaped what she wants to do in her life as far as her career goes. Maya, too, was inspired to pursue a certain education/career path in the helping profession based on her brother's mentorship, as a way to honor something they had intended to do together.

Melanie's Story

Melanie's initial interview was conducted in person in her private office on June 24th of 2014. Melanie and I had a previous relationship through some volunteer work together and she greeted me with a smile and a hug. Melanie is talkative and energetic. She spoke quickly and shared lots of details surrounding her story of loss. Melanie presented 'just the facts' of her story, often leaving a lot of emotion and feeling out of her re-telling. Melanie's response to the interviewer's initial statement, "Please tell me your story of loss regarding your brother," is presented below. Several reflections and comparisons to other sibling stories are presented after Melanie's story.

I guess I will start with giving a background of myself and my family. I was born, raised and continue to live in [the Midwest]. I am one of seven children to my parents. I am number two – I say 2/3 in the lineup of the bunch because I'm a twin. My oldest brother is just about two years older than Jim and I and then our youngest sibling is 10 years younger than us. So, as I said, I'm a twin, myself and my twin brother Jim. Where our journey begins is [in 2002]. My family and I had

gone out to dinner for my oldest brother Nick's 21st birthday. He had his plans lined up with friends that evening and he was going to start off by having everyone go to dinner and obviously with him being the oldest there was nobody else that could really partake in the activities that evening...So we went to dinner. The only one that wasn't able to make it that evening was my sister Gina who is the middle one of all of us. She is number four. She had to work, but the rest of us were there for dinner. Whenever we got there, which I don't really remember this part, but it was more of a conversation that Jim had with my dad. [Jim] had [recently] purchased a [sports car] and he was very proud of that car. He had worked very hard to save up the money to make a down payment and he was very proud of his purchase. Well, he had just gotten it back because maybe a month or so before he had gotten into a minor fender bender where he hit a slick spot after it was raining and he had hit a tree so he caused some damage to his car. So he had just gotten it back after being upset over that whole ordeal and he was on his way [to dinner that evening] and he was next to this Mustang that was wanting to race or he was challenging Jim and so Jim kind of sped up a bit and then laid off, but then my dad had yelled at him and was like you know the purpose of having this vehicle isn't so you can race. It is so you can get from point A to point B and Jim was kind of bragging to him but my dad got upset about it. But as far as I know that was kind of the end of the conversation there.

So we had dinner and then from there Nick...went over to meet with his friends and the rest of us were kind of heading home...So I go home and Jim had already been home and he was getting ready to go out for the evening and he was

going over to our friend Carson's house. A bunch of our friends were going to be going over there. That night was also the night of my friend Sam's birthday so I was going to stop by there see what was going on. So Jonathan went to our friend Carson's and then I went over to Sam's and I just hung out at Sam's for a few hours and then got home. It was probably around maybe 11 or so. It wasn't anything too late and Jim wasn't home yet. Typically in the summer, whenever we would go out or do whatever we would kind of sit up and wait for the other one to get home. I don't think it was ever anything that we consciously thought to ourselves that, oh I'm going to wait until Jim gets home and see what he did. I think we just ended up staying up and then by the time we decided we were going to bed they would be home and we would kind of see whatever they did and which friends they hung out with that night. So I go home and stayed up for a while and it was probably going on around 1:30 or 2:00. I remember I was like no I'm not going to wait up any longer for him. I'm just going to go to bed. So I went to bed.

And then it was about – I can't remember if it was – it was somewhere between 5:00 and 6:00 in the morning and I hear the doorbell ringing and going out of control. It woke me up and I was kind of like what's going on. So I got up and went to the door and in the meantime I saw my dad at the top of the steps...so I went ahead and opened the door. There was a police officer standing there and then another gentleman who I would later find out was the accident reconstructionist. So I answered the door and they had said, "Are your parents home?" And I said, "Well yeah just a second." So I said, "Dad it's for you," and

my dad came downstairs and I ended up going past the steps and then went into the living room and sat behind the wall because I figured in my head, okay either Nick did something wrong or Jim did something wrong and they are in big trouble and I'm going to sit in and listen in and figure out what they did. So I just kind of sat in the chair. Then my dad had went to the door and the officer asked him, "Are you the father of [Jim]?" and he said, "Yes I am." and [the officer] said, "Well can I come in for a minute?" So my dad was like sure. Again, I wasn't thinking anything of it and again still thinking that Jim had done something wrong and he was at the police station or something like that. So I sat there and they just kind of came out and said, "I'm really sorry to tell you but there was an accident this evening and your son Jim was killed." So at that point it was all just kind of like (pause) not a daze, but it was kind of like what's going on? So I got up...and I was almost just pacing around the house thinking what's going on? Trying to almost think am I hearing this right and everything else. So then I walk by again and I heard the guy tell my dad, "I can't tell you who the other person in the vehicle was that was killed because we haven't notified their family yet, but [Brett] was the driver of the vehicle." And I was just like oh gosh and at that point I knew – not that it was going to be bad and I don't think I could ever prepare myself for what happened as far as everything after the fact but I was just like, oh gosh of all people to be driving the vehicle it was Brett, because my parents had just had a conversation with Jim and I a few days before saying that they didn't like him and that he was no longer invited over to this house. And they were like, "He is airlifted to the hospital in very serious condition and that is all we can let

you know about him but he was the driver of the vehicle.” So then I’m thinking to myself, oh gosh, he’s in bad shape too. So I’m thinking what’s going on. My dad, I guess at some point, he said something like I need to go get my wife or the officer told him you need to go upstairs and get your wife. So I guess I did another lap or something. Then I end up going upstairs and my dad was standing there at the edge of my parent’s bed and my mom was sitting up in bed and there were tears coming down her eyes (Melanie starts to tear up a little) and she said, “*What?*” She just looked and she was like “What, what happened?” My dad was like, just come downstairs. They are down at the table. So she comes downstairs and they were sitting there and she was asking about everything that was going on. At that point they really weren’t answering any questions because again they couldn’t say anything because Ken’s family at that point hadn’t been notified and so they couldn’t say anything to us. They could not tell us where it happened because it was still a live scene. I guess is what they call it, and they were still doing the reconstruction and they didn’t want us going down there, so they couldn’t tell us where it was. The only thing that they could really tell us was that Brett was the driver of the vehicle and he was airlifted to the hospital and that Jim had been killed and I guess they had said he was (long pause)-the only other thing they told us was that he was taken and transferred to the coroner’s office and then he was going to be taken to whatever funeral home. So we are just in there and my mom said, “Well what do we do now?” And it was kind of one of those things, that thinking back now we kind of see how insensitive it was, but being in my line of work I now understand it with how little training there used to be, and

still is, with death notification but the officer just said, “Call your funeral home.”

So then I was like okay. My dad was sitting there and he was like how did this happen and everything else. And [the officer is] like, “Again I can’t give you specifics.” And he’s like I will say – which this comment to this day makes me mad and makes me upset...but the officer was like, “Well you know there was a little confusion as to where Jim actually lived because he had two forms of ID.” And my dad was like, “What you talking about?” And he was like, “Well he had a [Midwest state] driver’s license which does have this address on it but then he also had [another Midwest state] driver’s license which had a totally different address on it.” And my dad was like, “What? Why would he have [another Midwest state] driver’s license?” And I was sitting there on the steps while this is going on and I said, “It was a fake ID” and my dad was like, “What?” And I was like, “It was a *fake ID*. It was a *fake ID*. The [other] license was a *fake ID*.” And my dad was like, “What - to buy beer?” And I said, “Yes dad.” I look back on that now and, granted that would have been something that would have been given back to my parents after the fact, but at the same time I just found it to be insensitive on the officer’s part. [It was] some underlying information that had nothing to do with the crash and it didn’t need to be shared with them at that point. Was there a reason for him to tell them that? If they couldn’t find us, of course. So it was kind of annoying on that part. Plus, with the whole crash, Brett, who was the driver of the vehicle, was actually the son of a [police officer]. So his dad was the first one to arrive at the scene after they got the call for the crash so he knew that Jim and Ken were both in very bad shape after the crash had

happened but he knew who they were, but I don't know if at that point he realized what the situation was and got him and his son out of there right away to kind of get him away from the crash so that the other officers could take care of whatever, because at that point his dad being there was kind of not a conflict, but it was kind of like he had other things to worry about other than being at that crash and he needed to go to the hospital to figure out what was wrong with [his son], if anything (pause).

So basically from there – I guess I should explain what happened that evening as far as what we know. So Jim was driving the evening to start and I guess he picked up Brett and Ken at some point...but it ended up that they left our friend Carson's house...and then a group of them were going to [another friend's] apartment...to go hang out at the pool. So Jim ended up taking off and going down the street...and I guess there was somebody on the road in a Mustang that they were going to race. So the stretch of [road] that they were racing on is pretty open but it's kind of a dark area...So I guess Jim had raced the guy the first go around and then they ended up parking...at this gas station...but they got out and they were kind of looking at each other's engines and looking at the cars and whatever. So then they were going to race again, but this time around, we don't know why and we will never know, but Jim ended up letting Brett drive his car to race it. So Jim got into the back passenger side of the car, Ken got into the passenger seat and then Brett was in the driver seat. So they ended up racing and...I don't know if Brett lost or won. I can't remember those details to the story, but all I know is that the race was over but Brett continued on. So he took

off...and at some point and he lost control of the vehicle...and he hit the guard rail and the guard rail went straight through the passenger side of the car. And I think it took all 60 feet of the guard rail off of it and kind of...curved the guard rail along the four lanes of the roadway and just blocked off the whole intersection. But then the car came to rest. Ken was basically split in half and his top torso and everything up ended up 60 feet in front of the car in the roadway and then the rest of him was just left in the car. Jim, I don't know, it's in the police report but I've never read it. I don't know the full extent of his injuries. I know that he was killed on contact. I think one of his arms was ripped off. I think the one side of his face...was basically unrecognizable where his jaw was ripped off and it was just kind of hanging there and then I think there was just kind of brain matter and everything all over the place too so he was killed on impact also. And I think like his chest area was crushed. So I don't know. I had heard that he had been decapitated but I don't think it got – I mean his head was barely hanging on to say the least but I don't think he was fully decapitated (tearful). But I know that there were just kind of bits and pieces of Jim and Ken kind of all over the place. Brett did not suffer any major injuries. I think there were a few scrapes and everything else but I think with the amount of blood that was all over the place, I think it was all over him, so they didn't know when they arrived the extent of his injuries, so that's why they took him to the hospital. And I think also he was freaking out when they got there so they just needed to get him away from the scene...There were a number of [nearby neighbors] that had called 911 after they heard the crash...But apparently the people in the Mustang had stopped and they

saw what happened and kind of freaked out, and they left, if I'm remembering correctly. I mean I don't know the whole details of that. But it ended up that they went to the police station the next day. They explained what happened and there were no charges or anything brought against them because they didn't do anything wrong, but I think they had gone back to the police station the next day to kind of say, "We were the other vehicle involved even though nothing happened with us" and kind of gave their side of the story to leave to the investigation.

I'm trying to think of what else I should touch on. Basically from there, after my parents were notified, the police officer left and they just said that I guess we would get more details later on and that we should just call our funeral home and start from there and at that point my mom was like, "Well I think we need to start waking up the kids to let them know." So we went upstairs. Gina, Kate, and Frannie were all sharing a bedroom at that point in my parent's house and they told them. I think we look back now and we laugh...but I remember Frannie laying in bed and my mom telling Kate and Gina what happened and Frannie wakes up and is like, "Why are you being so loud? It's the middle of the night. Be quiet." (slight laughter). So that's how she, unfortunately, found out. But we woke up Evan and told him. But our problem came with Nick because he didn't stay at our house that night. He spent the night at his friend's house that evening. So we were trying to call his cell phone and he wasn't answering and it was getting to be almost 9 or 10 and we still weren't able to get a hold of him. So finally we were looking up numbers in the Yellow Pages...so I had called [his friends house] and

he answered and I said, "It's Melanie. I *need* to talk to Nick." And he's like, "Melanie who? What's going on?" And I said, "I just need to talk to Nick." And he said, "What's the matter? Is everything okay?" And I said, "No, it's not." And he's like what's going on and he kept pressing it...and I just told him, "Jim was killed in a car accident last night and I need to talk to Nick right away." And he is like, "Oh God." So you hear him going downstairs...you could hear him waking him up and he's like it's your sister, you need to talk to her...And he was irritated because I woke him up and he was still half asleep and at that point I just handed the phone to my dad. But he came home maybe an hour or so later and just was in pieces walking down the driveway. He kept saying, "I'm going to kill him, going to kill him." And my mom said, "I understand that you are mad. Go into the garage and get a baseball bat and smack the hell out of a tree. It's not to do anything right now. You need to compose yourself or hold it together but we don't know anything that's going on." We don't know any details or anything at that point. We just need to figure out what we're going to do and go on from there for the day. So that was pretty much it.

From there, my parents had basically taken care of all the funeral arrangements. We were asked to be involved with it but I don't think any of us really wanted to or I can't remember. But I do know that that night after they went to get everything taken care of with the flowers; get everything with the funeral home, with the cemetery, they had come home and we had kind of had a family meeting...There were still people at the house but we were all just sitting in the living room together and at that point my parents had said, "It's going to be a

closed casket” and that basically there was no way that (pause)...Nobody at that point realized how bad it was because all my parents had said at that point was that there was no way they could get Jim to look like himself, so we’re just going to keep it closed. So we were all kind of like just okay with it. We didn’t know the extent of his injuries at that point because when my mom...went to the funeral home she had Jim’s black pants, his white button up, a tie, his suspenders and everything and she had them ready to give to the guy and he was like oh just sit on to that for a minute...And he told her towards the end, “I just want to let you know that there is no way that it can be an open casket because he just won’t – we can’t get him to look like he would due to his injuries.” So I think that my parents at that point kind of knew but almost maybe sheltered us from it at that point to not know what was going on. So that was kind of it.

So the next two days were just two very long, very full days of having the wake and then the funeral. I didn’t end up going to any of Ken’s services because by the time Jim’s funeral had ended Ken’s wake was that evening and I didn’t want – I didn’t want – I wanted to obviously pay my respects to Ken and his family, but at the same time I didn’t want it to take away from them, if that makes any sense. I didn’t want to show up there and have everyone go, oh there’s Melanie, and not focus on Ken and so I didn’t end up going to any of his stuff, which they understood. Ken’s family actually, you know there is typically that time in the beginning of wakes where you have that hour that it’s just family, they had come in just an hour before to pay their respects and then just get in and get out before everything had started with that as well. So that’s kind of where our

journey began (Melanie, Interview 1).

Melanie began the story of her brother Jim's death by stating that she was going to share a bit about herself and her family history. She did provide a bit of family structure by sharing that she is one of seven siblings, but then she quickly moved into talking about what happened the day of Jim's death. Melanie provided many, many details in her story of loss. Most of these details were surrounding the day of her brother's death, including another sibling's birthday celebration that began the evening and the details of the car crash that killed Jim. It seemed important for her to know all of these details, which could be related to the fact that she points out in the beginning of the interview how frustrating it was to not know exactly what happened with regard to her brother's death. Melanie went back and forth a bit regarding the timeline of events, but for the most part she jumped right into her story of loss and provided a consistent, chronological, detailed account of the day her brother died. It was clear Melanie has told this story before and it seems as if she is more comfortable providing all of the details rather than providing an emotional account of the events. However, she does begin to get emotional at certain points in the story, including when she saw her mom so distraught, which is similar to other sibling stories of the difficulty in seeing important adults have such strong emotional responses.

I could sense some anger through a lot of what Melanie was saying. Her brother Jim was killed in a car accident in which her brother's acquaintance was drinking alcohol and racing another car when the crash occurred. The unexpected, violent, and gruesome way in which her brother died certainly appeared to impact Melanie's story of loss. She shared about how difficult it was for her family to find out the gory details of the car

crash, how upsetting it was when they discovered they would not be able to have an open casket at the funeral, and how the specific way in which her brother died complicated her own grieving process. Similar to both Maya and Samantha who experienced the sudden, unexpected loss of their siblings, Melanie reported a sense of shock and disbelief or being almost “in a daze” upon finding out about her brother’s death.

It is interesting that the focus of Melanie’s story was mostly on the day of the crash and the details surrounding that day, including herself and her family finding out about the death. Toward the end of her story, Melanie briefly discussed the funeral and “ends” her story by saying, “That is kind of where our journey began.” The emphasis on the details of the day and the car crash and exactly how her brother was killed could be the majority of Melanie’s story because these details are so important to her and to her family. A difficult time for both Melanie and her family occurred when they found out that her brother had been killed in a car accident. Other than hearing that he had died, no other details of the incident could be given to the family and that time of not knowing was characterized by a lot of anger and confusion. In many ways, Melanie still seemed to be searching for more details about exactly what happened on the night her brother was killed. Although Melanie did not initially share her grieving process or many of the ways in which she grieved the loss of her brother, she was able to share her grieving process after I asked. She recounted some of the difficult emotions she experienced in her grief as far as unsupportive friends and seeing how upset her siblings and other family members were. Also, she discussed what we have heard both Maya and Samantha talk about which is the devastation in losing the sibling bond, and in her case, how it was particularly difficult to lose her twin brother.

Anna's Story

Anna's initial interview was conducted over the phone on June 26th of 2014. Anna was talkative and shared her story of loss quite openly. She spoke quickly and seemed nervous about the interview process, but also excited about the possibility of spreading the word about sibling grief, a cause that is quite important to her. Anna had a very matter of fact way of speaking that did not involve much emotion. Her story was a bit different than the other siblings who were interviewed and she shared upfront, almost as if it was a necessary confession, that she and her sister Cleo did not get along very well throughout her lifetime. Anna's response to the interviewer's initial statement, "Please tell me your story of loss regarding your sister," is presented below. Following her story, I have highlighted several important concepts in addition to drawing important comparisons to other sibling stories of loss.

(Speaking very fast) I'm Anna and I'm the youngest of three kids and we're all two years apart. So my sister was the oldest. She was the one who passed way. Her name is Cleo and she was four years older than me. I never got along very well with her. I always got along better with my brother. Unfortunately, Cleo had a number of issues. She wasn't...she was just slower than most people. She was verbally very high functioning, but math and sort of seeing consequences of the future was not something that she could do...She could always express herself very well with her words, but then at the same time she was just emotionally very immature. It really isolated her from a lot of people. She was also smart enough to know that there was something different about her, which made her resentful. So even the people that were nice to her, who would

reach out to her, like there's always somebody who's kind in high school who will reach out to that kid who's a little bit off...and she just ignored them and she would then try to go after who she thought was the cute boy or the cool girl...So she sort of put herself in a lot of positions that would provide her with a lot of pain as opposed to comfort. But the one thing though that she did very well was singing...We grew up in the [Mid Atlantic] area and she sang in operas...She was in the children's chorus. She got five offers with [well known opera company] growing up and we thought she would become an opera singer because they can be eccentric and sort of goofy and nobody really thinks much of it.

Then, unfortunately...growing up, like if I had the flu, she had to stay home too like she had the flu too. It was just always sort of like this hypochondria type of thing with her. And then, you know, any normal woman when she's got cramps, she'd just take some Advil, but she needed to go to the hospital to get muscle relaxers. It was just always this extreme for her with anything. Like if she bruised her arm, she said it was broken and that she had to go to the hospital and get an x-ray done. It was always taken to extremes with her with her health and this continued, unfortunately, after she turned eighteen and we couldn't control over what she was doing anymore. So she would just go around and to hospitals and she would shop. And I think a lot of it came from, she had a lot of this emotional pain which she then manifested it into physical pain. So, she probably was in some amount of physical pain, but she was really I think trying to treat emotional pain. So she would go out to hospitals, get all these different muscle relaxers, things like that, Oxycontin or whatever it's called. All of those types of

heavy duty painkillers.

Then, when she was about twenty-one, so she actually did go off to college, cause like I said, she was very high functioning verbally. She did graduate from high school. Her math skills are pretty bad, but she went to school for music. She was out at [University in the Western region of the United States]...So she was out at the university and she was twenty or twenty-one and they called to say that they had to send her home because I guess she had been threatening to kill herself. So she was never really suicidal which, I know other kids you're going to speak with, their siblings did die from a suicide. Cleo wasn't suicidal. She was just - I think it was her way of expressing how she felt. She just felt that there was a lot going on. She was very much in pain and that she didn't know how else to say this to people without saying, "I'm valid. I'm going to kill myself."

So my parents had to pull her out from school and they brought her home. And those next two years, that's when I was finishing up high school, I might have been tenth grade, she had to come home. She was probably twenty-one. She might have been twenty or twenty-one, cause I was maybe fifteen or sixteen. So somewhere around there, between nineteen and twenty-one was when things really went downhill with her. I was at home and my brother was away in school in [another country]. So he wasn't there for a lot of this, but it was a lot of very scary nights with her. Because she was still, cause she was in the mental institution for a while. That's where she spent her twenty-first birthday was in the mental institution. And then she came back home, but her medicines, they were

still, it's the psychiatric meds, and they were still sort of getting it balanced out. At the same time too, she still kept hording all of these pills, like the really heavy duty painkillers. And so the combination of the two, I mean it was frightening. She would pick up a knife and start walking around the house. She tried to push me down the stairs once. It was just like this constant walking on eggshells sort of thing. And actually at the time, I had a car, and I put some huge amount of miles on it because I would just drive the car out and I would just go sit somewhere and I would just go to be by myself because I didn't want to be home with her. So Cleo and I had a very difficult relationship. And when my brother did come home finally from break and he saw how bad it was, he felt very guilty that he wasn't there to sort of help everybody with the situation. And because he wasn't there for the bad part with Cleo, he got along better with her. Because I didn't have it in my heart to forgive her for all of the things that she had done, but he had that because he didn't see all the bad things. So they had a better relationship.

But anyway, then finally I was in college. I was in my final year of college and Cleo had been living with my parents, just the three of them, and it was just unbearable. It was really hard for my parents and on their marriage. My father is very religious. He's Catholic and he was always of the opinion that if Cleo went to church more and prayed more and had that support, that then she'd get better. I don't share that same opinion, anymore at least. And my mom didn't either. So my mom and dad had a lot of arguments about what to do with her. And then also it's very expensive...I mean it's very expensive to hospitalize somebody, to get them into rehab, even to try and get them committed. I mean, it's not just the

money, but even just trying to get the hospital to take the person that's involuntary is next to impossible. So it was very difficult on their marriage. Then they finally decided they were going to have Cleo moved out. So, we lived in [Mid Atlantic state]. My parents lived in the suburbs. They got an apartment for Cleo in [the] downtown [area]. And I remember I was a senior in college when they did this and I remember crying to one of my random professors who I haven't even spoken to since being in college, but, I had some final project due for his class, and he was a very sensitive guy. He grew up in a house where there was a lot of instability in the house. His parents probably had three hundred foster kids come through the door, and he's also one of twenty children. He's the only biological child. All the rest of the kids were adopted. So he was very sensitive about mental health issues and the drug addictions and everything. So I kind of broke down crying to him cause I just said I need extra time on my project because my parents have decided to have my sister moved out and I think she's going to die. Cause I didn't think she could be on her own. Cause as impossible as it was to have her around, I thought if she didn't have the supervision that she would just end up overdosing on something.

So I had sort of like this premonition, I guess back when I graduated from school that something like this could happen. And, I guess in that summer after I graduated from school, I guess it was June or July or something, it was 2009, my parents went by to go see Cleo cause they were supposed to fly out to some foreign country...So they went by to go see Cleo just to make sure she had groceries and everything for the week and she was just, she was like a puddle,

they said. She was just completely high on all of her painkillers and she was confused about everything. She didn't know what year it was. She couldn't answer basic questions. She could barely even walk. And so at first, actually, I think it was my mother - I think my mom was very mad and so she just wanted to leave the house and leave Cleo. But then my dad convinced her and he said, "No, we can't leave her. We need to take her to the hospital cause she's going to die." And thank goodness they did that, cause I don't know what my mother would have done with that guilt if that would have been the moment that she died. So then they took her to the hospital. They had to delay their trip obviously, and then she got recommitted again to...a dual diagnosis disorder program that she got put into of the mental illness, cause she was diagnosed as bipolar back when she was twenty [or] twenty-one, and then also something to treat the addiction. But the problem was that Cleo was just convinced that she was in more pain than everybody else, and so she needed the pills. She wouldn't admit that it was an addiction that caused her to need the pills. So that was the issue with her is that she didn't see herself as slower than everybody else...She didn't see herself as being an addict. She just saw herself as in pain. So it was just - it was very difficult with her. So that was June or July of 2009.

Then in December 2009, it was December 15, my mom had spent the day with her. They had to go to some doctor's appointment. My sister never learned how to drive. It was too complicated for her, so she took the buses quite a bit. But sometimes my mom would take her to different appointments if it was an appointment my mom thought she might not come to. My mom took her out for

her appointment and then she took her out to the pharmacy to go buy some more hair products. Cleo loved her hair and she was always buying more hairclips and all sorts of things. She always had very elaborate hairdos. So she took her out to a pharmacy to buy some more hairclips and then they went to go eat at some hamburger place. It's in [Mid Atlantic region]. So they eat there and then my mom dropped her off back at her apartment and then that was the last she saw of her. That night, Cleo called cause she was confused. She thought that somebody famous had died. I can't remember who it was she thought had died. It was somebody who did end up dying. It might have been like Steve Jobs or something, but it was somebody random, not super famous, or famous in their own field but you wouldn't necessarily have heard of them. But she called and she said this person died. And she seemed very convinced of it and very confused about it too. So then we turned on the news and we were like Cleo, you know we were watching the [hockey] game. We're an ice hockey family. So it was like Cleo, we're watching a [hockey] game. This person didn't die. Why don't you turn on the game instead? And so then she got off the phone and that was it.

And then, the next day, it was December 16, my mom got a phone call from her building and they said it looks like Cleo has been in an accident. Could you just come by to the building, like everything's going to be fine. And so my mom drove over there, and I think as she was driving over there she got more nervous about what the accident could've been. Because we had always thought actually because of when Cleo was on her meds, she was on her meds plus the painkillers, she was like a zombie. I once saw her, I was coming up the metro

escalator and she was coming down the metro escalator, and that's a long ride, but she's falling asleep – like on the metro – on the escalator. And it's just one of those things that we just thought at some point, she would slip trying to get on and off the bus, she might get hit by a train car cause she might've tripped and fallen into it or something. We just thought that would be the way that she would go. So my mom was worried about what this accident could possibly be, and when she got there, then they told her, "Cleo's dead." And I guess what happened was that she – there was (exhale) an exterminator, because she lived in an apartment building, so the exterminator was going to come into all the apartments that day to spray and stuff, and he knew Cleo cause Cleo didn't work so she was often at home when he would come by. And so he came by to go spray and he saw Cleo on her couch, which is where she normally slept anyway. But he noticed that she was on the couch and at first he thought she was asleep so he went to go wake her up and then he realized that she wasn't there anymore. So then my mom had to sort of deal with it and started to inform all the family and everything, and so she did feel guilty cause then she was wondering if she should've come over cause Cleo had sounded so confused the night before, but, you know, I was with her too when she got the phone call and I didn't think much of it. I just thought Cleo was just being...goofy because lots of times these sorts of things happen with her.

And since then, I've just been really surprised how the grief has affected me cause I sort of explained to you my relationship with her. I mean it wasn't good. A lot of it, I think, kind of came from the fact too that I was like a popular normal girl who did well in school and had lots of friends and she just wasn't that

person and that's who she wanted to be. So... we just never got along and especially when things got so bad with her mental health and she was always such an angry person and such a violent person that I just couldn't get along with her and I couldn't forgive her for all the things that she did. So I was really surprised when she died by how much it affected me. How sad it made me. How much it's really changed my life.

When she died in 2009, I was working at my first job then. And at the job they were actually fairly sensitive to... that I lost my sister. Cause I know a lot of other siblings who write on the [online sibling grief group] have experienced a lack of sympathy from people who just don't understand. But I really haven't experienced that. The worst I've experienced is somebody, actually at that job in [the Mid Atlantic region], it was like a year after my sister died, or a year and a half after my sister died, and her cat died and she had had her cat for eighteen years. And she had this cat from when she was married to her first husband, to when she got divorced, to now when she got married to her second husband, and she just sort of felt like the cat was like her daughter, and so she basically asked me something that – a comparison of her cat and my sister, and that was pretty much the only insensitive thing I think I ever heard. Otherwise, everybody was pretty... nice about it. And the other thing too that's been nice is that nobody has said to me, "But oh, you didn't get along with your sister. Why do you care that she's dead?" which I was worried people might say because people knew I didn't get along with her. And actually a lot of people, even in my office then, cause I started my job in August 2009 and then Cleo died in December 2009. When I got

the news, cause I was at work when my dad called me to say that she died, and I just burst into tears and I tried to explain to my boss at the time what happened and I could barely formulate any words, and the first thing she said was, "I didn't even know you had a sister." Cause I just didn't talk about her. Cause she was a difficult topic for me, so I just didn't really share her with a lot of people cause it was just difficult to try and explain. I think it's when you have a sibling who's an addict, I think then a lot of people they would look at me thinking that I might have some more issues and I just didn't want people to think that. So I think that's why I didn't bring her up. That's probably my own insecurity about it. So I just never talked about it. I talked about my brother all the time, but never mentioned my sister.

So...I got a couple days off work for bereavement leave and then I would take days off for sick leave. Luckily we also had two major snow storms that winter, so I got a lot of time off work because of that. Then, I continued working for almost three, three and a half years at that company, but then I just needed a change. My brother had moved up to [West Coast] a few years back and he really liked [the West Coast]. Losing Cleo made it like more clear how important my siblings were to me, so I wanted to be closer to him. So I moved out there and the boyfriend I had, he came with me. And now, actually, that boyfriend's now my fiancé. But basically we went out to [the West Coast] for the year. I thought we would be there sort of indefinitely. But then, I don't know, it's like the grief caught up to me. And I just couldn't do anything. I got to the point where I was supposed to catch the 8:30 bus to get to work and I was rolling out of bed at 8:15

to try and get all my shit together and then get out the door and it was just...Like on the weekends I just wouldn't get out of bed unless [my boyfriend] was in town. I just couldn't do anything. I could feel sort of like this depression setting in. So I decided to quit my job to sort of deal more with the grief...I don't know, everything just seemed so dumb to me. Like whenever somebody, cause I worked in legal marketing, so basically they support lawyers in their business development efforts, but a lot of them don't appreciate what you're doing anyway, so they just sort of see you like an annoyance. And then on top of it all too, I would just get these requests for pitch materials or for research on a company and I just thought all of it was just so meaningless. I was like don't people know that people are starving in this world. I became like that idealist, that annoying kid who is like protesting everything in high school. I just constantly was just sitting thinking to myself that I was doing something so useless. I don't help anybody. I'm not making the world a better place. I'm just making more money. So I end up just quitting. I didn't even make it a full year at that job. I just quit after nine months. Luckily my boss I had there was a pretty sensitive person...And there were no hard feelings about me leaving. But I made the decision I was going to go back to graduate school.

And I basically have not been working now for the last year. I quit at the end of May - May 2009 and I've been living in [the Pacific Northwest] ever since then with my now fiancé and he has just been taking care of me. He's been working, so he's been handling everything financially for us. My parents are paying for me to go back to graduate school, which is nice, because I don't think I

would've been able to afford to go back. It would've just been too much. And so...it's just sort of like now I'm planning my wedding and if Cleo was alive, probably most of my anxiety about the wedding would be like what do I do with Cleo? Like, what do I do when she starts to act out? What do I do when she insists on doing this, or singing, or doing something, or just drawing attention to herself? But now it's almost like – I know this is going to sound terrible – but I guess I'd always assumed that when Cleo died there would be a burden lifted off from all of our shoulders, but it hasn't been that way at all. We just have been even more sad about it or wanting her to be around for all these new events. Cause she was very difficult, there was always sort of this background discussion of...my brother's a musician and I'm not so it was always something that like that I need to get the good job that pays well, because Cleo will probably have to live with [my brother] cause he gets along with her, but I'll be the one supporting her financially. And there was just always this tacit agreement between the two of us that this would be what would happen after our parents died. So maybe I think cause I realized she had died, like I don't need to just work for money anymore. I can do what I want to do. So I am going back to school for a master's of public administration, which is sort of like an MBA, but it's for the non-profit and public sector. Because then I could possibly be helping people when I graduate, which would be nice.

Yeah, it's just been one of these things that I didn't really know I would be so, (pause) I didn't know I'd be so sad about it. And my brother got married in the summer of 2012...or was it summer 2011...I'm a terrible sister! I can't remember

what year he got married, but anyways, he got married that summer. I'm guessing it was about two summers after Cleo passed away and it was hard. My parents were like zombies at the wedding. They were not really that involved in anything. They *couldn't* get involved in anything. I think they were just pissed that Cleo wasn't there. And then suddenly it just hit me that Cleo wasn't there and I just ran off and just cried for hours after the wedding because I just, I couldn't deal with it. All of our lives are just moving on and things just keep happening and she's not there for any of this. And as much as I didn't get along with her, I know she would've had fun at the wedding. So then now, even just with planning my wedding, I'm anxious now about how I'll act or what kind of emotions I'm going to feel on the day of the wedding. Just knowing that she won't be there...but that's something I never – back...when Cleo was alive I would just think about how much I hated her, basically, when she was alive, thinking that it's going to be so much easier when's she dead, and it's shocking to me that that's not the case.

And I did see a grief counselor briefly after Cleo had died and he had this line about complicated relationships make for complicated grief and it's just very true and that's what the case has been with me. I didn't continue seeing him much more. I think I saw him only for maybe four or five sessions cause he started to get...[inappropriate] and it was weird...So, I stopped seeing him basically cause of that. But soon after I stopped seeing him, that's when I met [Amy]. I don't know if you've seen her posting in the [online sibling grief] group or not, but I met Amy and we sort of went ahead and forged this sibling's group of children who have lost a sibling. And I was pretty active in that group in [the Mid Atlantic

region]. We would meet once a month for coffee. And it was nice hanging out with them, but still the thing that I missed, and I even went to one of the [national grief conferences] and met other siblings, but the thing that I was still missing in that group, cause all these people really loved [their siblings]. Like your sister, she died by a drunk driver who hit her right? ((Yes.)) So you really loved your sister. I think there was quite a few years between you and you must've looked up to her, and I didn't have that same relationship with my sister. And so the thing I feel is missing from all of this, is a group for kids who hated their siblings and then are really surprised that the grief has been so hard. Because I just feel like I haven't been able to find anybody to connect on that level with and cause even like Amy, when I first heard her story, I thought oh, you have somebody to relate to because her brother died of a heroin overdose, but it turns out that her family didn't even know he was doing heroin until he died of an overdose. And so there was never that same anger with him while he was still alive. She now feels it now that he's dead. But she didn't have that while he was alive so it didn't complicate their relationship. He was just her goofy little brother. But I knew about all of Cleo's issues while she was alive, and so it's made this quite hard. That's the thing I feel is missing...or maybe it's just my own insecurity or I think it doesn't entitle me to be grieving over her because I knew I didn't get along with her or I didn't really love her in the same way these other folks have loved their siblings. Cause I know if my brother died, I mean that would just be devastating cause we're such good friends and I talk to him all the time, but with Cleo, I didn't think it was going to be this way, and yet it still is. It's devastating.

It just completely changes your family dynamic. I think that's the other thing people don't realize about losing a sibling. They think it's like, oh you lost a sibling, you know, whatever. Like now you're down to two kids in the family. But no, it's so much more. Your parents are constantly missing that child of theirs and it changes their way of how they interact with you. You're also seeing more of that human side of your parents cause so often you just think your parents are superheroes until you see them as real humans. And seeing my parents with the way that they are and having to sort of take care of them more, like emotionally, just feels like you have these fragile people who really need help. So that changes everything. There's just that one other voice gone so when something new happens, we'll sit around wondering, like what would Cleo have done, or what would Cleo have said, or how would she have reacted? What was cute actually, was that a while back...at some point in our relationship [my fiancé] asked me, "Would Cleo have liked me?" And I just thought that was really sweet. And I think that's really, for me, when I was like he's great! Because I've got a feeling that no other man would've been comfortable even saying her name knowing that she was dead and he just said would she have liked me? And some friends didn't even care to think about that. And to think that she probably wouldn't have because he was my boyfriend (laughing). So probably she wouldn't have liked him because she didn't really like any of my friends cause they were my friends. But yeah, it was just very kind of him. So that's sort of why I always feel bad for the other siblings when they post to these [online sibling grief] groups about these people who are insensitive to them, or just don't want to understand their grief, or

don't want to let them grieve because I haven't had that experience, really. I think it's just in my own feelings that have held me back from really experiencing grief and probably why it took me so long for it to hit me, and I had to wait four years to really start to grieve her death (Anna, Interview 1).

As Anna explained, she feels her story and her grief is different from many other sibling stories that she has heard because of the complicated relationship she had with her sister prior to her sister's death. Anna provides details that paint an important picture of her family's life together while Cleo was alive. It appears important to Anna that others understand some of Cleo's personality and the issues and struggles that she had in her life. In a lot of ways, the family was centered around taking care of Cleo. Although Anna and Cleo undoubtedly had a rocky relationship, it is still evident in Anna's story the strength of the sibling bond and the impact that this sibling relationship had on her life regardless of how well they got along on the day to day. Anna grew up with Cleo, she was aware of her struggles in school and in relationships, she knew her strengths and her hobbies, and she was involved in the worrying about Cleo, her life, and her future. In fact, similar to stories shared by Maya and Samantha, Anna explained further exemplified the bond between herself and her sister when she shared about having a "premonition" that her sister would die.

Anna's sister Cleo died in a violent, unexpected manner through an accidental overdose. At multiple points in her story, Anna discussed some of the stigma related to this type of death and stigma related to drug/addiction problems in general. It still seems difficult for Anna to talk about her sister in terms of her being a drug addict or struggling with addiction. She does use this language at some points, but early on in her story, Anna

sort of talks around this issue and is not quick to label her sister in this way. This could be because in her eyes, her sister Cleo was so much more than an addiction. Anna does mention that prior to her sister's death, it was difficult for her to talk about Cleo because of all the problems Cleo was struggling with, so she often did not talk about her sister with other people, such as co-workers. Then, once Cleo died, Anna was surprised by the amount of grief and pain that she felt. It seemed she needed to talk about Cleo after her death and there is some sense of her feeling guilty for this.

Anna emphasized the important impact that losing Cleo had on the whole family dynamic. She discussed how she herself misses Cleo and feels sad, but reiterates how other people who have not had this experience tend to overlook just how much the whole family system changes after this kind of loss. She discussed her parents being changed because they are always missing that child who is gone. Additionally, her relationship with her parents is different because her parents interact with her differently now that Cleo is gone and she views her parents as more fragile and more in need of being taken care of, which is something she had not previously thought about. Similar to Maya and Melanie, it was so hard and overwhelming for Anna to see her parents in so much pain. She took on a caretaker role, similar to Maya, so that she became consumed with caring for her parents during their grief, that her grief was postponed until about four years after Cleo's death. Although taking care of her parents could be part of the reason her grief was delayed, it could also be that Anna was not in a place in her life where she felt ready or able to experience the intensity of her grief.

Anna mentioned multiple times how surprised she was at just how much her grief after Cleo's death has impacted her life. She feels lonely and isolated in her grief, as other

siblings mention, but perhaps even more so because Anna feels as if she often cannot even relate to other grieving siblings because her own personal experience of having a rocky relationship with Cleo is so unique. One major way that Anna discussed the impact grieving has had on her life is that it spurred her into contemplating the meaning of her own life. She was working a job she did not really like, only focusing on the money she was making, and the work she was doing felt useless. Anna talked about how her grief led her to re-examine her life and led her to the conclusion that she wanted to pursue a career path that would be more meaningful where she could do work that might make a difference in the lives of others. Again, this is similar to stories from Maya, Samantha, and even Melanie (in subsequent interviews) where they feel as if the path they have chosen in life was impacted by the loss of their siblings.

Jon's Story

Jon's initial interview was conducted in person at a private location on June 11th of 2014. Jon and I shook hands upon greeting one another. Jon was soft-spoken, polite, and appeared somewhat nervous to share his story of loss. He was emotional many times throughout the telling of his story and often presented with a nervous laughter when upset. Jon's response to the interviewer's initial statement, "Please tell me your story of loss regarding your brother," is presented below. Several important reflections, along with some comparisons to other sibling stories are presented at the conclusion of Jon's story.

Alright. I guess this was when I was about ten years old. We just kind of noticed that Jason wasn't hitting the milestones that he should. He wasn't progressing properly and that kind of put a red flag up to my parents. We had him

checked out by the doctors. He was originally diagnosed with cerebral palsy and then, when things weren't getting better, they had to fight the doctors to get the testing that they needed. And then they finally sent him to a neurologist and then we found out (pause) I think Valentine's Day, right before he turned two. We found out that he was diagnosed with leukodystrophy, and that is, it just affects the myelin sheath or coating that protects your nerves and if you lose that, you pretty much can't function neurologically and you just slowly regress back into a vegetative state; not really knowing what's going on and stuff like that. That was hard. The first diagnosis. Because our parents were pretty open about everything and then that bomb was kind of dropped (laughs). I mean, I was young. I didn't really understand. I knew something was wrong, but just really didn't understand it at the time. Until now, when I can actually do research online and figure [stuff] out, go back and it's like, oh yeah, that happened (laughs).

So then that kind of set things forward to where he had to undergo MRIs and other testing. He, because he wouldn't eat anything, they had to put in a G-tube, so I got to learn how to do that. Got to help out with that. And then, pretty much it was just one thing after another. He wouldn't roll on the floor anymore. He wouldn't (pause)-he would just sit there because he couldn't do anything. Cause his muscles wouldn't move. Kind of seeing that regression, it scared me a little bit and I didn't know. I would ask my parents questions and then I could see that they were hurt because they understood what was going on and, I, at the time didn't. But that's when I got to help out, taking care of him and everything and then when I started taking care of him more is when I learned more about what

the disease was and what's going on, or how it was.

So, we prayed; prayed for a miracle. Miracle didn't happen (laughs). It was tough. And then it kind of puts you in a state that I haven't gotten over yet. But I'm mad at God. Why? Why did you have to do that to us? Why did our family have to go through that? And just getting back to where we were taught, trust God. I don't trust him anymore (laugh) because of what happened. But yeah, and then they brought in a therapist and everything and they helped. They had us homeschooled, so at the whole time we're pretty tight knit family. So, I had a pretty good support system. If I had an issue, I could talk to my mom, my dad, whatever. They'd cry with us (laugh). They didn't hide it. Because they - we all knew we were upset.

