



Honors Program

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Mementos and Memoirs

Associated with Grieving in College Students

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Mementos and Memoirs Associated with Grieving in College Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to understand how memoirs and mementos can help a person through the grieving process after the loss of someone. The study focused on college students (ages 18 to 24) who have lost someone in the past five years. A survey was conducted, which asked questions about the deceased, visuals that were used during the grieving process, personal items that belonged to the deceased, and memoirs. The questions asked for the use of the items along with the participant's opinion on how the items helped them to grieve the loss. It was hypothesized that the use of these items would affect how well a person is able to cope with the loss. Results show that all people used stories and memories of the deceased in the grieving process, but the helpfulness of doing so depended on several factors. In addition, the helpfulness of keeping mementos was significantly higher than not keeping such items.

Introduction

Although it is not often recognized, many students experience the loss of a loved one during their college years. How students are affected by this grief and bereavement can provide important insights into effective methods for helping students cope with these situations. It is hoped that research on this topic will help create improved ways for college students to deal with grief.

This is not only an issue of emotional well being, but one of academic performance. Based on studies performed by other universities “22–30% of college undergraduates are in the first 12 months of grieving the death of a family member or of a friend, and 35–48% are in the first 24 months” (Balk 2001, p. 69). Because of this reason it was important for more research to be done on things that would benefit a student while going through the grieving process.

This project aimed to understand how memoirs and mementos could help a person through the grieving process after losing someone. For the purpose of this study, memoirs were defined as stories the deceased had written down and/or told the grieving person, or memories the grieving person had of the deceased. Mementos were defined as things that the deceased owned, such as clothing and jewelry, and visuals of the deceased, such as photographs and videos. Helpfulness was defined as how much a particular item helped the participant go through the grieving process. It was expected that results would show that the use of mementos and memoirs during the grieving process would be influential on how well a person is able to cope with the loss. The question that was hoped be answered by this study is would the use of mementos and memoirs be helpful to the process of grieving? To these ends, I conducted a survey with students at Bemidji State University that asked questions about someone they had lost, visuals and memories they used while grieving, and items that they kept and got rid of

during the grieving process. I also asked how well the items used benefited them through the process of grieving.

Literature Review

A study conducted in 1991 by O'Brien and Goodenow explained adolescent's reactions to the death of a peer. This study was performed to see how the mourning process is different based on each individual's experiences and reactions to the death. The researchers interviewed ten undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 21 years old who had lost a friend in high school. From the study they were able to find several themes:

1. The participant's relationship to the deceased ranged from a very close friend to a friend that they were not close to at all.
2. The amount of time they spent thinking about the person ranged from everyday to only when they were in a similar background, such as home or school.
3. There was also a variety of ways that they heard of the death, ranging from an impersonal way (reading it in the newspaper) to an empathetic and supportive way (hearing it from friends or family).

They also found that even though the participants had experienced another death throughout their lives, it was harder to experience the loss of their friend because the other losses in their lives were of older people.

Another study performed in 2009 by Williams and Merten indicated the effect of online social networking on a grieving adolescent. The study looked at 20 online profiles of adolescents who had died suddenly between 2005 and 2007, focusing on the online responses of surviving adolescents. They found that the friends and acquaintances of the deceased "posted a variety of content related to their relationship with the deceased as well as their bereavement

experiences” (Williams & Merten, 2009, p. 76). They also found that as time went on over the course of one year, the amount of postings decreased, there were more days between postings, and the postings were not as emotional as they were initially. It was also found that “many images, poems, and song lyrics were posted signifying emotional turmoil, coping, humor, and optimism” (Williams & Merten, 2009, p.77).

Further studies have advanced the work of Williams and Merten in the context and usage of online social networking by a grieving person. Carroll and Landry (2010) conducted a study to show ways young internet users connect with lost friends and family by using MySpace and Facebook. The study took an online survey of 100 undergraduates who were self selected. All were Facebook users who averaged 21 years of age and more than three-fourths of the respondents were female. The study found that “nearly 60% reported visiting the page of someone who had died or who had been killed, though less than 10% had ever posted to a memorial page themselves” (Carroll & Landry, 2010, p.347). It also found that 45% of the respondents visited the deceased’s page just after learning of the death. They were surprised to find that visitation of the deceased’s page often continues for a long time after the person’s death, although the visitation was at a lower frequency. It was also found that:

Though most Facebook users merely view memorial group pages and read the pages included in these memorials, importantly 38% reported joining such groups formed around the dead and 14% changed their own profile photos to either that of an image of a deceased person, a ribbon honoring a deceased person, or to some other memorial image. (Carroll & Landry, 2010, p.347)

These studies are important to this study because they were a great influence on the making of the survey that was given to the participants. They show how important the relationship to the deceased is, how people use images and memories of the deceased to

remember them and deal with grief, and how important viewing photos and information for the deceased helps a person grieve.

