Growing Through Grief: A Qualitative Interview Study of Adolescents’ Experiences with Death and Coping

The transition from childhood to adulthood marks a time of radical change in which one begins to form one’s own unique identity. The greatest influence on the ongoing development of an adolescent’s self-concept is the adolescent’s everyday social interactions with family and friends. Therefore, when an immediate family member or friend dies, it can have a profound and lasting impact. Studies indicate that as many as 20 - 40% of high school students report such a loss, making the experience of grief common among teens. Despite this, little research has been done to explore bereaved teens’ experiences. Most researchers collect data via survey and no findings have been delivered in teens’ own voices. This project examines the adolescent experience of grief by allowing teen’s individual voices to drive the research. Ultimately, these findings will be reviewed in relation to the existing literature on adolescent grief.

Research suggests that the adolescent experience of grief must be examined in tandem with research on healthy adolescent development. In order to develop a healthy self-concept, teens must complete a number of cognitive tasks. These tasks include emotional separation from parents, the development of a sense of mastery and control over one’s life, and the development of a sense of fairness. These converge to form a stable identity over time and are highly contingent upon parental, sibling, and peer interaction. When the death of a member of this important network takes place, it can threaten a teen’s ability to complete the cognitive tasks noted above. However, if responded to well, the loss of a close member of one’s network can also evoke growth and maturity.

Four bereaved adolescents were interviewed for this project. In discussing their experiences, each teen touched on how the death of a family member or close friend affected them and how that loss may have affected the tasks of identity development. For example, on the task of gaining mastery and control over one’s life, one participant spoke about how his mother’s death forced him to take responsibility for himself; He now cooks, cleans, and makes his own money. When asked how feels to have these new responsibilities, he responded with pride that it “feels amazing”. His mother’s death, while tragic, has given him some mastery over his own life and helped to contribute to a positive self-concept.

Each participant spoke about how initially difficult it was for them to talk about the death of their loved ones. However, each also credited eventually sharing this experience with others as the catalyst for coping well with their grief. The interviews conducted were videotaped and will be used to create an online resource for bereaved teens. Interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework for Thematic Analysis. A series of short vlog-style videos informed by the themes identified through this analysis will then be produced. These videos will allow participants to talk to teens about their own experiences, helping to relay information on what was helpful after losing someone**.** Future viewers will have a discreet and easy way to engage in what feels like a safe conversation with a sympathetic peer. Hopefully, this tool will be used to start some of the first conversations leading to growth through grief for teens. Ultimately, this project is useful is two ways: it adds much needed qualitative research to the small body of scholarship on adolescent grief and it provides a much needed tool for teens struggling to cope with the death of a loved one.

Biography: Lauren Tansley is a fourth-year Honours student in Psychology. She previously completed a Bachelor of Humanities and a Master of Arts in Religion and Public Life at Carleton University. Lauren hopes to start a PhD in Clinical Psychology next Fall.