So, we had therapists come in. The [specific home aide] program. I think that it was run by the state. They brought in the therapist and everything to try and help out and do as much as they could. We had social workers at our house trying to provide as much support as they can to try and get all the medical equipment and everything that he needed to survive, like feeding pumps and all that, special foam mattresses and stuff so he wouldn't get bed sores...pretty much any durable medical equipment we needed we could get and then doctors followed along with us. Dr. Smith out at [large hospital in Midwest] is an amazing neurologist. I love that man to death. He supported us throughout the entire process. He cried with us in the office when he said...it's probably going to be about a year or two. You're going to notice these regressions and Jason would wind up getting worse. Pretty much every time we went wasn't good news. And then that's when, this was over

the course of probably a couple of years, and they finally recommended hospice as an option for us. That's when they had social workers had us all set up and had um the hospice program come in and kind of help take some of the stress off of my mom and dad, (laughs) with at least the care part. Having the nurses come in two or three times a week. That was big help for them. Big, big help. Having more options for support and expressive therapy helped out a lot. I know with my sister it did. It kind of helped out with me too. Well, just to step away and get out of that kind of mindset. You know, we still love Jason and everything, but it's time for us, having, I guess it's, me time kind of helps big time. And then when the volunteers would come in and they'd take us out to like movies. Just get us out of the house because we really couldn't do anything as a family just because if we were to take Jason anywhere, we could risk getting him sick and we didn't want to do that (laughs). Because if we were to do that, if he got sick it'd be very, very, very bad. He wound up with pneumonia twice. Just because he couldn't move. He had to go to the hospital a couple times, but, other than that, all of his care was at home.

So I guess I played a big part in helping take care of him. I took on that big brother role (laughs)...I babysat, did as much as I could with his medicines and stuff and making sure he was fed. Pretty much anything my parents taught me how to do to help sustain him for that period of time. So, we had to grow up fast! *Very, very fast!* We had, (pause) my parents made the best of it. My sister kind of had a better childhood. I took on - I have to help take care of Jason. Have to (laughs)! And she kind of took on...a little bit less responsibility. You know, went

out with her friends more when she was younger. I pretty much stayed home. I had one good friend in the neighborhood that I would hang out with and we either hang out at my house or his house (laughs) between the two. And pretty much I stayed home and helped the parents do stuff around the house. Helped pick up the slack a little bit. I don't know where I was going to go with that, but (laughs), I grew up very, very, very fast. I learned how to give him his Diazepam and everything. So I was pushing that at nine or ten years old. Whenever he would have seizures, it'd scare the crap out of me (laughs). [It was] tough. Very, very tough to see all this go on.

Actually a little bit of it and what my parents would tell me, books we would read, other resources. Cause at that time, I mean we had dial-up (laugh). That's how long ago it was (laughs). But...we would search it. I did my own research. We were taught at a very early age that you learned how to look it up yourself. You don't ask mom. And, I mean, mom and dad would be there to help look it up, but (pause) they taught us how to look stuff up and kind of be self-sufficient. Everything that I read ultimately led to death and I was like, okay (laughs). You know, didn't really understand that totally. I mean my mom and dad had a couple of miscarriages when we were younger. But when you're 8 or 9 years old, you just have no concept of death whatsoever. At that point we never had any grandparents pass away or anything like that. We didn't even have any animals or anything to kind of go, oh yeah, that's what that is (laughs). So pretty much no concept of that and if we brought the subject up, mom and dad would just kind of avoid it a little bit. They didn't want to talk about it, which is

understandable, especially being in their position. They knew it and we kind of knew it, but they were kind of in the denial phase. As I look back it, have you seen the Youtube video of the giraffe when he's in the quicksand? Every [phase], the denial, the anger, we went through all of that. And my parents just weren't in a position to talk about it. I understood. No one wants to talk about their child dying, their sibling dying, you know (pause, Jon starting to tear up).

But, going back to the hospice stuff and the hospice care, [it was] absolutely amazing. I don't know what we would've done without them (laughs). It would've been a lot tougher just because we were our own support group. We had friends from our home school group and we had close friends from church that would help out [and] be there for us, but our family, our extended family, totally abandoned us. I don't know if it was just because they didn't know what to do, or it was just that that situation just scared them. I look back at it and it sucked very much. We'd only see our family maybe on Thanksgiving and Christmas and that was it, and we were lucky if we saw them then. We were all pretty much close knit and it kind of just tore us apart, and still to this day, it's never been repaired. It's hurt us pretty bad (laughs, pause). But yeah, just having our friends become our family and we're still friends with everyone that stood by us the entire time [and] were there with us. [It is] like a special bond that you can't break once you go through that as friends or as a family.

So, then, as Jason regressed more and more, his seizures got worse [and] closer together. It didn't seem like the Valium was doing its job. He would get fluid in his lungs from the feedings. Even though we would move him around and

hold him and stuff, he never got bed sores or anything like that because we made sure of that. It's just seeing that regression and everything. We kind of knew and the nurses knew too...like after a year he was in the program, they knew. They originally gave him six months and then he was in the program for a year [or] two years and just surprised them all because they just didn't think, because no one really knows about leukodystrophy. It's not, it's not a widely researched thing and there's just not a lot of cases out there. [It is a] very, very, very rare genetic disease. The regression that he had towards the end - we had to stop his feedings and everything and that was pretty tough. Those last, I think it was a month and a half, where we had to stop the feedings and just comfort care. It was really, really tough in that house. Everyone was anxious. They were upset. We were angry. Going through that whole - life just sucked (laugh). It very much sucked. And then having to do...school, and everything else on top of that. It was difficult.

And then one night he just, my parents were sitting on the sofa watching TV, and Jason would sit...pretty much his sofa (laughs). That was his chair and he would stay there, pretty much through the night just because it was easier than walking him up and down the stairs. Cause we slept in the same room for a long time until things got bad. It was kind of easier to transport, or keep him downstairs, then take him upstairs, and then downstairs in the morning. And my parents didn't like the fact that he could pass away in my room (laughs) and then leave me there, I mean, I want to go back in my room. So he stayed down there for the last few weeks of his life. And just one night, my parents were watching TV, and they saw him kind of get that spark of energy that I've seen in everyone,

when I took care of them at the hospital or kind of see in my own thing at hospice when I volunteered. He got that burst of energy and then a couple of hours later, he was gone. And, I'll never forget that night (deep breath, starting to cry). My parents woke us up, me and my sister. I kind of knew something was up. I kind of had a feeling. I couldn't get to sleep. Restless sleep. Rolling around in bed all night and then, it's about two o'clock in the morning that night. It was Memorial Day weekend, [they] came in and I kind of guessed what was going on because my parents had that look on their face, and (speaking softly) I knew. I just started crying. Crying my eyes out the entire night and into the early morning. It was – it is the worst feeling. I felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest and smashed into a million pieces. It's kind of hard to describe because that whole week it's just, it was like a blur. I remember parts of it, but I don't know if my subconscious just isn't ready to go back there.

I remember the funeral. I remember our family coming in, a lot of church people, friends from church (sniffing). I remember a lot of people at the funeral, like a ton of people (laughs). My dad's a lieutenant for the county police, so the entire department was there and family and close friends and our pastor. But, it was a beautiful day (laughs). Very, very beautiful. [The] funeral was under the tree outside. Perfect. A perfect way to send him off. But, it's just a blur. I just remember crying a lot, being upset, and still not, I'm still not totally over it, even though that's six years ago. I think 2005, so yeah that's about six or seven years. I'm still not totally over it. There's some things that I'll see. I'll see people at work. I'll see someone my age with his brother that's like fifteen (laughs). Cause

that's how old Jason would be and it just - I don't know what it is. It's just like a trigger and then I got a little bit upset. I kind of have to gather myself up and (laughs), kind of compartmentalize it and move on. It's just difficult. Very, very, very difficult. Constant reminders, like I'll see something that he would have liked or even seeing teenagers drive their car. The permit driver stickers in the window now. It just sets me off a little bit.

We're not totally over it as a family yet. We remember him on his birthday and then Memorial Day weekend and then constantly throughout the year. Cause he's not there for those big family events. He wasn't there when I graduated high school, when I graduated basic. He wasn't there when I graduated tech school for the Air Force or for my promotion ceremony. There's some things that he's missed, but, you kind of feel him there (tears up). But I'd rather him actually be there (laughs). That's kind of our story a little bit.

Pretty much the year that Jason died is when I started volunteering for Hospice and volunteering with [hospice program]. I think I was eleven or twelve...Cause I knew right away that I wanted to give back. I want to give back something that, you know, something that they gave us that we'll never be able to repay. Just being there for us was - it was amazing. I have nothing but positive things to say about the [hospice] program and everyone involved in it. I don't know what we would've done without it. We would have been like a ball lost in the tall grass, at wit's end, you know, financial distress, even though, insurance pretty much paid for everything. But just, having that support, knowing that we could call someone and that they would be out there the same day and when you

talk to someone, even just over the phone. And knowing that we're not the only ones going through this was a big, big, big help. It's - everyone is just amazing (laughs).

And then, I look back on this and think that this is *why* I'm in the healthcare field. I can kind of see, I guess, God's *plan* in all of the pain and all of the heartache. That this is why I'm in the medical field. This is why I wanted to be a medic. This is why I want to be a paramedic. And this is why I want to help people and kind of honor Jason's memory with that. It's kind of like a healing thing for me. That's why I try to volunteer at [hospice program for kids] every year. And I don't know if - it's weird. It's just kind of like yeah, I'm sad and I'm sad but I can give back to people who are in the same situation or [even] a different situation. [For example], if they have a broken arm, at the back of an ambulance, I can just be there for them because in their emergency, or their time of need, or grief, or whatever. Being there for the family when I worked on the cardiac floor, we had a lot, a lot, a lot of patients pass away. Being there for the family (speaking softly). I kind of know what you're going through. I'm here for you. It's just knowing that I've seen them, kind of like that we're not alone - I'm not alone. You're not alone. Just take your time in the room and we're here for you. That's all. That's all anyone really needs. I mean, different people have different needs, but they just want to know, us as humans, we want to have that person. I'm here for you. Talk to me (Jon, Interview 1).

Jon jumps right into his story of loss by talking about when the family first noticed that his brother Jason was not hitting all of the milestones he should. That was the

beginning of their journey: finding out that Jason had leukodystrophy. Although it is clear that family is important to Jon and played a huge role not only in the care for Jason, but in the grieving process, Jon does not give any family background or history prior to Jason's diagnosis. However, his story is very family centered around the care of Jason. Jon consistently used language referring to the whole family unit instead of himself or one individual person. For example, he stated "we" found out about Jason's diagnosis, "we" took care of him, and "we" worked with hospice. Jon was a major player in taking care of Jason, even from the young age of ten. Jon emphasized that he "got to help" take care of Jason and it seems that caring for his brother during this time was something that empowered Jon to learn more about the disease and what was happening with his brother. It was especially important to Jon to try and find out information about the disease and it was difficult for him at this young age because he was confused about the progression of the disease and about death in general, but he recognized that it was very difficult for him to discuss this with his parents because they would get so upset if Jon would ask them questions about it.

In telling his story about the progression of the disease and learning that it would ultimately end in Jason's death, Jon brings up God and how he and his family prayed for a miracle that did not happen. I could sense his anger and frustration with God and also some feelings of confusion. Jon stated how difficult it is now because he does not trust God like he was taught to do growing up. This appeared to be quite distressing to Jon and perhaps because the issue was so anxiety provoking, he quickly moved back into talking about the progression of the disease and the timeline of hospice coming in to help the family.

Most of Jon's story of loss is centered on the time prior to Jason's actual death. This is a departure from the other siblings stories presented thus far, but it makes sense given that Jason's cause of death was expected and non-violent. Jon talked about the progression of the disease over time and how the family coped with it. Jon emphasized the importance of emotional and other supportive services from doctors, nurses, therapists, and hospice workers throughout his story. This support was integral to Jon and his family, particularly because much of their extended family was unsupportive and did not come around to help or even visit once Jason was diagnosed.

When Jon tells the story of the day Jason died, he became emotional, especially when he shared how he found out that Jason had died. Similar to Maya, Samantha, and Anna, Jon reported having a "feeling" that something was going to happen on the day of Jason's death. In many ways, these stories highlight the strong sibling bond and unspoken ways in which siblings are often inextricably linked to one another. Similar to Maya, Samantha, and Melanie, finding out about his brother's death appeared to be a critical point in Jon's story of loss. His finding out story is detailed and emotional as he recounted the day as something he would always remember. However, similar to other sibling stories, even though the day is something he will not forget, many of the details surrounding that time of high emotion still feel like a "blur" to Jon and he insightfully suggested that perhaps it is just too painful for him to remember all of the details at this point in his life and it serves as a sort of protective factor.

Jon spends a few moments describing the "beautiful" funeral ceremony and then quickly transitions into the present. He talked about how he and his family are "still not over it" after six years have gone by and he discussed triggers, or incidents, events, or

commonplace daily activities that cause Jon to feel emotional distress by reminding him of his brother, his loss, and the loss of a future with him. Jon does emphasize the importance of wanting to “give back” and help others by doing something meaningful with his life and therefore honoring the life of his deceased brother. It appears that his brother’s death caused Jon to take a closer look at his own life and examine the ways in which he can live a more meaningful or intentional life. For example, he volunteers with hospice and has entered into the medical field because of his experience of losing his brother. Again, a common theme is seen here among many of the siblings as far as pursuing a more meaningful life through a certain career path that can serve as a way to honor the lives of deceased siblings.

Jon wrapped up his story by talking about the importance of “being there” for someone in their time of need. This theme seems very important to Jon’s story as far as who he and his family could count on for emotional support and even just being a physical presence in their lives during the time Jason was ill. Jon ultimately believes that the number one thing people need when they are grieving or experiencing some other tragedy is to have people who can be there with them and for them and let them know that they are supported and they are not alone.

I noticed that Jon appeared to shut down a bit, stop himself, or change directions of what he was talking about when he started getting very upset. It seemed like Jon had a hard time sharing some of these strong emotions during the interview and it could be why I could not get Jon scheduled for a second, follow-up interview. He agreed to do another interview, but timing never seemed to work out, and during my last attempts, I left a third and final message stating that if I did not hear from him, I would assume that he would

rather not complete another interview. I never did hear back from him after that point even when I sent a final follow up email thanking him for his time.

Bella's Story

Bella's initial interview was conducted in person at a private location on June 24th of 2014. Bella was friendly and we shook hands upon first meeting. Bella was talkative and truly enjoyed sharing stories and memories about her sister. It might be for this reason that Bella often lost her train of thought as her story is presented in a more disorganized fashion, jumping from topic to topic and from past to present. Bella also appeared a bit surprised by the emotional response she initially had as she began telling her story, which could also have contributed to the way in which she shared her story. Bella's response to the interviewer's initial statement, "Please tell me your story of loss regarding your sister," is presented below. Following Bella's story, some important concepts will be reviewed and comparisons will be made between multiple sibling profiles presented.

We, I remember we were in high school. She was my twin. She was diagnosed with leukemia. We were sophomores and then she passed away the year after we graduated. She didn't have much [of] a survival rate. We didn't find that out 'til later, way after she passed. So, she did bone marrow transplants and actually there are two sets of twins in my family and one of the other twins donated bone marrow. They didn't pick me cause they were afraid it was going to attack her, attack my cells because we were so identical. So one of my younger siblings, one of the younger twins did it. Yeah, there are six of us (laughing), so it's hard to keep it all [straight]. There are two sets of twins and then two singles.

So yeah, she passed away the year after I graduated. So she was diagnosed in '92 and passed away in '96.

It was like we were attached at the hip...I mean...I was really attached at the hip when she got sick, but we were always attached at the hip. It just got a lot stronger. I was very protective...I was known as the biggest bitch. You didn't want to mess with me cause I was very protective of my sister. Cause they were, like when she was...in the hospital for two and a half months when she was first diagnosed and people were saying that she died and that she had stuff amputated, and all this stuff. She almost died three other times before the fourth time. And so yeah, I got pissed off and I got very protective very quickly. I grew up really quick too. I was fifteen. The best example I can give you, we were all...in band and it was me and my sister, Jen, and then my oldest brother, Brian. We're the three older ones and then we have the three younger ones. That's how it is (laughing). And [the band teacher] told my mom he was amazed how much I matured since Jen got sick. But, I'm fifteen and I feel like I'm thirty. I need to be a kid. I can't be a kid when your world is just torn upside down and she's gone (starting to cry) for like two months (pause). You know it's hard when I see [her] twice with a ventilator down her throat. At the time, I didn't know any of that. I mean, I went into the medical field because of her. I don't usually get this emotional. ((Interviewer: "It's totally understandable to me and I'm comfortable with any emotions you want to express.")) But yeah, I saw the ventilator and we were told that she's now died twice in the hospital before she even came home.

She, she made it through. She came home, and then of course your world

goes upside down and inside out and you got your family adjusting to her being hooked up to IV's at home and taking her to chemo, and she's sick all the time and she can't go to school. So, we had to get a homebound teacher for her and we were fortunate. Her homebound teacher was great. She was our reading teacher and I have a lot of respect for her...I just love her (laughing). I talk to her on [social media] all the time. So she's very, very important in my life. But I was just getting used to that. And then once you finally get used to it, my oldest brother graduates from high school and goes to college, and he's going to college, and then we graduate high school.

I wasn't allowed to go away to college cause I had to stay home and help with her, and I don't regret taking care of my sister. I don't. But my dad would not let me grow as my own person. I didn't want to leave her anyway cause my dad was an ass...So I stayed home and we went to the community college together and then when she would get sick at school, I would have to leave. It was just a big mess. Not like a big - she wasn't an inconvenience by any means, and I have no regrets taking care of my sister while my parents worked. But I couldn't be myself either. I had friends and then I lose friends cause I was always with her. I had boyfriends, but then I'd lose boyfriends because I was always with her. And, I mean, I would rather, I loved being with her...She was my sidekick. It was just different cause we had to be. It's not like we didn't want to be, but I had to be by her side because that's what you get used to doing when you have to help her in high school and follow her everywhere. It just grows on you and you just deal with it. So then she had her, so yeah, we graduated.

We had started the community college and she relapsed. She relapsed three times. I only remember twice, but my mom said she relapsed three times, and then she had her transplant. No, she relapsed four times. Cause she had her transplant, that was good for six months. I'm trying to think. And then she relapsed again and it was...our birthday is April 19 and they admitted her April 20 and then she died April 29. So my birthday was the last real day I saw my sister. I talked to her every day on the phone until she couldn't talk. Well, I shouldn't say it's my last day. I did see her on April 29. April 19 is the last time I saw my sister living and not dying in the hospital again. In our eyes...they tell us - ok, in my eyes, I said, you know...Jen's dying...We have to go to the hospital. Oh, okay, we've done this before. She's gonna bounce back. You know, that was my mentality. When she didn't bounce back the fourth time it was really, really bad. That was a shocker.

So she did pass away and when she passed away and it was hard trying to find myself. I had to find my own person on my own. My younger siblings, Ted and Ethan, they get to find themselves with each other at their sides. I got to see that which was pretty cool. She died. I had to pick up the pieces. I had to figure out where I was going with my life. And I was a *fucking* mess. I was so depressed. I didn't eat... You could see the bone structure in my face. I was so bad. It was horrible. I would just not eat. It's not because I didn't want to. I was never hungry. I was dating this one guy and his mom, when I would go over to his house for dinner, they knew I liked corn, so they would make me corn, my own bowl of corn. So that they knew I was getting something in my system. So that

was kind of, I chuckled at it. But it was sweet. I understand now, they were looking out for me.

So...let's see, I forgot what I was going...So she died. We (pause) had the funeral, said goodbye, and then reality set in. And we weren't allowed to grieve. My dad basically told us suck it up and move on. And I sucked it up and moved on for a good year. Then I met my husband and...I have this great guy. He treats me so well...I always dated guys my age or a year or two younger, but he was older. He was even older than my oldest brother. He's about four years older than me. [My older brother Brian] is only two. It really made him mad (laughing), but...I have this great guy and we actually go do things. He has a good job. I was so happy for myself. I finally found somebody and she wasn't there. Couldn't tell her. Cried all the time. I would even cry - he would be taking me home and I would just start crying. He didn't know what to do...He knew I was severely depressed. He didn't know what to do. He never met her. He had no idea. He probably saw...Well, he used to work at [a discount retail store] right up the street from my house. And Jen and I were in there all the time. So he could've easily saw her and just didn't put two and two together. The girl with the hat with the bow on the back. People tend to remember the bow, but he didn't. That's okay though. But, I had this great guy, and then I come home crying one night and my dad thought it was [my boyfriend Peter] upsetting me. And I just looked at him and I said no, dad, I miss my sister and you won't let me grieve.

And then you deal with my dad's depression (speaking softly). Oh my god, it was so bad. He told everybody that he wishes everybody was dead instead

of her...I didn't find out that he told the younger ones until recently, cause...I made sure I took the brunt [of it because] the young ones...were so little. See she's been gone for eighteen years (pause). Wait, how old is Brian? He's thirty-seven. They're twenty-eight. So they were...ten when she died...The twins are the youngest. I didn't know he was saying that to them, but he would just come in these moods and start pitching fits and yelling and screaming and getting to the point where he was gonna be physical and I would jump in the way like if you're going to hit anybody, hit me. Cause he knew I'd hit back. I'm not afraid. He died...a few years later, but we don't have to deal with that anymore. But it got *so* bad because we can't grieve. My dad's not grieving. My dad was depressed. He went out and saw my sister every day. *Every day*. And we wanted to go to see her. But we couldn't go with my dad. We had to go at a different time. So that made it really hard cause we couldn't go as a family. We did go as a family for her twenty-first birthday. She died when we were nineteen. We went for the twenty-first birthday (deep breath). It was our twenty-first birthday. And then, we're Catholic...and my younger sister had her confirmation, which is basically a big huge ceremony that you are now an adult in the Catholic religion. We had a huge party (pause). So we had the confirmation and then we had our twenty-first birthday and we took out champagne and left her a glass and had a toast. So that was the last time we actually all went out as a family. But it was a big, big thing. I go out every year on her anniversary. I don't even go out on birthdays anymore cause they're so close together. I forgot where I was going with that. I get sidetracked so easily. Oh, so my dad, it got to the point where I had to move. I

moved out. It was '99. So I was nineteen when she died. She died in '97...so I moved in December of '99...So, my husband, at the time, he got transferred to Florida. I wanted to go. I had to get out of there. And then I deal with the hatred from my siblings. I still deal with it. That I left. I left them with my dad.

And then, you know before all this happened I was a social butterfly and I turned totally into a wallflower. I mean totally opposite of what I [was]. I'm slowly starting to come back to who I was. It's taking a long time. But I turned into this total wallflower and it really scared my husband, well fiancé, whatever you want to call him at the time. To the point where he was like, you gotta go get help. Cause I wouldn't go anywhere. I wouldn't do anything. I went to work and that was about it. So I went to a shrink. Yes, I knew I had depression. Yes, I knew I had anxiety. He put me on some happy pills and it worked 'til I got pregnant with my son, so I had to go off of them. And then I never went back on them again, which I'm really upset with myself cause...they really did help. That was probably the happiest I've been ever since she died was when I was on those pills, if that makes sense. Cause they did help. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm happy with my husband and my kids and stuff like that. It was a different happy. I was actually kind of feeling more myself. Cause when she died, that, that all went away. It all just vanished. There's no return of it.

And so then we got married. I got pregnant. I moved back home. Oh wait, we got married. My dad died. He died the weekend after we got married (laughing). I have the worst luck with families and death, I swear. So I came back home for that. And actually when my dad died, that was a huge relief cause we

could actually be who we needed to be; do what we needed to do. But then you start having your firsts. We got married. She couldn't be there. I did have a special bouquet for her and we did take it to her grave...A lot of my wedding was her. Sunflower is her favorite flower, [so] the sunflower...was my flower. Her favorite color was hunter green...and mine was royal blue, so those were my bridesmaids [dresses]. We had a picture of her set aside so she could be there in memory. I knew she was there, but, you know, so people could see her. I took her bouquet over. I started crying when I did that because she was supposed to be - we were going to get married on the same day. She was supposed to be there with me. Didn't happen. We were supposed to move to Georgia and I was going to be an interior decorator and she was going to be an architect. Didn't happen...We just had a lot of - I'm all over the place. I'm sorry. Things are just popping in my head. But, now that she's been gone for so long, my kids came. She wasn't there. When I had to pick godparents - that's the thing with baptism for Catholic people - she wasn't there. [When] she was alive, I was going to donate eggs so she could have kids. Can't do that. You know (pause) baseball, just the little things. The kids walking, talking, and gymnastics. Can't tell her anything. I mean, I can. I just can't hear her voice. I mean, I lost that too. Her voice is gone.

It's just...it's tough when you're not given the tools. When you don't know what to do. When you're kind of like, holy shit, what next? When you're trying to get yourself back on your feet and then someone has to knock you down...or whatever. Or if they would like, oh this is my favorite thing (said sarcastically), people would come up to me and [say] I'm so and so and I was

friends with your sister. Do you remember me? No. I have no clue who you are. And I don't. Well, I'm sorry. It's how I deal with that. I'm upsetting people because I don't remember them because they were friends with my sister. Well she had friends that I never met and I had friends that she never met. She had her friends I didn't hang out with. *Ce la vie*. Who cares. So I was dealing with that and how people get so mad like I'm supposed to remember everything and (deep breath) - I'm all over the place. I'm sorry. ((Interviewer: "It's okay."))

But we actually started to grieve. My dad's been – let's see we'll be married thirteen years in July, so dad will be gone thirteen years in July. Last April, Jen's oncologist had a dinner for families that lost their kids and we - it was me and my mom, my older brother Brian, and then my younger sister Kara - we all went together and we got to realize. I mean, there was another family that, Jen was very dear friends with her daughter. She died two years before Jen did. And then we began to realize, we're not the only ones. But we didn't know that. And that's probably when our grieving process started. Well after my dad died...so a good ten, thirteen years after my dad died to where we can try to start moving on. We can finally start to grieve. What family does that? I mean when...they had that luncheon [in the past], we didn't go. My dad didn't want us to go. He refused. I lost all my friends. Had to start from scratch. So I was very lonely. Very depressed. So (pause) and then Brian was away at college so he didn't really - I don't know what he saw. And that's another thing, we don't talk. We never talk about it. But we were never allowed to. We have our stories we like to share, [but] my mom hates it when I ask her questions. I think it's because it hurts her. I mean

I know her and my dad did what they could to protect us, so we didn't know everything going on. But then I found my sister's diary, and there was only a few pages in it. So I read it. It was after her bone marrow transplant and what she said, she came up with this cold and it kept going back and forth and they kept telling her, she's relapsed. No she's fine. No she's relapsed. No she's fine. It went on for like that for like three months. She didn't know what to do. She was told one [thing], [and then told a] week later, she's gonna die by her oncologist...and it wasn't her original oncologist, it was the bone marrow doctor...She was horrible. But, who are you? Why would you tell an eighteen year old that? She's trying to live her life. She's trying to go to school. I mean she took ballroom dance classes to build her muscles up. She was very smart about what she took...And I didn't know any of that. None of it. And I got mad at my mom. Why didn't you at least tell me? Why couldn't I have taken her so you guys didn't have to take work off all the time? I didn't get my driver's license until I was eighteen cause my dad refused for me to take her to chemo...We think he was bipolar. He never got tested for it. But at the time, you dealt with it. You knew you had to kind of gauge his mood. So if you wanted to go do something and he was in a bad mood and mom told you to go ask dad, you didn't bother asking cause you'd get your head ripped off. It...was just ridiculous. And when he was on that down, he was on that down for weeks and weeks. It was horrible, but we learned how to do deal with it. Cause to us, that's just dad. Dad's just moody. Dad has a short fuse... that was just dad...And that's just how we all felt...Don't talk about it. Especially not in front of him. And we, like I said, still don't, but when you've repressed it for so

long...and that's another thing...at Jen's cancer doctor there was a counselor and she was really sweet. We went and saw her once or twice. After that, she just fell off the face of the earth. We were just left on our own. And there were no grieving, you know, people we could go to. If there were, they were far down in the city and trying to sneak mom and...I wasn't allowed to travel...to the city for a support group...My dad would've killed me...How am I supposed to sneak out four other kids...twice a week to do that. Can't. So (long pause) (Bella, Interview 1).

Bella's story was presented in a bit of a disorganized fashion as she moved back and forth between past and present time and often jumped from topic to topic. It appeared that Bella was struggling to fit this story and these memories into her life story in a real coherent way. There could be many factors (or a combination of factors) that help explain why this might be the case for Bella. It could be that it was a difficult and emotional experience for her to share her full story of loss, that she has not had as much practice sharing her story of loss as other siblings in the study, that she is still really struggling with the loss and how to make sense of it in her own life, or simply her way of storytelling.

Bella's sister Jen died of non-violent, expected causes due to leukemia. Similar to Jon, whose brother also died from a long term illness, Bella emphasized her role in helping to care for her sister. She discussed how she looked after her at school and was extremely protective over her. The course of her sister's illness was a time of many adjustments because as Bella pointed out, by the time she got used to certain machines or new medical issues, then something else would happen, everything would change, and

she would have to figure out how to adjust all over again. Bella emphasized how she wanted to be there, know more information than what her parents would give her about her sister's illness, and even help out more, but her parents, in particular her father, would not allow this. Bella seemed to be negotiating how to help take care of her sister while at the same time still needing to grow and develop as an individual, which she felt was difficult with other demands and not wanting to leave her sister.

Bella's story also portrayed the close connection she shared with twin sister. Bella described them as being "attached at the hip" even before her sister's diagnosis. As twins, they experienced each moment of their lives together. Her identity seemed very tied into the relationship that she had with her sister. She knew her sister's needs even when her sister did not verbalize them. Similar to Maya, Samantha, Anna, and Jon, Bella "just knew" that her sister had died before anyone even told her. She further described this feeling in a subsequent interview where she discussed having physical reaction to her sister's death, as if she could feel that piece of her that was connected to her sister, lifting out of her body.

Bella emphasized how her sister had been sick over a long period of time and was often in and out of hospitals, so there was this feeling that she would "bounce back" any time she did have to go into the hospital. This is one reason why Jen's death was so shocking to Bella because she could not understand why Jen did not bounce back this last time. Bella did not initially go into much detail about the day her sister died and the details of her finding out. Later, however, she did share this story and became quite emotional in its retelling. Perhaps she initially avoided discussing the details of the day her sister died for fear of having a strong emotional reaction. Bella instead simply stated

that she died and then moved into the fact that her father would not allow the family to grieve. It seemed that Bella would have liked to grieve together with her family after her sister's death, but because of her family dynamic, namely her dad's mental health struggles, everyone in the family was discouraged from showing any emotion about Jen's death. It really was not until ten years after Jen's death (and her father's death) that Bella feels she and her family began to really grieve. This is when she realized there were other families like hers and they were not alone. This message is emphasized throughout her story and subsequent interviews, and similar to Jon, it seemed highly comforting to Bella to feel that she was not alone. This just happened much later in her story of grief than it did in Jon's.

Another important theme Bella emphasized in her story was feeling lost. Her life essentially revolved around her sister. She helped care for her, went to school with her, and had similar friends as her. They were planning their lives together. Where they would live, what they would become, what their weddings would be like, and then, when Jen died, Bella felt lost and alone. Her plans for the future were no longer possible and she had to re-imagine a new future that would not include the physical presence of her sister. Bella described the pain and difficulty in experiencing all of these "firsts" without her sister, such as when she found a boyfriend, graduated college, got married, and had children. She discussed a difficult process of trying to figure out who she was now that her sister had died. This theme is similar to one found in Maya's story when Maya's plan was to go and take care of her brother and then suddenly, her brother was gone and that future plan was no longer possible.

Allison's Story

Allison's initial interview was conducted over the phone on June 24th of 2014. Allison discussed being excited about the project I was doing and wanted to share her story to help shed light on sibling grief and loss, which she mentioned is a grief that is often overlooked by others. She was friendly and very matter of fact about sharing her story of loss. She did not present with much emotion, although at times she mentioned feeling bitter and angry and those emotions came through at multiple points in her story. Allison's response to the interviewer's initial statement, "Please tell me your story of loss regarding your sister," is presented below. Several important understandings from Allison's story are presented at the end, along with relevant comparisons to other sibling stories.

Alright, so my sister, her name was Tina and she was twelve years older than me. So she basically had a big hand in raising me and she was a lot of help to my mom. We also have a brother, but he's only a year younger than my sister. So my sister was the oldest. My brother was the middle. Then I was the youngest. Tina had a pretty good hand in raising me like I said. She would help my mom and – I would always go with her out and stuff and she would always pick me up from school and, so basically she was like my second mother. We were pretty close. We lived together a majority of our lives. Even in adulthood, you know, she lived in my house and stuff. We just had a lot of common interests. We went to concerts together, we met celebrities together, and we would do all things that normal sisters would do, including fighting (laughing). So I got engaged in 2009, May 2009 I got engaged. She ended up getting married a couple of weeks after I

got engaged at city hall to her husband. She was dating him for a couple of years. So they lived in [the Mid-Atlantic region] so she wasn't living in my house at that time. She moved back maybe that summer or maybe in October of 2009.

So, when my sister was born, she had a heart condition. She was born with a heart condition. I don't really know, they never really gave it a name or anything like that. I'm not really sure all the medical side of it, but she was just missing a lung. Her left lung was missing so she had a lot of problems health wise when she was growing up. She had open heart surgery at nine years old. She had a pacemaker put in at eighteen years old. So, when I was young, I didn't really know much about her sickness. I knew she was sick, but she was never sick to me, because she never acted sick. Her illness never, never stopped her from doing anything. She still lived a normal life. She went to work. She lived a pretty normal life, not like a sick person, but when she would get sick, she would get *sick*. So, where a normal person, if they got bronchitis, it could be okay with medication and she probably had to go to the hospital. So she had a lot of hospital visits when I was growing up. And like I said, when I was younger, I never really looked at her as that she was sick. Everything she was just normal. She was just like my normal big sister. So then as I got older, I guess, I mean I understood it more, but I never thought that, you she would pass away. That never entered my mind. Honestly, it never crossed my mind that she would pass away.

So, [as I was saying] she moved back to [where we were living in the Northeast] probably in October. So I got to see her and everything. In December, her birthday was December 2nd and she just turned thirty-four on December 2,

2009 and we went to dinner. Me, her husband, and my fiancé went to dinner. We had a nice dinner. We hung out with her at [restaurant]. And then a week later, she ended up getting sick and we didn't really know the extent of it. I guess she went to the doctor. He gave her medicine, or he didn't give her medi-, I'm not really sure, but whatever she did, it didn't work so she went to the emergency room. I was there when she went to the emergency room. She got admitted and then I was going on vacation. I was leaving for Florida to go with my fiancé to Disney World either the day she passed away or the day before. I don't remember, but I had a flight scheduled and everything so I didn't want to stay in the emergency room cause I didn't want to get sick and I just figured she was going to come out. Any time she went to the emergency room, she always came out. I wasn't thinking that she was going to pass away.

The next day I went to work like a normal work day and my mom called me and my mom was pretty upset cause she never left my sister's side in the hospital. She called me and said, "Come cause I don't want to be alone." So I went to the hospital and then everything just kind of went downhill from there and she was just progressively getting worse. Her oxygen wasn't good. We got to sit with her and talk to her, but she was sick and we kind of begged her to get certain medication. We had to beg her to let them check her oxygen level cause she was just in a lot of pain. Then, I guess maybe, I don't even know what day that was, but, I don't even know what the time frame was, but she needed to be intubated where they had to put her, I guess, in an induced coma cause her oxygen just wasn't working and she couldn't breathe. [They believed] that that would be the

only thing that would help her cause now she had double pneumonia. That was ultimately what it was and her doctor that she had for years and years would always tell my mom when she was younger, "Make sure she doesn't get double pneumonia cause that could kill her." And it happened. That's what she got, double pneumonia. We got to talk to her before she was intubated and I just told her that I loved her and I even said don't die (laughing) because I really didn't think that she was gonna. She got intubated and then I stood, we stood for a long time. Basically a lot of people came to the hospital when that happened.

Then we finally just said, okay, let's go home and refresh ourselves because at this point, we're at the hospital for a couple of days. So I had just went with my fiancé back to his parents' house just to sleep, I guess cause I didn't sleep. So I was in taking a nap. It was probably ten o'clock at night and my fiancé went back to the hospital without me. I guess just to stay there and then he was going to pick me back up. But it turned out that I guess he called his mom to tell her to wake me up because my sister's blood pressure was getting low, lower and lower, and they weren't sure what was going to happen. So she woke me up out of bed. We drove there. My parents met us there. Then the whole family started coming. My aunts, my uncle, my cousin, my best friend came, and my brother. Everybody was there. And then I just went downstairs to be by myself with my friend and then my husband came out and told me that she passed away. And that was December 9. So it was exactly a week after her birthday. And that's really how that happened. That's how she passed away.

Then that week we had the funeral. We had the wake. I spoke at her wake.

I read some poem. I spoke at the church. My dad read something he wrote at the church and then that was really it. My, my life changed after that (long pause). When she passed away, and I read about this, just in general when anybody passes away and you get the news, it's like, cause she wasn't, she was sick, but like I said, she wasn't a sickly person, so it was a shock to me that she passed away because it was unexpected. I guess, I don't know if someone has a sickness maybe they're more prepared or it's like if someone passes away in a car accident, it's very fast and maybe you didn't get a chance to say goodbye, so to me, that's how she passed away. To me, it was like she passed away in a car accident. It was like very sad. So, right when I found out she passed away, my initial reaction was to just say, like wake her up. It didn't hit me that she died and I've seen that in movies and stuff and in books where that's your initial reaction. It's not to cry. Your initial reaction is to say, "Well wake them up." You know, wake them up. And, after she passed away, like months and months, it was just so unreal to me. I would just say, I just can't believe. She's not here and it was crazy. And, I guess that's how I still feel because sometimes you just can't believe that the person is gone cause you went every day from talking to the person and now you don't talk to them at all. So, my life did change in that way because someone that I spoke to everyday and I saw her basically every day. She was at my house every day. And she, she's just not here anymore (Allison, Interview 1).

Allison's story of loss was brief and matter of fact. Similar to Melanie, she shared more of the facts of the story and less of her emotional responses. However, Allison's story, at least initially, included fewer details. When Allison was initially asked to share

her story of loss, she asked if I wanted her to talk about how she died or where I wanted her to start. I explained that I wanted her to share whatever was comfortable and whatever was important to her story and she could share it in a way she might with somebody who has never hear her story before. It could be that Allison's nerves impacted the matter of fact way in which she shared her story.

Allison did not provide a lot of family background or history, but rather highlighted the sibling relationship. Similar to most of the other siblings interviewed, Allison and her sister were extremely close. She described her sister as a "second mom" to her because she was approximately twelve years older than Allison. They were always close growing up and even into adulthood they continued to be the best of friends. It is important that the sibling bond is highlighted in her story so that the impact of the loss can be fully realized to others.

Another thing that Allison emphasized throughout her story was that even though her sister had a heart condition from birth, she never really saw her as sick. She discussed how her sister had a couple of surgeries when she was younger and if she got sick, she might have to go to the hospital, but for the most part, she was healthy. This is important because even though Tina died from non-violent, natural causes, Allison saw the loss as sudden, surprising, and very unexpected.

Allison does not go into many details after sharing of her sister's final hospitalization. Interestingly, she mentions all in one breath that her sister died and they had the funeral and wake, and that was pretty much it. Similar to the way Melanie ended her story, Allison ends by saying, "That was it. My life changed forever after that." She was able to go on and talk about the multiple ways in which her life was changed and to

share more details about her grieving process after the death of her sister when asked follow up questions and in subsequent interviews.

Overall, these sibling profiles paint a picture of each sibling participant and how they each initially presented their story of loss. Certain contextual factors were highlighted and both similarities and differences among siblings became evident. The next chapter will explore a more in-depth look at these sibling participants' processes of meaning making, including both the ways in which they attempted to make sense out of the loss and the meanings they found after their siblings death.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

Data from multiple interviews with seven bereaved siblings will be presented in two major sections within this chapter. As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this manuscript, previous literature emphasizes the importance of conducting studies in the area of grief and meaning making that explore both meanings made (outcomes of meaning making efforts) and meaning making processes (Bonanno et al., 2004; Davis et al., 2000; Uren & Wastell, 2002). Therefore the first major section will explore the ‘what’ of meaning making by examining what meanings siblings have made as a result of the death of their brother or sister. These outcomes of meaning making expressed by bereaved siblings will be presented in three main categories: identity change, sense making, and benefit finding. The second section will explore the ‘how’ of meaning making by taking a closer look at the strategies bereaved siblings used to make sense out of the loss of their brother or sister over time.

‘What’ Meanings Bereaved Siblings Have Made

Understanding what meanings bereaved siblings have made can help illuminate the multiple and varied ways in which bereaved siblings’ lives have changed as a result of the loss of their brother or sister. Within this section, the outcomes of meaning making for the current sample of bereaved siblings will be presented. Eight themes were found, which fall within the three main categories of identity change, sense making, and benefit finding. Table 4 below provides a summary of these important themes. Then, more detailed data from interview transcripts is provided to further clarify and support these themes.

Table 4

The 'What' of Sibling Meaning Making

Category I. Identity Change	
Theme 1. Changed view of self	(a) questioning 'Who am I now?' after broken sibling bond (b) loss of innocence (increased feelings of pessimism, fear, anxiety, bitterness) (c) increased feelings of empathy and compassion for others (d) re-evaluating own purpose in life
Theme 2. Changed view of world	(a) shattered sense of trust or safety in future (b) new outlook on life (life is unpredictable, don't take it for granted) (c) embracing the preciousness of life (d) re-evaluating priorities (realizing what is important in life)
Theme 3. Changed view of others	(a) shift in family dynamics (b) becoming caretaker for parent(s) (c) hiding pain or sadness from parents (d) family as support system (e) changes within friend relationships (feeling different, importance of friends 'being there' and 'listening') (f) forming relationships with mental health professionals
Category II. Sense Making	
Theme 4. Spiritual or religious understandings	(a) sibling death as impetus to begin spiritual quest (b) openness to new beliefs (c) anger at God (d) religion or spirituality as a source of comfort or support (e) desire or 'need' to believe in afterlife
Theme 5. Uniqueness of sibling relationship	(a) strength of sibling bond leads to unique grief experience (b) developmental aspects of sibling loss in adolescence (c) grief lasts forever (does look different over time) (d) re-experiencing grief at various milestones (life events often viewed as 'bittersweet')
Theme 6. Continued connection to sibling	(a) sense of presence (sibling 'here in spirit', guardian angel) (b) continued connection viewed as supportive or comforting (c) communication with deceased (through conversations, visiting gravesite, meditation) (d) importance of remembering and honoring memory (e) helping others develop relationship with deceased
Theme 7. "Embracing the loss"	(a) exploring existential 'reasons' for loss ('it is what it is' or 'maybe it happened for a reason') (b) acceptance that questions may never be answered (c) acceptance of strong feelings and emotions (d) understanding 'there is still something to live for'
Category III. Benefit Finding	
Theme 8. Seeing positives in life after loss	(a) seeking to view loss through positive lens (b) newfound valuing of significant relationships (c) embracing or pursuing 'what matters now' after the loss (d) 'my sibling mattered' (e) deceased sibling no longer suffering

Identity Change

Inherent in sibling loss is the concept that siblings feel ‘forever changed’ as the result of the death of a sister or brother. Siblings expressed experiencing these changes on a deep level at the very core of their being. This first category of identity change includes the following themes: (a) changed view of self, meaning changes in who a person is and how he or she understands himself or herself; (b) changed view of world, meaning changes in how an individual views the world after the loss, including changes in previously held beliefs or values; and (c) changed view of others, including changes within family and friend relationships.