It was also important to this study to recognize the grieving models that have been identified. The three main grieving models are Horowitz's "stages of loss", Rando's six R's, and Kubler-Ross's stages. The grieving process that was particular to this study is the Kubler-Ross model, which includes the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although, "not everyone will experience all of these stages, or, if all are experienced, they won't necessarily occur in this particular order" (Dombeck 2006). By knowing these stages it benefited the outcome of the study.

Methods

Participants completed a survey asking questions that included several things pertaining to certain mementos and memoirs. The questions included the following categories: the deceased (how the lost person died, how they learned of the loss, and how close they were to the person), visuals (what types of things that they looked at/watched such as pictures and videos), personal items (what types of things they held onto and what types of things they got rid of), and memoirs (memories and written stories from the deceased). The questions asked were also assessed on a Likert scale on how well each thing helped with the grieving process. Doughty (2009) also used survey methods to examine grieving processes. This shows that past research on the grieving process has been done through surveys and it has been successful, giving further verification that the use of a survey method in this study is acceptable.

A data analysis was conducted in hopes of identifying different variables which were compared to the participant's opinions to see if certain mementos/memoirs are beneficial to the

grieving process. Some variables that were considered for this study were closeness to the deceased, the amount of time since the death, the type of items being used, the amount of use for the item, and the sex of the participant. Previous research on grieving found:

Additional variables that demonstrated significant associations with the grief dimensions were (a) closeness of the relationship, (b) the "impactfulness" of the loss, (c) sex of respondent, (d) respondent obtaining professional help after the death, and (e) respondent belief that they could have prevented the death. (Bailey 2001, p. 5040)

I considered these variables when looking over the data to see if they were also true for this study. I used the PASW software program to examine the relationship between the variables. This process was how I determined there was in fact a correlation between the grieving process and mementos/memoirs.

Participants

Seventy participants took the survey, however there were concerns with four surveys resulting in them being excluded from the data input. These four surveys were removed due to the participant not being within the age range that was required or a concern that they were not truthful on the survey because of the way the questions were answered (ex. circling the same answer all the way down). Therefore, the study consisted of 66 participants (15 males, 50 females, and one participant who did not specify their sex). Participants were students from each of the psychology level courses (1000, 2000, 3000, and 4000) in order to have a variety in age of participants. Both male and female students over the age of 18 were eligible to participate in this study. The average age of participants was 19 years. In order to recruit participants, psychology professors were asked to make announcements in their classes along with having a sign-up sheet with the dates and times the survey was given. Participation was completely voluntary, although some students were able to receive extra credit depending on their professor(s). Participants

were required to have lost someone they knew, whether it be an acquaintance, friend, or family member, within the last five years. This was so the memory of the participant's feelings of the loss was still available for evaluation. Participants were not required to provide any personal information, such as their name or an ID number, except for their sex and age in order to remain confidential. Once all the data had been collected participants were debriefed via email.

Results

Pearson product moment correlation analyses were conducted on the variables under the deceased category (cause of death, closeness, relationship, age of deceased, and learned of the loss), the personal items category (clothing, jewelry, significant items to the deceased, and significant items to the participant), and the memoirs category (memories, stories, and written stories) (see survey in Appendix A for questions asked on these variables). The results are shown in Table 1 in Appendix B. There were significant relationships between the items on the survey and the use of stories during the grieving process. There are also some significant relationships between items on the survey and significant items to both the participant and the deceased and the thought of memories during the grieving process.