Changed View of Self

Siblings spend much of their childhood and teenage years together. Through their multiple and varied interactions, they begin to learn who they are and who they want to be. Siblings typically play a major role in identity development for one another. The sibling bond and interactions between siblings in this study helped each sibling begin to define who they were and who they wanted to be in the world. Therefore, when the *sibling bond was broken* through the death, the surviving sibling was often left questioning their own identity. The surviving sibling was wondering, “Who am I now?” After the loss, many experienced what they would call the worst thing that had ever happened in their lives up to that point. They reported feeling ‘broken’ and ‘incomplete.’ So as they continued to question who they are now after the loss, the questioning was often characterized by a certain *loss of innocence* or a sense of vulnerability. Surviving siblings become more pessimistic, bitter, anxious, and fearful. However, as more time passed, surviving siblings were often able to acknowledge some of the ways they had

grown as a result of their loss experience. Siblings often reported having an *increased sense of compassion and empathy* for others as they now had a better understanding of what it is like to experience a tragedy. Additionally, as the questioning continued, siblings began to *re-evaluate their sense of life purpose* as they questioned what the point of living is now. For many surviving siblings, this led to a desire to live a more meaningful life. In order to further clarify this changed view of self reported by bereaved siblings, multiple examples from the data will be provided.

Sibling bond. All of the siblings interviewed in this study emphasized the importance of the sibling bond or connection that they shared with the deceased. Often, there was an almost immediate questioning of “Who am I now?” after the *bond was broken* due to the death of a sibling. There seemed to be this questioning of how siblings could continue to explore and define their identity without the deceased sibling to help them. For example, Maya expressed the critical role both of her brothers played in her identity development growing up to clarify why she was left struggling to define herself and who she was after her older brother died:

I think it affected me immediately when he died. I was the youngest sister; I was the youngest of three. I always identified strongly especially having two brothers. People say tell me about yourself: I have two older brothers. Because they were so important to my development as a human being. They raised me. So it was important that my identity, anytime someone asked me I would make sure to show respect for my older brothers and I think that’s also a cultural thing – especially in Puerto Rican families, you respect your older siblings and it’s very collective so for me, my identity, even though I was raised in the states where

they really empowered economy like think for yourself; make your own decisions; that's not how we always were. When I made decisions I consulted with my brothers. Not that I needed their permission but I wanted their input. I wanted their blessing in a way to let me know I'm on the right path. I trusted them so much. So my identity was really based on the presence of my brothers and so when my brother died I was very lost in that identity piece because he had been so impacting and involved in my development, in my decisions, and even in my support system. We were extremely close so right away I just felt the void and I felt like I was no longer the sister of two older brothers. Now I'm the sister of an older brother. So I felt it dramatically quickly (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 345-359).

Similarly, Bella experienced a change in the sense that her identity was no longer intertwined with her sister after her death. She recalled, "We were always Bella and Jen. Always. Inseparable. We always were, so my hardest obstacle was trying to get my own identity without her being there to grow off of her or bounce off of her. So that's what my main focus was" (2nd interview, Lines 280-282).

Perhaps because a sibling's identity can be inextricably linked with his or her sibling, the death of a sibling can create a sense of confusion in a siblings' own understanding of himself or herself. Samantha explained how this break in the sibling bond can change your entire life in the excerpt below:

My brother was my big brother. He was born before me. I didn't know life, literally, did not know *life* without him. You know, even my parents did. They had a whole, many, many years before Ben's existence on earth became what it

was. So, I was the only person who had this relationship so close to him that I *literally* did not know life without Ben. So when things changed and I did lose him, I just feel like that makes something a little special [or] a little different. Something, I can't even really give you the words on what makes it so different, but I think it does. You have to really re-group, re-evaluate, re-learn everything, really, in a sense (Samantha, 1st interview, Lines 421-429).

Often, there is a sense that a piece of themselves is missing or broken after the loss of a sister or brother. Maya stated, "I depended on my brother. So when I lost him I was – I felt like I lost an arm. I had to learn how to reuse things because I no longer had that there and it was really hard for me" (2nd interview, Lines 380-382). Melanie reflected on her sense of identity after her brother passed away when she commented, "I guess I viewed, especially in the beginning, I viewed myself as a broken person because on the outside I knew I looked broken because I was either always in tears or always upset or zoned out and I lost a lot of weight after it happened" (2nd interview, Lines 460-462). Upon finding out that his little brother had died, Jon shared, "It was, it's the worst feeling. I felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest and smashed into a million pieces" (1st interview, Lines 290-291).

Loss of innocence. For siblings in this study, it was evident that this tragic loss greatly impacted their own sense of identity as they began to question how they would continue a process of identity development in which their siblings had previously played such an integral role. Siblings felt as if 'a part of them' was missing and this often left them with feelings of increased vulnerability. It was as their *sense of innocence* was *shattered* and they now felt more bitter, anxious, fearful, or pessimistic. When discussing

the ways in which her identity has changed as a result of her sister's death, Allison shared that she feels a sense of bitterness that she carries with her now in her life. She explained:

Just how I changed overall, I just think I can say I am probably more bitter than I ever was. I tell people that a lot and I really don't care because that really is how I feel. I am bitter. I am bitter because she was young and I am young and I shouldn't have ever had to go through this. I am bitter about other things. If someone is really old and they live to 100 I am bitter about that person because they lived to 100 years and my sister couldn't even live to 35 (2nd interview, Lines 130-135).

Many siblings also discussed certain identity changes related to feeling more pessimistic, fearful, or anxious as a result of their sibling's death. In the following excerpt, Allison explains her anxiety related to her own mortality after her sister's passing:

I had anxiety anyway before she passed away. It had nothing to do with her, I just...started getting anxiety. So after she passed away, my anxiety *really* came out and...I read a book [that explained the way I felt] where sometimes when someone passes away and they're your sister or your brother, [then] you think that you're going to pass away. Like, you think you're going to die cause they died, or you think it will be so easy for you to die cause it was so easy that they died. And I thought that way. I felt like, if she could die, I was going to die. And so I lived like that for a while. I just thought something was going to kill me cause that was my anxiety and...I was like a hermit. I didn't want to leave the house...I just didn't want to do anything (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 142-156).

Maya stated:

So I think because of the timing in my life I was much more pessimistic after he died and I was much more optimistic before he died...so that was a huge difference. I was more like oh we can do anything. I had worries...and I had learned to grow up in poverty but that was my main thing in life was just dealing with poverty that after he died it became so much more. There were so many other things to worry about at that point and it wasn't just poverty and so I was just [in] way over my head. Then I started thinking the future may not work so good and I felt a huge amount of responsibility...The before and after was just a huge dramatic difference. But that was the biggest. I was much more optimistic at that time before he died. I was 19 or 20 years old, partying...and having a good time. I was pretty free-spirited to a degree...I just really thought everything would be okay. I just had a lot of fun and then after he died I just couldn't enjoy life again for a long time that way. I didn't have that same kind of 'everything is going to be okay' [attitude]. I became very concerned and fearful in some ways that things are not going to be okay. Life is not okay. I was worried all the time. At the beginning, especially in the first two years I was always concerned, [wondering] is [my oldest brother] okay or I hope my mom doesn't get sick and die. I was very concerned to lose another person...I was just so freaked out. I was just like...what if someone dies or another person dies in a car accident. What if...somebody kidnaps [my nieces] while they are walking to school...I didn't feel like I could trust life. I felt like at any moment anybody I cared about could be taken away from me. I was extremely anxious and I was a worrier. I was

stressed out. So that really sucked considering how I was...before he died. [After he died], I worried about everything. I would be like, 'okay call me when you go home. I just want to make sure you are going to be okay.' I was very, what's the word, what's the word, (pause) nervous that something else was going to happen (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 482-510).

Clearly, Maya expressed many changes as a result of her brother's death. A lot of her language emphasized who she was before the loss versus who she was after the loss. She explained that prior to the loss, she was young, carefree, and optimistic. She spent a lot of time just having fun with friends as many teenagers that age would. However, after Ramon's death, Maya was more vulnerable in a sense. She became more pessimistic, more concerned, more fearful, and more nervous as a result of the loss. She worried more about what the future would hold and she worried that other loved ones would die. Bella echoed some similar fears for the future discussed by Maya. Bella discussed how the fear and anxiety continued to impact her many years after her sister's death:

[After Jen's death], I was so afraid. Am I going to be a good wife? Am I going to be a good mom? And then you have that fear...The fear of having kids and [you're] afraid that your kids are going to wind up with cancer...But I also came to that conclusion a long time ago...that I can't let that fear consume my life. So we had kids. But when [the kids] turn 15, because that's how old we were, you better believe I'm going to be freaking out inside...But we will cross that bridge when we get to it. I can't let that consume my life...Between Christmas and New Year's is when we found out. I know that's going to be harder than hell [those years my kids turn 15] around Christmas because my anxiety will kick in so bad

(Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 476-490).

Bella expressed worry and anxiety about what her future would hold, and similar to Maya, discussed a fear that important loved ones in her life could possibly die. It seems there is this sense of feeling unsure about what the future would hold and losing that sense of trust or safety that previously existed.

Increased compassion and empathy. On the other hand, all of the siblings interviewed cited what might be considered some of the more positive changes in identity that occurred as a result of the loss. One of these positive changes was feeling *more empathic and more compassionate* toward other individuals, especially individuals who might be going through a difficult life circumstance. It is an increased ability to be there and really be present for other individuals. Anna described this change in the following excerpt:

I think I've become more understanding of people. Like if I'm just out and I see somebody who is freaking out at a grocery store or really bad drivers...I think I've become more understanding that there could be something else going on for that person that day. Also I'll be more understanding of other people's family dynamics...I think it was only with her death that I picked up on other families that might have difficult dynamics realizing that those siblings do the same things that I used to do about not really talking about their siblings with difficulties or sort of glossing over that they have another sibling that they never speak of. I think I actually became more sensitive to that and so in that way I've changed

(Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 447-455).

Anna expressed a greater awareness that other things could be going on in an individual's

life that could be affecting how they interact on a daily basis and it is because of this realization that Anna feels more understanding of people and the multiple struggles they may be facing in this world. She also feels more in tune to and understanding of people's family dynamics. Melanie also talked about how she has a greater sense of empathy and compassion for individuals who have experienced the death of a loved one:

I guess you never go through life thinking, 'well one day I will lose a sibling and I will be able to help others out.' Do you know what I mean? For instance, I have a friend whose sister passed away [from] cancer...I feel like I'm able to help others out, not because I've necessarily wanted to, but because I want to now because I have the experience of losing someone. Like with [my friend], there has been a few times that I have talked with her about it...I was asking her how she was doing, and I sent her cards and all that kind of stuff and she had said it's hard for her because I am one of the only friends that really asks how things are going or brings it up or ever talks to her about it (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 578-589).

Melanie described a sense of being able to be there for others who have experienced loss and having greater sensitivity to their needs because she has gone through something similar with her brother's death. Anna echoed some of these sentiments about being able to really be there for someone who is going through a difficult time in life. She stated:

I think I may have tried to be a better friend of people for when they are facing difficulties...so if I know something difficult is going on in someone's life I try to be there for them...just being there and letting them know that they can call you. I try to be that person now. So I think I've become a better friend actually because I have gone through this difficulty and...I sort of learned that the best thing you can

do is not to abandon the person because they are going through something difficult (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 563-576).

Jon also described this increased ability to be there for other people going through some sort of tragedy:

That's why I try to volunteer at camp [for grieving children] every year...I don't know if it's weird. It's just kind of like yeah, I'm sad but I can give back to people who are in the same situation or, you know, a different situation. If they [have a] broken arm at the back of an ambulance, I can just be there for them because in their emergency, or their time of need, or grief, or whatever, you know, being there for the family. When I worked on the cardiac floor, we had a lot, a lot, a lot of patients pass away. Be there for the family...I kind of know what you're going through (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 380-393).

Similar to Jon, Maya also highlighted how the experience of losing her brother increased her ability to be empathic toward other individuals who might be experiencing some hardship. Both cited feeling more compassionate and having a stronger, almost intuitive insight into how to best be supportive of those individuals. Maya stated:

[I] started really being able to empathize with people in a different level than I think I would have without his loss, without the transitions in my life that occurred. So [his death] allowed me to connect with people in a different way, especially at a young age...I always volunteered but after that...I could connect with people and appreciate that that moment meant more because I realized that you don't always have this and that life can be hard. Life can be hard. And to really empathize with people on a different level...Unfortunately I've been there

and really understand some of the hardships. So I think it allowed me to have a different perspective on humanity, on empathizing with people around me (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 167-176).

Re-evaluating purpose in life. During increased exploration of who they were now after the death of their sibling, several siblings emphasized major shifts in identity which involved *re-evaluating their purpose in life*. The re-evaluation left siblings with a strong desire to live a more meaningful life. This included sibling statements about a desire to make a positive difference in the world and a strong desire to find and follow their own passions in life. Siblings discussed their own search for finding the purpose or meaning in their own lives. In the excerpt below, Samantha discussed how the core of how she understands herself shifted so that she is more open to change, more open to possibilities, and more inspired to follow her passions and pursue her sense of purpose in life:

Once my brother passed... meaning became something greater and more important for me... There is just something that is now instilled in me that I at any minute could just jump up and want to do something. I am looking into all these different programs and all this. I am thirsty toward so much more about how I could make a difference for one life to one million lives. I don't even know what it is yet but, for me, I think that through my brother's passing I have become a person who understands the importance of helping a community of so many different things... It's tough to explain. I just think that I see things, specifically people, in such a passionate way that I never probably even would have if I didn't lose my brother. I think that through losing him I have been able to value every

human life much more. I think that that's something I hope many people understand; how valuable and how beautiful even a single life is. That's something that I don't think I would have been able to learn within myself if not... There is something out there that I know I am meant to do and this has only really sparked in me since my brother's passing. I didn't really think about anything greater than my high school, my friends, my [extracurricular activities]... Nothing greater. Nothing abstract. That's really where all of my focus has gone to since my brother's passing. So now, there is something that I am meant to do. Some way in which I'm going to help people and I really, really know that. I don't think I've ever been more sure of anything in my life but I don't necessarily know what that is but I am 100% sure that I will stumble upon it at some point in my life and as crazy as that is to say, it feels really good to say too so it almost validates the fact that it is the purpose (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 276-289, 349-358).

During a process of self-discovery, travel, and increased risk taking, Maya also felt inclined to seek out the reason we are all here or the purpose in life. Losing a sibling seems to create a spark in many surviving siblings that leads them to contemplate the purpose of life in ways they might not have previously. Maya stated:

[My brother's death] pushed me to want to try to find the reason we're all here. Although I didn't ever find that answer out, but the journey itself was pretty cool. I met some really neat people and got to learn about some really cool religion and spirituality and be exposed to things. Cause I don't think I would've purposely been proactive to be exposed to [new things] if I wasn't so eager to try to absorb

any knowledge at that point (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 693-698).

Siblings described the experience of losing a brother or sister as life changing.

These experiences altered the ways that they thought about themselves and often led to them questioning their purpose in life. Often, based on these wonderings about what the purpose of life actually is, these siblings were inspired to make choices to live a more intentionally meaningful life and find ways to follow their passions and do things they felt would make an impact on the world. Anna explained:

Cleo found a lot of joy in singing. I don't think I've ever done anything in life that gave me that kind of joy that she got from singing. So that's sort of what I'm searching for in life is to find something that will give me that same sort of joy. Because I am a pretty ambitious person and a focused person I feel like I could find that in a career because I have this sort of ability to do good (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 540-544).

Many siblings discussed this altered view of their purpose in life. Siblings discussed changed goals and plans for the future that would include living or working in more intentional ways. Samantha explained:

I do think that one thing that has changed is the way...I make sense of things and things that trigger my passion in a way, is different. I know I'm looking a lot into different [paths] that my career can take me. I almost have this – it's not a calling or commitment to – but I really, really want to do something...like volunteer and help somebody somewhere. I don't really know what that is but I'm still searching...The experiences that I have been through have definitely led me to the search that I am on to figure out what exactly I should be doing. Where...if I

hadn't been through the experiences that I have been through, I don't know if I would even be looking if that makes any sense at all (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 73-84).

Often, siblings discussed pursuing a certain degree or subject in school or a certain career path as one way to live a more purpose filled life. For example, Maya said, "I decided to definitely pursue the [social services] profession that my brother had advised when I was younger" (2nd interview, Lines 166-167). Bella also discussed how her sister's death impacted her career choice:

I'm a medical assistant and because of [my sister] and the experience I went through with her it made me decide to go into the medical field. So because of all of these wonderful nurses and docs that we met and how well they were to Jen and all the other kids there and their parents, it was like I needed to give back what we got and that's why I did it (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 110-114).

Jon, who, similar to Bella, also lost his sibling due to a long term illness, discussed a desire to work in the medical field. Jon views this both as a way of "giving back" and also as one way of honoring his brother by living a more meaningful life. Jon shared:

I kind of look back on this and think that this is why I'm in the healthcare field... This is why I wanted to be a medic. This is why I want to be a paramedic. And this is why I want to help people and kind of honor Jason's memory with that (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 372-376).

After the death of a sibling in adolescence, surviving siblings in this study wondered how they would continue to explore their own sense of identity without the help of their siblings. When the sibling bond was broken through death, the surviving

siblings felt as if a part of them had died too. In many ways, this left them feeling ‘broken’ or vulnerable which was often characterized by bereaved siblings as increased feelings of pessimism, bitterness, anxiety, and fear. However, siblings also reported some other changes that could be viewed through the lens of posttraumatic growth. For many siblings, it was easier to see these changes as more time had passed since the loss.

Bereaved siblings discussed having an increased sense of empathy and compassion toward others and a desire to live a more purposeful, meaningful life.

Changed View of World

In addition to a changed view of self after the death of a brother or sister, many siblings in this study expressed changes in the way they viewed or understood the world. Prior to the death, many siblings reported having a general sense of safety in the world that everything would work out okay. After the death of their sibling, that *sense of safety was broken*. There was a realization that bad things can happen at any moment, which often led siblings to hold a *new outlook on life*. Siblings reported that they began to understand that life is unpredictable and precious and they must live in ways that do not take life for granted. Often, siblings *embraced the preciousness of life* as one way to honor their deceased siblings. The loss experience led them to *re-evaluate their priorities in life* which often led to them finding and embracing those people, things, or experiences that they valued most. In order to further explain and clarify this theme of a changed view of the world, multiple examples will be provided based on data gathered in the study.

Sense of safety shattered. Prior to the loss of their sibling, many of the siblings expressed feeling a general sense of safety in the world. They held the belief that everything would generally work out and everything was going to be okay. For many of

the siblings, this *sense of safety and comfort in thinking the future would be okay was shattered by the loss of their brother or sister*. Maya expressed her viewpoint on this in the passage below:

I felt like I had the whole world ahead of me before he died and I had many more choices and options. I trusted the future. I trusted that everything was going to be okay and I trusted – I guess I trusted the future thinking that the people that were in my life currently would be in my future. I just assumed. I never questioned it. So I thought everything was going to be fine because as long as I have the two of them [older brothers] guiding me and mentoring me and my mom also, everything would be cool...So after he died I no longer trusted the future. I think I questioned everything and my relationships changed and I was confused (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 473-482).

Melanie discussed a viewpoint similar to Maya's when she talked about how when you are a teenager, you just feel invincible, as if nothing bad could ever happen to you or those that you care about. Her viewpoint on this changed after her brother died. Melanie stated:

I think...when you are young and at that point it was the summer after our freshman year in college and everyone was just getting back and it was an exciting time for all of us. We were finally getting like almost our own little doses of freedom, but also there is that sense of being invincible and nothing is going to happen to me and I think too, you just feel like you are so old that point. I'm in college. I'm doing this. We're on our own, but then whenever [my brother died], it's amazing how I look back and I'm like gosh we were so young. We were so

clueless (Melanie, 1st interview, Lines 413-424).

New outlook on life. Based on the ways in which the surviving sibling experienced the loss, he or she came to have a *new outlook on life*. Not only did they see themselves differently, as previously discussed, but they began to see the world differently. Often, there seemed to be a lost sense of control after their siblings' deaths which led to the conviction that life is unpredictable. Surviving siblings discussed how their siblings' deaths led them to the realization that anything could happen at any moment. As Bella stated, "I've learned that you can't control things. You have to roll with the punches, but that took me a long time to figure out" (2nd interview, Lines 706-708). This new understanding led many siblings to shift some of their previous beliefs that nothing bad could ever happen to them or those they love. Siblings instead started to hold the new outlook or belief that life is precious and should not be taken for granted. Siblings talked about embracing life, living it to the fullest, and learning not to sweat the small stuff. Samantha eloquently described how her outlook on life shifted dramatically after the death of her brother:

Before Ben passed away my view of the world was very, very simplistic I think. I was a teenager and somebody who hasn't experienced something enormous, [just] as I never expect[ed] that I would more than three years after that point. I knew the world as almost, not perfect, but I didn't think that those things that you read or that you saw on TV...pertained to me...It's never going to be me kind of thing. I always just saw the world as my little bubble of simplicity. I never really thought about other countries being important to me. I never thought learning about different cultures or different traditions was anything I would really care

about. I just cared about what homework assignment I had that day or what I was going to eat for dinner. It really was just simplistic. I never thought about anything deeper. So after losing Ben that just became the *only* thing I thought about...I care about my homework and I care about what I'm going to eat – but those are the things that I think about. That's nothing what I put my focus on. Now I have this worldview that I am so, so interested in learning about other people's stories, their cultures, and their traditions. That's just something that is so interesting to me. I have never wanted more than to go volunteer in Africa or go travel to some remote part of the East. There is a part of me that now sees the world as, rather than simplistic [or] my own personal bubble, now it's so much more than that. It's almost this beautiful eclectic mix of desire and inspiration for learning the lives and stories of so many other people, whether that be in my neighborhood or in a country thousands of thousands of miles away. It's just a much more vast worldview...I don't even know what the word would be. I just realized that there is a big, big transformation that has been made from my worldview then to my worldview now (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 367-391).

Samantha highlighted a common view of bereaved siblings in this study who felt that losing a sibling shifted the way they saw the world. It opened their eyes to a broader world that existed and in some sense ignited their passions. Many times, this led siblings to try to live in ways that would not take the life they had for granted. Anna discussed how her worldview shifted after the death of her sister in the passage below, including how she felt more driven to follow her passions after her sister's death:

I do think that life is short...Life is short and you need to live it to the fullest

extent cause even [if] you're not doing - cause Cleo was a drug addict - you're not doing something to shorten your life, life can be shortened by something else.

You need to sort of embrace it and always be living. So, I think that's sort of been something which has been a part of my life. I quit my job and now it's like money doesn't matter. I want to do [something more meaningful] that I love doing (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 718-723).

Jon agreed that losing a sibling gave him a whole new outlook on life. With this understanding that life is unpredictable, came a sense of really cherishing life. Jon stated:

It brings a different perspective to life. You can't take it for granted. You take every moment and you make it special because, you know, I could walk out the door or my mom or dad could walk out the door and they could be gone. They could just go to the grocery store, get hit by someone, and they'd be gone (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 453-459).

This greater appreciation for life was also echoed in the following excerpt from Maya:

I'm kind of a big risk taker. And enjoy life in a different perception than before, like maybe I took it for granted. Like I said I had the world ahead of me and I can do anything I want, but after his death I really started to appreciate life more and tried to utilize that more and in a different way and make the most of it (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 176-179).

Embracing life. Another transformation in the way that many siblings began to view life after the death of their brother or sister involved the idea of *embracing or living life for their deceased brother or sister*. Many siblings talked about how they would try to live a good life now in order to honor their sibling who passed away. In a sense, they

would live a life that their sibling would have wanted for them and they would perhaps be living a life that their sibling never got to experience. Samantha stated, “Ben would want us to celebrate life, celebrate each other (1st interview, Line 333). In many ways, it seemed as if this allowed siblings to experience more joy in their own lives because it was helpful for them to think that this is what their sibling would have really wanted.

Allison stated:

So now being that she passed away I kind of feel like it’s my duty to live my life for her. I try to just live my life, because – I try to just live my life better for her. So I try to live a better life than I did (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 137-138, 187-188).

Jon also talked about living a life that would honor his brother. Jon discussed how he might be able to help other siblings who have experienced a loss figure out how to keep living life in a meaningful way:

I guess kind of [having other people] seeing, oh well he lost a brother [and] that’s why he’s doing that. What’s your reasoning behind it, you know. Get people to think why they’re doing what they’re doing. And if I can help someone else in the same situation, [saying] what are you interested in? Don’t let this stop you. Just because you lose a sibling, honor their memory with what you want to do. I knew I was going to go in the Air Force before Jason died and I told him one night, I said I’m going to graduate. I’m going to be successful and that is what it is. I told him, I’m going to be successful. You can pass. You can go when it’s good for you, but I’m going to do this and it’s going to be for you. So, that’s kind of why I did what I did (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 526-551).

Re-evaluating priorities. After a sibling's death, it appeared that multiple siblings began to *re-evaluate their priorities in life*. Their values, beliefs, and goals shifted as they began to realize what was most important in their lives now. Melanie stated, "You realize what is important in your life and you don't let the little things bother you (2nd interview, Lines 407-408). The "what" that was most important ranged from memories, to important relationships, to living a more purposeful, meaningful life, to taking more risks. The point is that once they became a bereaved sibling, they began to realize that some things they may have previously valued were actually not all that valuable. Melanie stated:

Nothing is ever good when somebody passes away. It's always a loss. But I guess the greatest gift that you have are the memories. The greatest gift that you have are little tchotchke things whether it be photos or a favorite shirt and you find value in things that were never valuable before. I don't look at life and take it for granted anymore. I realize I was able to weed out with my friends who were the good ones and who were the bad ones and who I wanted in my life and who I didn't want to my life (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 438-444).

Anna also discussed a major shift in values after the death of her sister when she contemplated how she now valued more than just work:

I guess value wise – Cleo wise my values changed... I guess also the value of seeing more in life than just work. That's part of it too. Like taking that time for vacations, taking that time for the little things, taking the time to exercise, and all that sort of stuff (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 505-508).

Maya also discussed how her beliefs and values shifted after her brother's death. Maya

talked about how she really lived her life differently after he passed away because of the realization she had that life was short. She began to take more risks, do things that made her happy, follow her passions, and began to see the true value in relationships. She discussed these shifts in the excerpt below:

I try to find ways to live a more silly life cause of it. Cause I realize life can change at any moment. I think it makes you realize that we don't have as much control in life as we would like to think we do. And I became a big risk taker... There's all these things in life I wanted to do and I just started going out and doing them. Cause I'm thinking holy shit, what if I died. So I went skydiving and traveling around the world. And my family's like, what are you doing? But I realized that, you know, what the hell, anything can happen in a split second. And so I just started taking more risks and doing more crazy things. But I felt more alive doing those things. I enjoyed doing the crazy risk taking, learning stuff, just constantly pushing myself because I just feel like life is short. And I don't try to think oh, maybe ten, twenty years from now, I can maybe do that. I have a hard time - some people are really good at being patient and they know it will work out [if they] just give it a couple of years. I don't like that as much... So, I'm a little more impatient about stuff because I just feel that he was twenty-seven. He was fairly young and even though he did live a longer life than a lot of other people, but you just don't know. So, I just try to enjoy life in that kind of way. I like doing a lot of crazy things because I figure maybe that's part of living life! That's one of the things I learned from his passing was to try to make the best out of the short amount of time that we have here. Life is so much about quality and relationships.

Because, after he passed, we didn't talk about his car. We didn't talk about his apartment. It was about the relationships. And so for me that's what really mattered the most (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 655-678).

Similar to Maya's final comment about recognizing the true value of important relationships, many other siblings also cited this as an important change in the way that they viewed the world. Many siblings discussed appreciating important family and friend relationships more than they had previously and becoming more closely connected to certain significant individuals by valuing the relationship more. In the excerpt below, Samantha discussed how she had a better, almost intuitive ability to determine those relationships that were good for her and could then really value them:

I think that I hold all of my relationships a little bit tighter in a way. I value each person that I have a close relationship with a little closer...I think I have a better sense of who is meant to be in my life and who is not and the people who I have found, I hold very, very close to my heart. I value them more than anything on earth. It's almost like a more mature sense of who is good for me. Not that I throw away or abandon relationships that aren't necessarily good for me, but I definitely put my focus towards people who I am 100% sure are allowing me to be all that I can be within the relationship...First and foremost, like I said, valuing my family is something that is amplified to the millionth degree. My family is everything to me. Very important. When you lose one person within that – I feel like you hold onto everyone else *and that person* still so close (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 272-298).

For Samantha, it seemed she had a stronger desire to figure out who was meant to be a

part of her life so that she could truly honor and strengthen those important relationships. Although she had discussed in the first interview that family was always something that was important to her in her life, it appeared that this valuing of family was amplified even more so after the death of her brother. This also held true for Melanie who explained that the loss of her brother just made family an even more important part of her value system. Melanie said, “I appreciated them before but I feel like I have a greater appreciation for my family” (2nd interview, Lines 363-364).

Several siblings discussed how the loss of one sibling made them value the importance of other sibling relationships even more so than they might have in the past. Anna stated, “I think I cherished my relationship more with my brother since Cleo’s death because I’ve always been very close with him but I think now more so I put [it] as a priority” (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 562-563). In a similar fashion, Jon also discussed how the death of his younger brother transformed his view of sibling relationships as even more precious and important:

Kind of like my sister and I. It’s brought us closer together as brother and sister. We don’t fight as much as I see a lot of other siblings do because we know, just like that, they could be gone...It brings you...so much closer...because you have an understanding of what that person’s going through and, you know, it’s kind of comforting a little bit. Cause she knows she can wake me up at three o’clock in the morning if she’s having an issue and I’m there. I’m there to listen. I’m there to cry or hug or whatever. Whatever comes of it, I’m there...It’s even more important now (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 447-449, 1250-1274).

In addition to feeling more closely connected to significant others, losing a

brother or sister led to a shift in their valuing of important relationships for many bereaved siblings. They often reported a greater appreciation of important relationships. Allison and Maya clearly highlighted how their outlook on relationships looks different prior to and after the loss of their siblings. Allison stated:

I think it made me a lot closer to my mom. In the beginning after she passed away I just thought our lives are just over and we are never going to get over it and especially my mom, but I guess we are closer now because of it...I think I am a lot closer to my family members because of that. It opened our eyes a lot... They were there for us in the very beginning so that made me appreciate them more - that everyone came together and really never left and really stuck by us for those next couple of months after her death. So that made me feel good... Then since she passed away I guess I still fight with my brother. I still argue with my parents. That really didn't change but I guess in the back of everybody's mind is that we want to just be there for each other because we all went through something so horrific and I think it made us appreciate everybody a lot more than what we did [before] (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 197-214, 231-235).

Maya again emphasized this major shift in her worldview with regard to the importance of close family and friend relationships:

After he died I became much, much closer to my family. I became closer to my brother, even though we were pretty close [before]... It was a huge loss for our family so our family actually got closer after he died. I became much closer to my cousins... So that changed big time. It was good in a way too because my family and I are really close. My cousins and I became – we're like sisters and I never

had sisters. It was cool. Then my brother, when I moved in with him, he had two daughters and I became so close to those two little girls. I was very protective over them. I became so involved like I was the bigger sister...I did all kinds of stuff with them and we are so close now still...So those two little girls became a huge part of my identity...It mattered a lot to me to build that relationship with the two little girls when before it didn't matter as much. So that was a big deal...It's kind of like Ramon did with me. So I kind of felt a responsibility to do the same thing with [them] because he taught me really healthy ways of being involved in someone's life and helping them out. He was a great brother and a great mentor and he taught me that. I don't think he realized what he was doing and I never realized at the time either but as an adult and I look back on it and I think he really taught me how to be a really good family member. Him and Noah. My brothers. My siblings. They taught me how to really care for someone and be involved and provide a healthy balance of guidance without being overbearing... We became even closer after my brother died. So I think that it really became important for me to achieve that bond with my family, with my nieces. I wanted to be there. I wanted to be a part of their life. I wanted them to be a part of my life on a full-time basis...I don't think that experience would have happened if Ramon wouldn't have died. I was much more selfish. It didn't matter to me. But *after* he died it mattered to me big time to be a part of their life. To me that is probably one of the coolest things in my life is being part of their life...Relationships just mattered more...With all the other relationships – well my mom and I drifted because she was dealing with it really bad, but everybody

else I was getting closer to, including my closest friends...I became closer to my family and my dad and to my stepmom and extended family. I didn't really know that much or get to know them until then. So a lot of good relationships came out of that (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 536-590, 614-620).

Siblings in this study clearly explained how they embraced a changed view of the world after the death of their siblings. For several siblings, this shift began when their sense of trust or safety in the world was shattered by the loss. This sense of unpredictability in life often led siblings to embrace a new outlook on life wherein life was viewed as precious. Many siblings wanted to live in ways that would not take life for granted and would honor the life of their sibling who had passed away. A re-evaluation of priorities in life led siblings to realize what was most important to them in their lives, which often included relationships, family, and living a good life.

Changed View of Others

In addition to a changed view of self and others, another component of identity change expressed by bereaved siblings was a shift in their relationships with important others in their lives. The death of a brother or sister in adolescence often led bereaved siblings to report a *shift in family dynamics*, which sometimes included anger or frustration regarding changed roles within the family for the surviving siblings. Often, surviving siblings reported having to take on the *caretaker role for one or both parents* after their sibling's death. Seeing their parents' difficulties in coping with the loss led many siblings to *hide their intense feelings of pain and sadness* from their parents as they came to view their parents as more fragile. However, there were many ways in which bereaved siblings were able to use their *families as support systems* to help in coping with

the loss. Losing a brother or sister also led bereaved siblings in this study to report a *shift in friend relationships*. Many surviving siblings found that it was difficult for their adolescent friends to be supportive after the loss. This often led to siblings having a better sense of what it meant to be a good friend which allowed them to find support in friend relationships in which their friend could just ‘be there.’ Additionally, siblings also discussed some of the ways in which they found a *relationship with a mental health professional* to be beneficial after the loss. In order to provide a fuller picture of the changed view of others expressed by bereaved siblings, multiple examples will be presented below.

Shift in family dynamics. As evidenced by bereaved siblings in this study, the death of a brother or sister has the ability to *change the entire family atmosphere*. It impacted how remaining family members interacted with one another in major ways. In the following excerpt, Anna explained how losing a sibling really changed the way her parents interacted with her:

It’s devastating. It just completely changes your family dynamic. I think that’s the other thing people don’t realize about losing a sibling. They think it’s like, oh you lost a sibling. Like, you know, whatever. Like, now you’re down to two kids in the family. But it’s so much more. It’s just, your parents are constantly missing that of theirs and it changes their way of how they interact with you... And there’s just that one other voice gone so when something new happens, we’ll sit around wondering, like what would Cleo have done, or what would Cleo have said, or how would she have reacted? (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 294-306)

In cases of an expected sibling loss where the family was aware of the sibling’s

eventual death due to a diagnosed long term illness, it seemed there was a shift in family dynamics prior to the actual loss. For example, Jon discussed his shifting role within the family where he took on an increased level of responsibility in the care of his brother and matured very quickly at a young age:

So I got to - I played a big part in helping take care of him. I took on that big brother role. And I babysat, do as much as I could with his medicines and stuff and making sure he was fed. Pretty much anything my parents taught me how to do to pretty much help sustain him for that period of time. [I] had to grow up fast! *Very, very fast...* I think my sister kind of had a better childhood. I took [on the role where] I have to help take care of Jason. Have to... I pretty much stayed home... and helped the parents do stuff around the house. Kind of helped pick up the slack a little bit... I grew up very, very, very fast. [I] learned how to give him his Diazepam and everything. So I was pushing that at like nine or ten years old (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 110-141).

Bella, whose sister died of leukemia, also expressed a shift in her role within the family prior to her sister's death. Similar to Jon, Bella took on more responsibility in caring for her sister and in many ways was forced to mature quite quickly. Bella shared:

I was really attached at the hip when she got sick... We were always attached at the hip, but it just got a lot stronger... I was very protective of my sister... I grew up really quick too... [The band teacher] told my mom he was amazed how much I matured since Jen got sick. But, I'm fifteen and I feel like I'm thirty. I need to be a kid. I can't be a kid when your world is just torn upside down... I wasn't allowed to go away to college cause I had to stay home and help with her, and I

don't regret taking care of my sister. I don't. But my dad would not let me grow as my own person (Bella, 1st interview, Lines 27-30, 37-39, 60-62).

For other siblings in this study who experienced the unexpected death of a brother or sister, the family dynamics were not reported to shift until after the loss. However, some of these changes within the family system appeared similar regardless of the type of loss. For example, the death of Maya's brother left her with a similar sense of a shifting role within her family where she took on more responsibility. Maya stated:

My role in the family changed. My two older brothers were the ones – my mom especially and my oldest brother – my oldest brother made a lot of the family decisions and so then my middle brother – my mom looked to him for a lot of involvement regarding things. Then it changed to me and I was like, what? I had to step up and take on much more responsibilities right away. So I wasn't prepared for that at that time. Well I don't think anybody is prepared for that at any time. But I wasn't and I felt that I was lifting something. I was lifting that huge car that is my identity and that changed within seconds. It changed overnight. I immediately became...[the one] to step up and do a lot of things that I don't think I would've been the one to do if Ramon was there. Ramon would've done those things. So it immediately changed my role in the family and I became much more involved as the caretaker in the family...*I had to*....It was exhausting and it was hard. So those responsibilities in that short amount of time and still trying to figure out okay I have this life before he died but now I have these responsibilities after he died. So it changed very dramatically (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 359-372).

Some siblings expressed anger about their changed family structure after the loss. Specifically, several siblings discussed how, at times, they felt as if they did not matter as much to their parents as their deceased sibling. Melanie expressed this viewpoint in the excerpt below when she described the awkwardness of celebrating her birthday after her twin brother's death:

The first few years I almost felt bad that we were having to celebrate my birthday but then I also would have – there were a few years that I got angry with my dad because he was so focused on it being Jim's birthday that he almost forgot it was my birthday and didn't say anything to me about it. So that was hard. My mom dealt with that and she came down on him so she was the one who kind of took control over that. I get it. It wasn't that big of a deal to me but it was kind of hurtful whenever I thought about it. *You are more worried about the dead child then you are about the child that is here.* That was kind of tough at times (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 648-655).

Anna also discussed feeling like the forgotten child by her parents at times after her sister's death. This led her to feel angry and hurt. Anna said:

I think sometimes I'll still get upset because I sometimes get that feeling of the middle child syndrome of like my parents have still forgotten me. So I still get those upset feelings here and there that they...are so sad and are focusing on that grief and then it's like but you still have me and you still have [my brother]. Like are we not enough? I think sometimes I'll still get those feelings of anger (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 467-472).

Role changes. In many ways, siblings were also grieving the loss of the family as

they knew it since the whole family dynamic changed when their brother or sister died. Bereaved siblings discussed the impact the loss had on their family throughout the interviews. One common shift expressed by multiple siblings is the surviving siblings *becoming caretakers for their parents* after the loss. Often, it was quite difficult for the surviving siblings, who were teenagers at the time of the loss, to see their parents express such distress and intense emotions with regard to the loss. For example, Anna explained:

So often you just think your parents are superheroes until you see them as real humans...to see my parents the way that they are and having to sort of take care of them more, like emotionally, [and] just feel like you have these fragile people who really need help. So that changes everything...I was taking care of my parents and I was not taking care of myself...I was sort of internalizing the grief [Before Cleo died], I didn't do the dishes. I didn't cook dinner. I didn't have to go grocery shopping. So I started doing those sorts of things after Cleo's death, just sort of help out more around the house, cleaning up the different rooms and stuff around the house, just spending time with them when maybe I wouldn't have thought to have stayed home to hang out with them. I would start staying in at night to just be with them. And, you know, my mom would just burst into tears a lot. So taking care of her, letting her cry and sort of comforting her and that type of stuff... I think that was sort of how I was taking care of them was by being there so that both of them could grieve in their own way and not end up, I mean cause so many couples, they end up getting divorced after they lose a child, so I started being there just to help and hope that doesn't happen with them (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 299-303, 333-336, 355-361, 373-376).

For many siblings, this was the first time they had ever seen their parents this distraught. They were confused and felt a need to comfort and care for their parents even though they themselves longed for care and comfort. Maya reflected this concept in the following excerpt:

I was trying to help my mom out because my mom was *really depressed* after he died so I was worried about her so I became a caretaker for her because she was in bed every day. She wouldn't get out. She wouldn't eat. So I went from not having many worries, going from 21 having fun, partying, to all of the sudden I still was getting wasted and stuff but it shifted from having fun and keeping at light to I was drowning in my grief and taking care of my mom and her worries. So it changed quite a bit...I took two jobs because I was paying the bills. My mom wouldn't work. She wouldn't get out of bed. So I was overwhelmed and everyone except for Noah, was like your mom is going through a hard time and you need to be there for her. *I was 21 years old*. I was working two jobs. I dropped out of school...So it was exhausting. I was just like holy shit, with our electric bill if I didn't pay it we didn't have it. It was as simple as that...It was a hot mess for a while...So I became her caretaker on top of trying to look happy and smiling when I was outside...I just remember being tired all the time. I couldn't sleep at night. I just felt like I had so many responsibilities. I just remember feeling exhausted. And even though I was exhausted, I couldn't fall asleep. I was just so sad about Ramon (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 118-123, 780-796).