Several independent sample t-tests were conducted to determine if the use of mementos (clothing, jewelry, etc.) were more helpful in the grieving process compared to not using mementos. First, the amount of help that keeping the clothing had ($M=3.43$) was significantly different than the amount of help not keeping the clothing had ($M=2.70$), $t(64) = 2.345$, $p < .05$. Thus there is evidence that keeping the deceased's clothing is more helpful during the grieving process than not keeping the clothing. The amount of help that keeping the jewelry had ($M=4.15$) was significantly different than the amount of help that not keeping the jewelry had

($M=2.51$), $t(64) = 4.149$, $p < .05$. Thus there is evidence that keeping the deceased's jewelry is more helpful during the grieving process than not keeping the jewelry. The amount of help that keeping items significant to the deceased had ($M=4.04$) was significantly different to the amount of help that not keeping the significant items had ($M=2.60$), $t(64) = 4.800$, $p < .05$. Thus there is evidence that keeping items that were significant to the deceased were more helpful during the grieving process than not keeping the significant items. The amount of help that keeping personal items to the participant had ($M=3.66$) was significantly different than the amount of help that not keeping personal items to the participant had ($M=2.71$), $t(64) = 2.967$, $p < .05$. Thus there is evidence that keeping items of the deceased that are significant to the participant is more helpful than not keeping items significant to the participant.

One-way between subjects analysis of variance tests were conducted to determine if the cause of death, closeness to the deceased, relationship with deceased, age of deceased, and how they learned of the loss, was related to how helpful the use of stories and mementos would be in the grieving process.

There was a significant effect of the amount of closeness on the helpfulness of the thought of memories, $F(2, 63) = 5.765$, $p < .05$. LSD post tests showed that the helpfulness of memories for people not very close to the deceased ($M=3.11$) was significantly less than the helpfulness of memories for people close to the deceased ($M=4.18$) and very close to the deceased ($M=4.21$), $p < .05$. The helpfulness of memories for people that were very close to the deceased was not significantly greater than the helpfulness of memories for people that were close to the deceased, $p > .05$. There was a significant effect of the amount of help memories had on the participant's relationship to the deceased, $F(2, 63) = 9.956$, $p < .05$. LSD post tests showed that the helpfulness of memories for an acquaintance ($M=2.25$) was significantly less

than the helpfulness of memories for a friend ($M=4.05$) or family member ($M=4.22$), $p < .05$.

The helpfulness of memories for a friend was not significantly different from the helpfulness of memories for a family member, $p > .05$. There was a significant effect of helpfulness of keeping the deceased's significant items and items significant to the participant to the age of the deceased, $F(4, 60) = 2.568$, $p < .05$. LSD post tests showed that the helpfulness of keeping significant items to the deceased and the participant if the deceased's age was 20 or under ($M=2.23$) were significantly less than the helpfulness of keeping significant items to the deceased and the participant if the deceased's age was 21 to 40 ($M=3.80$), 61 to 80 ($M=3.28$), or 80 and older ($M=3.55$), $p < .05$. The helpfulness of keeping the significant items to the deceased and the participant when the deceased's age was 20 and under was not significantly different than the helpfulness of keeping significant items to the deceased and the participant when the deceased's age was 41 to 60 ($M=3.00$), $p > .05$. The helpfulness of keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the deceased's age was 21 to 40 was not significantly different than the helpfulness of keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the deceased's age was 41 to 60, 61 to 80, or 80 and older, $p > .05$. The helpfulness of keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the deceased's age was 41 to 60 was not significantly different than the helpfulness of keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the deceased's age was 61 to 80 or 80 and older, $p > .05$. The helpfulness of keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the deceased's age was 61 to 80 was not significantly different than keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the deceased's age was 80 and older, $p > .05$. There was a significant effect of helpfulness of keeping items significant to both the deceased and the participant and how they learned of the loss, $F(2, 62) = 3.752$, $p < .05$. LSD post tests showed that the

helpfulness of keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the participant learned of the loss from a friend ($M=2.53$) was significantly less than the helpfulness of keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the participant learned from a family member ($M=3.30$) or from another source ($M=4.00$), $p < .05$. The helpfulness of keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the participant learned of the loss from a family member was not significantly different than the helpfulness of keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant when the participant learned of the loss from another source, $p > .05$. The rest of the one-way analysis of variance tests that were given resulted in not being significant.

Thus there is evidence that the closer the participants were to the deceased, the more helpful memories were to the grieving process but there was not much of a difference in the help of memories for being close and very close to the deceased. There was also evidence that the thought of memories is more helpful for a friend or family member than for an acquaintance, but there is not much difference in helpfulness of memories for a friend or family member. It also shows that keeping items that were significant to the deceased and the participant was more helpful when the deceased was of an age of 21 and older. However there is no evidence that there is a difference in helpfulness between the deceased being 20 and under and 41 to 60. Along with this evidence, it was found that keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant is more helpful to the participant when they learn of the loss through a family member or other source than from learning of the loss through a friend.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine what types of items people use during the grieving process and how helpful these items are to people. It was found that all of the items listed in this study were used by people during the grieving process. The type of items used varied by person, but every item seemed to be helpful on some level to every person that used them.