Hiding pain and sadness. For many siblings, it was as if their family as they

knew it was completely changing and this was characterized by a lack of control, a sense of increased responsibility, and feeling completely overwhelmed. Siblings explained that they felt sad and scared, but often *hid these feelings in an attempt to protect their parents* from additional pain. Even prior to his brother's death, Jon learned that it was quite difficult for his parents to talk about the fact that his brother was going to die. Jon stated:

It was just, pretty much, one thing after another. He wouldn't roll on the floor anymore. He would just sit there because he couldn't do anything cause his muscles wouldn't move. Seeing that regression, it scared me a little bit, you know, and didn't ask my parents questions and then I could see that they were hurt because they understood what was going on. I, at the time didn't...[I had] pretty much no concept of death and if we brought the subject up, mom and dad would kind of avoid it a little bit. They didn't want to talk about it, which is understandable, especially being in their position. They knew it and we kind of knew it, but they were kind of in like the denial phase. They wouldn't...my parents just weren't in a position to talk about it. I understood, you know, no one wants to talk about their child dying, their sibling dying, you know (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 32-41, 180-205).

Maya, too, felt as if she needed to hide her sadness from her mom because her mom was so upset already that Maya felt as if she would not be able to handle hearing about her pain. Maya explained:

I couldn't cry. I couldn't tell my mom I was having a bad day. I think I just kept it to myself more because she was such a mess...So I think the hardest part at that time is I felt like I didn't have support. I was hurting...I was grieving and I was

also really resentful over the whole situation...I was upset my brother died but then I was also upset that now I took over the household and that my mom kind of gave up in my opinion. So then I was mad at my mom. I was trying to be understanding. I got it. She lost a child. I could not imagine what that is like. I really couldn't. But at that age I still needed my mom. I still needed a parent...I needed my mom but she checked out. She checked out. So I was on my own. And I had more responsibilities than ever. So it was a horrible time. *It was a horrible, horrible time.* I was so overwhelmed (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 824-838).

Families as support systems. In addition to all of these shifts in family dynamics discussed by bereaved siblings, many siblings also reported the importance of *viewing their family as a support system*. Often, bereaved siblings found a place of comfort and safety in turning to their families during their grieving process, at least at various points. Melanie discussed how having a large family was beneficial since there was always someone to lean on in a time of need:

My family, I think we all were really good supports to one another at some point...a big one was my family, especially my mom. I think it was just - fortunately I come from a large family so there is a lot of us so it's almost like we were all trying to be supportive to one another when each of us were down. So I think we were all a huge support to one another (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 100, 139-142).

Jon also discussed his family in terms of a good support system. For him, it was important to be able to talk to his family members because they also experienced a great loss and understood some of what he was going through. Jon explained:

I had a pretty good support system. If I had an issue, I could talk to my mom, my dad, whatever. They'd cry with us. They didn't hide it. Because we all knew we were upset...Just go talk to mom, or dad, or [my sister] if I have an issue or something...It helps. Very much. Venting and everything else. It's a huge help being able to talk to someone, you know, someone that understands (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 60-66, 1179-1189).

Shifts in friend relationships. Additionally, after the death of a brother or sister, siblings experienced multiple *changes within friend relationships*. Often, bereaved siblings found that although their friends tried to be supportive, they did not know how to do this in ways that were viewed as helpful by bereaved siblings. Melanie discussed how some of her friend relationships changed after her brother's death:

When I got [back to college] my friends were all very supportive but I felt like whenever I would walk on campus or see people I know they would tiptoe around me or walk on eggshells around me because of everything which was hard. There were times when I would just be a mess and I needed that, but it was hard...I felt like to other people who knew me and knew what happened - I think they felt badly for me and they felt sorry for me. I don't like the feeling of people feeling sorry for me and I felt like people were afraid to talk to me or say anything to me for fear of how I would react...I felt like I looked like a broken person and I felt people felt sorry for me. I know that's normal but I didn't necessarily like it...I think people saw as time went on that I was getting better and I think physically but also emotionally they could see my healing as I went along. Yes there would be times that I would still have anger and still be mad and everything else but I

think the progression – I think people could see it. I feel like in the very beginning, almost like you walk into a room and everyone's like how she doing today. It was just uncomfortable. Well and nobody knows what to say (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 216-219, 417-442).

In the selection above, Melanie talked about wanting or needing support from others, but finding that other friends of that age don't necessarily know how to react or how to be supportive in this type of situation, so what they express outwardly to bereaved siblings often ends up feeling like pity, which is uncomfortable. It seems this reaction made Melanie feel extremely vulnerable. Similar to Melanie, Bella experienced certain friends expressing pity toward her after the death of her sister which was quite unhelpful in her grieving process. Bella stated:

I got tired of the pity... Then all of that, oh I'm sorry. I heard about your sister. She was so sweet. Do you remember who I am? I was friends with your sister. It kind of got – it weighed a toll on me. It got really bad for about a good year before we moved to [the south]. It was everywhere I went. I still get it now that I'm older so I know how to channel it better just because of dealing with it many years ago (Bella, 2nd interview, Line 83, Lines 234-238).

Siblings also discussed this notion of friends not knowing how to respond after the loss. It was almost as if friends expected the bereaved sibling to be the same person and act the same ways they did prior to the loss. This was often quite stressful for bereaved siblings who felt so immediately changed by the whole loss experience. A lot of times, this led to siblings pretending like everything was okay and hiding their pain from their friends. Maya elaborated on her experience with changed friend relationships after

her brother's death:

[With regard to my friends,] no one really asked me – they knew my brother died and no one else seemed like hey if you need me let me know. They were like hey I heard your brother died, let's go out and get some drinks. Or hey I heard your brother died, let's go out for ladies night. So it was like okay. So that's what I would do... But I tried to carry on like everything was normal and everything was okay and it wasn't but I didn't want people to know it. It wasn't until I was able to move and that was a big deal moving. I felt like if I could move and get away I wouldn't have to worry about keeping up this persona. Nobody knew me... [Before I moved] I had a friend and she was so heartbroken because her and her boyfriend broke up and it was literally a month after I got back and she was like oh my God this is so hard, you have no idea. And I just wanted to be like, *stupid bitch! My brother died and I'm sitting here consoling you over your boyfriend breakup and you don't even ask me about my brother.* That's how I felt... she kept saying things like it's just so hard to lose someone. It just pissed me off so bad. I was like I just need to get away... But at that time and that age that's what my friends were concerned about (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 686-710).

There is certainly a sense that friends at this age have not experienced major loss and therefore did not know how to respond in any sort of meaningful way. That increased sense of maturity often cited by bereaved siblings in this study seems to be related to the fact that they have greater concerns and worries in the world because of their experience than many of their friends of the same age. This could be quite isolating for adolescent

siblings during a time where many of them are trying to fit in. Allison elaborated on this concept in the following selection:

My best friend, you know, bless her heart, she is a very nice person and everything, but I feel like she doesn't really have a clue either. Because her fear is that her dog is gonna die. So that's okay. Like that's okay! And I can't get mad at her because that's just what she knows. She never really had someone very close to her pass away and...she can't imagine her life without her dog...It's just, you know, they're just naïve. I can't fault anybody if they don't know how I feel. I can't fault them. Thank God nobody in her family passed away that she's close to and that the saddest thing in her life will be when her dog dies. You know, that's good for her. But, I just feel like people really when they say things to me, I really don't think that they're thinking (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 261-278).

A common understanding of bereaved siblings was that their friends were not able to fully understand what they were going through because they had never experienced anything like it before. Jon further discussed his experiences with friends who did not seem to get it:

[I wish people knew] just to, you know, be there. Be understanding. Sometimes I just need a shoulder to cry on. And that's a big, big thing. And you know, there's no way to really understand it unless you've been through it. You can try and understand, but unless you've been there and done that, you have no idea what it's like to do that. And I think that's a big thing for people. They don't understand, you know. I could see a kid in a wheelchair or see some two brothers around the same age that sets me off (deep breath). It just makes you upset and my friends

don't understand that. They understand to a point and to a certain extent, but never to like where if you experienced it or lived through it, you know [so they] just don't understand. As hard as they try, you just don't know the pain and the heartache and everything else. It's very much, you feel alone. Very much alone...When you have that type of thing happen where you're having an issue due to that because they just, (deep breath) they don't understand (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 1150-1178).

Often, siblings talked about how the most supportive thing friends could do was to just 'be there' and 'listen.' In circumstances where certain friends were able to do this, they were often viewed as a helpful support system by bereaved siblings. Melanie explained, "Some of my friends were helpful. They were understanding, and they would just listen and not give their opinions" (2nd interview, Lines 142-143). Jon further elaborated on the importance of having friends who can serve as a support system during a difficult time. He highlighted how friends become family when they are able to 'be there' during the bereaved family's time of need:

We had friends from our home school group and everything and we had close friends from church that would help out, you know, be there for us... Just having our friends become our family and we're still friends with everyone that stood by us the entire time; were there with us. Like I said, [there is] a special bond that you can't break once you go through that as friends or as a family (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 208-209, 227-229).

Even though certain friend relationships were viewed as helpful and supportive by bereaved siblings, there were also a majority shifts in friend relationships that were seen

as unhelpful or even harmful. Siblings often discussed an increased ability to sense whether or not a relationship was positive and beneficial in their life. After the loss, they had less tolerance for maintaining those relationships that they viewed as negative or harmful. For example, Samantha stated:

And people who I think aren't necessarily...as close to me as I thought they may have been, I have more ability to I put those relationships behind me and really, really focus on the people who allow me to be a better person, who really understand me for who I am (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 273-276).

Melanie echoed these same sentiments with regard to letting go of friendships that were unsupportive after the death of her brother. She said:

Talking about it with the right people was really important. When I say right people, I decided that the friends who weren't very supportive of everything that was going on, those were the people that I needed to unfortunately filter out of my life and say to heck with you (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 95-98).

Often due to their experiences with friends after the death of a sibling, bereaved siblings quickly learned what it meant to be a good friend. It appeared that they also quickly learned that not everyone they had a previous relationship with was capable of being the type of friend they needed after the loss. For example, Maya explained:

I only had...three sincere friends that were close to me and my mom and they were the ones that were like how are you doing. They didn't push their problems on to me. They knew to give me space. They knew not to impose more on to me. They are the three friends that I'm still best friends with now even. That was a sign of their maturity and their sincerity and empathy at that age. But [for] a lot of

other people that was not the case. So when I moved it was a weight lifted off my shoulders. I didn't have to go out at night. I didn't have to work every day. I didn't have to have a smile on my face. Nobody knew me. They had no expectations from me. It was great. I would go back home and visit but I kept a distance from some of the people. After that it was like, okay I know what a good friend is now. So that kind of changed that up (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 710-719).

Relationship with mental health professionals. Bereaved siblings also often expressed a *changed view of their relationship with mental health professionals*. Many siblings sought out mental health services for the first time after the death of their sibling. For most siblings in this study, their experience of seeing a counselor or therapist was seen in a positive light. Jon stated, “They brought in a therapist and everything and they helped” (1st interview, Lines 55-56). The counselor's office was often viewed as a safe place for catharsis, to express difficult emotions. Melanie expanded on the concept below:

I had gone and spoke to a counselor a few times, which I think was kind of good to just talk to somebody and releasing emotions that I had with other people but almost have a neutral person to say – who didn't really know anything about it, about me, the whole situation. I can just express all my emotions and my anger and just let that all out. Almost like I aired out my dirty laundry. Now I can continue on and feel better now that that is out as opposed to having someone who already knew about it and try to continuously explain emotions (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 100-106).

Allison also felt that her relationship with her therapist was helpful because she could express some of her emotions, specifically anger:

I spoke to a grief counselor. She basically was like a therapist. I would talk to her about everything, but at least she specialized in grief and, I'm not even sure really if she lost anybody cause she never told me... But she helped me and I went to her for a lot of months. And I would just cry and I would get out any anger I had (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 161-167).

Maya found a relationship with a counselor helpful, but it was not until much later after the loss that she was able to find this important supportive relationship. She stated:

[Ten years after my brother's death, my father died] and I found a good therapist, a good counselor. I went in originally for my father's death, but I told her I was still on my brother's grief. So, I went to her for like three years. And that allowed me finally an opportunity to keep talking about it things... And I guess it wasn't helpful early in the process because I was in such a place at 21 that I did a lot of drinking... and I was working so much that I didn't have to deal with it (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 390-398).

Another way in which bereaved siblings reported identity change was through a changed view of others. This included shifts within the family dynamics where bereaved siblings described feeling angry, hurt, or forgotten. Often, it was distressing to see their parent(s) in so much pain. Many siblings reported a shift in roles where they became the caretaker for one or both parents. One way of taking care of parents seemed to be for bereaved siblings to hide their intense feelings of pain from their parents as a way to try and prevent them from additional heartache. However, it is important to note that families

were also often seen as a source of support in the grieving process as they ‘understood’ the impact of the loss. Siblings also discussed major changes in friend relationships. Although some friends did not know how to be supportive, siblings reported a stronger sense of how to be a good friend, which led to them seeking out friends that were most supportive by ‘being there’ and ‘listening.’ Additionally, most of the siblings in this study who sought out mental health or counseling services found this to be supportive and beneficial.

After a loss happened, bereaved siblings in this study began to look for ways to understand and make sense out of the death. This search led to changes at the very core of the bereaved sibling’s identity. Bereaved siblings reported multiple changes in their views of themselves, their views of the world, and their views of others. These changed views comprise the identity change component of meanings made by bereaved siblings after a loss in adolescence.

Sense Making

When a sibling death occurs, the surviving siblings often began to ask themselves why this loss happened. They also questioned what the meaning of the loss was in their lives. Often, making sense of the loss meant trying to understand the loss, including what it meant, and exploring ways in which this loss experience could be integrated into one’s life narrative. In the second category of sense making or what meanings bereaved siblings have made out of the death of their brother or sister, the following themes will be explored: (a) spiritual or religious understandings, including changes in one’s relationship with God, religion, or spirituality as a way to explain the loss experience; (b) uniqueness of sibling relationship, including the idea that grief lasts forever because of a deep

connection or sibling bond as a way to explain the loss experience; (c) continued connection to sibling, including the importance of remembering and honoring the deceased sibling as a way to make sense out of the loss; and (d) “embracing the loss”, meaning acceptance of not ever getting the answers one is searching for and of learning to live a life without the physical presence of the bereaved siblings as ways to understand the loss experience.

Spiritual or Religious Understandings

For the siblings in this study who were bereaved in adolescence, it seemed that the death of their sister or brother often served as an *impetus for these siblings to begin their own spiritual quest*. Many times this exploration of religion and spirituality after the loss left bereaved siblings with an increased *openness to new beliefs*. However, many initially reported feeling *angry with God* as they questioned why this loss happened. In spite of that anger, it appeared that many siblings found *religion or spirituality as a sense of comfort or support* in their time of grief. Many siblings also expressed that one important understanding for them was *wanting or ‘needing’ to believe in some type of afterlife* after their sibling’s death to help in their coping. In order to clarify the concept of spiritual or religious understandings as sense making, multiple examples from bereaved siblings are provided.

Beginning of spiritual quest. As siblings began to ask questions about why their sibling died or what the purpose of life was, many began to take a closer look at issues that had not previously been of much importance to them, including religion and spirituality. They expressed increasing curiosity about religion and spirituality which often led to a type of *spiritual quest* to search for answers. Samantha suggested that her

views on spirituality became more important to her as a result of her brother's death:

Yeah, and I think too its [views on religion or spirituality] becoming more important to me in general in that I didn't really pay much attention to it, nor did I really care about learning about different religions or different aspects of what people believe in [prior to Ben's death]. I never really cared to figure out what made the most sense to me and now listening to people, meeting different people, has given me the opportunity to learn so much about so many different things.

There are things that are starting to allow me to say, oh yeah that really does make a little bit of sense to me, or that could be true for me, so that would definitely be something that might have definitely changed...If I find out something spiritual or religious that makes sense to me than that's another part of me and another positive thing. So it's almost like a lifelong journey to better myself but through that I do find positive things or I do find that meaning making that really is the essence of what we keep talking about (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 325-331, 341-344).

The spiritual quest often led bereaved siblings to begin a process of questioning related to an afterlife or what happens when someone dies. These concepts became much more important to bereaved siblings as they struggled to understand where their sibling might be now that they have died. Many siblings began actively searching for answers by seeking out more religious or spiritual guidance through people, books, or classes. Maya explained:

My religious and spiritual voice changed. I think before he died I honestly didn't give it as much thought. I was raised Catholic. I was expected to be Catholic even

though I was pushing it since I was young... My mom wanted me to be a nun and that wasn't going to happen... So she took me to a lot of Catholic things for a couple of years and I knew she was trying to get me to be a nun and so I was really fighting it... It was funny because I was a youth leader of the church but I was just a rule breaker. I kind of learned from [my brothers] to break some of the rules and have fun. So that's what I did.... But I had questions about God. How do you know there's a God? Well I had a lot of questions the kids ask. How do you know the Bible is telling the truth? How do you know this? How do you know that? It was all basic questions and I had questions about other religions too... But I never really dwelled on it and it wasn't until my brother died that all of the sudden those questions really mattered to a different degree. And it mattered because now Ramon was in that realm. How do you know there is a heaven because I want to know there is a heaven now because it matters because Ramon should be there. So to me and my belief it became very important. Trying to make sense of all that became important. I took philosophy classes. I started reading books. So now I was really listening to what the priest had to say. I was talking to other spiritual leaders. I wanted to know their perspective and I wanted to know more of anything about the afterlife. So I was like what do you think of an afterlife? What do you think happens when someone dies? Those were the questions I was most concerned with... It mattered more because I knew somebody who was now impacted by all these questions that I had asked and we got different answers. And the good thing was that at least they wanted to have these conversations with me. From what I can tell it was their own teachings and

no one knew for sure. It's a belief. Faith is not knowing for sure but believing in it 100% anyway. So to me I didn't have strong faith because I just had so many questions and I didn't feel content with any of the answers. So my belief changed after that regarding spirituality more than anything else (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 420-453).

Throughout their spiritual quest for answers, many siblings began to challenge their previously held religious or spiritual beliefs after the loss of their brother or sister. Anna explained her willingness to challenge, and as a result change, a part of her religious beliefs:

I don't go to church anymore. I don't really pray anymore. Although it's not like I don't believe in God. I do think there is a God, I just don't believe that he has his control over our lives or has this flight plan for us. I don't see that worshiping him in any way will make your life better, I guess that sort of thing. I don't see the value in it may be what it comes down to...I don't really cherish [it] anymore I guess is the word. So I'd say in that sense my belief system has really changed (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 497-505).

Openness to new beliefs. As they began searching for answers to some of their questions about religion or spirituality, many siblings embraced a new *openness to multiple types of religions or spiritual beliefs*. Their searches led them to realize just how many different beliefs existed in the world and in many ways, these siblings began to pick and choose certain beliefs that fit with their way of thinking, rather than arbitrarily adopting a whole set of religious beliefs. For example, Samantha explained:

Also on a different level I think a lot of people change or question or reevaluate

what they think on an existential level or spiritual level or religious level or whatever, you know whatever suits a particular person, but for me...I think that one of the greatest changes that I value would be that maybe not from a religious standpoint but going back to what I keep saying is so important to me and learning who people are and accepting them for what they have been through and who they are as people...Not only have I looked at myself and what I believe [but] I have also gathered a better understanding and a better acceptance for other people's beliefs. There are an infinite amount of things that you can believe in terms of religion or spirituality or whatever and I just try now not to judge people based on what their beliefs are because I know for me my beliefs have changed so much...I went to a Catholic-based grade school so I learned a lot of the practices, traditions, and beliefs of that religion but through the loss of my brother I have been able to – I don't want to say like a keener eye, but a better understanding for what makes most sense to me and I have realized that what I have learned through school may not be it – and I am okay with that...Right now I am in this place in my life where I don't exactly have one particular belief that just rings louder or more important than any other as far as that goes, but I do know that there is a change currently being made. I'm in the middle of a journey that I will hopefully find one day. I don't really know necessarily the end...because I am not right there [yet]...but I definitely know that through losing my brother a change is being made in that aspect of my life (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 299-319).

Maya also explained how she had more openness with regard to learning about multiple forms of religion and spirituality after her brother's death. She stated:

And learning more about [religion and spirituality]. I was much more interested in being much more open to other religions. Before it wasn't that I didn't care, I just went to church because I had to. After that I went to church because I wanted to because I was truly seeking answers. So my attentions really changed. I too got much more serious. Much more serious. So it changed my belief system spiritually *big-time*. Since then, it took a while but I have become more spiritual as time has gone by. I have found other religions and things that to me are inline more with me (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 453-459).

Anger with God. Although many siblings embraced a new openness to various religious and spiritual understandings, many also expressed *anger at God* with regard to the death of their sister or brother. Bella stated, "I have a lot of anger at God. I yelled a lot to him because I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to do (2nd interview, Lines 165-166). Especially early on in their grieving processes, siblings discussed feeling angry as they questioned why a God they trusted and loved would take their sibling away from them. The following excerpt from Jon further exemplifies this concept:

We prayed, prayed for a miracle. Miracle didn't happen. It was tough. And then it kind of puts you in a state that I haven't gotten over yet. But I'm mad at God, [asking] why? Why did you have to do that to us? Why did our family have to go through that? And just getting back to where we were taught, trust God. I don't trust him anymore because of what happened (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 47-55).

Some siblings questioned why they should go to church after their sibling's death because they were angry with God. Although Melanie talked about how she only really went to church on holidays prior to her brother's death, she explained how she was not

really inspired to go because of her resulting anger after her brother's passing:

I wouldn't say at that point in my life that my faith was good because it was one of those things that I went to church just holidays so it wasn't anything that was important in my life... I was kind of angry at God because it happened so it impacted [my faith] in that sense where again I wasn't a practicing Catholic but I didn't feel the need to start going to church or start praying more often because... it didn't mean anything to me at that point in my life... Also at that time I wasn't practicing so it didn't give me any sort of motivation whatsoever to start going to church because I thought it was going to be good for me. I just, at that point, was angry with everyone at some point including God and it was like why go to church? What is the point? (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 157-166).

Allison was a bit back and forth on whether or not she had anger at God and ultimately stated that she probably did as she questioned why this happened to her family, but she made it clear that she never questioned God's existence:

When someone passes away automatically you hate God and you don't want to go to church and you don't understand why this happened to you and why it happened to your family. But I can't say that I really felt that way. Maybe I did and I did question at first like how could this happen to me? How could this happen to her? How could this happen to my family? But I never questioned God or anything like that (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 144-148).

Bella, too, emphasized that although she was angry with God, she never lost her faith. She explained, "[I remember] yelling and screaming at God, [but] I never lost my faith in him. We teach religion class so I never lost that. Actually I think he really helped guide

me a lot [and] figure things out” (2nd interview, Lines 270-272).

Religion or spirituality as comforting. For many bereaved siblings, *religion or spirituality was seen as a source of comfort or support* after the loss of their sibling.

Siblings often described certain beliefs as comforting during their grieving process. For example, Allison stated:

It makes me feel better to believe that everybody goes somewhere and in the end we will all be together. We will all be together again and everything will come full circle again eventually. We are all here for a reason and that’s how I feel. It makes me feel better to know that you can pray and that they can hear you and stuff like that. It is comforting (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 175-178).

Melanie discussed how it became important for her to practice more religion as she got older. She felt that her spiritual beliefs could be a comfort to her in difficult times, even if it was not her main source of support:

But as I have gotten older I have realized how for me personally it is important that I practice my religion...About four or five years ago I started to go to church again on a regular basis and I think my faith, as far as that goes, helps out. I don’t ever think of myself as a religious person that I am spiritual and my faith is more spiritual than it is actually religious. I’m Catholic. I believe in some of the things the Catholic Church does and there are other things that I am not necessarily in agreement with, but with that being said...I wouldn’t say it has been a direct help as far as where I was in my healing at that point but it is just kind of another little side thing now. It is a support to me if I ever really need it...If I’m having a rough time to be able to kind of – not fall back on it, but know that I have my faith

(Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 145-152, 190-191).

‘Needing’ to believe in an afterlife. Due to their sisters or brothers passing, many siblings discussed comfort *believing in an afterlife*. Jon stated, “I believe that he’s in a better place and everything, you know, he’s having a lot of fun up there” (1st interview, Lines 1022-1024). For many, there was a strong desire, almost a need, to believe in the afterlife now that their sibling was no longer physically present here on earth. Melanie explained why she *needed* to believe in some kind of afterlife because it made her feel better with regard to her brother’s death:

I think that my faith as far as the afterlife and everything – I guess it got to a better spot because I almost needed to believe it and needed to say to myself he’s in a better place to make myself feel better (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 525-527).

Allison, too, echoed some of these thoughts in the following selection:

I just have to believe in a higher power to get me through my days. I need to believe in Heaven and believe that there is another side and that we go somewhere great when we die because that makes me feel better. If I just think that my sister died and is lying in the ground - I get extremely devastated (Allison, qualitative response on survey).

Religious and spiritual understandings appeared to be a common way in which bereaved siblings in this study made meaning after the death of a sibling. For many siblings, the loss of their brother or sister was an impetus for them to begin a sort of spiritual quest. They began exploring religion and spirituality and questioning some of their previously held beliefs. Often times, this quest left siblings with a new sense of

openness about other religious or spiritual beliefs. Although many siblings initially reported anger at God after the loss, many still viewed religious or spiritual beliefs as a sense of comfort to assist in coping with the loss. Many siblings had a newfound belief in the afterlife because it was important for them to feel as if they would someday get the chance to reunite with their bereaved sibling.

Uniqueness of Sibling Relationship

One important way for many siblings to understand the death of their sister or brother was to acknowledge and emphasize the importance of the sibling bond. Siblings reported feeling so strongly connected to their sibling because of the *strength of the sibling bond*. For many siblings, emphasizing the strength of the bond may have been a way to validate the intense grief experience they were going through as a result of the loss. Additionally, there were certain *developmental aspects to losing a sibling in adolescence* that were discussed by participants. All of the siblings in this study felt as if *sibling grief lasts forever*. There is the grief and pain of losing a sibling, along with a grief for the future they would never get to have with their sibling. Often, this led many bereaved siblings to report *re-experiencing grief at various milestones* throughout their lifetimes. Examples from bereaved siblings will be provided to further elaborate on this important theme of the uniqueness of the sibling relationship.

Importance of sibling bond. Many bereaved siblings expressed their view that the sibling relationship is unlike any other relationship. There is a connection or a bond between siblings who spend the majority of their lifetimes together. Perhaps it is because bereaved siblings often feel silenced in their grief that they feel such a strong need to emphasize the *importance of the sibling bond* because this helps to validate their

intensely painful responses to the loss as legitimate. Jon explained how the pain of sibling loss is indescribable:

There's nothing in comparison to losing a sibling. Nothing... There's nothing really to describe it. It's just there's a hole that you're never going to be able to fill again and there's different ways of kind of helping to not necessarily fill that hole, but make it better and there's nothing like it. Nothing. Nothing that I've experienced anyway that even compares to that (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 974-978).

Siblings who lost an older brother or sister explained how they never knew life without their sibling, which is really a unique perspective because even their parents knew life prior to the birth of their child. Therefore, after their death, everything they knew and understood was different. Samantha discussed this concept in the following excerpt:

I told you about how it was very weird for me to adjust to life after Ben's passing and one of the reasons for that was the fact that I didn't know life without him. He was born when I was born. So I really, literally didn't have a life without Ben. Everyone around me did and I think that the idea of losing a brother or sister at an age that is already so confusing – so chaotic (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 488-492).

Allison explained how some people did not acknowledge the importance of the sibling bond because she got the message that her grief was not as intense or as important because she “only” lost a sister. She discussed the importance of the sibling bond and growing up together almost as a way to validate the intense grief she was experiencing as a result of the loss. She stated:

Siblings grieve too. You know, so a lot of people, when they hear someone passes away, and they're young they say, oh my, that poor girl and... what her parents must be going through or [what] their spouse must be going through. And they don't really say, oh she had sisters or she had brothers... I feel like siblings aren't really included in that. I feel like siblings are the biggest part because... you knew them all your life. You grew up with them. You know everything about them. You share the bathroom with them. You share everything with them... I just feel like siblings are left out... because my sister was a very, very, very big part of my life. I guess people just... don't think I'm going through what I'm going through, what I'm still going through cause she was just my sister (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 205-222).

Developmental aspects of loss in adolescence. For the siblings in this study, the ways in which they understood the loss was directly related to the age they were when their sibling died. Siblings cited many *developmental aspects of losing a sibling in adolescence* as it is often very overwhelming to experience such intense emotions at such a young age. Often, siblings felt as if they did not yet have the tools they needed to effectively process all of the pain, emotions, and trauma around their siblings' deaths. For some, these factors led these adolescent siblings to hide their grief from others. Samantha discussed what it was like to be only 17 years old when her brother died:

I think that being a teenager made a huge impact on the way that I handled that situation... I think that every teenager – it's the perfect time for all emotions to be amplified over nothing or something that is very important... I still think that being 17, being in the midst of crazy teenage years, I was definitely affected by

that. I think, for example, many teenagers never really want to talk about things that are important to them at the time with their parents or try to keep things within themselves and that's why things get so emotional. They get to a point where they can't take anymore and that's when the whole flood of emotions come and that definitely happened with me with this...So I think that being a teenager made me put up a wall to the things that I felt and the things that I was going through at that time from my parents. I can see, still to this day, I can see the difference between the way in which they cope and the way that I cope. I don't really talk much about the things that have happened or my feelings – the way that the loss of Ben has affected me with them, but they talk about Ben all the time...So I think that being a teenager maybe made me more reserved to opening up. I feel so comfortable opening up with you but really that's not how I am day to day. I am really a much different person. Someone who holds a lot in, who likes to deal with things on my own...and honestly I think that has a lot to do with being a young teen who lost her big brother. I really think that that age had a big impact on the way that I have coped over the years (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 449-471).

Samantha described what many would acknowledge as a common pattern in teenagers who are attempting to cope with a difficult situation where they bottle up their emotions and close off from others until something happens and they feel unable to cope with it all and all of the emotions they had been keeping inside just come pouring out. Jon was 12 years old when he lost his younger brother and described almost an identical pattern in his response to the loss:

[After Jason's death] I was probably a bad person to be around. I was upset. I mean I was just like not a good person to be around. I was angry. I didn't want to really want to, yeah, I participated in expressive therapy and everything else that they offered us, but I guess I didn't really know how to express [my feelings], like deep down, I have a tendency to bottle up all of my emotions and then once it comes uncorked it's bad. So I think I bottled them up. I was upset, just wanted to be alone and I know my parents, they saw that. They got upset about that. They understood, but they also wanted to make sure that we're here for you. When you do want to stop hiding out in your room, we do want [you] to be able to be social, kind of like when you're a teenager, that's the best way to express it. You don't want to be around anyone and you don't want anyone around you and that was, that was what I went through. And then finally when it all came uncorked, we could all have a good cry and we got over that little bit of that moment, kind of moved on a little bit and when it would happen again, we'd do the same thing over again. So that was kind of your pattern for a little while of not really wanting to talk to anybody, kind of isolating yourself a little bit and then something would happen, it would be too much and you'd kind of have this emotional expression or you'd have a good cry with your family (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 616-647).

For all of the siblings in the study, the teenage years were identified as a particularly difficult time to lose a sibling due to all of the other changes that are occurring at that age. This is often the time where one is starting to become more independent and it created a struggle for many siblings between their desire to move toward independence and their need for comfort and support from important caregivers in

their lives. Anna explained how she was glad to be in the work force when her sister died because it felt like, to her, that that might have led to less struggles in some sense. But in her case, Anna struggled between pursuit of her own independence and a need to stay home and care for her grieving parents:

I'm glad I was not in high school or I'm glad I was not in college. I'm glad that I was working when Cleo died if that makes any sense because being in college, it's like you can't have an off day. You need to keep up with everything. You need to keep up with your school work... I think like if Cleo died when I was in school then it might've really impacted my marks and then maybe I wouldn't have got into graduate school now. So in a way I feel like it was good that I was in the work force because even though I had to deal with the awkwardness of crying while at work and trying to find a place to go hide or taking sick days here and there and having people [be insensitive], those are frustrating but I think it was actually much better that I was working... because I think my life was at such a point that I could take those days off and it really didn't harm in future. But with the perspective of being 22, I do feel like I was quite young and it was hard to have this major trauma happen to the family dynamic. Being that I was 22, it was sort of like this I was just starting my life I guess you could say... so you are sort of kicking everything off with your own independence. In a way it sort of forced me to stay home for a few years because I wanted to look after my parents and also I wanted to not put too many stresses on myself in needing to pay rent and other stuff and then it sort of forced me to not fully launch yet – I guess you could say (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 603-632).

During the teenage years, bereaved siblings were at an age where they were beginning to experience more freedom and independence. It was also a time where they were beginning to think more about their futures as far as what they would do in their lives and who they wanted to be. The trauma of losing a sibling during this time appeared to have a major impact on a sibling's ability to think about the future. Melanie discussed some of the difficulties of losing her twin brother at the age of 19:

I think [losing a sibling as a teenager is hard] because you're still trying to learn about yourself and find your way in the world if you will. The way that you handle things as far as your maturity level goes. When you were 19 you think you are really mature but now looking back it's like *my gosh I was so immature...* I think it played a huge role but I think to talk about the age of 19 it was complicated too because it's so young. He had so much more to live for and everything... A lot of it was maturity. Everything was going on where you have newfound freedom at that age between either going to school or finding out what you want to do for the rest of your life and really thinking about your future at that point and then first off somebody is taken away but then also thinking to yourself holy cow, how do you recover from something like this? (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 531-552).

Melanie emphasized how she felt so old when she was 19, but the reality is that is still a very young age which is often characterized by a lot of immaturity and a lack of real world experiences. Often, this lack of experience coping with difficult situations can impact a sibling's ability to cope with the loss in healthy, meaningful ways. Maya further exemplified this concept when she discussed her experience of losing her brother when

she was 21:

For me at that point in time the hardest part is that's an age where at 20, 21, you are expected to really know things. People are like you are an adult now and they expect you to have more responsibility than I think you can take on. It's a tricky age because you are old enough to take care of yourself but at the same time I think you are young enough to still need support. I think that's the hardest thing about the age... So I was expected to step up and be an adult about it. I still felt like a teenager in some ways... You still need help. You still need support... You are still young. So I think the hardest thing about losing him at that age is that is a tricky age because it's a transition age of wanting to be an adult, be on your own, do more and be independent... Now I'm kind of an adult so I wanted to be on my own but at the same time I needed help still from the adults around me. I didn't know what was appropriate to ask for. I think if I was younger and I asked for stuff it would not have been a shock. But because I was 21 and I asked for stuff I come off as I was being selfish or maybe I'm not handling it as well as I could or I should be more considerate towards other family members or I was handling it worse. So it's tricky. To me it was tricky... and at that age everybody else at that age does not cope with things anyway in a healthy way. You're legal enough to get into trouble... you can really mess yourself up... You have alcohol, you have drugs, you have your peers that also could go to those things when that's how they are dealing with other stuff whether it's their parents or school or whatever. So you have options, they are just not good ones. But to have some good healthy options at that age is a really big deal. Because like I said, for me everyone was

like oh I'll take you out. I'll get you a shot...And that's how people around that age communicate (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 881-919).

Grief lasts forever. Losing a sibling at a young age is difficult, particularly because there is often a realization very early on after the loss that this *grief will last forever*. In addition to the difficulty of dealing with such intense emotions at a young age, there is also a grief for the future that surviving siblings will no longer get to have with their brothers or sisters. Also, there is much pain associated with losing a sibling who is considered relatively young because inherent in this is the idea that the deceased sibling was 'robbed' of life or missed out on so much living. Allison further discussed some of the ways in which it was difficult for her to lose her older sister when Allison was only 22 years old:

Well I think that it was definitely very hard for me being that young because, well number one I never had anybody passed away that was that close to me...So I never experienced a loss like that. Being that I was only 22 I think that my age had a lot to do with the craziness of everything because I still had a lot to do. I still had to get married. I still had to have children. I still had to buy a house. I still had to do all of the living as an adult. She witnessed me grow up from a baby to a teenager and into an adult and then she missed all of these major milestones in my adult life...She didn't get to see one thing. I think that had a lot to do with how I felt, how I handled it, that there was hardly anybody for me to relate to because I didn't really know many people that lost siblings at a young age...I can only say I had 22 years with my sister and that's not a lot I feel like. Then as I get older and say I'm 65 my sister will have been gone for so many years when I'm 65. That's

scary...My sister she just totally – she just totally missed out. And 22 years is not a lot when you think about it...And just the things that I accomplished in these four years [since she's been gone]...So much is missed already in four short years (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 265-305).

It is often quite an overwhelming experience for adolescent bereaved siblings when they have the realization that their pain will never go away. Losing a sibling creates a void in the life of surviving sibling and all acknowledged that their grief will last forever. Seventeen years after the death of her twin sister, Bella explained:

I just miss her every day. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think of her. That a memory doesn't pop in my head or a chuckle to myself. She is always on my mind. She is always in my heart and she's always around. I just wish I could hold her or hug her or hear her voice. I miss talking to her on the phone...I just miss her being around (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 466-471).

Jon also emphasized that losing a sibling is not ever something that you 'get over.' He said:

I don't think anyone totally gets over losing a brother or a sister. It gets easier, but I don't think anyone totally gets over it because you're missing that piece of your life. That bond, you know. He, he was only two years old. But we were best friends (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 437-443).

Adolescence can be a particularly difficult time to realize that the intense pain of loss is something that is never going to go away. Samantha explained:

Being adolescent, you are still so young. There is still so much life to live so the grieving process for somebody who loses a sibling or anyone really at a young

age like that, you have a lot of life to live and a lot of grief to have with you for a long time. So it's almost [like] grief automatically becomes a lifelong process. I don't think there is a point at which it never ends. It's not like, okay boom it's over. I've made it through. I don't think there will ever come a point in which that is the case... That's why you need to take extra caution and care for yourself a little bit more so that you can endure that because that's a long, long time to be faced with heavy emotion, sometimes anger, sometimes sadness, sometimes no emotion at all. That's a long time to be faced with those things... I think teenagers also have this idea that when they are faced with something they just want to get it done and over with. They have so much focus and attention on that one goal and sometimes they get wrapped up in that a little bit and once it's done, they celebrate, it's done, it's great, but I think grief is something that they are faced with in adolescence and that's not the way it works. So if you can understand that early I think you are in a better place than others because there is no, boom, done, I'm over it and let's move on kind of thing for grief (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 493-518).

Re-experiencing grief. Although the pain of losing a sibling will never go away, most siblings agreed that the grief does look different over time. Grief is often experienced differently at different ages and stages of a bereaved sibling's life. For example, as they get older and enter into a new developmental stage, they will be able to understand and process aspects of the loss in very different ways than they previously could. Therefore, it is often the case that bereaved siblings reported a *re-experiencing of grief throughout life, particularly during important milestones*, life events, or important

experiences. Maya explained how the grief of losing her brother has changed and transformed over time:

As time transitions and life happens and you find yourself at a different place than you were five years ago or even two years ago or ten years ago and a new opportunity presents itself or a new surrounding and yeah it changes and things occur over time organically. Sometimes I am aware of it and other times I don't think I am. I think definitely the older I have gotten... I think time just gives you more opportunities to find other ways to live your life and learn to adjust without that person being there. So I think as time has gone by I have learned to live a life without Ramon in it. There are ways I want to incorporate him in my life... It's not like it heals. You still grieve. I think you grieve in different ways though. So for me, as time has happened there have been new ways that I have discovered myself and then throughout this way to discovering a new side of myself brings a new perspective of how he could've been or what would he have thought of in the moment or would he have thought this was cool, what would he think of this place. But there are different what-ifs because you are in different place (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 223-236).

It seems like a common experience for bereaved siblings to wonder what their sibling would be like if they were still here as the bereaved adolescent sibling enters into different stages in their life. Maya discussed wondering what her brother would have been like or if he would have liked certain things. Anna also explained some of these wonderings or “tinglings” of what her sister would think about certain things as she moves through her life. She stated, “[Over time]...since November, a lot has happened. I

got engaged and then we've been planning the wedding and we bought a house so I definitely feel those tinglings of like wondering what Cleo would say if she were here" (2nd interview, Lines 25-26).

Another thing that is difficult for surviving siblings bereaved in adolescence is the idea that their sibling will miss out on so many of their milestones or important life experiences as they move from teenagers into young adults. This can include life events such as graduations (from high school and/or college), birthdays, starting a career, finding a significant other, getting married, or having children. Sometimes, the milestone brought up difficult emotions of sadness or anger, as is the case for Bella with regard to her sister's birthday:

A lot of the negative it depends on the year. She died ten days after her birthday so that whole ten days – her birthday on to that day is just hell. I replay that every year every day, those last 10 days. It never fails (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 77-79).

Often, milestones would serve as triggers that led siblings to re-experience some aspect of their grief. For many siblings, even little day to day happenings could trigger a grief reaction and this was often described as confusing or difficult for siblings. For example, Jon explained:

There are some things that I'll see. I'll see people at work. I'll see someone my age with his brother that's like fifteen cause that's how old Jason would be and it just, I don't know what it is. It's just like a trigger and then I get a little bit upset, kind of have to gather myself up and kind of compartmentalize it and move on. It's difficult, very, very, very difficult. Constant reminders, like I'll see something

that he would have liked or you know seeing teenagers drive their car. The permit driver stickers in the window now. It just sets me off a little bit. We're not totally over it as a family yet. We remember him on his birthday and then Memorial Day weekend and then constantly throughout the year. Cause he's not there for those big family events. He wasn't there when I graduated high school, when I graduated basic. He wasn't there when I graduated tech school for the Air Force or for my promotion ceremony. There are so many things that he's missed (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 309-327).

On the other hand, sometimes the event or milestone brought up positive emotions of remembering or honoring a sibling, but most often, siblings described the emotions as feeling bittersweet. These life events were often positive and happy times in general, but there was still this sadness that went along with each event because one person was missing. Allison explained how she understood this in the following excerpt:

Despite the fact that she missed a lot of things that happened in my life it's sad to see other things that she is missing. Other family members are having babies, they are getting married. She is missing that. So there never is a complete happiness for me when these things happen because I just feel like my sister is missing or my sister didn't get to see this or my new cousins will never know my sister. She will never be in pictures and that bothers me (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 346-350).

For Samantha, going to college was bittersweet because it was positive and meaningful to her based on her brother's encouragement of her college career, but there was also this sadness that he was not there to see it. She clarified this point in the selection below:

Birthdays and anniversaries are two big ones where the events of - or the physical memories come back. There are definitely some negative emotions. Those are two big ones that are almost one step forward two steps back kind of thing. An anniversary or birthday comes along and you say oh crap, now I've got to start all over almost. And that has happened to me. I remember I think it was the first anniversary I was like oh I have to do this all over again because it feels like it was today. I have to start new. And that's kind of how it feels I think for some people. But I think there are other events too that almost make it bittersweet, not a negative...One of those things for me was going to college. My brother more than anything loved that I was so smart and that I really like getting an education and that I love to learn...so even when he passed my parents decided...in lieu of flowers...people made donations to my education and so everyone really knew that he loved that I was going to go to college. He didn't do well at college so for me to have so much potential for success and going to college was something that was really important to Ben...So going to college...I remember the first day I was so - bittersweet is probably a really good word - I have finally almost accomplished a goal in a way. I made it there. I am still to this day in college and still living that potential success that my brother saw. I am accomplishing that goal that he saw in me. So...starting college each year, I am like, okay Ben I'm doing it. I'm making it through. I am getting my education just like you saw that I could do. I am really achieving that goal (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 531-552).

Melanie also described certain events in life, such as graduation and her wedding as

bittersweet:

Graduating from [college] – I wouldn't say that was hard but it was kind of a bummer to think that he didn't get to see that and maybe he would've graduated there too. The wedding, it was tough. I remember that day that [my husband] did have an open spot for Jim in his line of groomsmen and it was kind of noted in the program and everything. Once we left the church we went to the cemetery and dropped off his boutonniere and I had my little...moment and then I got back on the bus and I was fine the rest of the day. It's always bittersweet. When you have your big occasions like that it's always exciting for everyone but then there's always that part that somebody is not here (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 688-699).

One way in which bereaved siblings made meaning out of their experience of loss was by emphasizing the strength of the unique bond shared by siblings. Additionally, their age and developmental stage at the time of their sibling's death affected the meanings they were able to make. All of the bereaved siblings felt it was important to acknowledge that their grief would last forever, even though the ways in which they understand the loss can continue to change. Siblings reported re-experiencing grief triggers that brought back painful memories and also re-experiencing grief in more positive or bittersweet ways at various milestones or events throughout their lifetimes.

Continued Connection to Sibling

All of the siblings in this study held the belief that their brother or sister's death did not end their sibling relationship. The bereaved siblings continued to feel a connection to their deceased sister or brother even after the loss. For many siblings, this

continued connection took the form of a *sense of presence* which was often described as feeling as if their deceased sibling was there with them in spirit or there with them as a guardian angel. All of the siblings in this study viewed the *continued bond with their deceased sibling as supportive and comforting*. Often, the connection took on many forms of *continued communication with the deceased* sibling that ranged from continued conversations to visiting the cemetery in order to feel close to the deceased. Bereaved siblings often emphasized the *importance of remembering and honoring* their deceased sibling whether it was through activities, memorials, or the life choices they made. Also, several of the siblings who now have their own children reported the importance of *helping others, namely their children, develop a relationship with the deceased*. In order to further describe the theme of continued connection to the deceased, examples from bereaved siblings will be presented below.

Sense of presence. One important way that bereaved siblings in this study continued to feel connected to their deceased sibling is through a continued relationship. Siblings reported that they still felt their sibling was around, but it was just in a different way now. Often, bereaved siblings reported that their *deceased brother or sister was still present*, with them in spirit, or there as a type of guardian angel. Anna stated, “She is there in spirit” (2nd interview, Line 62). Melanie explained how she believed her twin brother was still around to look out for her. She said:

I am thankful for him. Even though he is not here, I know that I still in some way have some sort of relationship with him still because I guess I hope in my heart that he is watching down on us in making sure that we are okay (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 547-549).

Similarly, Samantha explained how she thought her big brother was still around to protect her and look out for her but just in a different way than before he died:

I'm sure a lot of people would think I'm crazy for saying this but a lot of people don't think the way I think but I believe that Ben is with me. I don't exactly know how but I think that he - for lack of a better explanation - is almost like a guardian angel to me. Somebody who looks after me and protects me because [that was] the person that Ben was in the physical [life]. He was my big brother. He protected me. He stood up for me. He prepared me all the time. No matter what. I just cannot fathom that ending with the ending of Ben's physical life. It was so strong and so important to him that I just can't believe that it's still not happening. A lot of people think I'm full of...crap for saying this but I almost think that I've even been given some proof. I dream about Ben not necessarily often but when I do it's almost like visual visits in a way...And that's *awesome* to me. I think that as long as I can have my brother with me somehow I'm good and I'm as happy as I can be (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 576-586).

Bella explained how she continued to feel the presence of her twin sister in her life. Not only could she feel her sister's presence, but she even explained a time where she actually saw her sister after the death:

She's here in spirit but she is not here... I know she would be here if she could be. Don't get me wrong. I probably sound crazy, but she is around...I always feel her presence. She likes to come and visit the kids. There was one night...I was out here on the phone and the kids were sleeping and I turned and looked through that door and there she was staring right back at me. She was pale white...She waved

and then was gone. But her presence is still around (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 620-621, 629-634).

For both Bella and Samantha, it seemed as if they almost worried that these beliefs about a continuing connection would make them appear “crazy” to others. Perhaps they have received messages from others in their lives who do not believe a continued relationship is possible after a loved one dies.

Continued bond viewed as comforting. This continued relationship or *connection with the deceased sibling was viewed as a source of comfort and support* by bereaved siblings in this study. For most, a belief in a continued connection helped in coping with loss by providing them with a sense of comfort or peace. Samantha explained:

I don't think our relationship needs to end when somebody dies...I think for some people it maybe freaks them out...if you haven't really experienced a lot of that kind of situation before – that could be freaky and I could understand where that could make you question a lot of things. But I think also especially for me it is so comforting and it all goes back to the coping thing. I think more people would like to think that their loved ones are still around them than not because that is comforting. That does allow you to cope little easier I think (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 590, 599-604).

Bella felt very fortunate to still feel connected to her sister in such a strong way because she feared that would not be the case anymore after her sister died:

It's very comforting. She's around...She's around once every few months maybe. It just depends on what's going on. She's not here now because she knows I'm

talking about her. It's still weird, even though she's gone, I can still feel that. I guess that's...another good thing is I can still figure out when she is here or when she is around because that was supposed to leave when she left and it never did (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 648-653).

Continued communication with deceased sibling. Many bereaved siblings maintain *continued communication with the deceased sibling* as a way to stay connected. This is done in multiple ways including through visiting the cemetery, continued conversations, or just constantly carrying their memory around. Allison also talked about how found it comforting to think of her sister's presence as all around her. She described feeling particularly close to her sister when she visited the cemetery:

Yeah it is comforting [to go to the cemetery]. I don't know – some people don't care about going to the cemetery and they say you can just talk to the person in your head or whatever but it makes me feel better going. Sometimes I just sit there by myself and it's actually...relaxing but...it's like serenity there. It's so peaceful to just sit there. I sit there and I take lunch there and I eat there. I'll play music. It's nice. It just makes me feel better knowing that I can do that. I think it makes me feel closer to Tina. Hopefully. I always hope that she is listening to me. Then a lot of people say she is probably in the car with you when you are going to the cemetery because a lot of people say they are not really at the cemetery – they are all around you. I like to think that too, but I still like to go to the cemetery (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 375-387).

Although all of the siblings in this study said that they did still have a relationship with their deceased brother or sister, it is important to note that most believed that this

relationship looked and felt different now, after the death. Also, this relationship often shifts and changes over time. Jon explained how his brother's presence was different in their lives after the loss:

He's kind of like a different presence in our lives other than if he was here...I guess I kind of do [still have a relationship with Jason]. I'll just talk and hope he hears me. I kind of sound like a crazy person, but you know, I'll talk...but you know that seems to help a little bit, you know...The little bit of a relationship that I did have with him is, I still hold that. I still have him. I still have him in my heart. I'll always hold him in my heart and hold him real close (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 435-437, 1108-1132).

And Maya talked more about how her relationship with her brother changed over time. For her it was important to maintain a continuing connection with Ramon. She also reported that she continued to look for new ways to strengthen that connection as she moved forward in life. Maya explained:

I feel like I [still] have a relationship with him...When I was younger, like probably about six years ago, I used to actually try to have conversations or I dreamed about him quite a bit. But in the last six years...spiritually, I feel like I'm not as active as I once was...I want to continue working on getting there to have a closer relationship with him. Cause I felt like I needed to talk to him more. I used to try to be more proactive in that...time has passed and I didn't realize how much time had passed. But, I think yeah, I still *have* a relationship...I need to be more proactive about how I continue that and that's something I do think about and I've made some life choices moving out here and doing this the other thing to try to

keep that connection (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 549-561).

Importance of remembering and honoring sibling. There are multiple ways that bereaved siblings helped maintain a continued relationship with their siblings after the death. For many siblings, this included the importance of not forgetting their deceased sibling and staying connected through *remembering, keeping their memory alive, or honoring their memory*. In the passage below, Maya explained some of the ways in which she maintains a ‘healthy’ relationship with her brother:

I made a book of his poems to give to my family members...I can tell these poems were very personal to him and I said to them you can get the feel for him cause poetry is an intimate process...I’ve got some pictures [and other] stuff of his, but not too much...I wanted there to be a healthy balance to it but I don’t have it where it keeps me from doing anything else in my life right now...I continue finding ways. And as time goes by you, you re-define ways, I think. You re-define ways to keep someone’s memory alive or think of the things you never thought of before, because now you’re in a time of your life that those things are relevant...so as time goes by and new things happen, a new perspective comes up, for me about I wonder how he would’ve thought about this, or how life would be different with his presence, and things like that (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 595-612).

Allison also discussed some of the meaningful ways in which she stays connected to her sister, whether it is a big event or just in day to day activities:

Everything I do I keep her in mind. Even if I go on vacation I say maybe this is a place she would’ve liked to come. Since she can’t come so I am here for her. I’m

doing this for her. Or even like a concert or meeting celebrities. She was so into celebrities and music and all that stuff. Anytime I go to a concert she is really not far from my mind. Anything else I do, I definitely want to do things for her in the future once I can figure out what I can do and I want to get a scholarship maybe in her name and things like that. But until then I guess she is never far from my mind. I can turn the TV and watch a movie that we both watched 100 times together and I can just sit and watch it and act like she is sitting next to me watching it too. Anything I do I really try not to keep her far from my mind (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 410-418).

Several siblings felt like the career path they chose was one way to continue a relationship with their sibling by honoring their sibling's memory. For example, Bella stated:

When I finally decided to go to medical assisting school it made me feel like I was trying to give back what we got...I think that's just what I needed. I needed to do something I guess to honor her (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 715-719).

Helping others develop relationship with deceased. Additionally, once bereaved siblings had children of their own, several of them discussed the importance of *helping their children build some sort of relationship with the deceased* because that person was still the child's aunt or uncle, even if they never got to meet them. It seemed important for these bereaved siblings to share that sense of connection with their children who would never get a chance to really know the deceased. Allison explained how she hoped her daughter would be able to know her sister in some sense since she would never get to meet her:

[When] I raise my daughter now, I try to make her listen to certain music that my sister liked or watching movies that we liked or shows, that way there is a piece of her and I am teaching her how to have a little of my sister [as] a part of her (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 248-250).

Naming children after a deceased sibling was also another way to remember or honor that sibling. Bella discussed how multiple people in her family would honor her sister by giving their own children her sister's middle name:

Then when the kids were born, she wasn't here but [my daughter] got Jen's name as her middle name...She knows that that's a big name she has to live up to. That's one thing in the family we've kind of decided that we would like all the first girls to have the middle name of Jen...I think every daughter in our family – I think every little girl has to have that name incorporated somehow. Or even a little boy (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 601-609).

Similarly, Melanie named her first born son after her twin brother. She discussed how difficult it could be to recognize that her children would never know her brother:

I know that he is here with us but it sucks that he is not here in person. When [my first son] was born the first boy was going to have Jim as a middle name...It was hard. I look at the boys now and sometimes I'm like they have an uncle that they will never know. It's like I think to myself how am I ever going to explain somebody like him to them so they have a full understanding of who he is and then at the same time it's like it makes me mad because...I like to think I know the uncle he would be to them and it just stinks that they are missing out on that...It was hard with both of the boys after they were born to realize that he was

taken not only from me but was taken from them... We will say stuff. We will look at pictures. [My oldest son] looks at them and we will be like this is uncle Jim (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 699-724).

Maintaining a continued connected to the deceased is one way in which bereaved siblings made sense out of the loss of their brother or sister in this study. Bereaved siblings reported a continued bond through a general sense of presence they felt with regard to the deceased. Additionally, they often felt as if their deceased siblings were with them in spirit. These understandings were viewed as a sense of comfort and support to bereaved siblings. They continued to find ways to communicate with the deceased whether it was through conversations with them, visiting the cemetery, or finding other important ways to remember them and honor their memory.

“Embracing the Loss”

Another way in which many bereaved siblings explained what meaning the loss of their sibling had in their life involved this concept of “embracing” or accepting the loss in some sense. For some siblings, this meant embracing that loss is a part of life, that this loss happened and *‘it is what it is.’* Perhaps, they explained, their lives are the way they are now because of the loss. For other siblings, embracing the loss meant *finding some reason that this loss was supposed to happen.* Here, many siblings decided to explore (or not) more existential reasons for the loss. For some siblings, this existential exploration was frustrating because the siblings felt as if they would never get the answers they wanted. Often, there was a process of *accepting that they would not get those answers.* Siblings reported times where they realized they had to *accept strong feelings and emotions* as important turning points. They let themselves feel very intensely and seemed

to have a sense that they would be able to make it through this tragedy. Another type of acceptance or embracing the loss was presented by siblings in the form of their new understanding that *there is still something to live for*, even though the loss hurt. Examples from bereaved siblings will be provided to further elaborate this important theme of embracing the loss.

Exploring existential ‘reasons’ for loss. For many siblings, it appeared that there was a negotiating between the ideas of accepting that the *loss is what it is* and accepting that perhaps the *loss happened for some reason*. Samantha wrote that she made sense out of the loss of her brother through a form of acceptance where, “I have just come to see that this was the universe's plan for my brother and for my family” (Samantha, qualitative response to survey). Melanie wrote that she sometimes struggled between wanting to believe things happen for a reason but also not really believing that. She did, however, embrace that her life could be totally different if it were not for her brother’s passing, and because she finds happiness in her current life, she is better able to embrace her brother’s death as a part of it. She wrote:

It's complicated. While there are times that I think - 'things happen for a reason' - there are other times that I don't. While I would give anything to bring Jim back, I also know that my life would be nowhere close to where I am now - the friendships that I have made, my husband and my children especially. I guess I wouldn't say that I have 'accepted' it because I would never say that I am okay with Jim no longer being here with us, however, I would say that I have embraced it as part of my life (Melanie, qualitative response to survey).

Jon believed that perhaps the purpose of his brother’s life was to guide the direction of

his own life. Jon wrote, “I have tried to figure out why he had to die and I think that he was placed in my life to help me find my true passion for helping people” (Jon, qualitative response to survey).

For Anna, there was some acceptance that perhaps her sister died at the ‘right’ time in her life when things were only going to get harder for her as she moved forward. She explained:

Cleo was an unusual person with many difficulties. She had trouble interacting with others so she had few friends. She was keenly aware of the fact that she was slower than other people and mentally ill, which made life very difficult for her. I think her accidental overdose came at a time when life would only continue to get harder so it was almost a mercy in a sense. I feel terrible saying that, but her life wasn't improving and it would only become more difficult for her and she'd only start to feel more isolated. She abused prescription pain killers, would go through withdrawal which caused her heart to race, get put on heart medicine, all of this in ADDITION to her meds for mental illness. She overdosed by taking two doses of her Seroquel instead of one. It was a pure accident. She didn't suffer and she died in her sleep so there was no issues with life support, etc. which I am grateful for. I see her death as the end of her suffering which is how I explain it to myself (Anna, qualitative response to survey).

Anna felt that perhaps she had practice accepting difficult things during Cleo's lifetime because it was common for difficult situations to arise with regard to her sister. She speculated, “I guess I just had to deal a lot with accepting things and I couldn't change a lot when Cleo was alive so it was sort of practice for this, you know?” (Anna, 2nd

interview, Lines 371-372).

Acceptance that questions may never be answered. For some siblings, embracing the loss took the form of *accepting that they may never get the answers they were searching for* with regard to the loss. As discussed previously, the loss experience can often propel siblings into questioning why the loss happened and what it all means and a multitude of other questions. However, there comes a point where some siblings recognized that they were just never going to get the answers they wanted to these questions and this led some to stop asking certain questions. Maya explained her journey related to embracing not having the answers in the following excerpt:

After his death I read a lot of grief books, books about the afterlife, and saw a psychic. I was trying to contact him and find meaning. I kept searching actively for years until I realized I will never get the answers I seek. I had to learn to accept that I won't make meaning of his loss, and can only learn to live with his memory... Things happened in my life where I really tried to still make sense of it in different ways and I just kind of learned to accept that I will never get the answers that I wanted. I was thirsty for answers and was hoping it would make sense and it doesn't... It took years before I was able to accept it as it is. Truly accept... So for me it's now become this time to celebrate his life instead of trying to make sense of his death because I really can't. I think that at that time though when he died it was so important for me for the first couple of years to try to make sense of it and that actually drove me insane because I really couldn't. *I could not make sense of that.* I couldn't wrap my head around why he had to die at that age and why this had happened to us... it was probably a good four or five

years after his death that I was in that confusion level and I was much more active about reading and looking for answers but at the same time I was still very angry and confused about the whole thing. Then I just got tired of being so angry and being so confused. So I still wonder or ask the questions myself but I'm not such an active searcher. I just kind of let that go (Maya, qualitative response to survey, 2nd interview, Lines 30-39, 67-72).

For Melanie, too, the loss initially led her to ask more questions, but she felt a frustration similar to Maya. It led her in circles with more and more questions and seemingly no good answers. Melanie said:

It did [lead me to ask more questions] but then I felt like I needed to almost stop doing it because I wasn't always getting answers and it was becoming more frustrating than it was worth so it was just take what I believe and stick with it and don't try to question things because for me it was becoming more frustrating and it would just make me more – it would make me frustrated. It would make me angry. It would make me sit there and question other things that I wasn't questioning before. It wasn't driving me nuts but I was just like okay stop. Quit asking (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 561-566).

Acceptance of strong feelings and emotions. Most of the siblings interviewed also talked about the importance of *embracing or accepting whatever feelings or emotions you have* in life. There is an acceptance that one cannot continue to hide certain emotions such as sadness or anger because they are still there underneath the surface. Additionally, siblings often had to embrace the idea that it was okay to feel joy or happiness again after their sibling's death. Samantha explained how meaningful it was

her to embrace whatever feelings she had:

I think that my initial reactions...that I had closer to the time when he passed were reactions of nothing but sadness in a way... There really was nothing else for me to think about when I thought about the fact that I did just lose my big brother and this is something I'm going to deal with for a long time and it's sad. But now, with all the meaning making that I have done and all the understanding that I have come to, I think that my reactions are still full of emotion but also with a hint of almost – I don't want to say acceptance...but I think a better understanding and a better insight...to seeing that there may be positive things or saying that it doesn't always have to be sadness. But also that it can be sometimes. I think it's just more of a self-awareness (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 611-623).

Still something to live for. For several siblings, *acceptance that there was still something to live for* was an important meaning made as a result of the loss. For Melanie, there was an acceptance that even though it was terribly sad that her brother died, it was okay for her to go on living. It was okay for her to enjoy things in life and embrace living in a sense. Melanie stated:

I would say after...the third or fourth year it was "better," where it was kind of like I didn't feel like it was consuming me as much. It's like, yeah it's always there, there is not a day that goes by that I don't think of him, but it was like it wasn't as consuming on my life because I couldn't let it be. Also just the realization that it's terrible that he is not here. I would give anything to bring him back, but at the same time there are still a lot of good things going on in my life and things that I am doing that I should feel good about. It made me realize that

there still is something to live for, if you will (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 106-113).

For Melanie, and several other siblings, embracing some of their real feelings, whether they were finding joy or really expressing sadness or anger, was almost viewed as a turning point to them. This was a time where they realized they were going to make it through. Not that things would always be great, but that they were capable of still living a good life, even with the pain of losing a sibling. For example, Maya stated:

Since I think [I was] in my 30's...helping me with my grief...has shifted and it's more about the actions I did and it seems more rewarding after that and it was easier for me to live my life without feeling so stuck. But I think I was going through the actions for a couple of years after his death but I wasn't really being honest with myself and I was still very much numbed because I was trying too hard to try to move on and make sense of it and not feel the pain. But I think finally once I allowed myself to be honest with myself and do that...and acknowledge the anger too – that was a huge turning point for me (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 264-276).

For Anna, a turning point was moving from feelings of negativity to more feelings of positivity. Also, she explained how the acceptance of her own emotions and feelings was a very important part of her grieving process. She explained:

I think it's gone from this anger and the negativity, sort of those types of feelings, to being more focused on the positives of seeing Cleo's death as an opportunity in my life to really experience my life and chase after my goals and take advantage of the time that I have. And then, over time, I guess because initially there is just

so much numbness and so I guess it's also sort of accepting the feelings that will come and that I will be experiencing them and that I might experience them more than once, but maybe being more prepared to handle them the second time around (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 861-867).

Multiple aspects of embracing the loss are seen as important ways in which bereaved siblings in this study made sense out of the death of their sister or brother. For many siblings, there was negotiation between accepting that the loss is what it is and accepting that maybe the loss happened for a reason. Intense questioning about why the loss happened often left siblings feeling frustrated and led to an acceptance that they may never get the answers they want. An important turning point for many bereaved siblings was an ability to accept whatever feelings and emotions that would come up for them. Many siblings embraced the understanding that although the experience of losing their sibling was devastating, there are still good things that happen in life and there is still something to live for.

Bereaved siblings in this study made sense out of the loss of their brother or sister in various ways. Often adolescently bereaved siblings reported making sense through religious or spiritual understandings of the loss. Many bereaved siblings engaged in a spiritual quest which led to an increased openness to multiple new beliefs related to spirituality. Emphasizing the uniqueness of the sibling relationship was another important meaning bereaved siblings made out of their loss experience. Additionally, the sibling bond was thought to be so strong that it was not ended by the sibling's death. Instead, bereaved siblings described finding comfort in a continued connection to their deceased siblings. Embracing and accepting intense feelings and certain aspects of the loss were

other important was bereaved siblings made sense out of the death of a sibling.

Benefit Finding

Another important way in which bereaved siblings attempted to make meaning after the death of a brother or sister was through the concept of benefit finding. This involved an ability to see the silver lining or to view something that might have stemmed from the loss in a positive light. In the third category of benefit finding, the following theme of seeing positives in life after loss, including the various positives that have come as a result of the loss will be explored. Often, bereaved siblings expressed shifting the focus from a negative outlook on loss to a more positive outlook.

Seeing Positives in Life after Loss

All except one of the siblings interviewed discussed the importance of seeing the positives that might have come as a result of the loss of their sibling or that might otherwise exist in their lives. The ability to *view some things through this positive lens* gave siblings a sense of hope for the future and in some ways helped them cope with the loss. Often times, the benefit identified by bereaved siblings included a *newfound valuing of significant relationships* in their lives. Additionally, bereaved siblings began to identify and *embrace what mattered in their lives now* after the loss. This led to an important and beneficial understanding for many siblings that *'my sibling mattered.'* The lives of their siblings were understood as important and impactful which was seen as a potential benefit to come from the loss. Also, for some siblings, the fact that their sibling was no longer in pain and *no longer suffering* was viewed as a benefit. Examples of benefit finding are presented below to further expand on how siblings reported seeing the positives in their lives that may have come as a result of the loss.

Attempting to view loss through positive lens. For many bereaved siblings, it was important for them to try and *view the loss experience through a positive lens* even though it was painful. Often, this was viewed as helpful to siblings because understanding at least some aspects of the loss experience in more positive terms left siblings feeling more hopeful about the future. Samantha provided an example of this idea which is presented below:

It's the way that you see a situation. It's the way you see, maybe even life in general...I think thinking about the negative all the time, which we all have our days of doing, I don't see how you could really be living life as a person who is living if you are dwelling in that negativity all the time...I think finding positivity or anything positive really in a situation that could be so negative really gives you that hope [and] gives you more coping [in a] sense (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 159-167).

Viewing the loss through a positive lens seems to lead bereaved siblings to an understanding that good things can still happen in life even though the loss is characterized by so much pain. It appeared that this shift to seeing things through a positive lens happened as more time passed, particularly because many siblings expressed feeling guilty about having good or happy moments because they felt it was unfair to their sibling. They were often so devastated that it was almost difficult to accept that both of these feelings could exist within them at the same time. Melanie explained this phenomenon:

Obviously [there are] huge moments where I'm like *there is still good*. There are still positives. Like when I got married and when I had my children. [But also]

embracing little moments where...I could do something or go somewhere and have a good time without getting upset about it. Whenever I could talk about Jim without sobbing...where I wasn't feeling guilty anymore that I was doing "okay". Where I wasn't feeling so sad all the time. I think it was almost those little moments that were the good points...I didn't feel like I was going to burst into tears. I [was] realizing that life is still good. It still is terrible without him here but it still can be good (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 314-326).

Anna explained how she needed to move more into seeing some things as positive because otherwise she would just stay stuck in a negative way of thinking and it was making her angry. She described why this shift was meaningful in her life in the following excerpt:

I think that I focused too much on being angry about her addictions and focusing too much on that and how that shortened her life and not looking at it from this perspective of maybe her life ended at the best possible time for her when things were just starting to get more complicated and also ended at the best possible time for my parents that they could have those golden years of empty-nesters and being able to do whatever they wanted to do. I guess I went from a more negative perspective to a more positive perspective...I think I need to stay in a positive light or otherwise I will just constantly be wallowing in grief about it or I will just constantly be angry about it and I don't want to remember Cleo in anger because I do want to introduce Cleo in whatever way possible to my future kids and I don't want them to think of this aunt as just like an addict or something. I want them to know there are other things about her and the only way for me to be able to do

that is if I start changing the way I think about her and so I think that's important. I don't want to be constantly angry about it I think because I see anger as being very destructive and so I want to be more positive about it so that it's easier for me to talk about it with people and sort of explain it to people and also then just to talk about Cleo and not just talk about Cleo in negative situations but also in positive situations (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 190-214).

Newfound valuing of significant relationships. For many siblings, finding some sort of benefit or positive that might have come as a result of the death of their sibling involved a *newfound valuing of significant relationships*. It was as if the tragedy of the loss experience gave the siblings a deeper sense of understanding what is truly important to them in life. Siblings reported feeling more closely connected to loved ones. The following excerpts exemplify some of the benefits found by bereaved siblings:

I realize life is short and can end unexpectedly so it's important to find joy in your life and fight for what you want out of life. I cherish my parents and my remaining sibling even more now. I know that even if you weren't close with a family member, their passing is still complicated which helps me better understand and relate to others (Anna, qualitative response to survey).

I come from a large family. I am one of seven children. For me personally, I feel like it has brought us all much closer together. We were close prior to the crash; however, we have a greater appreciation for one another and don't let the little things in life come between us (Melanie, qualitative response to survey).

One of the good goals that came out of that was that it reconnected me with my father and that had always been a goal of mine. To get my father back in my life

and have a good relationship. So when my brother died my dad reached out and said okay I want to get know my daughter. So that worked out. We reconnected and our relationship as father daughter was very strong and so that was a good thing that came out of that situation (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 144-148).

Embracing what matters now. Several siblings suggested that another benefit they found that came after the loss experience was that they learned to really embrace life and lead a life that they and their deceased siblings would be proud of. In many ways, siblings began to *pursue what mattered now* in their lives. For example, Samantha stated, “[My family has] come together. We are 100% together in efforts of honoring Ben and living the life that he lived and living in a way that would make him happy and proud” (2nd interview, Lines 151-153). There was this striving to be a better person and perhaps live a life where they would follow their passions and inspirations. Samantha, Maya, and Anna explained how they really began to embrace life after the death of their siblings:

I don’t even know if I necessarily had any passion before my brother passed. But not only am I open to finding whatever this passion may be, I also am actually beginning to find some as well (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 203-205).

I lead a life I believe he would support and take more risks and adventures since his death. I don't want to waste time. [I have learned that we] never know when life can end, and as a result, have been more observant of others, experiences, and of self. I also explored spirituality more since his death (Maya, qualitative response to survey).

[Over time] I think it’s gone from this anger and the negativity, sort of those types of feelings, to being more focused on the positives of seeing Cleo’s death as an

opportunity in my life to really experience my life and chase after my goals and take advantage of the time that I have (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 861-863).

For many bereaved siblings, pursuing passions, interests, school, or career choices that were meaningful as they related to their deceased sibling was another thing that siblings were able to view as positive. For example, Jon stated:

[My brother's death] is giving me motivation to pursue a career in the medical field...It's heartache and tragedy turned into something positive for not only myself, but for my family to kind of see that success and [think] he's doing something, you know, worth it (Jon, qualitative response to survey, 1st interview, Lines 524-526).

Several other siblings reported how pursuing a certain life path felt like a positive thing that stemmed from the loss of their sibling. To answer a question asking what (if any) benefits she has found in the loss of her brother, Maya wrote, "[My] brother suggested the profession we should enter, [and] after his death I made sure to complete my degree on our behalf" (qualitative response to survey). To answer the same question about benefit finding as it related to her brother's death, Samantha wrote, "I changed my major to psychology because I originally wanted to help people with the grieving process. I love the major I am currently in" (Samantha, qualitative response to survey).

'My sibling mattered.' Several siblings discussed that another benefit they found was being able to view the life that their sibling led as inspiring. A positive and beneficial meaning made by these siblings was that *their sibling's life mattered*. Bereaved siblings recognized, remembered, and honored the fact that their sibling made a positive difference in the world and this difference could be seen as a benefit. For example, Bella

stated:

The only thing positive out of this whole issue was [that with] the leukemia she had there was only a ten percent chance of living. Now it's eighty-five. The only way I can accept this positively is knowing she helped with that research. So in my eyes because of her loss and because she went through what she went through, other kids are being survivors with the same disease. So that is what makes me accept it as a positive (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 73-77).

In a similar way, Samantha discussed how her brother was so inspiring to her and to so many other people and this was one benefit that would continue to endure:

Ben was friends with so many people. Still to this day I don't even know how he met these people from different cities in different states...there have been so many people who shared so many incredible stories with me about ways that Ben has changed their lives that it makes it difficult to not see how great of a person my brother was and how inspiring that is. There's no way I can't see that as something positive (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 189-194).

Deceased sibling no longer suffering. For Bella, whose sister was often suffering, especially toward the end of her life, she was able to see the *end of her sister's suffering* as a potential positive thing to come after her sister's death. She stated:

The only good thing that came out of it was a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. I miss her dearly, but there was no more chemo. There was no more pain. No more nothing. I had to try to keep telling myself that (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 430-432).

On the other hand, there was one sibling interviewed who stated that there was

nothing beneficial that came from the death of her sister. Even though there were some ways she felt she might have changed for the better, it was still very hard for Allison to describe or view it as positive or potentially beneficial because anything that stemmed from losing her sister was hard to see as a positive. Allison discussed her perspective in the following excerpt:

I would still say no, that nothing positive or nothing beneficial came from it because, (deep breath), how could I put this, the way that we're living life...today is because my sister passed away...just everything that we do today is, is because of the impact of her death...her death is just like a shadow...I just feel like our life just changed and we altered *our lives*...after she passed away. So if we're living any kind of life now...not that we live a negative life, it's just...nothing is really positive I guess because she passed away. Everything was just like a domino effect. It was like a chain reaction. She passed away, so, maybe we don't do this anymore, maybe we don't do that anymore. And we're just kind of going with the motions cause we have to...nothing positive came out of it and I don't think anything was beneficial...if I'm doing something that's positive, maybe I'm doing it because of her, you know, like talking to you. Something as simple as this, you know, it's a beneficial thing. It's beneficial and it came out of her loss, but it's because she passed away that I'm doing it (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 559-581).

Finding benefits or seeing the silver lining that might have resulted from the death of a sibling is one way in which bereaved siblings made meaning out of the loss of their sister or brother. Most of the siblings were able to view certain aspects of the loss through

a positive lens. Other benefits reported by bereaved siblings included an increased valuing of the importance of relationships, finding benefit through the pursuit of what mattered now in life after the loss, and expressing the value in the deceased sibling's life to understand the meaningful and beneficial impact their life had on others in the world.

Instead of finding support for the constructs of identity change, sense making, and benefit finding as processes through which bereaved siblings made meaning out of the loss of their siblings, these concepts appeared to have a better fit as outcomes (meanings made) of the meaning making processes of bereaved siblings. Bereaved siblings were able to indicate what important meanings or understandings they had made out of the loss and these understandings fit well within the constructs of identity change, sense making, and benefit finding. The next section will take a closer look at the strategies bereaved siblings used to come to these new understandings related to the death of their siblings.

How Do Surviving Siblings Make Meaning?

This section will explore the processes used by bereaved siblings to make meaning after the death of their brother or sister. Losing a sister or brother in adolescence has a huge impact on the lives of surviving siblings. As detailed in the previous section, siblings reported (a) a changed view of self; (b) a changed view of the world; (c) a changed view of others; (d) changed spiritual or religious understandings; (e) new understandings regarding the uniqueness of a sibling loss; (f) a continued connection to the deceased sibling (g) a sense of embracing the loss; and (h) an ability to see some positives in life after the death of a sibling. Understanding what changes bereaved siblings report after the loss is important and can help us shed light on important ways bereaved sibling lives have changed as a result of the loss. Equally important, though, is

asking *how* bereaved siblings came to these new understandings or changed views. In this section, we will explore some of the processes utilized by bereaved siblings in attempts to make meaning after the loss, which resulted in the above meanings or understandings described by siblings. Specifically, nine strategies of meaning making used by siblings in this study will be explored. These themes include: (a) assimilation and accommodation; (b) use of metaphor; (c) storytelling; (d) meaning making through action; (e) affirmation or restoring a sense of self; (f) comparisons of loss; (g) questioning; (h) negotiation through relationships; and (i) seeing ‘signs’ as messages from deceased siblings. Table 5 below summarizes the nine meaning making processes before further, in-depth data is provided to support each theme.

Table 5

The ‘How’ of Sibling Meaning Making

Themes	Descriptions
Theme 1. Assimilation and accommodation	Assimilation involves integrating ‘appraised meaning’ into life without changes to previously held meanings. Accommodation involves reevaluating some previously held meaning to account for new meaning.
Theme 2. Use of metaphor	To relate something unfamiliar or incomprehensible to something familiar in attempts to create something that makes sense.
Theme 3. Storytelling	Siblings created a sense of coherence as they began to re-think, re-evaluate, re-define, and/or re-create a new life story that better integrated the loss experience.
Theme 4. Meaning making through action	Process of taking actions that have symbolic meaning to the bereaved siblings.
Theme 5. Affirmation or restoring a sense of self	Searching for ways to confirm previously held values or beliefs that were threatened. Often included holding stronger convictions of certain familiar values/beliefs in other, possibly unrelated, areas.
Theme 6. Comparisons of Loss	Comparing loss of a sibling to other types of losses, to different circumstances of loss, and to other deaths they have experienced as a way to make sense.
Theme 7. Questioning	Early questioning often automatic or unconscious response. Could also be a deliberate process used in attempts to understand or organize the loss experience in a coherent way.
Theme 8. Negotiation through relationships	Attempts to understand the loss through exploration with family members, friends, or other significant relationships.
Theme 9. Seeing ‘signs’ as messages from deceased sibling	Ability to see signs from deceased helped siblings identify and connect things that happened in their own lives to their deceased sibling.

Assimilation and Accommodation

Assimilation is a process whereby bereaved siblings integrate some aspect of the loss experience into their lives without any significant changes to previously held meanings. Accommodation, on the other hand, is a process in which bereaved siblings reevaluate, change, or reconstruct some previously held meaning so that their new personal meaning structure can account for their understandings of some aspect of the loss experience (Holland et al., 2010; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). Most often, this involves a process of alternating or negotiating between two opposing beliefs, understandings, or explanations of the same event or experience until either assimilation or accommodation occurs.

When a sibling has inconsistent beliefs related to some aspect of the loss experience, this is said to initiate coping efforts (Park, 2008). As siblings in this study attempted to resolve some inconsistent beliefs, a process of negotiation occurred. With assimilation, bereaved siblings viewed or understood some aspect of their loss experience (perhaps by biasing their own thinking about it) so that it matched with their previously held meanings. One example of assimilation was clear when Allison attempted to integrate the loss of her sister into her life:

It's unfortunate and you really can't make sense out of it. If you believe in God and you are religious it's just that his way and that's what he wants and you can never understand it. I feel like I felt that way before she passed away and even after she passed away it really hasn't changed, it's just more unfortunate I guess...I can't really say that [my beliefs or values] changed because when someone passes away, automatically you hate God and you don't want to go to

church and you don't understand why this happened to you and why it happened to your family. But I can't say that I really felt that way. Maybe I did and I did question at first like how could this happen to me? How could this happen to her? How could this happen to my family? But I never questioned God or anything like that because I have to believe in that to know that my sister is somewhere, like that she is in heaven and that is somewhere good. I never was negative about my beliefs. I never turned my back on it because I had to just believe in it and how could I believe in it if I'm so torn about it. If I'm sitting here cursing God, how can I believe in him and know that my sister is somewhere good with him. So it was better to just not go down that route and just say there is a God and he has a plan for everybody and this is hers, unfortunately. I have to just believe that there is something – that we will all be together in the end. I just think if I was negative about God I just think – where would my sister be then if I didn't believe in him or if I was angry with him or anything like that. I tried not to ever do that (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 31-34, 144-157).

In the passage above, Allison's previously held belief that God is in charge and has a plan for people on earth becomes clear. Throughout the excerpt, Allison alternated between continuing to hold this meaning structure as true, which would mean it was God's plan for her sister to die and between changing this meaning structure to better accommodate to her perception that her sister's death was not a part of "God's plan." Ultimately, it would appear that Allison, at least at this specific point in her life, has assimilated her perception of her sister's death to be more in line with her previous thinking that this is God's plan. It is almost as if this felt necessary for her to do so that she could believe that

her sister was in a better place and that they would be reunited one day.

Another example of assimilation can be seen as Anna negotiated how to make sense of her sister's death. At different points throughout the interviews, Anna alternated between thinking that perhaps it was just the 'right time' for her sister to die and thinking that her sister was so young (26 years) when she died and she still had so much living to do. Prior to the loss, it would seem that Anna held the view that her sister would die young and would not live a full life and ultimately, it seems that she assimilated her understanding of Cleo's death to fit in with this meaning structure. Anna stated:

As far as it goes with Cleo, because of her various issues with the addictions and just the mental health issues, we had assumed that she wouldn't live a full life and so this was always sort of in the back of our minds that we thought she might die around then, but obviously it was still shock when she did die because it was very traumatic for everybody. But for me it's one of those things that I think if I try to make sense of it - to me it's one of those things that life just kept getting more and more complicated for her and as she got older it would just continue to get more complicated for her – her having sort of to accept her disabilities and maybe work in a position at McDonald's instead of how she had these initial ideas that she could become a nurse or something. For her to accept that type of position and then I think it would also just get more complicated for her in terms of just making relationships and realizing that maybe the people she has to make friends with are other people that had the same sort of disabilities that she had but she wouldn't want to associate with those people because she would know that they are different. So I think that that would get harder for her. And then just as my

parents aged their ability to take care of her would decrease so all of that would get harder. So I think in a way it was almost like she died when maybe she was at her peak in life and everything would just sort of be downhill for her from there. So that is sort of why her time came. So that's kind of how I think of it (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 137-153).

It becomes clear in the excerpt above, that prior to her sister's death, both Anna and her family believed that Cleo would not live a full life because of her mental illness and drug addiction. So, after the loss, one way that Anna made sense out of the death was by fitting her understanding of the loss into that previously held belief by explaining that Cleo was sort of at the peak of her life (even though she was young) and that life would only have been downhill for Cleo from that point. She believed this may be why her time came.

As was the case for many siblings in this study, the death of Melanie's brother led her to ask more questions about why things are the way they are in the world. She began wondering more the purpose of life. The excerpt below exemplifies a process in which Melanie negotiated between the meaning making strategies of assimilation and accommodation. Melanie explained:

It's like I know some people will say everything happens for a reason and God has a plan and sometimes I believe that and other times I don't...I think that my faith as far as the afterlife and everything – I guess it got to a better spot because I almost needed to believe it and needed to say to myself he's in a better place to make myself feel better. Even though I do believe it but sometimes it's like, is there a heaven? Is there a greater place where we don't know everything is good? What really does happen to us after we die? Is it just a big black hole? How does

it work? There have been questions as far as that goes...It did [lead me to ask more questions] but then I felt like I needed to almost stop doing it because I wasn't always getting answers and it was becoming more frustrating than it was worth so it was just take what I believe and stick with it and don't try to question things because for me it was becoming more frustrating and it would just make me more – it would make me frustrated. It would make me angry. It would make me sit there and question other things that I wasn't questioning before. It wasn't driving me nuts but I was just like okay stop. Quit asking (Melanie, 1st interview, Lines 775-777; 2nd interview, Lines 525-530, 561-566).

As Melanie was alternating between these inconsistent beliefs, she felt discomfort. She felt like at some point she needed to stop asking questions and challenging some of her previously held beliefs because she was not always getting answers (or answers she wanted) and it was frustrating. Melanie moved back and forth between assimilation and accommodation and ultimately landed on assimilation when she decided to view the experience related to her brother's death so that it would fit into her previously held beliefs (belief in God, that he has a plan, that there is a Heaven). As is common with many siblings in this study, there is a lot of back and forth for Melanie. For her and most other siblings, it seems like meaning making or making sense of certain aspects of the loss is a process that changes over time. Siblings alternated between assimilation and accommodation and at certain ages/times/experiences in their lives, they chose which strategy or way of understanding fit best. For Melanie, at this point in her life, she felt it was best for her to just stick with what she previously believed and attempt to understand her brother's death through that lens (assimilation) because it was too difficult and

frustrating to start questioning all of those beliefs related to the afterlife. I imagine this will be an ongoing process as she continues to grow and change and have new life experiences.

Meaning making processes became evident as siblings negotiated inconsistent beliefs. As the above examples demonstrate, siblings often used assimilation as a coping strategy so that their previously held beliefs could be validated and they could continue to hold those beliefs as true. On the other hand, sometimes siblings used accommodation, which involved processing these conflicting attitudes and changing or adjusting previously held beliefs to account for their new understandings or perceptions of some aspect of the loss experience. For example, prior to her twin brother's death, Melanie held the belief that nothing bad could happen to her. She stated, "There was that sense of being invincible and nothing is going to happen to me" (Melanie, 1st interview, Lines 420-421). At various points throughout the interviews, it appeared that Melanie believed in a sense of fairness in the world. That she and her brother and her family were good people and so nothing bad would happen to them. When her brother died, this violated Melanie's previously held belief because her understanding of the death did not make sense in this pre-existing meaning framework. Her brother was a good person and nothing bad was supposed to happen to him, so it did not make sense that he would have to die. In order to accommodate her new perception of the loss experience, Melanie shifted her meaning framework. She stated, "[I have realized] that bad things do happen to good people (Melanie, 1st interview, Line 895).