The tests found an association between the variables of how the participant learned of the loss and the use or nonuse of both items significant to the deceased and items significant to the participant. It was also found that there was an association between how the participant learned of the loss and the use and helpfulness of stories. This shows that how the person learned of the loss is related to what is helpful for people to use during the grieving process. An association was also found between stories and how close the participant was to the deceased, the participant's relationship to the deceased, and the cause of the death. These findings show that the use and helpfulness of stories is related to the circumstances between the participant and the deceased. This supports the findings of Carroll and Landry's (2010) study because they found that people read the pages of the deceased shortly after learning of the death. It was also found that there was an association between memories and how close the participant was to the deceased and the participant's relationship to the deceased. This finding can also be related to the finding of Bailey (2001) since the associations found were between grief dimensions and closeness of the relationship.

This study also found that the people who kept items found those to be more helpful than those who did not. The variables of memories, pictures, videos, stories, written stories, and the keeping of clothing, jewelry, items significant to the deceased, and items significant to the

participant were all found to have a higher rating of helpfulness. This relates to the findings of Williams and Merten (2009) and Carroll and Landry (2010) because both studies found that people used images and other things representing the deceased while grieving.

It was also found that if the participant is close or very close to the deceased the use of memories is more helpful during the grieving process. Memories are also more helpful to grieving for a friend or family member than an acquaintance. The results also showed that keeping items that were significant to both the deceased and the participant were more helpful when the participant was 21 and older in most cases. It was also shown that keeping items significant to both the deceased and the participant were more helpful when the participant learned of the loss through a family member or another source than a friend. The results of this study relate to the results of the O'Brien and Goodenow (1991) study that was previously discussed because both studies show a range in closeness to the deceased and a variety of ways they learned of the loss. A finding of that study was that it is harder to lose a friend than older people in life. This finding relates to this study because the results showed that the keeping of personal items significant to both the participants and the deceased was more helpful when the deceased was 21 or older. Since the difficulty of the loss was not measured in this study, the results are not completely comparable; however, the finding of significant items being more helpful if the deceased was older than 21 could be assumed to be similar to the finding that it is harder to lose a friend because keeping these items were not as helpful to the participants when the deceased was 20 or under, making it possibly harder to go through the grieving process.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study was limited to only look at the results of college students rather than people of different age groups. There was also no research conducted on the use of internet sources for grieving, such as Facebook and MySpace. Also there were no other electronic forms of grieving tested other than the use of video.

If this study were to be researched further there are many variables that could be added. The difficulty of the loss could be added to see if it had any effect on how the participant answered the questions. Other variables that could be added are the religious and cultural views of the participant. This could have an effect of how they grieved. Further research could also be done on different age groups to see if the age of the participant makes a difference in the helpfulness of the items during the grieving process. Another variable that should be further looked into is how long it has been since the death of the deceased because this could have affected how far the participant is in the grieving process.

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APPENDIX A: Survey

Mementos and Memoirs Survey

Please answer the following questions by circling your answer. All questions involve the deceased and the grieving processes used during the time of the loss and shortly after the loss. For the questions asking how much the item helped, the scale of 1-5 refers to 1 being no help, 3 being some help, and 5 being a lot of help. Please answer questions as honestly as you can.

Participant's Age: _____

Participant's Sex: M F

The Deceased					
How did the person you lost die?	Terminal Illness	Natural Causes	Accident	Other	
How close were you to the deceased?	Not Very Close	Close	Very Close		
What is your relationship to the deceased?	Acquaintance	Friend	Family Member		
What is the age of the deceased?	20 and under	21 to 40	41 to 60	61 to 80	80 and older
How did you learn of the loss?	Friend told you	Family member told you	Newspaper	News (TV)	Other

Visuals					
Did you look at pictures of the deceased while grieving?	Yes	No			
If yes, how much did this help?	1 No Help	2	3 Some Help	4	5 A Lot of Help
Did you watch videos of the deceased while grieving?	Yes	No			
If yes, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5