Another example of accommodation is presented below when Anna explained her changed views on religion:

I was raised Catholic, like, we went to church every Sunday, regardless of what was going on. Even when we were on vacation, we would find a Catholic church...and we would go to church. So that's just how I grew up. That was just how I was raised and even when I was actually in college, I still went to church every [week], I think it was on Saturday nights...It was very much like a comforting aspect of my life that, I very much believed in everything, you know, all the prayers and I knew all the stories and stuff, but it was also, just culturally part of my life that I was Catholic so I went to church every weekend. But then, after Cleo died...it was really hard...It's been really hard to think about all this afterlife stuff now that Cleo has died cause I think also in part, for me...I sense Cleo a lot. And she comes into my dreams a lot and if heaven is the way that I was sort of taught, then that shouldn't be the case. She shouldn't be coming around like she does. She should be up in heaven. So I have trouble thinking that there is a god who's in charge of everything, who knows the direction of our life and what challenges we can handle and what we can't handle...It works for some people, but it doesn't work for me. I guess kind of like running to me now. I can't run. I'm not interested in running. And I'm just, you know, I'm not religious. I'm not interested in religion anymore (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 387-399, 425-434).

Anna changed her religious beliefs, particularly as they related to beliefs on the afterlife and the idea that God has a plan for everyone and determines earthly events that happen. One way that Anna understood the loss of her sister was by sensing her sister's presence or having the feeling that her sister was still around in spirit even after her death. These perceptions of the loss conflicted with some of the Catholic beliefs she previously held to

be true, so Anna changed those previously held beliefs so that her new understanding (my sister is still around) would fit into her personal meaning structure.

A further example of the meaning making process of accommodation can be seen in the following excerpt from Jon. Jon stated:

We prayed, prayed for a miracle. Miracle didn't happen. It was tough. And then it kind of puts you in a state that I haven't gotten over yet. But I'm mad at God, why? Why did you have to do that to us? Why did our family have to go through that? We were taught, trust God. I don't trust him anymore because of what happened (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 47-55).

Jon changed his previously held meaning that he should trust God because it did not make sense to him anymore. How could he trust God when his new perception was that God took Jason away from them? So, he changed his previously held belief to better integrate his new understanding and reported that he no longer had a trust in God. However, it was clear at multiple points throughout the interview that Jon still moved back and forth on this idea. He was in a process of trying to negotiate new meaning and figure out if his new belief (he no longer trusts God) will hold or if he can somehow make sense out of the loss in a way that will allow him to keep his previous belief that he can trust in God. Later in the interview, some of this back and forth thinking became evident through a process of negotiation where Jon seemed to alternate between thinking this might have been God's plan and not wanting to accept that this could really could have been God's plan to take away his younger brother because it just did not make sense. Jon elaborated:

It is [important for me to try and make some meaning out of the loss]. It's... with

me being in the medical field, I think that's... what might have been his purpose to show me, hey, go do this. You're good at it. You'll have a passion for it. If that was his purpose, then he served his purpose and it's sad that he won't be there to see it, but it's always why? Always, always. But, if that's what God's plan was for him, then God did his job and so did Jason... You know, I still have trouble making sense of it, like making sense of why him, or why did this have to happen or, you know, any of this at all? I just can't. It's something I haven't been able to wrap my brain around, personally (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 1061-1083).

Prior to her brother's death, Maya held the meaning structure that life would last a long time and she believed there was a sense of safety in the future; life would all work out okay. Some of Maya's perceptions about the death of her brother did not fit within this meaning structure because after the loss, her sense of safety in the future was shattered. She no longer believed her future was safe, she worried it might not work out okay, and she realized that life was unpredictable and did not necessarily last as long as we might want it to. Maya changed her previously held meaning structure in order to accommodate her understanding of the loss. Her new meaning structure included the idea that life is short. Life should not be taken for granted. Maya reported a realization of what is most important, including valuing life and relationships. A new belief that the future might not work out okay led Maya to hold a new understanding that she would live in a way that embraced life and she would live in the moment since the future was uncertain. Maya's process of accommodation is highlighted by the excerpt below:

I trusted the future. I trusted that everything was going to be okay and I trusted – I guess I trusted the future thinking that the people that were in my life currently

would be in my future. I just assumed. I never questioned it...[Now] I'm kind of a big risk taker... There's all these things in life I wanted to do and I just started going out and doing them. Cause I'm thinking holy shit, what if I died. So I went skydiving and traveling around the world. And my family's like, what are you doing? But I realized that...anything can happen in a split second. And so after that, I just started taking more risks and doing more crazy things. I felt more alive doing those things. I enjoyed doing those crazy risk taking, learning stuff, just constantly pushing myself because I just feel like life is short... And enjoying life in a different perception than before, like maybe I took it for granted, like I said I had the world ahead of me and I can do anything I want, but after his death I really started to appreciate life more and tried to utilize that more and in a different way and make the most of it... I really feel that life is too short and that we take it for granted... And it could be gone tomorrow and what was all that worth? You know your last relationship, for a car? Or a house? So I kind of see it as trying to do the most I can in a beneficial way with my time. I want to leave this earth saying I did the best I can to help it while I was here. I didn't have that... perception as much before my brother's death (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 659-666; 2nd interview, Lines 176-190).

Another example of accommodation can be seen in the following passage from interviews with Anna. Anna described one aspect of her loss experience:

Part of me wonders too if she hadn't passed away would I have decided to go back to graduate school for my Masters of Public Administration. I might've gone back to school instead for a Masters of Business Administration. I probably

would've been thinking more about just making large sums of money as opposed to doing something that is good for the world... You know, I quit my job and now it's like money doesn't matter. I want to do something I love doing (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 50-54; 1st interview, Lines 724-725).

Anna's meaning structure prior to her sister's death was that it was important to have a job that is viewed as prestigious where one could make a lot of money. After the death, in thinking about the loss of sister, Anna had a realization that money did not matter in life and death. This new perception led Anna to change her previously held meaning structure to accommodate for her new understandings related to the loss. Now, she felt that it was important for her to do something good in the world that she loved doing. Meaningful work became more important than money or prestige.

Sometimes the negotiation between processes of assimilation and accommodation was evident and examples could clearly be seen in transcripts of sibling interviews. When examples of assimilation or accommodation were easily identified, it was often because siblings had already moved through a process of negotiation and decided (unconsciously or consciously) upon a strategy of either assimilation or accommodation. Other times, this strategy appeared in more subtle ways that could only be identified by comparing comments or stories about how one was prior to loss to how one was after the loss. The fact that this negotiation process often appeared in more subtle ways could be because some of these processes were still ongoing as bereaved siblings continued to negotiate whether their new understanding of the loss could fit within their previous meaning frameworks or if their new understanding of the loss would require them to adjust or redefine their previously held beliefs in order to accommodate for their new

understanding. The strategies of assimilation and accommodation appeared to be used to make multiple meanings or understandings of the loss including the categories of identity change, sense making, and benefit finding.

Use of Metaphor

Early on in the coding of transcripts, I began to notice how often bereaved siblings were using metaphors throughout the interview process. Metaphors appeared to be one important way in which bereaved siblings attempted to make sense out of the loss. Siblings often used metaphors as a way to try and give meaning to something that seemed so senseless, such as the death of their sister or brother. It was as if the siblings felt so changed and so different after the death of a brother or sister that they had to try to find a way to explain the unexplainable to others who had not had that same experience. The use of metaphors appeared to be a creative meaning making process through which bereaved siblings attempted to relate something unfamiliar to something that was familiar in order to create something that not only made sense to bereaved siblings, but to others with whom they were sharing their stories. It was a way to express ideas or concepts for which there were no adequate words.

At one point or another, every sibling interviewed used metaphors in their story in an attempt to give words or meaning to an experience related to the loss of his or her sibling. Often times, metaphors were used frequently by bereaved siblings in attempts to make the experience of loss understood to the interviewer and others who might hear their story. One common way in which metaphors were used was to describe a process of hiding or concealing pain from others after the death of their sibling. This is exemplified in the following excerpts in which siblings used metaphors to describe putting on a 'joker

face,' 'putting up a wall,' 'wearing a mask,' 'bottling up emotions,' and 'feeling black inside':

There are definitely times where, it's often when I'm alone or in the car driving, that's the biggest time where all emotion...goes haywire. I have a time where I just can't control myself. I'm so upset. I go back to the moments I wish I didn't. But those times are becoming less and less. But I realized that I'm at a point where I almost put on a face that doesn't necessarily match how I always feel and I only realized this very recently, so I'm trying to figure out what the next stage would be in my process. I realize that putting on this joker front isn't necessarily a good thing and I don't feel that way all the time...I think that being a teenager made me put up a wall to the things that I felt and the things that I was going through at that time (Samantha, 1st interview, Lines 279-286).

I went out a lot. I would do my hair and I would do my makeup and I would put on a smile and then on the way home I would be crying in my car. It was just like – I just felt like I had to look strong and my definition of strong was look presentable and have a smile on my face. But I was a mess. *I was a mess...* But I tried to carry on like everything was normal and everything was okay and it wasn't but I didn't want people to know it...I wore the mask. Maybe they weren't expecting that and I thought that they were. I don't know...Maybe I was projecting...I didn't really want to go out per se but I was going out all the time and I didn't want people to know how bad I was hurting and so I was too busy trying to keep the mask on which is exhausting (Maya, 2nd interview).

I was upset...I mean I was just not a good person to be around. I was angry...I

didn't really know how to express, like deep down...I have a tendency to bottle up all of my emotions and then I, once it comes uncorked it's bad...I think I bottled them up. I was upset, just wanted to be alone (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 616-624).

Another thing that I tried to explain to people when they ask is you move on with the motions...I carried on with the motions of living but inside I am completely black...I was just torn up inside. I had no way, no idea to figure out how to not be so black anymore (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 471-474).

Another major way in which many siblings used metaphors as a strategy to make sense out of some aspect of the loss experience was to describe the intensity of the pain after their sibling's death. For many siblings, the pain was unexplainable. The deep grief and suffering that they experienced could not be understood. Some ways in which they sought to make sense of the unexplainable pain was through metaphors. For example, Melanie stated, "The hole in my heart is never going to be gone" (2nd interview, Line 176). Similar to Melanie, several siblings emphasized how they felt so close and connected with their sibling that it was as if a piece of them was missing after the death. Allison explained, "I think siblings...she's just like another part of me...from the minute she passed away, you know, my heart was broken (1st interview, Lines 300-304). The following sibling comments further reflect this idea:

I depended on my brothers. So when I lost him I was – I felt like I lost an arm. I had to learn how to reuse things because I no longer had that there and it was really hard for me (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 380-382).

I was hurt. It hurt bad. I knew when she died a part of me – it sounds horrible but

I guess I had some of her within me and a part left. I was always told I had a twinkle in my eye and it was gone... It hurt bad. It was really bad... That's probably the only word I can describe. I was just hurt. It hurt bad. It still hurts... [And] when her anniversary comes up that wound opens and it opens – like it was the day of (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 426-428, Lines 438-440).

I just started crying my eyes out... It's the worst feeling. I felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest and smashed into a million pieces. It is kind of hard to describe (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 289-293).

Another common theme in which many siblings used metaphors as a tool to make sense out of the death of their sibling was seen in attempts to understand the process of grief over time. Siblings often described grief as a 'process' or 'journey' that was ongoing and continued to have lasting effects regardless of how much time had passed since the loss. Below are a few sibling comments that represent some of these metaphors:

It's like watching the waves of an ocean. This is the way my grief was. At first, they were crashing, and crashing, and crashing. And I would crash, and crash, and crash. And then... I guess the more time that passes, the time between the crashes lengthens... The water will mellow out a little bit. There will infinitely be crashes. You know, waves still come. But they mellow out and the... calm lengthens [between the waves] (Samantha, 1st interview, Lines 268-278).

It always surprises me every time I share her story, if I do get teary-eyed, cause... it still makes you get emotional. Maybe not quite as emotional as when I first heard the news about Cleo, but just as emotional as when I first had to share the news about Cleo. That still always surprises me and it probably will continue

to feel that way... The way I describe the grief to people is you learn to fold it into your life and you learn, like it's always still there, but it's under a few more layers. Because when you first lose your sibling and you're first dealing with that grief, it's just like this endless waterfall that's just like coming out of you. But then after a while, it gets smaller and smaller and then you can fold it away, but then when you bring it out, like from the closet, then it's like it's full on again. It's just as much as it was before, but you sort of learn to like not wear it on your sleeve all the time (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 750-765).

The first year was kind of like a blur... I remember a lot of it - but I was just numb. But there are still some things that happened in between that year when I had some fun but there was always the drastic downfall. It was like if I had a good time I need to be prepared right after that because it's going to hit, or it's going to plummet and it's going to tank and it's going to hit hard so it was almost like you are damned if you had any fun because after you did and you got back to "reality" it was just going to be even worse... so you just have to get into your new reality... you are never fully healed (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 334-349).

The use of metaphors as a meaning making strategy was quite common among bereaved siblings in this study. Metaphors were used throughout the interviews and across the meaning categories of identity change, sense making, and benefit finding. Siblings used language, specifically metaphors, as creative strategies to try and make certain experiences feel more familiar. By creating something that made sense to them (metaphors that linked an unexplainable experience to a more understandable or relatable phenomenon), bereaved siblings were better able to make sense out of these concepts that

were often difficult to comprehend.

Storytelling

Telling stories was one important strategy siblings used in order to negotiate meanings and identities. Stories were a way for bereaved siblings to create a sense of coherence and meaning with regard to the loss experience. Death challenged their sense of life as they knew it which forced bereaved siblings to re-think, re-evaluate, re-define, and/or re-create a new life story or narrative that better integrated the loss experience. This involved a process of changing or reconstructing identities, roles, beliefs, goals, hopes, views of the world, and more. Sibling stories of loss as they were initially told by siblings (prior to being asked follow up interview questions) were presented in Chapter 4 of this document and it is in this chapter that one can find examples and explanations of how contextual and experiential factors can influence individual stories of loss. One can see how certain siblings chose to emphasize certain things, while leaving other things out and how siblings negotiated meaning as they moved back and forth between alternate understandings of the same event. Therefore, within this section, only a few important themes related to storytelling will be highlighted to emphasize the importance of stories in the process of meaning making. Interested readers can refer back to Chapter 4 for a more in depth look at storytelling as one important meaning making process used by bereaved siblings.

Stories were one way siblings could begin to reconcile with these sometimes inconsistent beliefs and begin to make meaning out of the loss. Stories can provide a sense of coherence in an event that can seem so senseless, particularly as meanings are negotiated and renegotiated with each retelling. In an overall sense, there were several

areas in which most siblings told important stories emphasizing their own unique experiences. Siblings often told (a) stories that emphasized the closeness of sibling bond or sibling relationship; (b) ‘finding out’ stories which emphasized their personal experience of how and when they discovered that their sibling had died; (c) stories related to a ‘process’ or ‘journey’ of grief which often included searching for answers or searching for a new sense of purpose or meaning in life; (d) turning point stories which often highlighted a point in time where siblings realized they would be able to make it through this experience even though it was difficult; and (e) stories about a future without a sibling which could take a positive or negative outlook.

Most siblings expressed that it was a positive experience to share their stories of loss with me during the interview process. Below are some sibling responses that highlight their view on the importance of using stories as processes to help make sense of the death of their sibling. These are some sibling responses to when I asked them how it was to talk to me during the interview:

I’ll usually stop talking about Cleo when I start to sort of feel myself getting teary-eyed, but I continued talking through it with you so that was different for me. Actually it’s been a long time probably since I’ve shared the full story. So that was actually nice to get into it and to be able to just say everything and put it all out there (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 750-753).

It was nice. It was nice that I was able to get it off my chest to someone else and someone that understands. You unfortunately understand and we’re kind of in this club now unfortunately, and it was nice to be heard and it was nice to talk to someone that didn’t give their two cents every other second. You know, cause

when you have conversations with people and they're just listening to you cause they're waiting to say something about themselves. So it was nice to talk to someone that, you know, you were genuinely listening to me and you didn't have an ulterior motive or anything...I was glad that I was able to share my story with you (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 790-801; 2nd interview Line 528).

Yeah, this is probably the first time, maybe second, [but my] first in this much detail, where I've even spoken [so much of my story in such detail]...So this is kind of a first for me and I'm kind of *proud* of myself that I was able to do that. I'm at a point where that was kind of comfortable and I want to thank you. You actually made it very, very comfortable to talk about such an unfortunate situation...and I think that that really made me able to share so much (Samantha, 1st interview, Lines 636-643).

Thank you for letting me open up. People's stories need to be heard. That's just how I feel (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 749-750).

For bereaved individuals, and perhaps siblings in particular, it appears that stories are an important part of sense making after the death of a loved one. Many siblings discussed how this was one of the first or only chances they had where they felt safe or comfortable enough to tell their story and most were thankful for such an opportunity. This fits with some of the previous literature that refers to siblings as "forgotten mourners" and discusses how the voices of bereaved siblings have too often been silenced. The ordering of stories, what is left out, and what is focused on are all factors that can be negotiated and changed over time with each new retelling of important stories. This process allows siblings to move back and forth between alternative

understandings about the same thing, which often leads to reconciliation of inconsistent beliefs.

Meaning Making Through Action

Meaning making through action occurs when bereaved siblings begin acting on some of their thoughts, beliefs, or understandings to create or restore a sense of meaning as it relates to the death of their sibling. This process often involves the bereaved sibling taking action to achieve a certain outcome; however, it does not necessarily matter if the outcome is ultimately achieved. Instead, it is the process of taking action that becomes important because these actions (or plans/exploration of actions) have symbolic meaning to the bereaved siblings (Armour, 2003; Solomon, 2004).

This process of meaning making through action involved the bereaved siblings exploring what matters in life now, after the loss. These symbolic actions can take various forms and, like many other processes can change over time. Often, meaning making through action involved the pursuit of new life purpose. Siblings begin to practice or engage in activities that are now considered important after the loss. One example of something that mattered now for many siblings was practicing religion or spirituality. For example, the ways in which Maya made meaning of her brother's death through actions in pursuit of spirituality is evident in the following comment:

I got all spiritual and I think I went searching for answers. I've read every - I took all these philosophy classes and I went and met with these Buddhist people and tried to get their philosophy on life and met with some Hindu people and tried to get their philosophy on life and I talked to our Catholic priest about his philosophy on life. I was reading all kinds of books. I mean all kinds. The year he

died, I just...got all these life books and, tried to learn how to meditate so I could try to feel a connection. I was reading in books that people can feel closer to them when they meditated or when they did this, or when they did that. So, I was trying to do all that stuff (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 421-429).

For Maya, remaining connected to her brother was of utmost importance so she actively sought out ways in which she might be able to continue that bond. Some of the actions that Maya took that had symbolic meaning included reading books, taking classes, meeting with spiritual leaders, and meditating.

For many siblings, there was a fear of forgetting the deceased sibling. It became important for them to find ways to keep their siblings' memories alive. They wanted to find ways to honor their siblings' lives. This was often done by bereaved siblings through various actions such as creating some type of memorial tribute to honor their sibling, choosing to pursue a certain degree in school or a certain career path as a way to honor their sibling, or volunteering to help others in honor of their sibling. These actions involved finding ways to live now that gave some sense of purpose to their loved one's death. For example, Samantha stated:

I wanted to help families. So I started looking into [majoring in psychology] and immediately thought I could do so much with this. I could make my own program where adolescents and teens and, you know, a seventeen year old like me could go somewhere and there'd be a program that was actually beneficial or good would come out of it and find positive things within it. And, that's immediately what I thought. That would be a great thing now. I don't necessarily know if I'm going to still do that. I don't know. But it was definitely a great starting point for

all the ideas that I do have (Samantha, 1st interview, Lines 205-212).

For many siblings, what mattered after the loss was finding ways to intentionally live more meaningful and purpose filled lives. Anna described how living more intentionally became important to her after her sister's death when she stated:

I think for a while I couldn't think about my future and what I was going to do.

But then after I sort of came to I realized my goal was to have more meaning in my life and find a job that was more meaningful and find a career that was more altruistic and I tried to craft a future that included that so that's what I am working towards now. I'd say that my goals have changed in life from just sort of being successful from a monetary and sales perspective to being successful from more of a 'how am I helping others' sort of perspective (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 235-241).

For many siblings, volunteering to help others who might be suffering in some ways was an action that could be done in order to honor the life their sibling lived. Volunteering mattered more to siblings for various reasons after the death, ranging from wanting to support others in their grief to volunteering in activities that were meaningful to the deceased prior to their death. The following excerpts are examples of meaning making through the action of volunteering:

I want to help people and kind of honor Jason's memory with that. It's kind of like a healing thing for me. That's why I try to volunteer at [grief] camp [for children] every year...It's just kind of like I'm sad but I can give back to people who are in the same situation (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 375-386).

My parents and I...each year on the anniversary of my brother's birthday and the

anniversary of his passing, we always try to do something that would be something that Ben would do. He always helped everybody. I remember this one time that this friend of his said “oh that shirt is so cool” and I swear he literally took it off his back and [said] “here I can get another one, you know, whatever.” That was just always what Ben did. He was always there for everyone. And, so, every year we go to the... food bank kind of thing. We make meals and hand them out to the people in line who are homeless. And that’s what we do each year on his birthday. So we try to live life in a way that honors, celebrates, [or is] a tribute to...the essence of Ben. What he would do. How he always was. We had not done it before Ben’s passing and then once he died, that’s when we started. We did it in memory of and celebration of [Ben] (Samantha, 1st interview, Lines 342-359).

Allison, too, discussed how one thing that mattered after the loss was honoring her sister’s memory. She talked about some actions she would like to take in the future in order to do that. As was previously stated, perhaps the outcome does not matter (if she does all these things or not), but it is the process of thinking about these actions in a meaningful way that becomes important. Allison explained:

I think that if there was something that I could do to remember her and honor her or something I could do to bring awareness to her health issues and stuff I would definitely do it... That would be a positive thing for me to do in honor of her so I would definitely do something like that if I could... I just don’t know exactly what I could do. There were things I wanted to do like fundraisers and stuff but there is a lot of other details and a lot of other things you have to be concerned about or if I wanted to do a scholarship in her name for creative writing, it’s just a lot of in-

depth things I'd have to do to look into doing it or else I would definitely do it. It would be hard on me a little bit but I was doing something good to help somebody because of her and that person would get to know who she is so that would make me happy (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 82-96).

Meaning making through action is an important process used by bereaved siblings in attempts to try and make sense out of the loss of their siblings. It is a meaning making strategy that is characterized by the exploration and pursuit of life purpose. Bereaved siblings often develop and engage in new goals that are perceived as meaningful as related to the death of their brother or sister. As time passes and siblings grow older and have new life experiences, the pursuit of new meanings changes as their conceptualizations about what matters in their lives now shifts.

Affirmation: Restoring a Sense of Self

Affirmation involves a process of searching for ways to affirm previously held values or beliefs that were threatened as a result of the death of a sister or brother. Often, these values and beliefs that have been challenged are ones that the sibling still considers important and therefore they must seek out other, new ways to confirm these values. Additionally, when certain values or beliefs were violated because of the death of a sibling, this led to a state of anxiety or uncertainty, which can lead the bereaved siblings to hold stronger convictions of certain familiar values and beliefs in other, possibly unrelated, areas (Adler, 2012; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012).

One example of affirmation is presented below. After her brother died, Maya felt a sense of powerlessness in her life. His death violated her belief that the world was safe and that she had control over events and experiences in her life. Affirming other values

she was committed to and familiar with (women's rights and Hispanic rights) helped bring a sense of control and order and helped restore this meaning violation that she had no control over her life. Maya eloquently explained:

I was very angry at the beginning. *Very angry*...I had to do something with it. It was poisoning me...I was so resentful and I had to really do something with that because I seemed fine. I'm smiling. I'm going through life, but I was still very angry. I think finally finding a way to channel it and a healthy way that I think he would've approved of gave me a lot of comfort. The biggest way was through advocating. Like going out on the street and protesting. That really kind of changed things. Feeling that I can change things. That was important for me to feel some sense of control of what I was doing because when someone dies you feel so powerless, so for me to channel my anger in a healthy way to go out there and feel like I'm doing something with it and knowing that I am being conscious of this and being angry about something else. Being angry about women's rights...or being angry about Hispanic rights...So it kind of changed things... That is how I think I have been able to channel anger...I think anger without violence is an acceptable way of changing society...and anger is what gets me out of bed – to go and deal with people who don't want things to change. So it's helped me mostly during those moments. There is a hope that I can hopefully be part of a group of people where I can make a difference and so that's how I was able to use it more than anything... Ramon would have been out there and advocate as well. He was an advocate for children so if for me it's a way to use my anger for something that is beneficial that I think he would've been by my side to do as

well...if he was alive he would still be doing this, but now I feel like I have to do on behalf of him and me and that contributes to the passion but also allows me to channel some of that anger at that life and at losing him too soon. So for me it provides me an opportunity and a beneficial way (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 277-311).

Similarly, the death of Bella's twin sister also violated her sense of control over life and events that occur in life. This meaning violation led her to hold stronger convictions in other areas, namely, that it is important to help others. Choosing a career path where she could help others alleviated some of the conflict that arose with regard to her threatened sense of control. Bella stated:

There is nothing you can do. I've learned that you can't control things. You have to roll with the punches, but that took me a long time to figure out. You eventually just have to accept it and do the best you can move on...I think when I finally decided to go to medical assisting school it made me feel like I was trying to give back what we got...I think that's just what I needed. I needed to do something I guess to honor her...To do something for me (Bella, 2nd interview, Lines 706-720).

Many bereaved siblings expressed feeling a threatened sense of self after the death of a sibling. For example, several siblings expressed a feeling of losing their voice after their brother or sister died. Often, this led to various forms of affirmation as bereaved siblings began doing other things to try and find their voice again, such as speaking up for others in need or others who were unable to speak up for themselves for whatever reason. Advocating for marginalized others was one way to affirm familiar

beliefs when a sibling's sense of self was threatened. Melanie saw herself as weak and 'broken' after her brother's death. She lost her ability to speak up for herself because there was a period of time where she was so concerned with how everyone else was feeling. Her sense of self as a strong, competent individual with something to say was challenged, so she found a way to reaffirm this threatened sense of self. Melanie explained:

I think because there were so many people who had so many opinions about everything that happened as far as Jim being killed [and] in the sentencing and all that kind of stuff in the criminal setting that it's not – not that I let people walk all over me but I wasn't focused on my feelings...I was worried about everybody else and what did they think and how are they feeling and I don't want anybody mad at me but at the same time I was like what did I do? What did I do to have everybody come at me and make it that I'm the one that did bad here or we are the one that is going after [the driver of the vehicle]...I don't have the patience for people who are just either rude or dumb or just do stupid things. It's little things too. I'm trying to think of a good example... I can't think of one of the top of my head but...It will just be me looking at someone and I'm like *what are they doing?*...I think anyone in my family can always count on me to be the one to say something if I don't agree with something just because I felt like for a time in my life during that time I felt like people were walking all over me and that I was already on the ground – knocked to the ground and I was just continuously being kicked because there was just too much going on. Half the time I was in a daze and I was like what's going on? Are they really saying this? And I got the point

where I was like heck with you. I'm not going to put up with this anymore so I will say something...I feel like especially when somebody is trying to beat somebody down or trying to bully them I don't have patience for it...it's like don't mess with people when they are down because I know how that feels and it sucks! It doesn't feel good and you just feel like you are already knocked to the ground and you are just continuously being kicked. Sometimes it's hard and other times it's just a nice little tap, but it's a reminder that hey you are already down there...It gets me in trouble sometimes but hey somebody's got to do it right? (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 508-563).

Maya also engaged in a process of affirmation after her sense of self was threatened because of her brother's death. She described a process of finding and using her voice to help others:

If my clients have gone through some pretty horrible experiences and I try to advocate for them and I tried to counsel them. And I would say you know this is bull shit. This is ridiculous. They shouldn't have to go through this. Life is too short. How the hell are you going to treat somebody this way. It allows me – it gives me that backbone that I need to help my clients out. I've had people say you seem passionate and angry at the same time and I think that is a perfect combination. That's true. That is how I feel in a lot of those situations...you find a worthy cause to use your voice for. It took a while for me to realize that that's what I wanted to use my voice for, for the social justice. I just felt like I was having this resentment just open up, open up, open up and then finally finding a way to use my voice. I think that took years for me. I'm still learning ways

actually. I think it's a lifelong process (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 312-334).

Another example of affirmation can be seen in the following example with Jon. Helping others in need was a familiar value for Jon. He helped his family in the care of his little brother once he was diagnosed and throughout the course of his life. This was important to Jon to be able to help care for his brother and once Jason died, Jon was plagued by a sense of uncertainty; it was an uncertainty that life could end at any moment. Many of his values and beliefs were violated by the death of his brother (violation in his belief that the world is just and fair, in his belief that this was not supposed to happen to someone so young, and in his sense of purpose in life and in the world). These threatened values and beliefs led Jon to hold stronger to his convictions about the value of the importance of helping others. Jon's process of affirmation is exemplified in the following excerpt:

It brings a different perspective to life...I could walk out the door or my mom or dad could walk out the door and they could be gone...I think I've always, when I helped Jason, I always kind of wanted to help people, but now that I'm older and everything, my motivations have changed. It goes from yeah, I want to give back, to now I want to honor Jason's present...I want to honor his life. I want to do this to help people...I believe that he would want to see me succeed and want me to help people and kind of...heal inside a little bit. I found a quote online that kind of sums up my feeling...It says "I didn't become an EMT to get a front row seat to other people's tragedies. I did it because I knew the world was bleeding and so was I and somewhere inside I knew the only way to stop my own bleeding was to learn how to stop someone else's" (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 453-492).

In a similar way, Anna's sense of purpose in the world was violated after the death of her older sister. Anna began questioning what the point of life was. This sense of anxiety and uncertainty led her to try and affirm other important values and beliefs by taking more of a stand for social issues. She began seeking out what is meaningful and important in life and had a realization that there are bigger issues in the world. She tried to figure out how she could make a meaningful difference in the world. One way Anna decided she could do that is through more meaningful work. She wanted to engage in work that would allow her to help other people, which in her mind, would make a positive difference in the world and give her life more meaning or purpose. Anna explained:

Everything just seemed so down to me...I worked in legal marketing...and I would just get these requests for pitch materials or for research on a company and I just thought all of it was just so meaningless. I was like, don't people know that people are starving in this world. I became that idealist, like [that] annoying kid who is protesting everything in high school. I constantly was just sitting thinking to myself I was doing something so useless, I don't help anybody. I'm not making the world a better place...So I ended up just quitting...But I made the decision I was going to go back to graduate school...So I am going back to school for a master's of public administration, which is sort of like a MBA, but it's for the non-profit and public sector because then I could possibly be helping people when I graduate, which would be nice (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 206-241).

For several siblings, a violation of personal goals led to increased anxiety and uncertainty that initiated various meaning making efforts in bereaved siblings, including affirmation. One example of this can be seen after Maya's brother died. The plans she

had for the future all included her brother and now he was gone. This meaning violation led Maya to affirm her personal values by holding the value of family and culture even closer. Family and the importance of her Puerto Rican culture became even more important to her in the face of uncertainty for what her future would look like now that brother was gone. This concept is exemplified in the excerpt below:

Ramon and I had decided we were going to go to school together and get our degrees together and open a place up. After [his death], I don't know that I was motivated. He wasn't there with me. It was no longer *our* plan. I no longer had a plan. So I felt very lost and my motivation was down. So I wasn't motivated afterwards. Then it took me a couple of years and then I got back to being motivated again because I thought to myself I can't keep up like this... That's not the kind of life that I want to live... I was also embarrassed about my family. My mom is falling apart. My older brother, he can't be responsible for me forever. So again my collective piece kicked in which is a strength for me and it was [this thought where] you need to get off your ass and put yourself together for your family and be a productive family member and help them out as much as you can. That's what helped me... After he died I became much closer to my family. I became closer to my brother, even though we were pretty close, but I was living with him so we were really close. Then I became really close to my cousins... and everybody from Puerto Rico to the United States – our family everywhere... we have to keep in touch. We have to see each other more... Our family actually got closer after he died... I went to Puerto Rico much more by myself... So I became much more involved with respecting and staying close to my Puerto Rican roots

(Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 521-544).

When certain beliefs or values are violated, which is often the case when a sibling dies, meaning making efforts are initiated. Affirmation is one important meaning making strategy used by bereaved siblings in order to attempt to assert familiar values and beliefs when others are violated. Often meaning violations threaten a bereaved siblings sense of self, which leads them to try to affirm certain values or beliefs that may assist in restoring their sense of self.

Comparisons of Loss

Another meaning making strategy used by bereaved siblings involves social comparisons of loss. At multiple points throughout interviews with siblings, they shared stories wherein they compared the loss of their sibling to different types of losses (sibling loss vs. parent loss vs. child loss, etc.), different circumstances of the loss (such as younger or older sibling, expected versus unexpected death, etc.), and other deaths they might have experienced or have known others to experience. Comparisons made by bereaved siblings served as one strategy whereby bereaved siblings worked to understand what their loss experience meant in their own life. Comparisons could lead to outlooks that tended to be positive or negative in nature. Positive understandings involved siblings discussing how others' loss experiences could have been worse than their own loss. On the other hand, negative understandings involved siblings discussing how their personal experience of sibling loss was worse than others' loss experiences.

For bereaved siblings, a common comparison of loss involved the concept that it is more tragic when a younger person dies because it violates the "normal" order of life in which older people are expected to die first. All of the deceased siblings in this study died

between the ages of 6 and 34 years. Therefore, most of the siblings interviewed discussed how difficult it was when a young person dies in comparison to when someone older, such as a grandparent, dies. For example, Allison explained how ‘a loss is not just a loss’ in the following passage:

People just...maybe they don't think I'm going through what I'm going through, what I'm still going through cause she was just my sister. I don't know. But that's how I feel that's people how people think [about] it...but I do have people that say to me a loss is a loss. Like they don't want me to diminish their loss. I had this friend, and I used to go to work with her everyday and I guess her aunt died, but her aunt was older. She was a lot older. She had to be in her fifties when she passed away... We must've been talking about her aunt to get on this subject of my sister. And I guess her aunt had cancer and her aunt must've been suffering. So she made a comment to me and said...at least your sister didn't suffer. And I said, but what do you know? I said my sister suffered from the day she was born. My sister was born with a health ailment...She was born suffering and she died suffering because she had to be put in a medically induced coma. To me, that's suffering. She was suffering, she couldn't catch her breath in the last minutes of life. So that pissed me off! And then the same girl...we maybe were talking about her grandmother's [death]...and I hate to say this, but I do say it, I say I would've traded any one of my grandparents for my sister...And that's sad to say but that's just the way that it should go. Your grandparents should die, then your parents pass away. Like all older people should pass away first cause your parents should never have to bury a child...It's not in the cards that a young person should pass

away. So, when she's comparing her grandmother, her 90 year old grandmother to my 34 year old sister. That really bothered me! And she's just kind of saying a loss is a loss...I just turned around and said if your brother died, I don't think you would compare him to your grandmother (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 220-223, 233-260).

Anna further explained why she believes it is more difficult to make sense out of the death of a younger person versus an older person. She explained:

Like if somebody is older – like okay my grandmother actually this weekend we are supposed to go on a hike and spread her ashes...and I feel like her death is not something that we try to make sense of because she was 92 when she passed away. She had been battling serious illnesses for quite some time. She had her time and she was able to start a family, she was successful, she was well loved, she had a strong place in the community. That's not something you try and make sense of. I feel like when somebody says they are trying to make sense of a loss it is because somebody's life was cut short. Whether it be that they were a small child or whether it be that they were Cleo and 26 years old. So I feel like that. Those are the sorts of things that you try to make sense of. When somebody is 92 and they are grandmother or great grandmother nobody is sitting around wondering why now (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 126-136).

Maya used comparisons in her meaning making attempts when she compared the death of her brother to the death of her father in the following passage:

I mean it's harder, I think, if you lost somebody if you're very young. I mean, like when you're 21 and you're making all these life decisions, you know, what are

you going to major in? What are you going to do? Where you going to move?...I think that had a lot to do with it. I think...later in life when I lost my dad I was much more situated. I wasn't in such a place in life where I had so many options of so many things...One, his grief was different because I expect that a parent goes before you [so] some of it was normal for me. But for my brother, I just thought it was too soon, too abrupt, it doesn't happen, that kind of thing. But with my dad, a lot of it seemed much more accepting. The family talked about it much easier. Like, it was cancer, so that's okay to talk about it (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 724-734).

Jon also made multiple comparisons of loss as he attempted to make meaning out of the death of his brother. He described age as a factor in loss comparing that it is 'easier' to lose a grandparent who has lived a long life versus a sibling who is so young. Jon stated:

One grandparent...it was my mom's mom and we were very, very, very close to her and my mom was very close to her and she was a huge part of the family. So it was kind of like losing Jason all over again. Jason passed away in May and then in September is when our grandma passed away...So it was like ripping the band aid off of it all over again (laughs). It was like ripping it off and it all would just come gushing out again and it was bad all over again. I think I got over losing our grandma a little bit more, or a little bit easier and a little bit quicker. Actually a lot quicker than Jason. Cause you know...I had an attachment to her, but I didn't have the same attachment my mom had to her. You know, kind of like that special bond that I had with Jason and, you know, my family. Then we lost another grandparent and I was like, okay, they lived until they were ninety-something

years old. They had an amazing life, or a pretty good life...It was like, ok, yeah we're sad and everything, but it's okay. But there's nothing in comparison to losing a sibling (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 950-974).

Another common comparison made by several siblings in this study seemed to be comparisons regarding type of loss as far as if the loss was sudden and unexpected or if it was an expected loss due to either age or long term illness. Maya used comparisons of loss as one meaning making strategy in the following passage:

So now we're at an age where the kind of losses we have are very different than losses we had when we were much, much younger. As we get older, there'll be more losses. That just comes with life, unfortunately, but it's interesting when you get older, when people get sick, you at least know it's coming. As opposed to I think with a car accident or something so abrupt that you just don't see it coming at all. It's just such a shock factor that comes with it. And I think it's hard to really have closure...I had closure easier with my father's death than my brother's death and I think it's because I was able to prepare more for it. As opposed to my brother's death, I mean the shock of it, by the time you get over the shock, it's like a year or two. It's like you still can't believe it happened. It happened so fast. So even the type of loss I think makes a difference with the grieving process... They both suck, but yeah, it was a huge difference. It really was. I mean, the lack of feeling that you have control when someone's terminally [ill]...and there's nothing you can do about it, I think that's really hard...but at least you have time to know it's coming. But when it's so sudden like my brother's...it just changes your life within seconds. At least when someone's

terminal you try to prepare for it for a couple of weeks or a couple of months....At least with my dad, I knew he wanted to be cremated. I knew he wanted his ashes in Puerto Rico. The whole thing was arranged...With my brother...we don't have a *clue* what he would have wanted. We had no clue...At that age, he wasn't talking about it...so we were completely winging it! And doing that for somebody so close, you really want it to be what they would want. But we didn't know...So, when we know someone's terminally ill, it's nice to know what they would want...Cause it was a lot of stress putting together a funeral within twenty-four hours...So when my dad was dying I called up ahead of time. I just felt like I was in a little bit more control of that whole situation regarding what he would want and how would we go about it as a, as opposed to when it's something so quick, like there's a car accident or a murder (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 840-913).

In a similar fashion, Samantha used comparisons of loss as she sought to make sense out of the unexpected death of her brother. Samantha explained:

I'll compare it to, you know, my grandfather passed the same week my brother passed a year later. So, comparing the two, my grandfather wasn't sick [and] it wasn't an accident. It wasn't immediate. He just was old. He just passed and that's it. And I got to see that journey. And, it [was] actually really, really beautiful. Something, I think, also hard to explain, just that situation of death is *so* entirely different and than a situation where [there is] an accident and you find out within hours that somebody who was here is no longer. And I think that that really, at least for me, affects the way I have grieved thus far. I think it's, again

for me, the grief is more powerful for a situation where the event itself is so immediate and so unexpected and also, you know, it was my brother. So that has something to do with it too. But I just think the emotions are so much more powerful in my situation with that...rather than me seeing my grandfather just slowly move on to whatever else is out there and that's the way I'm going to say it because I watched this beautiful process happen and I feel like I'm unable to, or don't even necessarily have the emotion that I have with my grieving process with my brother. I think they're two totally different railroad tracks, really. I'm not saying one is easier than the other, they are just entirely different. Maybe one's a little more powerful at times than the other, but the grieving process is definitely different because of the experience. The actual event [that took my brother so suddenly]...And, this is kind of even cliché, but, the ability to say goodbye is a very powerful thing, I think. I was able to do that...to my grandfather before he passed. Whereas with Ben, I didn't even see him that day; I didn't even get to utter a word to him. So, that immediate snap makes that difference...peaceful is a really good word, actually...[because] for me [it] makes it easier being able to see that rather than a traumatic, unexpected situation (Samantha, 1st interview, Lines 496-532).

For some siblings, comparisons of loss took on a positive form. Several siblings used comparisons as a form of sense making as they explained how hearing other people's stories of loss could put the sibling's own pain in perspective. Perhaps this comparison allowed for siblings to have a more positive outlook because it gave them a sense of hope that they would be okay even though they were going through this tragedy.

Melanie used comparisons of loss in the following example. She explained:

[I was] talking with other people and John Smith is the one that, when he went to his first national [grief] conference and...[shared] yes, I lost my son and he would tell the story and they would be like oh that's so sad. And it is. It's so sad what happened to everybody but then you hear all these other stories or journeys of other people where it's like they lost their mom and their dad. They lost a number of people and – I know it's not right to do and you don't want to level people's stories or people's tragedies whether it be through drunk driving or whether it be through cancer, or anything else but you hear some other stories of people who have lost loved ones...and the circumstances are where you are just kind of like oh gosh. That's terrible...It was [a few years ago] when [someone I know] lost his mom and his sister in a drunk driving crash...and [a year later] his dad was killed in a drunk driving crash. So basically he is left by himself... Then we [knew someone else that] passed away [last year]. He had cancer and he has one sister. But his father had passed away [a few years earlier] and his mom passed away whenever he was very young, so now his sister...was left planning his funeral and doing everything for her brother because they had no other family and because her parents weren't there and she had just gotten done planning her father's funeral couple of years ago. So it's kind of like you hear the stories and these journeys of people and you're kind of like gosh I have nothing to complain about. It's almost like I just lost one sibling. Do you know what I mean? I still have all these other siblings to be very thankful for and it's kind of like...when something bad happens to you like...I think when you lose a sibling or you lose somebody

very close to you, you are almost open to hear what is going on with other people and to hear those kind of journeys it's like, holy cow (Melanie, 1st interview, Lines 791-820).

Another example of a comparison of loss that was more positive in nature can be seen in the following excerpt from an interview with Maya. Maya explained:

When I was in that grief group, some of them lost somebody due to murder. And, that was my first time really hearing about all of these stories. And I thought to myself...[that] their grief was different from my grief in the sense that, I just remember thinking thank god he didn't go out with that kind of fear. Some of the people had lost somebody who they were stabbed many times before they finally died hours later, [and] that kind of thing. I thought to myself, thank god [for] my brother, it was quick! It was a car accident. It was very quick. He wasn't tortured. You know, I was thinking it that kind of way cause it could have been worse. It could've been, even though it was still shitty, but it could've been [worse]. And so, at least that, at that age...I just handled it with a car accident. I don't know if I could've, how much I could've handled it if it was a murder and we had to go to court and all this other stuff had to happen...I think that would've made the grief harder for me. Cause then you're re-living it that way and going to court and having to deal with all that, I think is traumatic...We didn't have to deal with that...But I know a lot of people do and, like I said, when I was listening to the stories of other people grieving, just listening to what they had to go through, I realize that at least ours was peaceful in its own way compared to other losses, and I think that that peace, in its own way, provided me a little bit of comfort like

I said, that he didn't experience fear for a long period of time before he died. So to me that mattered. So as long as it was quick. And, and it was interesting how I rationalized that. You know, like at least it was this and not this, and this and not that. And (deep breath) try to make the best of the circumstance, or try to see it through that perspective. Now that I'm older, I look back on it [and] I realize he lived a life and he was fortunate to go out without much suffering... That [grief support] group was one of the things that helped with that, [because] I'm thinking, god if that's how they lost that person and they're still able to get out of bed every day, then there's hope... I would listen to some of these *horrible* to me, just sad, sad, horrible stories. There was a woman in the group [and two of her family members] were stabbed and killed in front of her at a park. And she sat there and watched both of them get attacked by these strangers and just, [to] go through this horrific thing and she eventually moved on... And I'm sitting there looking at her like, holy shit! Like, I wouldn't be able to get out of bed. But she does. And I was just thinking well shit, if she can lose two people in front of her that way... then I might be okay making my way in life (Maya, 1st interview, Lines 982-995).

Comparisons of loss appeared to be a common strategy bereaved siblings used as they attempted to make meaning out of their experience of sibling loss. These comparisons likely changed over time for bereaved siblings and were based on each individual's past experiences. The process of using comparisons of loss seems particularly important to the bereaved sibling population. Perhaps this is because bereaved siblings experience a form of disenfranchised grief as the intensity of their pain is often not acknowledged by others. Bereaved siblings can then use a process of comparisons in

attempts to validate the significance of their own grief reactions by emphasizing how tragic it is when a young person dies.

Questioning

Questioning often appears to be one of the first meaning making strategies used by bereaved siblings as they attempt to understand why the death of their sibling happened. Often times, it seems that questioning is more of an automatic or unconscious response that occurs to try and understand certain aspects of the loss experience. However, questioning can also be a very deliberate or effortful process used by bereaved siblings as they attempt understand or organize the loss experience in a coherent way. Often, losses that are unexplainable, traumatic, and untimely are the ones that are most difficult to make sense of (Folkman, 2001). This appeared to be the case for many bereaved siblings in this study as all of the losses were considered untimely, and most were considered traumatic.

Especially early in the grieving process, bereaved siblings began an intense series of “why” questioning as they sought to make sense out of the unexplainable. Their questioning often involved wondering why me? Why my sibling? And, why now? The following excerpts provide clear examples of siblings engaging in the meaning making process of questioning:

Well I know that I myself tried to make sense of his loss and never really could.

What it meant to me, again especially when I was younger, [was] to justify the early departure of one’s life and so I was trying to understand: Why would he be the one to die as opposed to someone else? And what his impact could have been or was up to that point? And trying to make sense of why him? Why at that time

in his life and why now? Why not allow him more time to do good?...I couldn't wrap my head around why he had to die at that age and why this had happened to us? (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 23-28).

So I think that with my situation I still feel to this day I ask myself why does this have to be spooky...Maybe I won't ever understand why my brother had to pass and why I was faced with this situation (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 52-53, 128-129).

I do ask, you know, why did that person live? And why did my sister die? And why did God save that person's life and he didn't save my sister's life? You know, I'm bitter in that regard (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 524-526).

Sometimes, these why questions seemed to be directed at God, as siblings asked why God would allow their sibling to die. For example, Jon explained:

I'm mad at God, why? Why did you have to do that to us? Why did our family have to go through that? This whole experience is like it's just why? Why did this have to happen? Why us? You know. I feel that there's greater good that's gonna come out of it eventually. Throughout the entire thing and, not so much now, but when those milestones come up. Like he'd be fifteen this year. I could teach him how to drive. You know. Why? Why will I never get to have that? Why will he never be able to, you know, wear a graduation gown? He could've been the person that came up with a cure for cancer. Whatever he wanted to do. It's just tough because I'll never understand it totally, but I'll have an idea, but never understand it...It's always why? Always. Always (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 49-53, 1038-1059).

Sometimes, siblings attempted to understand guilty feelings they might have had with regard to why their sibling died and they lived. For example, Bella said:

And now she's gone. How am I supposed to pick up the pieces and move on? You know, it was Bella and Jen. It was not just Jen by herself and Bella by herself. So that was very, very hard...I did go through the phase why her and not me? I did go through that phase (Bella, 1st interview, lines 736-741).

For many siblings in this study, the constant why questioning that resulted in no answers became frustrating. Siblings reported wanting to stop this intense, almost automatic questioning process in which they were engaged. For many, they reported that one thing that was most helpful was a sort of acceptance that they would never get the answers to the questions they were asking (See 'Embracing the Loss' theme). For example, Samantha stated:

I think the sense of loss could be greater because questions will remain unanswered no matter what you do and no matter what you try to find out so I think that may actually make it harder for some people (Samantha, 2nd interview, Lines 41-43).

Melanie explained how her family attempted to resolve some of those frustrating why questions that kept popping up by adjusting the questions she was asking. She explained:

That was one of the things that my sister said to my mom was why did this happen to us? And I think my mom for a moment was stumped and then she just said, well why not us? What makes us any different from anybody else? Why skip over the [Smith] family? Could I ever in my lifetime imagine that anything like this could happen? Do I sometimes look back at my life and think how did this

happen to us? Yeah I have that, but at the same time why not us? Why does it have to be somebody else? What makes us any different or makes the [Smith] family so special that nothing like this could happen to us? (Melanie, 1st interview, Lines 883-889).

Questioning was also used by bereaved siblings in attempts to make sense out of how the future might look without the deceased sibling. There appeared to be a curiosity about what their deceased sibling would be like now, whether or not they would like certain things, or how they would have responded to certain situations. According, the questions being asked by siblings seemed to change as they entered into different stages in their life and had new experience. Maya questioned:

What would he have thought of in this moment? Or would he have thought this was cool? What would he think of this place? But there are different what-ifs because you are in different place (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 234-236).

Similarly, Anna questioned what her sister might be like now or how her world could be different if her sister was alive. She said:

There's just that one other voice gone so when something new happens, we'll sit around wondering, like what would Cleo have done? Or what would Cleo have said? Or how would she have reacted? (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 304-306).

Many siblings used the meaning making process of questioning in attempts to understand what how the loss might impact some of their previously held views, beliefs, or values. This was one strategy used by bereaved siblings in attempts to restore a sense of coherence and order during an experience that seemed so out of control. A process of questioning related to previously held spiritual beliefs was common among bereaved

siblings (see Spiritual and Religious Understandings for further examples). One example of this can be seen in the following excerpt from Melanie:

Is there a heaven? Is there a greater place where we don't know everything is good? What really does happen to us after we die? Is it just a big black hole? How does it work? There have been questions as far as that goes (Melanie, 2nd interview, Lines 574-576).

Similarly, Maya explained how she questioned some of her previously held beliefs as a result of the loss:

I questioned everything...How do you know there is a heaven because I want to know there is a heaven now because it matters because Ramon should be there. So to me and my beliefs it became very important. Trying to make sense of all that it became important (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 439-441).

A process of questioning by bereaved siblings in this study seemed to be most prevalent as siblings sought to make sense of the loss, although questioning was also seen as siblings sought to make meaning related to identity change and benefit finding as well. Sibling loss is untimely and losses such as this are often more difficult to make sense of (Folkman, 2001; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, 2000). Not only did siblings attempt to use the strategy of questioning to explore multiple “why” questions, but they also used questioning as a strategy to attempt to figure out what this loss meant in their lives now. While the process of questioning can certainly lead to new meanings made, for many siblings in this study, the early why questioning often lead to an acceptance that they would never have the answers they wanted.

Negotiation through Relationships

The expression of grief can be highly unique and individualized, but it is also important to note that attempts to understand a loss or the grieving process are often socially negotiated through various relationships (Attig, 1996; Nadeau, 1997; Neimeyer, 1998; 2001a). As bereaved siblings attempted to make meaning out of the loss, this was not done in a vacuum. Siblings instead negotiated meaning through a process of exploration with family members, friends, or other significant relationships. Meaningful negotiation processes through relationships can be seen as siblings discussed shared meanings with family members or input from friends related to how to make sense of some aspect of the loss experience.

Shared meaning through the family context would likely be clarified in a sample that includes multiple family members. However, some examples of shared family meanings were evident in siblings' stories. Anna explained how her family attempted to make sense out of her sister's early departure:

We, we always kind of knew that Cleo was not going to live a full life. We had talked back when she was 18 that she would probably die before she turned 30 and she did. She died when she was 26. So, we sort of had this anticipation that this could happen (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 549-552).

Similarly, Maya described a how significant it was for her to share in the meaning making process with her oldest brother, Noah, after their brother Ramon's death:

What's interesting is that my brother was also searching for answers, Noah. So he and I would go to the bookstore and we would buy books by Silvia Browne or by anybody and we would read these books and we would compare our notes...Noah

would try to make sense of it. He...didn't cry in front of anyone. He didn't really tell you if he was upset. So he kept it to himself but the good thing was when I moved in we could talk about it. He could talk about with me and I could talk about it with him so it was the first time I was able to really talk to someone about making sense of it. We would read books. I would be like hey I read this book – a Buddhist book and this is what they talked about regarding life and energy in all this stuff. I would read it and I would say do you think this is what's happening? And he would say I don't know. And then he would read another book. So it was great. I was able to grieve in a different way. I was able to grieve without responsibility. I was able to grieve with someone who was also searching for answers and it was really cool to know – it was a relief to know that I'm not the only one that was obsessed with trying to make sense of it. He was too. So it was great to have that dialogue with him and yet know that I don't have to take care of him. I could talk to someone else who was grieving and I didn't have to take care of him the way I had to take care of my mom. So I felt like okay, I can start to focus on myself. That was a huge weight off my shoulders. It allowed me to give it more time and thought without feeling so resentful about the situation that was occurring (Maya, 2nd interview, Lines 843-861).

For some siblings, a process of negotiation of meaning with friends was helpful as siblings attempted to understand some aspect of their loss experience. Jon explained how a friend offered some insight into meaning when Jon just could not make sense of the loss:

It's something I haven't been able to wrap my brain around, personally. I've had

other people that have kind of looked from a distance and they offered one person, they offered [that] it was like...if he wouldn't have been here or whatever then you're family probably wouldn't be as close. You probably wouldn't have these amazing friends that are like family to you. And you know, I was like, that kind of makes sense a little bit. The impact this little, little boy had in him. The impact on hundreds and hundreds of people. And then he'll still have an impact because everyone will remember him...I'm kind of making some sense out of it and here's some things that might be true, but I still want him here (Jon, 1st interview, Lines 1082-1100).

In a similar way, when Allison was struggling with how to make sense out of the loss, she found it helpful to turn to other bereaved siblings who might have some insight into how to make sense out of the loss experience. She could negotiate new meanings and understandings of the loss with this group of people who better understood what she was going through. Allison stated:

I can't really make sense of her death because I don't under-, you know, I guess it's just a part of life, unfortunately, that people die every day. She passed away so suddenly and the only thing I can do, not makes me feel better, but at least I know I'm not alone, you know, is talk to other people. Talk to other people that lost their sibling. Preferably at a young age, because they're the only ones that can understand how I feel (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 342-348).

One important meaning making strategy used by bereaved siblings is a process of negotiating meaning through relationships. The loss experience creates distress and initiates meaning making efforts as siblings begin to see out ways to understand the loss.

Often, siblings seek understanding through relationships with family, friends, or others. Through a process of communication, siblings often find support in meaning making through relationship as they engage with important others who understand or are attempting to understand what the sibling is going through.

Seeing ‘Signs’ as Messages from Siblings

Another important meaning making process used by bereaved siblings as they attempted to understand some aspect of their siblings death was seeing ‘signs’ as messages from deceased siblings. Often, this was seen as a source of comfort and support by bereaved siblings. This meaning making strategy might be most closely linked with the continued connection meaning made theme, as holding a belief that the deceased sibling could send them signs or otherwise communicate with them, often served to create a stronger sense of an ongoing relationship with the deceased sibling. The ability to see signs or messages from deceased siblings helps sibling identify and connect things that happen in their lives to their deceased sibling which is an important way of making sense of the loss, remembering their sibling, and staying connected to their sibling.

Many siblings sought out meaning through an active process of trying or choosing to see things in their lives as signs or messages from the deceased. For example, Allison stated:

I think, if I hear a song on the radio, that’s maybe her saying hi to me, you know?
Or even my daughter, she’s really into her Doc McStuffins, behind one of her Doc McStuffin toys it says who created the toys and it says Tina Creations. So it actually said my sister’s name that she is the creator of the toy. So, just any things like that make me happy because I think it’s sweet and, as sad news it could be,

those little things make me happy...I'm really into that. I'm really into getting signs and I think everything is a sign (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 455-478).

For many siblings, sensing their sibling's presence is an important part of seeing signs or messages from the deceased. They may hold a general belief that their sibling is still around, which can lead to them seeing certain things as messages from their deceased sibling who is 'still around.' The excerpts below provide further examples of some of the ways in which siblings reported seeing signs from their deceased sibling:

I also think that, you know, he's still around me. And that's something my family all has never doubted. You know, we still believe that he's around making his presence known (Samantha, 1st interview, Lines 365-367).

I remember seeing after she had died, Cleo had this American flag bandana sort of thing that she put on for the Fourth of July and stuff like that, and soon after she died, I was walking around town and this homeless woman walked by me and she was wearing that same bandana. So that's sort of what I mean by sensing Cleo. I see a lot of those types of things. Cleo also loved really big rings and so randomly I'll meet somebody and I'll notice that she's wearing like a gigantic ring. And so then that makes me think of Cleo (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 460-466).

Physically I feel like I can't really sense her but I guess she's never far from my mind. I'm constantly thinking about her...I like to think that she can hear me and everything like that. I'm very big into seeing signs and stuff. I don't feel like I get a lot of that physically but there are some things that I guess could happen where I would think oh maybe that was her or maybe that little speck in a picture was her and stuff like that. Physically I don't feel her around me, but in my mind, in my

heart, in my soul I definitely feel her (Allison, 2nd interview, Lines 455-461).

In a similar way, Anna explained how she feels her sister is with her in spirit. She light heartedly sees certain things that might go wrong as a sign from her sister, who tended to stir up trouble during her lifetime. Anna stated:

She can just be there in spirit. Still with her sometimes being there in spirit, we'll joke - like if something just goes terribly wrong like we will joke that Cleo was here or Cleo took over or something. I remember it was pretty soon after Cleo died and I was at work and I was leaving the office and the elevator jammed on me and so I was stuck in the elevator for about an hour and I blamed it on Cleo. I was like it must have been Cleo doing something to say like I'm still here or I'm still around. My brother, he will say, if...he gets days where he feels really foggy and he thinks it's Cleo coming to see him because he thinks that that's probably how Cleo felt most of the time (Anna, 2nd interview, Lines 62-69).

For other siblings, sensing a deceased sibling's presence moved from beyond a spiritual sense that their sibling was still around to physically feeling the presence of the deceased sibling. For example, Bella explained:

I've had a few other encounters with her...She came down...One night I was sleeping and I just felt this heaviness on me. And, I told Jen to get off me, just out of habit, cause when I found out she relapsed...I slept in her bed every night with her...and every once in a while I'd get a smack in the face or a kick. So not realizing, I said Jen get off me and it left. And my friend said that was probably her giving you a hug. It made sense. And then one night, I was laying, sleeping. And you know how you wake up groggy and you roll over. There was a huge

hump on my side, on this side of the bed *and* there was nobody there. So, it was like she was just there laying with me. And then there was one time my husband and I got in this huge fight, and I was just crying, and crying, and crying. And she came in and she actually, I could hear her and she was rubbing my back. So a lot of times, I know she's there...I feel her presence (Bella, 1st interview, Lines 606-631).

One important way in which bereaved siblings saw sign or messages from their brother or sister was through dreams. Often, the dreams were described as feeling so real, almost as if the deceased sibling was actually present and communicating with them. These were often understood as meaningful signs from the deceased sibling that often aided in meaning making efforts as they assisted bereaved siblings in coming to understand some aspect of the loss in a new way. The excerpts below highlight the importance of dreams in the meaning making process of seeing signs from siblings:

A couple of dreams I've had...I write them all down cause I don't want to forget them...So the very first dream I had of her after she passed away, we didn't even say anything to each other, we just saw each other and I just hugged her and I'll never forget how I felt when I woke up. It really felt really real and it was really sad and I'll just never forget that feeling. And then after that, I guess just little things. Like if she comes to me in a dream and she knows what's going on, like I had a dream and she knew my cousin was getting married. So that made me feel good, cause she wasn't alive when my cousin got married or anything like that. So I thought that was a sign that she knows what's going on. And then the mediums I go to are pretty good, if you believe in that. They help me, I think a great deal

because they really knew things that nobody would possibly know. So those little things make me feel good (Allison, 1st interview, Lines 484-497).

The thing too that I get, is I have dreams about her...I was having a dream about Cleo and I had this dream that she had called me on my cell phone and so her name and picture came up, and I remember actually being really angry because in my dream I knew Cleo was dead. So I thought someone was playing a prank on me by using her phone to call me. So I remember being really angry in the dream and then I woke – and I picked up the phone and it turned out it was Cleo calling me. So I don't really remember what we talked about, but I remember asking her, like Cleo, do you know that you died and she said yes, I know I died...I have these dreams that I feel like they're not just dreams about her, I feel like she's actually in them cause of the things that we say to each other is present tense, you know. So that's sort of why I feel like she's there (Anna, 1st interview, Lines 468-482).

The process of coming to understand or view certain things that happen in life as signs or messages from the deceased sibling seemed to be an important meaning making strategy used by many siblings in this study. Often, it was important for bereaved siblings to be able to identify and connect certain things, such as spots on pictures or dreams, as a form of communication from their brother or sister. It is possible that once something is identified as a 'sign' that siblings begin to notice it more, see it more often, and even seek it out, since these things are attributed as messages from the deceased. All of the siblings reported seeing signs as comforting and it made them happy to feel as if their sibling could still communicate with them in some way.

Bereaved siblings engaged in multiple processes in order to attempt to make meaning out of some aspect of their loss experience. Although presented separately, it is important to note that these meaning making processes are often overlapping and not mutually exclusive. Additionally, it would seem that these various processes used by bereaved siblings can occur in automatic ways or through more effortful seeking.

Summary of Methods Chapter

Through a process of narrative analysis, 8 themes of meanings made by bereaved siblings unfolded. These themes appeared to fit nicely within the larger framework commonly used in meaning making research of identity change, sense making, and benefit finding. Although understanding the sense bereaved siblings have made out of their loss, it is also important to explore meaning making strategies or processes used by this bereaved population. A better understanding of how bereaved siblings make new meanings out of the loss can have important implications for counselors working with grieving clients. Additionally, a better understanding of both processes and outcomes with regard to meaning making can help clarify these concepts and provide insight into how to better explore, measure, and define them in future research.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experience of sibling loss in adolescence through personal narratives and to explore the concept of meaning making with regard to sibling loss. In particular, I examined what meanings bereaved siblings made out of the death of their sibling over time and what strategies bereaved siblings used to make those meanings. I looked at meaning making as an ongoing process that unfolds over time by interviewing seven young adult siblings who lost a brother or sister in adolescence. Each participant (with one exception) was interviewed twice and also provided written answers to two open-ended questions related to meaning making and sibling loss. Since bereaved siblings are often thought of as “forgotten mourners,” it was important for me to find a way to share their important voices and stories. Presenting sibling profiles in the words of the bereaved siblings interviewed (see Chapter 4) allowed for each sibling’s unique story and process to be shared in their own words. Additionally, these profiles represent a unique way to establish and illustrate the context, structure, use of affect, and overall integration of the loss experience into the sibling’s larger life narrative. It provides a greater understanding of how bereaved siblings make meaning of their loss over time and how meaning making processes can differ based on individual characteristics, cause of death, social support, family functioning, culture, and religion or spirituality. Further, through an in-depth process of narrative analysis, I explored common themes with regard to sibling grief and meaning making by examining: (a) what meanings or understandings bereaved siblings have made out of the loss of their brother or sister over time, and (b) how bereaved siblings have made meaning out of the loss.

This research is particularly important because it helps provide a more in-depth

look at the phenomenon of sibling loss in adolescence. Additionally, the rich qualitative data allows for increased clarification of the complex processes involved in meaning making. Based on this research, meaning making (in general and as it relates to sibling loss) can be better defined and conceptualized which will have important implications for both research and practice, particularly because there is a lack of literature available that specifically explores the concept of meaning making as it relates to bereaved siblings. Below, I will compare major results from this study to important meaning making models and sibling grief models found in the literature. Additionally, based on the data gathered in this study, implications for teaching, practice, and research will be explored.

Discussion of Findings

Based on recommendations from previous research (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Park, 2010; Report on Bereavement and Grief Research, 2004), this study sought to explore and better understand both the *outcomes* of meaning making by bereaved siblings and the meaning making *processes* used by bereaved siblings to make sense out of their loss over time. The findings of this study help shed more light on how researchers might begin to better and more clearly define the complex processes of meaning making. In the past, multiple research studies have defined identity change, sense making, and benefit finding as important meaning making *processes* (Currier et al., 2006; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). These studies often define or describe these concepts in terms of processes, but instead measure them as outcomes of a search for meaning (e.g., reported changes to identity, sense made, benefits found; Park, 2010). When I began this study, I thought I would get clarification of these important concepts as meaning making processes, but instead I found that they seem to describe and fit more as products or

outcomes of meaning making processes. Thus, the concepts of identity change, sense making, and benefit finding became overarching categories in what meanings bereaved siblings made after the death of a brother or sister.

The first category, identity change, is a frequently cited component of meaning making throughout the literature (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002; Tedeschi et al., 1998). Bereaved siblings in this study reported multiple meanings made through identity changes, which included a changed view of self, a changed view of the world, and a changed view of others. Similar to findings presented by Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) and Tedeschi and colleagues (1998), certain meanings made by bereaved siblings within the category of identity change were expressed in the form of posttraumatic growth. For example, siblings reported an increased sense of empathy or compassion, a new outlook on life with the understanding that life is precious and should not be taken for granted, realizations of what is most important in life, including increased valuing of significant relationships, and a desire to live a more meaningful life, and to find ways to embrace life by honoring their deceased sibling. Findings from this study indicate that posttraumatic growth after sibling loss in adolescence is not only possible, but often viewed as beneficial by surviving siblings as they find more ways to pursue and live a more meaningful life. These outcomes seem to be in line with previous research in which identity change has been conceptualized in terms of life purpose or life significance (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Ulmer, Range, & Smith, 1991). Posttraumatic growth in adolescence has previously been linked with decreases in emotional distress (Ickovics et al., 2006); therefore, assisting siblings in meaning making efforts that lead to posttraumatic growth will be useful for work with the bereaved sibling population.

The findings in this study suggest that losing a sibling in adolescence leads to multiple changed views of others, including many changes with regard to family dynamics. Many siblings expressed anger about changes in family structure since these changes often include becoming caretakers for parents, hiding pain or sadness from parents, and feeling neglected or as if their primary caretakers were less available and present to take care of their needs. Support systems were viewed as extremely important by bereaved siblings. Findings suggested that those who lost a sibling in adolescence had experiences with adolescent peers who did not know how to respond to the loss or how to be supportive in ways that were helpful to the bereaved sibling. This often led bereaved siblings to hide their pain or 'wear a mask.' Social support from the peer group is particularly difficult in adolescent bereavement because other adolescents may not have much experience dealing with life tragedies. Additionally, coping strategies might not be as developed as in adulthood, possibly leading to coping through potentially dangerous strategies such as increased use of alcohol or drugs.

With regard to social support, it seems there is a paradox for bereaved siblings wherein siblings have a desire for other people to recognize their pain, but are involved in a process of hiding it, nonetheless. This paradox could exist because it is scary to allow others to see who one really is now, after the loss. Siblings might fear rejection, worry others will not be able to understand their deep sense of pain and sadness, or fear others cannot handle such strong emotion. Developmentally, adolescents are focused on the task of developing intimate friendships (Balk, 2001) and my findings suggest that the loss of a sibling during this time can complicate this process. Findings from this study showed the tendency for bereaved siblings to feel different and isolate themselves. Overall, a lack of

social support (whether that be peers or family) can have important implications, particularly among bereaved siblings because a lack of social support in response to bereavement has often been linked with increased levels of post-loss distress (Bonanno, 2004). Additionally, positive interactions with a social support network can have beneficial effects by potentially reducing symptoms of complicated grief (Vanderwerker & Prigerson, 2004). Family and friends characterized by bereaved siblings as ‘being there’ for them and having an ‘ability to listen’ seemed to be the most beneficial.

The second major category, sense making, presented outcomes or sense made by bereaved siblings with regard to the death of their brother or sister. Bereaved siblings in this study reported multiple meanings made that fell into the sense making category, including spiritual or religious understandings, emphasis on the uniqueness of the sibling relationship, importance of a continued connection to deceased siblings, and embracing or accepting the loss. Consistent with previous literature on adolescent sibling grief and meaning making (Balk, 1991; Balk & Hogan, 1995; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999), participants in this study understood their sibling’s death as an impetus to begin a spiritual quest. The loss of a sibling during adolescence seemed to spur many siblings into thinking more about religion and spirituality, ideas about God and the afterlife, and to challenge previously held religious or spiritual beliefs. After some anger at God, there appeared to be an increased openness to new beliefs and a “need” to believe in the afterlife. Many siblings saw religion and spirituality as a sense of comfort and support during their grieving process. Fowler (1981) suggested that it is during the adolescent phase of development that teenagers often begin a deeper exploration of their faith. Perhaps it is because they are in this developmental stage that bereaved siblings in this

study reported an increased sense of openness and a desire to learn more about various forms of religion and spirituality. For most siblings, this spiritual exploration was viewed in positive terms and often led bereaved siblings to describe an increasing sense of the importance of spirituality in their lives. These findings are particularly important because they provide a strong rationale for integrating spirituality into work with grieving adolescents.

Another common way in which bereaved siblings understood the death of their sister or brother was through emphasizing the importance and uniqueness of the sibling bond. There was a sense that because siblings are so connected for all of their lives, the grief that results from the loss is extremely painful and lasts forever. Even though the pain of grief lasts forever, bereaved siblings explained that there are changes in the way grief is experienced over time. As Balk (2001) suggested, adolescent siblings who experience the death of a brother or sister must often re-examine issues of grief and loss as they enter a new developmental stage. Siblings in this study re-examined the loss at multiple times in their lives, particularly at various developmental milestones such as going to college, graduations, starting a career, weddings, funerals, and new births. The personal meaning of the loss was re-explored in a new light as the bereaved sibling now had new life experiences, new values or beliefs, and new levels of maturity. Thus, it appears that the meaning making process is ongoing, as siblings bereaved in adolescence continue to use new strategies to attempt to make sense out of the loss and integrate it into their lives now. This process appears to continue at least through young adulthood and possibly throughout the lifespan.

Maintaining a continuing bond or a continued connection with the deceased is a

concept that continues to be explored in bereavement literature (Hogan & DeSantis, 1992; Foster et al., 2011; Packman et al., 2006; Silverman & Klass, 1996). Siblings in this study viewed their continued relationship with their deceased brother or sister as another important way to make sense out of the loss. All of the siblings in this study viewed their continued connection to their sibling as supportive and comforting. Siblings made sense of their continued connection to the deceased sibling through feeling a sense of presence, like their deceased sibling was always with them in spirit. Often, siblings expressed other ways of maintaining a continued connection such as communicating with the deceased, visiting cemeteries, or finding other ways to honor and remember their bereaved sibling. These findings significantly contribute to the literature in bereavement, particularly a component of postmodern bereavement theory that emphasizes the important role a continuing connection to the deceased can play in the grieving process (Klass et al., 1996; Neimeyer et al., 2006). Although there is discrepancy with regard to whether or not the maintenance of continuing bonds impacts post-loss distress in general bereaved samples (Neimeyer et al., 2006), the findings from this study lend support to the idea that continuing bonds with the deceased sibling that assist with meaning making efforts and allow siblings to move forward in life, appear to be beneficial. The unique role of continuing bonds in bereaved siblings should continue to be explored.

Embracing the loss is another way in which bereaved siblings made sense out of their loss experience. The theme is really similar to the idea of acceptance that is commonly cited in bereavement literature (Davis et al., 1998; Park, 2010). For many siblings, this form of sense making involved an acceptance that the loss 'is what it is' for some, while others chose instead to make sense by believing that the loss happened for a

certain reason. Multiple siblings appeared frustrated by attempts to try and make sense of the loss and felt as if it was better to stop asking questions because they would never get the answers that they wanted.

The final major category with regard to meanings made by bereaved siblings was benefit finding. Six out of seven participants in this study were able to make some meaning out of the loss by finding or identifying positive things that may have come as a result of the loss. These siblings emphasized the importance of seeing the loss through a positive lens. For some siblings, the positive meaning made was that a sick sibling was no longer suffering. Another important meaning made was a newfound valuing of relationships in which siblings felt more closely connected to loved ones, which is consistent with research conducted by Coleman and Neimeyer (2010) and Davis and colleagues (1998). An important positive meaning shared by many was the idea that ‘my sibling mattered’ and his or her life made a difference in the world. Siblings also found benefits in the pursuit of what matters to them now (Armour, 2003) after the loss, which often included finding and following their passions in life, choosing to live a more meaningful life, and pursuing life choices that were meaningful as they related to their deceased sibling.

Based on sibling stories in this study, it was evident that the “what’s” of meaning making (the outcomes of sibling meaning making processes) were not static. Often, the meanings siblings made were fluid, and changed over time as the siblings changed and developed, as their relationships changed, and as they gained more life experiences. The outcomes or meanings made in this study are a snapshot of potential meanings made by siblings bereaved in adolescence. These are the meanings found over time by young adult

bereaved siblings who attempted to decrease distress through various meaning making processes. These findings are important for several reasons. First, the meanings made by bereaved siblings in this study fit into research and theories from past literature as related to bereavement and meaning making, which lends support to postmodern theories of grief and loss that posit meaning making is a central concept in the grieving process.

Additionally, these findings lend support to viewing the important concepts of sense making, benefit findings, and identity change as meaning making outcomes rather than meaning making processes as they have often been defined in previous literature.

Interestingly, these outcomes of meaning making only became apparent through a rigorous process of coding. When asked, “Do you feel you have attempted to make any meaning or sense out of the loss of your sibling?” six participants said yes and one participant, Allison, said no. However, in interviews, when siblings were asked directly about their ability (or not) to make meaning of the loss, most found this an extremely difficult question to answer. Often, a visible struggle became apparent as siblings expressed a desire to make sense of the loss and also a feeling that the loss would never really make sense. One important implication of this is that researchers must find a way to better assess and learn how individuals understand the concept of meaning making. There has been a lack of standardized language with regard to research related to meaning making (Davis et al., 1998; Park, 2010; Neimeyer et al., 2010) and now it appears that even participants are unsure how to define the concept they are being asked about. This could be particularly problematic in quantitative studies where follow up and deeper exploration are often not a possibility.

To begin to explore this important concept of how siblings in this study

understood the term meaning making, I asked them to talk about this in their interviews. Interestingly, it seems that most of the siblings in this study understand making meaning of the loss to be a specific component of sense making in which bereaved individuals search for answers to multiple questions (e.g., Why did this happen? Why my sibling? Why now?) rather than the more comprehensive definition of meaning making understood by many researchers, including components of sense making, but also identity changes, and finding positives in the loss experience. In the responses below, it becomes clear how operational definitions of meaning making (or lack thereof) can certainly impact outcomes of studies and impact participant responses to meaning making questions. Here are some the sibling responses to my question asking how they understand the term “meaning making”:

I really didn't think that there was never going to be a 100% pure, true understanding of it. I don't think that sense will ever be made...I myself understand that. I accept the fact that it makes no sense to me right now and it probably will still not make much sense to me in the future. And I'm okay with that. I understand that a lot of people may struggle trying to find an answer or trying to make sense of the loss of a loved one but I just don't see that benefiting me much...I just see it being almost like a never ending journey. If I tried to dive in to understanding or make sense of it, I don't think I would ever actually get there so I am kind of playing along with it in my head in a way. I just understand that that's the way it is and that's the way it will be. So no reason to start that journey when what I'm looking for may never present itself...I think that could almost cause your grief to be more severe. I think the sense of loss could be

greater because questions will remain unanswered no matter what you do and no matter what you try to find out so I think that may actually make it harder for some people (Samantha, 2nd interview).

There are those people who are like why would God do this to me? Why did this have to happen to us? It's not like it was a disease or something like that. It was a car crash. It was something that didn't have to happen. If it didn't have to happen and everything in our world is supposed to be "good" why would something like that happen? But I didn't need to in my mind make sense of it. It's almost like...it is what it is. *It happened. I can't turn back time. I can't do anything about it.* All I can do is take what happened and find a good place for it in my heart... This is my new reality. This is my new life now that he is not here and all I can do is make the best of what I now have when something has been taken away from me that was so precious (Melanie, 2nd interview).

It meant to me...especially when I was younger to justify the early departure of one's life and so I was trying to understand why would he be the one to die as opposed to someone else. And what his impact...was up to that point but could have been - also a future component to it and trying to make sense of why him, why at that time in his life and why now. Why not allow him more time to do good, and then also trying to make sense of how it impacted my life as well. For a long time I really couldn't make sense of it. I think I was so angry. Then when enough time has gone by...things happened in my life where I really tried to still make sense of it in different ways and I just kind of learned to accept that I will never get the answers that I wanted. I was thirsty for answers and was hoping it

would make sense and it doesn't (Maya, 2nd interview).

I kind of wrap my head around things [and] I never really did because when I would start I would play that what if game. You don't want to play that what if game because it's going to hurt you. So I just kind of let that part go. I accepted – it took me a while to accept she was gone but other than that that what if game would pop in my head and everybody was like you don't play that (Bella, 2nd interview).

I don't think I'll ever be able to make sense out of it. I just think it just is what it is and I just have to learn to live with it and deal with it. I don't think I'm ever going to make sense out of it...I don't think I'm ever going to be all the make sense out of it or understand why it happened or anything like that. I guess I just kind of have to deal with it (Allison, 2nd interview).

I feel like when somebody says they are trying to make sense of a loss it's because somebody's life was cut short. Whether it be that they were a small child or whether it be that they were Cleo and 26 years old. So I feel like that. Those are the sorts of things that you try to make sense of. When somebody is 92 and they are a grandmother or great grandmother nobody is sitting around wondering why now. So that's what that means to me (Anna, 2nd interview).

Even though many siblings did not report making any sense of the loss as they understood or defined sense making, categories and themes of meanings made became clear to me through conversations and through an intensive coding process. Not only did I observe meanings made (when looking through the meaning reconstruction theory lens of sense making, identity change, and benefit finding), but I observed important meaning

making processes or strategies used by bereaved siblings in attempts to make sense out of the loss. Inherent in meaning reconstruction theory is the assumption that bereaved siblings often strive to make meaning out of their loss, whether through implicit or explicit processes (Neimeyer, 1999). Multiple studies provide support for the idea that those who are able to make some sense or meaning out of the loss seem to fare better (report less distress) than those who are unable to do so (Currier et al., 2006; Holland et al., 2006; Keesee et al., 2008), so an important question becomes, how can we help siblings view their shared stories of loss and grief reactions as meaning making strategies and/or outcomes? It would appear that findings from this study are one important step in helping us answer this question.

Findings from this research underscore multiple important meaning making strategies used by bereaved siblings, including assimilation and accommodation, the use of metaphors, storytelling, affirmation strategies aimed at restoring a sense of self, comparisons of loss, a process of questioning, negotiating meanings through relationships, and seeing 'signs' as messages from siblings. Meaning making processes or strategies have been less often explored in the literature and so it is unknown how certain strategies of meaning making might be related to attachment style, personality, age, sex, culture, or type of loss experienced. This study found important meaning making strategies used by mostly female, young adult, bereaved siblings who lost a sibling in adolescence. It is unknown if these results can be generalized to other grieving populations or even all grieving siblings, but it certainly adds to the scarce literature on meaning making processes.

Many of the meaning making strategies used by bereaved siblings in this study

are supportive of strategies found by Nadeau (1998) who explored the meaning making processes of bereaved families. Nadeau also found evidence to support the meaning making strategies of storytelling, comparisons of death with other deaths, family communication (which is similar to the strategy of negotiating meaning through relationships in this study), and seeing coincidences as meaningful (which is similar to the strategy of seeing signs as messages from deceased siblings in this study). This is important because meaning making processes, although not often clearly defined or explored, are understood to be strategies through which bereaved individuals attempt to decrease distress created by discrepancies between global meaning structures and meanings attributed to the loss event (Park 2008/2010). Therefore, identifying meaning making strategies is of utmost importance so researchers can begin to explore if, when, how, and which strategies would be useful in decreasing post-loss distress in bereaved individuals. These meaning making strategies represent a good starting point for future research that could more closely examine meaning making processes of bereaved siblings (in attempts to replicate the results) or meaning making processes of other bereaved populations (in attempts to explore and compare important meaning making strategies and begin to assess which strategies are used by whom, for what purposes, and in what contexts).

Park (2010) attempted to summarize a majority of meaning making literature and in so doing claimed that the four most commonly studied areas of meaning making processes included: (a) assimilation and accommodation; (b) automatic or unconscious versus deliberate or effortful processes; (c) searching for comprehensibility versus searching for significance; and (d) cognitive processing versus emotional processes. Park

acknowledged that these processes are overlapping and not mutually exclusive. Based on findings from this study, I would propose a shift in the current thinking about meaning making processes. Although findings from this study support Park's contention of assimilation and accommodation as important meaning making strategies, I was left wondering where the other meaning making strategies were and why they were not being more extensively explored in the literature.

It would seem that some of the other components presented by Park (2010) as meaning making processes appear to instead be factors that serve to modify meaning making processes. Park's automatic versus deliberate category could modify various meaning making processes in different ways. For example, questioning is one meaning making strategy used by bereaved siblings. Initial questioning in response to an untimely loss (such as that of a sibling) can spur automatic questioning such as why did this happen? On the other hand, questioning can also be a more deliberate process wherein one asks certain questions about religion or spirituality, for example, in a very intentional way in order to try and make some meaning out of the loss experience. Additionally, the category of cognitive versus emotional processing could also potentially be viewed as a modifier rather than a specific meaning making strategy. For example, within each of the strategies used by siblings, they could be processed in cognitive or emotional ways. Also, it is quite possible that these two constructs (cognitive and emotional processing) are not often discreet and instead occur together.

Finally, it seems that the final category of searching for comprehensibility versus searching for significance (Park, 2010) appears to be more of an outcome (or a modifier of meaning making outcomes) rather than a meaning making process. For example, if the

meaning making process is storytelling, then the meaning making strategy involves telling stories in an attempt to process, construct, or reconstruct meanings of the loss experience. The outcome of storytelling, or the actual meaning made through the process of storytelling, could be characterized by a sense of comprehensibility (a story that attempts to make sense of an event) or significance (a story that attempts to determine the value of an event).

Meaning making processes might be impacted by age/developmental stages, cognitive abilities, major life events, context, culture, or social support. Findings from this study confirm that many meaning making processes or strategies are often implicit, unconscious, or difficult to express in words (Neimeyer, 2000). Many siblings could not speak to strategies used in meaning making (or, in most cases, meanings made) when asked specifically about these things. Rather, they had to be gleaned and interpreted from the data through a process of qualitative coding.

Additionally, findings from this study suggest that the meaning making process lasts much longer (perhaps forever) for bereaved siblings than is traditionally studied in bereavement research. Siblings in this study appeared to continue meaning making efforts up to 17 years after a sibling's death. Perhaps it takes longer for siblings bereaved in adolescence to making meaning out of the loss than it takes adults who experience a loss, due to the sibling's developmental stage in life. With adolescent sibling loss, there is a need to re-process grief, find new understandings, and make new meanings as surviving siblings enter into each new stage in life up through adulthood. The siblings in this study searched for new ways of understanding their experience of loss as they got older, graduated, got married, had children, etc. These findings seem to be contrary to previous

research which contends that meaning making efforts decrease over time (Bonanno et al., 2004; Cleiren, 1993). This difference could be because of how meaning making is understood by participants in these studies. For example, when asked if they were able to make sense of the loss (a question typically used in meaning making literature) siblings in this study contended that they were not continuing a search for meaning. However, during data analysis and coding, multiple and varied meaning making efforts were identified through various strategies bereaved siblings used to continue to search for new ways to understand some aspect of the loss experience and integrate it into their current lives.

Also, it is important to note that Coleman and Neimeyer (2010) found that the ability to make sense of loss in the first four months after the loss predicted increased well-being in bereaved spouses. This finding held true for up to four years post loss. These researchers also found that an ongoing search for meaning is linked to increased levels of distress. Findings from this study again present as contrary to these findings. Although well-being was not assessed in a quantitative way in this study, all bereaved siblings continued in meaning making efforts 2 to 17 years post-loss and most reported a sense of coping well and moving forward in life in meaningful and important ways. Therefore, researchers must further explore links between meaning making efforts and well-being and consider what this might mean (or if it holds true) for siblings bereaved in childhood or adolescence if the search they initiate continues into adulthood.