Personal Items					
Did you keep any pieces of clothing (including shoes and hats) belonging to the deceased?	Yes	No			
If yes, how much did this help?	1 No Help	2	3 Some Help	4	5 A Lot of Help
If no, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5
Did you keep any jewelry belonging to the deceased? (ex. Watches, rings, earrings, necklaces)	Yes	No			
If yes, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5
If no, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5
Did you keep any other personal items that were significant to the deceased?	Yes	No			
If yes, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5
If no, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5
Did you keep other personal items of the deceased that were significant to you?	Yes	No			
If yes, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5
If no, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5

Memoirs					
Did you think of any memories you had of the deceased while grieving?	Yes	No			
If yes, how much did this help?	1 No Help	2	3 Some Help	4	5 A Lot of Help
Did you think of any stories	Yes	No			

that the deceased told you?					
If yes, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5
Did you read any written stories of the deceased? (ex. memories they had written down, diary/journal, letters, etc.)	Yes	No			
If yes, how much did this help?	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study.



APPENDIX A: Informed Consent

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study titled "Mementos and Memoirs Associated with Grieving in College Students" conducted by Jacelyn Anderson under the supervision of Dr. John Gonzalez of the Psychology Department. You will be asked to complete a survey asking questions about someone you have lost within the last five years and the items you used during the grieving process. The survey should take you no longer than 30 minutes to complete.

The information obtained in this should help in understanding the influence of mementos and memoirs during the grieving process. The benefits you may expect to receive from participating in this study is a better understanding of what types of items are helpful to you personally while grieving.

All the data obtained will remain confidential. Your name will not appear on the survey or any individual data. All the data will be reported as group results. If one of your professors has offered to provide extra credit for your participation in this study, only your name will be given to your professor as proof of participation.

Due to the content of this study, there may be some potential risks. The questions may remind you of your loss, bringing back feelings of sadness. There is also a risk that part of the grieving process will come back to you while thinking about the questions being asked.

You are free to decline participation in this study or withdraw your consent and discontinue at any time. However, if your professor is offering extra credit for your participation, by withdrawing you may no longer be able to receive the extra credit offered. Any questions you have about this study may be asked before, during, or after your participation.

Please provide your email in order to receive information about the results of this study.

Email: _____

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX A: Debriefing Statements

Debriefing Statement Immediately After Survey

Debriefing Statement

The purpose of this study was to identify which items are beneficial to the grieving process. Based on previous research, my hypothesis is that the use of mementos and memoirs will be influential to how well a person is able to cope with a loss. I believe that the results of this study will provide people with helpful tips on ways they can help themselves through a difficult grieving process.

The results of this study will be emailed to you once all the data has been reviewed early in the Spring 2012 semester. If you would like more information or have any questions concerning the study, please contact me, Jacelyn Anderson at jacelyn.anderson@st.bemidjistate.edu. With the emotional content of this study, it is possible for you might feel sad and experience part of the grieving process again. If you experience these effects and feel there is a need for counseling, please contact the Student Center for Health and Counseling at (218)755-2053.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Debriefing Statement After Results

These are the results of the mementos and memoirs study from Spring 2011 that you participated in.

The purpose of this study was to determine what types of items people use during the grieving process and how helpful these items are to people. It was found that the type of item that was used and the amount of helpfulness varied by person. There were many associations found between the questions pertaining to the deceased and items used during the grieving process. Some variables that were found to have more correlations were how the person learned of the loss and the use of stories during the grieving process.

It was also found that those who kept items found it more helpful than those who did not. The variables of memories, pictures, videos, stories, written stories, and the keeping of clothing, jewelry, items significant to the deceased, and items significant to the participant were all found to have a higher rating of helpfulness. Being close or very close to the deceased and the grieving of a friend or family member found the use of memories more helpful. It was also found that keeping items significant to the deceased and the participant were more helpful if the the participant was 21 and older in most cases.

Once again I would like to thank you for your participation for without it the results would not have turned out the way they did.

APPENDIX B: Data Figures

Table 1. Correlations Between the Deceased and Items Used

	Variables								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Stories									
2. Stories Helped	-								
3. Memories Helped	-	.609**							
4. Items Significant to the Deceased	-.217	-	-						
5. Items Significant to the Participant	-.217	-	-	1.000**					
6. Learned of Loss	.294*	.163	-.020	.296*	.296*				
7. Closeness	-.361**	.419**	.292*	.146	.146	.166			
8. Cause of Death	.196	-.292*	-.225	.078	.078	-.132	-.360**		
9. Relationship	-.549**	.537**	.379**	.235	.235	.294*	.331**	-.430**	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$