The findings from this study reflect previous theories of adolescent sibling grief found in the literature. Specifically, two prominent theories of adolescent sibling bereavement point to meaning making as a central driving force (Forward & Garlie,

2003; Hogan & DeSantis, 1996). The model proposed by Hogan and DeSantis (1996) includes three main constructs: (a) grief, (b) personal growth, and (c) ongoing attachment. The grief construct, which includes a changed sense of self and family, physical effects of loss, increased vulnerability (fear, guilt, depression, and isolation), cognitive interference, desire for union with sibling, and coping through increased risky behavior, is said to be spurred by an initial questioning of the meaning of life after the loss experience. Siblings in the current study similarly reported a changed view of self and others within the construct of identity change. Many siblings reported initial physical effects of sibling loss, including not being able to eat, losing weight, hair falling out, and a general sense of not feeling well. Additionally, siblings reported increased feelings of fear or anxiety after the death of a sibling, particularly an increased worry that something else bad would happen to a loved one. Several siblings supported the construct of cognitive interference as they reported trouble concentrating, including lower grades/scores in school. Coping through increased risk behavior was mentioned by a few siblings in this study as they reportedly turned to drugs or alcohol to avoid dealing with the intense pain of sibling loss.

The second construct of the model presented by Hogan and DeSantis (1996), personal growth, includes five categories: a permanently changed reality, an increased sense of others (stronger connections to others and increased compassion/empathy), increased resiliency (more optimism, increased maturity, and increased sense of self), increased faith, and increased ability to give and receive help. Findings from this study indicate that bereaved siblings experience a changed view of the world, often embracing the idea that life is precious and should not be taken for granted. Additionally, siblings in

this study often reported feeling a stronger connection to significant others and an increased ability to be there to be supportive of others going through a difficult time. The contention that siblings are more optimistic after the loss does not seem to ring true for siblings in this study, particularly as several siblings actually reported feeling increasingly pessimistic after the loss as their sense of hope in a future where everything would be okay was shattered by the death of their sibling. However, there are others ways in which increased resiliency is indicated in this study, including siblings' increased sense of maturity and a changed view of self wherein siblings resolved to live life in more meaningful ways. In line with the previous findings, many siblings from this study reported increased faith as a result of sibling loss. In particular, siblings felt more open to explore questions of religion and spirituality and often gained a greater importance for however they defined their own spirituality.

Hogan and DeSantis (1996) described the final construct of their theory, ongoing attachment, as a bi-directional mediator between grief and personal growth. Ongoing attachment was comprised of six categories including regretting, endeavoring to understand, catching up, reaffirming, influencing, and reuniting. Certainly, the importance of a continuing connection to the deceased sibling was exemplified in the present study. Bereaved siblings reported a sense of presence, multiple ways of communicating with the deceased, and the importance of honoring and remembering the deceased. All of the siblings in this study viewed the continuing relationship with their sibling as supportive and beneficial in their grieving process.

Many of the meanings bereaved siblings made in the current study appear to reflect important concepts in this previous theory of sibling grief. However, what appears

to be missing is the important meaning making processes used by siblings to make these meanings. Thus, when viewing adolescent sibling bereavement according to this model (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996), it becomes evident that meaning making is a central process in the grief experiences of bereaved siblings, but specification about strategies used in this important process are not elaborated on or further explored.

In another theory of adolescent sibling bereavement, Forward and Garlie (2003) draw many parallels between their theory and the theory presented by Hogan and DeSantis (1996). Interested readers can see Chapter 2 for a more comprehensive description of each of these models. Findings from this study, too, offer much to the model proposed by Forward and Garlie. In this theory of sibling bereavement, the grief process is presented as a series of stages. The first stage includes finding out about the loss. Based on findings from the present study, this seems like a pertinent addition to Hogan and DeSantis' model because each sibling placed strong emphasis on 'finding out' stories, which were often characterized by intense emotion. For many siblings in this study, this is when initial meaning making efforts occurred as they began a process of questioning why this would happen.

The second stage of Forward and Garlie's (2003) theory is avoiding reality, which often includes feelings of numbness and attempts to keep busy. Findings from this study support this avoiding reality stage, as one sibling reported working multiple jobs in an attempt to keep busy to avoid dealing with the pain of the loss. Additionally, multiple siblings in this study reported a type of delayed grief where it was a year or more after the loss that they were able to begin their grieving process. This appears to be another important component of sibling loss that needs to be further examined. Siblings often

avoid intense feelings of grief (intentionally or not) as they focus on just making it through the day to day.

The third stage of the model proposed by Forward and Garlie (2003) is the facing reality stage which involves working through the pain, and also a sense of loneliness and ambivalent feelings about being different. Findings from the current study again show support for this construct, as siblings explain a time where they ‘woke up’ or ‘had to deal with the loss.’ For many siblings in this study, that appeared to mean taking a closer look at the meaning of the loss in their current lives. Siblings often reported feeling alone in their grief because others could not understand the pain and uniqueness of their loss. Additionally, there seemed to be that paradox between wanting others to notice their pain, but also wanting to fit in and not wanting to be ‘called out’ as being different based on their loss experience.

The fourth stage presented in the theory by Forward and Garlie (2003) is turning the corner. In similar ways, siblings from the current study reported turning points, or points in time where they realized they would be able to make it through the pain of this loss, even though it was difficult. Often, these turning points involved embracing the loss and choosing to live life in spite of the loss. In a sense, siblings began taking back control of their lives. In Forward and Garlie’s model, this stage leads to either ending the search or finding new meaning, which is characterized by accepting the pain, continuing the bond, and redefining self. Certainly finding new meaning is represented in the present study as siblings reported the importance of accepting whatever feelings they are having as legitimate, the importance of maintaining a continued connection with the deceased siblings, and a changed sense of identity. In the model proposed by Forward and Garlie,

siblings would then circle back to the facing reality stage and cycle through the last two stages again as an ongoing process.

Once again, the emphasis on this theory of adolescent sibling grief is clearly rooted in meaning making. Much support is found for constructs within this model based on the present study. However, it appears to be a stage model of grief, which may explain why there is no mention of important meaning making processes or strategies within the model. A major contribution from the current study is an exploration of various meaning making processes used by bereaved siblings. It is through these important strategies that new meanings are made and it is possible that these meaning making efforts in and of themselves (regardless of meanings made) are helpful in the grieving process of adolescently bereaved siblings.

Based on findings from this study, a preliminary model of sibling grief could be proposed which identifies three categories at its core: (a) identity change, (b) sense making, and (c) benefit finding. These categories are not distinct stages through which a sibling moves and are instead representative of the complex web of meaning making that occurs when a sibling dies. Identity change is characterized by stories of finding out, delayed grief or the need to be strong (which often involved becoming caretaker for parent(s)), wearing a mask or hiding intense feelings of pain, getting lost (losing voice, confused understanding of self, fear, anxiety, isolation), and finding voice again (which involves a process of re-discovering self, view of the world, relationship with others, and seeking out what matters now). Sense making is characterized by initially asking “why” after finding out, feelings of frustration and anger, existential sense (seeking answers through religion or spirituality), seeking validation of intense pain (emphasizing the

uniqueness of sibling loss), maintenance of a continuing connection to the deceased sibling, and a sense of embracing the loss (accepting that it will never make much sense, that one will never get the answers they are seeking). The third category of benefit finding is characterized by the initial intense feelings of pain, hurt, and sadness (feeling that there is nothing good about the loss), 'forcing' self to see aspects of the loss experience through a positive lens, finding benefits or 'choosing' to view things as benefits as a way to assist in coping efforts, and the emphasis that the deceased sibling's life mattered and the surviving sibling can now find ways to live for them and honor them.

Importantly, each of these categories is guided by an often implicit desire to make meaning after the death of a sibling. Therefore, meaning making strategies or processes are central in the understanding of adolescent sibling bereavement. This theory is underscored by the emphasis on meaning making processes and the assumption that meaning helps siblings organize things they want to try and understand. When the death of a sibling calls into question previous understandings or meaning structures, this creates anxiety, which leads siblings to use strategies in order to attempt to negotiate meaning and make sense of the loss experience. Strategies commonly used either implicitly or explicitly by bereaved siblings in attempts to make sense out of some aspect of the loss experience include assimilation and accommodation, linguistic strategies such as use of metaphor and storytelling, affirmational strategies which included restoring a sense of self, comparisons of loss, and meaning making through action, and other creative strategies, such as negotiating meaning through relationships and seeing signs as messages from the deceased sibling.

Implications for Education, Training, and Practice

Based on this research, including the comprehensive literature review and the compelling data on the importance of meaning making by bereaved siblings, I would suggest a more comprehensive bereavement training program for future counselors and others entering into the mental health profession. Most counselors will work with individuals experiencing issues related to grief and loss at some point, even if it is not their specialty area. Increased training in the area of grief and loss can help prepare counselors for work with bereaved clients, while also equipping them with skills that can be applied to clients experiencing other forms of loss on a broad scale (i.e., life transitions, divorce, substance abuse, illness, trauma, career change). Even though most (90% or more) counselors in multiple studies believed that training in grief counseling is necessary (Allen & Miller, 1988; Charkow, 2002; Ober, Granello, & Wheaton, 2012), coursework in grief or bereavement is not specifically required by most counseling programs (Breen, 2010).

Counselor Education programs must find ways to incorporate training in the area of grief and bereavement so that future counselors feel more prepared to work with grieving clients. One way to do this would be to add a mandatory course (or courses) that emphasize theories of grief and bereavement and how to most effectively work with grieving clients. Another option would be to require a certain number of training hours in grief specific training programs. Finally, counselor education programs could look for important ways to infuse grief education into the current counseling curriculum. For example, current theories of grief and bereavement could be included in a counseling theories course, cultural attitudes towards grief and loss could be examined in a

multicultural counseling course, students could be encouraged to present client issues through the lens of grief and loss to exemplify important clinical skills in working with grieving clients, and counseling programs can partner with various community agencies that have a need for counselors in training to work with grieving individuals, families, or groups.

Additionally, it is important for counselor educators to be trained well with regard to death education. It is important for faculty to share the most recent theories of grief and bereavement with students and to find ways to incorporate and apply the most recent literature in the area of grief and bereavement. One study assessed current counselors' familiarity with different theories of grief and loss and found, in a sample of 369 counselors, that most counselors reported at least some familiarity with stage models of grief such as Kubler-Ross's (1969) theory but many of the counselors (40-48%) reported no familiarity with more current theories of grief such as Neimeyer's (2001c) Meaning Reconstruction theory, Stroebe and Schut's (1999) Dual Process Model, and Klass's (2001) Continuing Bonds theory (Ober et al., 2012). This is problematic for clinicians (and clients!) because much recent research in the area of grief contends that there is minimal empirical support for the older grief work theory of loss which involves stages or tasks through which an individual must work through to "resolve" his or her grief (Bonanno, 2001a; Stroebe, 2001). Thus, clients can be negatively impacted when counselors are working from outdated models of grief.

Certainly, findings from this study provide support for a more postmodern understanding of sibling grief with an emphasis on the importance of meaning making after loss, the supportive role of a continuing bond with the deceased siblings, and the

importance of storytelling and re-telling in establishing a new life narrative. Education of counselors must involve training in more recent conceptualizations of grief that includes a “new wave” of postmodern grief theories which are indicative of more dynamic, complex post-loss adjustment patterns that do not fit neatly within stage models (Attig, 1996); incorporate the idea of the importance of continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996); emphasize the importance of complex meaning making processes in understanding loss (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Neimeyer, 1999); increase awareness of the likelihood of identity changes as a result of the loss (Attig, 1999; Neimeyer, 1998); account for the possibility for posttraumatic growth (Folkman, 1997); and emphasize the importance of relationships and “local” understandings of the grieving process by various groups, cultures, and societies (Nadeau, 1997; Neimeyer & Keesee, 1998).

The findings of this study also have important implications for counselors working with grieving siblings (and perhaps other bereaved individuals as their bereavement process relates to meaning making). Findings from this study would support the idea that a search for meaning plays a significant role in the grieving process after a brother or sister dies. Therefore, it is important for counselors to help facilitate this meaning making process. Based on this study, the specific “what” or outcomes of meaning making might not be as important as the processes used during meaning making attempts. Many of the outcomes or meanings made by bereaved siblings fit within the larger context of meaning making literature (though some specific meanings made are unique to sibling loss). Thus, it is important for counselors to understand postmodern conceptualizations of the grieving process and grief theories so that they can adequately work with bereaved siblings. Some important questions counselors can ask about the

outcomes of meaning making might include: Are the meanings constructive? Do they allow the bereaved sibling to integrate some aspect of the loss into their current life story? It is important to remember that counselors do not need to help siblings arrive at a specific outcome, though they might be integral in challenging negative or unhelpful meanings, but rather need to assist in the *process* of meaning making.

Counselors can facilitate a process of therapeutic meaning making with bereaved siblings in several important ways. First, counselors can help make meaning making processes and outcomes explicit to clients. They must work to create an environment in which meanings can be explored, negotiated, constructed, or reconstructed. Meanings made should assist the client in understanding and integrating the loss experience into a new life narrative. Narrative therapy and techniques can be quite useful in working with bereaved siblings. Counselors can help bereaved clients explore important changes to their sense of identity, including how they view themselves, others, or the world differently as a result of the loss. Additionally, counselors can assist bereaved siblings in exploring a new sense of life purpose or what matters now in their life after the loss.

Another major process important in meaning making is negotiating or reconciling between two opposing beliefs or explanations. Often, siblings need space to do this. Bereaved siblings need to be able to present and negotiate inconsistencies, to construct and reconstruct new meanings or understandings of certain aspects of the loss experience, and to negotiate or create new meanings or understandings of the world or of themselves as related to the loss experience. One thing counselors can do to assist in this process is to value the importance of storytelling by providing a safe place for siblings to tell and re-tell their stories of loss. Narrative retelling techniques can be used to promote mastery of

difficult material, provide social validation, and demonstrate empathy (Neimeyer et al., 2010). This gives bereaved siblings a chance to retell difficult parts of their narrative under safe conditions until they can hold images and meanings with less pain or distress.

It is often the case that new meanings are created, constructed, or assembled by bereaved siblings during their grieving process. When clients are attempting (or struggling) to create new meanings, more creative strategies to aid in meaning assembly can be successfully used. Expressive therapy techniques can be used to help clients both construct and integrate meanings made into a new life story or a new identity (Lister et al., 2008; Neimeyer, 2001). Some examples of useful expressive therapy techniques include creative writing such as poetry or songwriting, creation and exploration of grief metaphors, creating memory boxes, or using art or music (such as collages, painting or finding symbolic song lyrics).

It is important for counselors to validate each client's unique experience of loss, with a curiosity and validation that sibling loss creates its own version of unique loss that is often difficult for those who have not experienced it to understand. Sibling loss is a disenfranchised form of grief (Doka, 2002) and siblings often feel as if the intensity of their pain and lasting grief does not get acknowledged by important others in their lives or by society as a whole. Perhaps they will make comparisons of loss to validate their own experiences or will need space to tell stories of the sibling bond to emphasize all that was lost as a result of their brother or sister's death. Additionally, counselors should explore the construct of continuing bonds, and, if appropriate, support ongoing connection to the deceased sibling as healthy and continue to provide space for the client to explore important ways to integrate this new relationship into their current life.

Identifying threatened values and beliefs that may have impacted a sibling's sense of self would be another useful technique that counselors can use to assist in the meaning making process. Bereaved siblings often question who they are now that they have lost a sibling so it would be beneficial to help siblings explore and find ways to affirm their sense of self, and thus affirm their new identity.

Overall, counselors must work to facilitate the meaning making process with bereaved siblings who are struggling to make sense out of the loss. As counselors work with clients, they must remember that meaning making is an ongoing process. For many bereaved siblings, it may continue for the rest of their lives. By helping clients to search for and create meaningful understandings of various aspects of the loss, counselors are helping them alleviate distress and learn positive coping strategies. However, it is important for counselors to remember an important postmodern concept related to grief posits an emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual's grief experience (Nadeau, 1997; Neimeyer & Keesee, 1998). In this study, all seven participants engaged in a search for meaning, but evidence from some other studies (Davis et al., 2000) suggests that a small number of grieving individuals may not engage in a quest for meaning but instead cope in other ways.

Social support and meaningful supportive relationships are very important to bereaved siblings. Counselors should assist bereaved siblings in identifying and exploring important relationships in their life since one important meaning making strategy is to negotiate meanings through relationships. Since social support and a sense of deep connection with others who 'get it' is so important to bereaved siblings, it appears that support groups could be particularly important for siblings (and other disenfranchised

grievors) as these groups can serve as one way to validate the pain and intensity of grief experienced by bereaved siblings. Also, support groups can help instill a sense of hope for bereaved siblings as groups can help participants feel like they are not alone, provide a safe place to share their story of loss, and a place where they can find safety and empathy for their loss as they will be among other bereaved siblings.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study have vast implications for future research on both the important concept of meaning making within the bereavement field and with regard to future research as it pertains to bereaved siblings specifically. First, future studies should continue to make attempts to recruit more people of color from diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as recruit a greater representation of men. Second, research should continue to emphasize the unique grief experiences of bereaved siblings. More research in the area of sibling grief will help make sibling voices heard and sibling experiences visible. Perhaps more research could be done which explores how the pre-loss relationship to the deceased sibling might impact the grief or meaning making experiences of surviving siblings. For example, Anna had a rocky pre-loss relationship with her sister and she was surprised because she felt her grief was still quite intense and impacted her more than she thought it would. Many siblings, particularly those who lose a brother or sister in adolescence, will have pre-loss relationships characterized by various attributes such as sibling rivalry, ambivalence, bickering, fighting, etc.

Future research should focus on more longitudinal studies that can continue to shed light on the unique grieving processes experienced by siblings. It is important for researchers to identify and trace negative and positive meanings made over time and to

look at processes or strategies used to make meaning at various ages or developmental stages. Researchers can compare meanings made, meaning making strategies, and active search for meaning to adaptation to loss or level of bereavement related distress. It can be more difficult to do this retrospectively.

Researchers should carefully consider and pay attention to how meaning making is defined and measured within their study. This is important for consistency across studies and will make it easier to compare results of meaning making studies related to grief and allow researchers to begin to understand more about the relationship between death of loved one and meaning making efforts/outcomes. It is also particularly important in studies with bereaved siblings to be intentional about how we ask siblings about meaning making. Researchers must think about how the way we ask about meaning making can impact the study. For example, when asked directly about meaning making, most bereaved siblings in this study said it was important, but when asked whether they have made sense of the loss, many said no even though it becomes clear through interview all of the ways they have tried to make sense of the loss or continue to try to make sense of the loss. This could be because the question is not clear and individuals can define “making sense” quite differently, as we saw from the siblings in this study. It could also be because meaning making or sense making is more of a process, but the questions we ask bereaved individuals often imply that it is more of an outcome. For example, researchers have commonly asked, “Have you made any sense of the loss?” This can be confusing because there is not often a list of outcomes siblings can list, but instead, they often articulate a complex, ongoing, confusing process. Perhaps a better question would be, is it important to you to continue to think about or integrate your

experience of the loss into your current life? Or, maybe researchers must take care to explain what is meant by meaning making in their particular study, which is difficult since it seems even in the literature there is not consensus.

Future research should emphasize the “how” of meaning making by exploring meaning making processes and strategies. This research can help to further clarify important meaning making processes, and not just outcomes. Additionally, continued studies on meaning making processes or strategies used by bereaved individuals to make meaning after a loss will help counselors be able to better work with bereaved individuals by understanding and assisting in utilizing some of these important meaning making strategies with clients who are struggling to make sense of the loss. The eventual development of an instrument to assess meaning making strategies would be important. Longitudinal studies that can track meaning making strategies over time (instead of just retrospectively) could help us assess what meaning making strategies are used by whom and at what points in time. Measuring meaning making strategies, meanings found, and grief related distress at multiple time points would give us a better understanding of the impact of meaning making strategies both on meanings made and on grief related distress.

The power of narratives was exemplified throughout the sibling stories presented in this study. Perhaps future research could explore interviews as an effective form of meaning making. These future studies could assess whether interviews alone impact meaning making efforts or strategies. Early in the interview process, Samantha reported that meaning making was not something important to her something that she thought she had done. Then, toward the end of the second interview Samantha disclosed that perhaps

everything she had been talking about (throughout both interviews) was really meaning making. Can co-construction of the loss through the interview process be helpful in reframing certain positive understandings as new meanings and then incorporating this into ones new narrative? If so, is there a lasting impact? Do interviews result in new found meaning or understandings of the loss?

Future research could also explore support groups as important forms of meaning making. Sibling grief support groups that specifically address meaning making should be implemented and assessed. These groups could be a good way to further explore storytelling as an important meaning making process. The idea would be that these groups give siblings a chance to tell their stories, which is important, and a more naturalistic context in which to tell their stories so that meanings made can be challenged and negotiated by other bereaved siblings and other stories of sibling loss over a period of time.

Limitations

Although findings from this study offer unique contributions to research and practice in the area of grief and bereavement, there are several limitations that should be addressed. First, a majority of the participants were recruited for this study through various grief support organizations. This means that a majority of the siblings interviewed found out about this research study because they had previously (or were currently) seeking out some type of grief support services, whether that be through an organization or peer support through online groups. I did attempt to control for this potential limitation by placing paper flyers in various locations throughout the Midwest. However, because interview participants were chosen based on specific criteria important

to this study, five of the seven siblings interviewed found out about this study through online solicitations or emails from various grief support organizations. This could mean that the siblings interviewed had a stronger desire to make meaning out of the loss that would not be representative of a group of bereaved siblings who did not seek out any supportive services after the death of their siblings. Second, because this study relied on self report from bereaved siblings, the results were limited by what participants could articulate to me over the course of two interviews.

Additionally, although I attempted to achieve much variation in participant selection (see Table 1 in Chapter 3), this was not always possible for various reasons (unreturned emails, participants not meeting other required criteria for the study). I was unable to obtain the variation I was hoping for with regard to interviewing participants who were representative of various sexes and races. The majority of participants identified as female (6) and Caucasian (5). Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon trend within grief and bereavement literature to have an overrepresentation of white women in the sample (Report on Bereavement and Grief Research, 2004). Of the fifteen potential interview participants contacted to participate in this study, only one was male.

Additionally, there was a much lower survey response rate from African American participants, which resulted in no potential African American interview participants who met the age requirements for this study (lost a sibling between the ages of 11-22 and currently between the ages of 18-39). One potential reason for this could be related to the recruitment method. Recruitment methods focused on grief support organizations and groups and the African American population is less likely to seek out mental health services in general and specifically after the death of a loved one (Laurie & Neimeyer,

2008; Whaley, 2001).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the phenomenon of sibling loss in adolescence through personal narratives. This is important because siblings are often referred to as forgotten mourners in literature related to grief and loss. Therefore, it was my intention to give voice to the powerful and important voices of bereaved siblings. I also explored the concept of meaning making with regard to sibling loss, including both meanings made and meaning making processes. Postmodern conceptualizations of grieving processes, such as an emphasis on the importance of meaning making and continuing bonds, are important themes that were pronounced throughout sibling grief narratives in this study. This study lends support to meaning making theories of grief and loss while also adding unique components specific to sibling grief. The findings of this study call for continued research in the important area of meaning making as it relates to grief in addition to a continued research focus on the important grief experiences of bereaved siblings. As Bella stated, "Sibling stories need to be heard."

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APPENDIX A: My Story

I feel a pain that no one else can know.
 Sometimes I don't know if I should let my feelings show.
 All I really want to do is scream and cry,
 But sometimes it is easier just to keep it all inside.
 My heart aches without you in my life.
 It is a deep, shooting pain that feels just like a knife.
 Some days are good, but many are bad.
 I don't know what to do when I feel this sad.
 I always think of you and the times we used to have.
 Then I remember that you're gone and I get very mad.
 I need your help. I really do. I have so many problems to mend.
 You were and always will be my very best friend.
 I will never forget your loving, gentle face.
 My memories of you will live on forever in a very special place.

As I began my dissertation journey, I realized how important it was for me to locate myself, as a researcher, counselor, and bereaved sibling. The poem above was taken from my journal. It was written by me three years after my older sister Tracey died. The day my sister died is and forever will be etched in my mind. July 17, 1996 was a hot summer day. I was a joyous, carefree thirteen year-old and I decided to spend this day like many other days that summer. I went on a long bike ride with my sister Jesse, who was fourteen at the time and my friend Mary, who was thirteen at the time. After riding our bikes to the park and then back to my family home, we decided to go swimming in our backyard pool in order to cool off. A couple of hours later, my mom informed us that it was time to take Mary home for the evening. As we were preparing to leave, my older sister Tracey, who was 24 at the time, was studying in the office inside our home. She had been working tirelessly the entire day as she was finishing her last trimester of classes at Logan College of Chiropractic. Tracey needed a break from her studies and offered to take us all to get snow cones and then drop Mary off at her house. We all eagerly agreed.

After arriving at the snow cone shack and placing our orders, we each climbed back into my parents' minivan to take Mary home for the evening. The next thing I knew, I was lying outside. I could feel the imprint of the wet grass on my face. I tried to sit up, but the shooting pain in my stomach and back prevented me from doing so. I screamed out in pain and was met by the comfort of strangers who had witnessed the terrible car crash. We had been hit head on by a drunk driver who crossed over the center line. I remember my parents showing up as I was being loaded into an ambulance. They tried to comfort me, but the fear on their faces was evident and I was scared. I woke up in a hospital bed feeling cold. I remember lying there shivering and feeling intense pain in my stomach and back. I looked around the room and I suddenly felt very lonely. I was scared, hurt, and confused because I did not know where my parents were or how my sisters and friend were doing. There was no one there; no one to answer my questions. When my dad came into my room, the first thing that I asked was, "How is everyone? Are they all alright?" My dad told me that Tracey was hurt pretty bad, but they were doing everything they could for her. I am not sure why, but the thought that she might die never crossed my mind. Perhaps it was my sense of invincibility as a teenager or maybe it was because I had not experienced any significant deaths of family members or loved ones since I was six years old.

That night, I had emergency intestinal surgery to repair internal damage done in the crash. The doctors also discovered that I had fractured my back. I spent some time recovering in the intensive care unit and my memories surrounding those few months I spent in the hospital are a blur. I remember the morphine drip that I had where I could push a button to receive pain medication every ten minutes. My family and I joked for

months afterward that I would be so out of it, but I sure knew when those ten minutes were up because they would see my thumb press the button even when they thought I was sound asleep. I just remember bits and pieces of my time there: a sweet nurse who always checked in on me and called me chickadee, a fun physical therapist who would run down the halls pushing me in my bed, family and friends by my side, holding my hand, often crying or looking sad, and me trying to make them laugh. I remember loved ones bringing stuffed animals and balloons. I remember feeling scared and sad, but thinking that I needed to be strong for everyone else. I wanted them to believe that I would get better and be alright. I wanted to believe I would be alright. It still upsets me that I cannot remember when or how I was told about my sister's death. It must have been early on after my first surgery because I know I was still in the hospital, but I cannot remember the moment. What I do remember feeling after my parents told me that my sister Tracey had been killed in the crash, is a sense of disbelief. It could not be true. My physical pain was nothing compared to the hurt that I felt deep in my heart after hearing of my sister's death. It felt as if a piece of me had died right along with her. I remember thinking that I would never be the same, my parents would never be the same, my family would never be the same, and my life would never be the same.

As a teenager, I struggled to make sense out of the death of my sister. I felt a deep sense of loneliness and isolation in my grief. Even though it seemed to me like my parents were trying to hide it, I saw how sad they felt. I think they tried to hide some of their strong feelings from me because they wanted to protect me. They wanted me to believe and feel like everything was going to be ok, even if they were not sure it was. I remember hearing my mom cry from another room and feeling helpless because there

was nothing I could do to ease her pain. I often kept my feelings to myself because I too wanted to protect my family. If they were having a good day, then I did not want to bring up Tracey or the crash and upset them. I, like many bereaved siblings, suffered alone in extreme emotional pain. Even at school or around extended family members, I would have people ask me how my parents were doing. This increased my sense of loneliness as I felt as if my loss did not even matter. Losing my sister was, by far, the worst and most difficult thing I had ever experienced. I had overwhelming feelings of anger, sadness, anxiety, guilt, and loneliness. Often times, I felt like I was going crazy. I truly felt as if no one could understand what I was going through. I often kept my feelings to myself and it seemed as if I was just going through the motions of life. My journal writings during this time reflect my intense sense of loneliness and difficulty discussing my grief. I felt a strong desire to stay connected with Tracey. I wrote letters to her and often spoke to her as if she was sitting right next to me. I contemplated suicide as an escape from my pain and as a way to reunite with my sister. At that time, I wrote, "I miss you so much. I really wish that you were here. Sometimes I get so sad that I wish my life would end so that I could come to heaven and be with you again." Thankfully, the support and love of family and friends prevented me from converting these thoughts into action.

As I got older, I felt as if I continued to grieve the loss of my sister alone. I saw how my mom tried to protect me by shielding me from her intense grief and sadness and I felt like I had to do the same. I had to protect her and the rest of my family by not showing how sad and devastated I was. I had to be strong. I could not be one more thing that my parents had to worry about because they were already going through so much. One of the ways I sought out meaning at this time was by trying to find some sense of

purpose in her death. I turned to religion and spirituality. I thought maybe god took her up to heaven because he needed her there for some reason. I felt as if there must be some higher power who has some sort of plan and that is why she died. This had to be the case; otherwise, her death had no meaning. It simply did not make sense. At the age of 18, I wrote, "The day you left this earth, my heart leapt out of my chest. I now know that god only wanted the best. He knew of your knowledge, your thoughtfulness, your helpfulness, and your special ability to put all others above yourself. When he saw all of your actions and kind behaviors towards other, he knew he had to have you up in heaven where all angels like yourself belong."

As I entered into college, I remember thinking that I did not want to forget about my sister. I was worried that I would not be able to remember all of our fun times together and the wonderful person that she was. I had a strong desire to keep her memory alive. One way I made meaning at this time was by trying to remember the type of person my sister was and the memories that we had together. At age 20, I wrote, "Please don't let me forget you! I am so, so scared that soon you will be gone, but it is still so hard for me to talk about you because when I say your name I remember that you are gone and it breaks my heart all over again. I cry until I don't have any more tears left to shed. I don't want your memory to fade, but it hurts so much. The pain in my heart never seems to go away." A few years later, I decided that I wanted to become a counselor so that I could help other people who have suffered from terrible tragedy. This would be something that I could do in order to honor my sister's memory. I made meaning out of her death by doing things in my life that would exemplify what she represented. I lived for my sister. I wanted to do good things and be a better person so that something positive could spring

from her death.

These are a few examples of the various ways that I have attempted to make meaning out of the death of my sister. I want to remember her, to honor her, and to help other people who are experiencing pain. In many ways, I feel as if I view the world differently after my sister's death. The small things in life do not seem as important as they used to and the relationships that I have can never be taken for granted because you never know what can happen. The world is unsure and unpredictable, so I must try to live more fully in the present moment and enjoy the time that I have. I strive to be a better person and to do good because that is how Tracey would have lived.

I believe that making meaning, or trying to make some sense out of the death of my sister, was something that was and continues to be extremely important to me. Perhaps I did not know it at the time, or could not label it as such when I was younger, but looking back now I can begin to see how my search for meaning is a process. It is difficult to describe this meaning making process, or exactly how or why the meanings that I make change over time. It seems with each new transition, holiday, or major life change, I begin to think about my sister and what her death means at that point in my life. In many ways, this dissertation is another step in my grief journey that will allow me to make meaning out of Tracey's death in a new way.

To me, grieving is a lifelong process. I still think of my sister every day, but now I remember her mostly with a smile. I believe I am able to do this because I allowed myself to feel intense grief and I continue to process and make meaning out of the loss. Losing my sister is the greatest tragedy I have experienced and I believe that this loss gave me a new outlook on life. I began to realize the importance of family and other important

people in my life because I had seen firsthand just how precarious life can be. Life is unpredictable at times, but it is also precious and must be cherished. I realized that I needed to devote my life to doing something that could help other people who have experienced great loss in their lives. I wanted to help the hopeless find hope again, and so I chose to become a counselor. Now, as a counselor and researcher, I can begin to explore the impact of sibling loss on other surviving siblings. I tell my story here to offer one individual's experience of loss. I understand and appreciate that the grieving process is very individual and unique to each person and I in no way am asserting that I know what other bereaved individuals are going through. I tell my story here because of all the times I was unable to tell my story and, through my research, I hope to give voice to other bereaved siblings who have too often suffered in silence.

APPENDIX B: Sibling Grief Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research on sibling grief. Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions. Upon completion of the survey, you have the chance to be entered in a raffle to receive one of ten \$10 gift cards to a major retailer.

1. Gender

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Transgendered
- ☐ Other Please describe _____

2. Race/Ethnicity (You may check multiple boxes.)

- ☐ African American/Black
- ☐ Hispanic-American/Latino/Chicano
- ☐ Native-American/American Indian
- ☐ Asian/Asian-American
- ☐ Caucasian/European-American/White
- ☐ Multiracial
- ☐ Other Please describe _____

3. What do you consider your socioeconomic status to be?

- ☐ Very low income/poverty level
- ☐ Working class
- ☐ Middle class
- ☐ Upper middle class
- ☐ Upper class
- ☐ Other Please specify _____

4. Please choose which best describes your level of education.

- ☐ Currently in high school or working toward GED.
- ☐ Completed high school/GED
- ☐ Currently in college working toward 2 or 4 year college degree.
- ☐ Completed a 2 or 4 year college degree.
- ☐ Currently in school working toward advanced college degree such as a master's or doctorate.
- ☐ Completed an advanced college degree such as a master's or doctorate.

5. Age

6. Age at time of sibling death

7. Please indicate the total number of siblings you have, including your deceased sister or brother.

- ☐ 1 sibling
- ☐ 2-3 siblings
- ☐ 3 or more siblings

8. How old were you at the time of your sibling's death?

9. How old was your sibling when he or she died?

10. Please indicate the sex of your deceased sibling.

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

11. How long has it been since the death of your sibling?

_____ years _____ months

12. Did you have prior knowledge that your sibling was expected to die or was the cause of the death sudden and unexpected?

- ☐ I had prior knowledge that my sibling was expected to die.
- ☐ The cause of death of my sibling was sudden and unexpected.

13. How did your brother or sister die?

- ☐ Accident
- ☐ Homicide
- ☐ Suicide
- ☐ Sudden, unexpected medical reasons
- ☐ Cancer
- ☐ Long-term illness or medical condition
- ☐ Other Please specify _____

14. Prior to your sibling's death, had you experienced the death of any other significant persons in your life?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

15. Do you consider yourself spiritual or religious?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes Please describe _____

16. Do you view religion or spirituality as important for you in coping with the death of your sibling?

- ☐ No

☐ Yes

17. Have you ever been to counseling or therapy related to the death of your sibling?

☐ No

☐ Yes If yes, please indicate approximate dates _____

18. Have you attended any grief support groups?

☐ No

☐ Yes If yes, please indicate approximate dates _____

19. How close to your deceased sibling would you say you were?

Not at all close

Somewhat close

Very close

1

2

3

4

5

20. While your sibling was alive, what was the impact of their life on yours?

Not at all significant

Somewhat significant

Very significant

1

2

3

4

5

21. Is it important to you to make any meaning or sense out of the loss of your sibling?

☐ No

☐ Yes

22. Do you feel you have attempted to make any meaning or sense out of the loss of your sibling?

☐ No

☐ Yes

23. Have you found anything you might describe as positive to come as a result of the death of your sibling? Please explain.

24. Please respond in writing to the following: Please explain how you have attempted to make sense out of this experience of loss in your life.

Thank you so much for taking the time to fill out this survey related to sibling grief and loss.

Would it be ok to contact you for future research related to sibling grief?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If Yes, please provide the following information:

Name:

Date of Birth:

E-mail address:

Telephone number:

Mailing address:

Would you be willing to complete individual interviews revolving around your experience of sibling loss?

If you would like to be entered into the raffle for a chance to win a \$10 gift card, please click on the following link and provide the requested information. Thank you!

APPENDIX C: Informed Consent

**Division of Counseling and Family Therapy**

One University Blvd.
 St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499
 Telephone: 314-516-5782
 E-mail: jmr4fd@umsl.edu

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities
Making Meaning after Sibling Loss

Participant _____ HSC Approval Number _____

Principal Investigator _____ PI's Phone Number _____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jodi Flesner, under the guidance of Susan Kashubeck-West, Ph.D., full professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The purpose of this research is to understand how bereaved siblings make meaning out of their sibling's death so that counselors may be able to more effectively work with bereaved families.
2. a) Your participation will involve completing two or more interviews with the researcher listed above, at a location of your choice. About twenty people, each interviewed individually, may be involved in this part of the research project.
 b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be anywhere between 60 minutes and 120 minutes for each interview, depending on how much information you desire to share. The interviews will be audio-recorded.
3. There may be certain discomforts associated with this research. You may feel uncomfortable while discussing the death of your sibling or answering questions about the grieving process. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and you will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.
4. Your participation may contribute to the knowledge about sibling grief/loss and may help counselors better serve bereaved families. Additionally, discussing the loss of your sibling may lead to increased feelings of self-awareness and understanding.
5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time.

6. By agreeing to participate, you understand and agree that your data may be shared with other researchers and educators in the form of presentations and/or publications. In all cases, your identity will not be revealed. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data. In addition, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked office.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Jodi Flesner at 314-401-2778 or the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Susan Kashubeck-West, at 314-516-6091. Jodi Flesner may also be reached through e-mail at jmr4fd@umsl.edu and Dr. Susan Kashubeck-West may be reached through e-mail at susankw@umsl.edu. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research Administration, at 314-516-5897.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

Participant's Signature

Date

Participant's Printed Name

Signature of Investigator

Date

Investigator/Designee Printed Name

APPENDIX D: Bereavement Resources

National Bereavement Resources for Siblings

Links to important resources

Website	Information
www.moyerfoundation.org/nbrg/	National bereavement resources guide that process a list of state and local bereavement resources
myadultsiblinggrief.com/resources	Resources for adults who have lost a sibling
www.compassionatefriends.org/home.aspx	National bereavement support organization that often has local chapters with sibling groups
www.healingheart.net/siblings.html	Information and resources for bereaved siblings
siblingsurvivors.com/sibling-grief/	Information and resources for sibling survivors of suicide
www.pomc.com/sibling.html	Sibling support for sibling survivors of homicide
www.counselingstlouis.net	The Sibling Connection website provides various resources for bereaved siblings

Important Toll-Free Phone Numbers

National Phone Numbers	Information
1-877-969-0010	Compassionate Friends bereavement support and information about local chapters
1-800-273-8255 (1-800-273-TALK)	Crisis/Emergency Help Line
1-800-784-2433 (1-800-SUICIDE)	Suicide Prevention Hotline

APPENDIX E: First Interview Guide

1. Please tell me your story of loss regarding your brother/sister.
2. Please tell me about your relationship with your brother or sister (before and after death).
3. Please tell me about your grieving process after your brother/sister died. What things/people played a role in your grieving process?
4. How does your grief look different over time? Who/what helped? Who/what hurt?
5. What does it mean to you to be a bereaved sibling?
6. How do you try and make sense out of the loss of your brother/sister? Does that sense making look different at different ages/stages in life?
7. How do you see losing a sibling as unique or different from other types of loss? How is it the same or similar?
8. What do you wish people knew about bereaved siblings?
9. What does it mean to you to lose a brother or sister in adolescence?

APPENDIX F: Second Interview Guide

What was it like to tell your story during the first interview?

Questions about sense making:

1. How did you initially make sense out of the death?
2. Did you continue to try and make sense out of the death at different times in your life? Please describe.
3. Do you feel like the meaning/sense you have made changes over time? How?
4. Were there events, people, things that affected how you attempted to make sense out of the loss? (i.e. race/ethnicity/culture, religion/spirituality, family/friend relationships, peer relationships, significant life events, significant memories)
5. How did this loss affect your goals and hopes for the future when it first happened? What about at later times? What about now?
6. Do you feel it is important to make sense out of the death? Do you feel that making sense out of the loss is related to how you have coped with the loss?

Questions about benefit finding:

1. Did you find anything positive that came out of the loss of your brother or sister?
2. When did you notice these positive things?
3. Do the positives you have found change over time? How?
4. Do you think that your ability to find some positive things to come out of the death has helped you to better cope with the loss?

Questions about identity change:

1. How would you describe your understanding of yourself before the death versus after the death?

2. In what ways have you changed since your sibling's death? How do you understand these changes as related to your sibling's death?
3. How would you describe your view or understanding of the world before your sibling's death versus after your sibling's death?
4. Do you feel that some of your beliefs and values have been questioned or changed as a result of your loss? Please explain.
5. Has the death of your brother or sister affected your sense of purpose in the world? How?
6. How would you describe your view on important relationships in your life before your sibling's death versus after your sibling's death?
7. Did the death of your brother or sister affect choices you have made or goals you are pursuing in your life? Does it still affect choices you make or goals you pursue? Please explain.

Questions regarding a developmental view of loss:

1. Do you think there is anything important regarding the age you were when your brother or sister died? Tell me more about that.
2. What (if any) would you describe as some of the lasting or long term effects of losing a brother or sister during adolescence?
3. Do you think that how your sibling died affected your reactions to the death? Please explain.

Questions rooted in previous research on sibling loss and meaning making:

1. How would you describe your views on religion or spirituality before your sibling's death versus after your sibling's death?

2. Do you feel you still have a relationship with your brother or sister now? What does that look like?
3. Do you do things now to remember or honor your brother or sister? What types of things? How are they significant?
4. Do you remember any point in time after the death where you had a sense that things might be getting better; that you would be able to handle the grief of losing your sibling? After that point in time, what was different about you? How did you change?
5. Overall, how do you feel like your understanding or reactions to the death have changed over time?

General follow up questions:

1. Is there anything I missed that you would like to talk about?
2. How was it for you to complete this interview with me today?
3. Would it be o.k. if I followed up with you if I have any more questions or to check in with you about some of the results that I find as I continue to interview people?

APPENDIX G: Transcription Rules

Transcriptions should include the following information:

Interview Date:

Interview Location:

Interview Time:

Length of Interview:

Transcriber:

Interviewer:

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Symbols to be used in transcriptions

? indicates a question

! indicates an exclamation

??? indicates ambiguity or a phrase that was not intelligible

... indicates a pause or silence of less than 30 seconds

(pause) indicates a pause of longer than 30 seconds

italics indicate words that were emphasized by the speaker

- indicates a change in the flow of the word or sentence by the speaker

(()) indicates the other person speaking briefly

() indicates transcriber's observations/analysis, such as emotions expressed by interviewee