AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT
ON INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED
MULTIPLE LOSSES FROM DEATH OVER TIME

by

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Abstract

The study explores the experience of individuals who have lost a number of close people in their life, through death, over the course of their adult lifetime. Twelve individual interviews (11 women, 1 man) are presented in narrative form and explored for their content and meaning. The experience of multiple loss was revealed to be unique and varied for each participant and each loss was experienced independently from the others, concomitant on the relationship to the deceased, the nature and timing of the death and the relevance to the participant’s identity. Similar themes occurred across and within cases that are attributable to having lost a number of close others. Common effects were seen in participants’ experiential knowledge of grief and its vicissitudes, death and its processes, and life and its meaningfulness. Participants believed that their losses have had a profound effect on them, changing their lives immutably. Changes were perceived in terms of impact on the way they view the world, themselves and their relationships. Individuals perceived both positive and negative effects. Analogous with current research and theories in the field many of the participants reported experiencing personal growth as a result of their losses. The present study extends past research findings by attributing these effects to the accumulation of losses. A model for understanding the process of meaning-making in multiple loss was devised. Respondents were apt to process one death at a time, incorporate its meanings and effects on them, compare the effects to each other by contrasting the distinct experiences,
and create a framework for meaning that was mutable. There were typical features of these meanings that were characteristic to the tone of the narrative. Stories of multiple loss tended to have an unresolved, a transformational or a growth related tone. An enhanced model of meaning-making in loss is described that augments current models of meaning-making in coping with loss. The implications of these findings for theory and practice are discussed.
Acknowledgments

The project is a product of the narratives of all the individuals who opened their hearts and minds to me, a stranger, as they shared such profound and intimate stories. They and their stories are the soul of this project. I am deeply honoured to have been allowed a window into this aspect of their lives. There really is no greater privilege than the one that allows us to be a witness to others remarkable stories of loss, grief, sorrow, recovery and renewal. No matter where these participants were on their life journeys I was, and still am, awed by their courage and determination. Their stories have affected me deeply. My sincere thanks to all of them.

I am indebted to my supervisor Dr. Charles Chen for his support, guidance, knowledge, accessibility and patience. An undertaking such as this requires the insight and succour of an advisor and mentor. Dr. Chen was both of these and more. The success of this project owes a considerable amount to him. I am grateful for having worked with him.

I am thankful for the advice and guidance of my committee members, Dr. Niva Piran and Dr. Margaret Schneider. Their ideas and insights were invaluable and I am appreciative of the wealth of experience and wisdom which they brought to this project.

This journey was a formidable one for me. There were times when my own losses threatened to derail and sometimes stop me in my tracks. But with the kindness, love, encouragement and support of the many dear and cherished people in my life who were there when I really needed them, I always managed to find my way back. Thank you to all of you: Mrs. Claude Painter—for picking up where Mom left off; Dad—for your courage and hope; Tracy Riley—for your wisdom, friendship and awesome ability to “be present”; and Dr. Elizabeth Bolger—for telling me “yes, you can”.

Finally, but not lastly, I am indebted to my husband, Ian Cooper for all his love, support, and patience. Let’s face it, the partner of the grad student bears the biggest brunt! This is as much his accomplishment as mine. Thank you Ian for being my soul-mate and friend.
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my Mom
Barbara A. Elmslie
1941-2007

And to the memory of all the cherished loved ones lost, the subjects of these narratives, who remain alive in the hearts, minds and stories of these participants.

As is a tale, so is life: not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters.

—Seneca
Chapter 1: 
Introduction

The current study is interested in exploring the impact on an individual of having experienced multiple losses from death over the course of one’s adult lifetime. It is interested in the nature of personal transformation and what meaning is ascribed to an individual’s multiple loss experiences. As such, it proposes an exploration within the context of a meaning-making framework of post-loss change and post-loss growth.

Loss is a ubiquitous experience that virtually all humans encounter at some point, if not numerous times, throughout their lives. Loss of a significant other through death is an intensely stressful, painful and disruptive event that can have a profound and lasting effect on an individual’s life. It is an event that has the potential to render people forever changed.

The death of a significant other can impact individuals in such a way as to affect their preexisting sense of self and those views and assumptions about the world that they have hitherto held (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Neimeyer, 1998; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Weenolsen, 1988; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991). In this sense, it is seen as being a transformative experience: for in all of the personal, relational and spiritual realms, transformation as a consequence of loss is a common outcome (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Aldwin & Levenson, 2004; Attig, 1996; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Davis, 2001; Franz, Farrell, & Trolley, 2001; Harvey, Barnett, & Overstreet, 2004; Janoff-Bulman, 2004; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Lieberman, 1996; Neimeyer, 1998; Park & Ai, 2006; Parkes, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Weenolsen, 1988).

In addition, the literature implies, both explicitly and implicitly, that one’s experience of loss, i.e., previous losses, has an impact on an individual’s present loss experience (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006; Mercer & Evans, 2006; Rando, 1993; Sanders, 1988; Stroebe & Schut, 2001b; Turco, 1982; Viney, Henry, Walker, & Crooks, 1991-92). However, there is little published research about the effects on an individual who has lost two or more close relationships at separate times through death. Despite the notion that previous losses have an effect on one’s acute grieving of a recent loss (Rando, 1993), the exploration of the impact of experiencing multiple losses of loved ones over time, has not been done.
The effects of loss through death of an important other have been widely reported in the literature. The notion of a changed self is commonly espoused amongst researchers (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Attig, 1996; Cadell, Regehr, & Hemsworth, 2003; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990, 2001; Davis, 2001; Franz et al., 2001; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Neimeyer, 1998; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Parkes, 1996; Richards, 2001; Wolfelt, 2003; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006), and through the writings of the bereaved themselves (Didion, 2005; Frankl, 1984; Lewis, 1963; Peart, 2002). Loss of a close loved one through death can leave us with a heightened sense of our vulnerability (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), our self in relationship with others (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001), our sense of efficacy and competency (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Lehman et al., 1993), our identity (Attig, 1996; Didion, 2005; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005; Neimeyer et al., 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Peart, 2002) and our spiritual beliefs (Attig, 1996; Frankl, 1984; Lewis, 1963; Richards, 2001; Wolfelt, 2003; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991).

Current Western models of grief conceive of the experience as an active, dynamic and integrative process of reformulating one’s life and worldview, resulting in an adaptation to a world changed by the loss. This change is often construed by the person as positive and beneficial. Indeed, religious, philosophical and folk traditions have for centuries recognized that struggling through major losses has the potential to lead to positive growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001). Modern research that has investigated this change and growth phenomenon has discovered that it tends to occur in three broad domains: that of a changed sense of self (growth in character), changed relationships (increased sense of connectedness to others) and changed philosophy of life (change in one’s perspective of life) (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001).

**Context of the Inquiry**

A burgeoning body of bereavement research is taking shape on a multidisciplinary level with contributions from the fields of anthropology, ethology, psychology, sociology, social work, medicine and thanatology. Such a vast array of theories and frameworks has resulted in a multitude of perspectives and currently there is no one dominant disciplinary or theoretical paradigm in the field of bereavement and grief research.
The present study is situated in the midst of this immense area of knowledge. It resides within the discipline of psychology, taking a humanistic, constructivist, narrative approach to exploring the meanings that individuals ascribe to their experiences of loss. This study is further situated within the realm of clinical and counselling psychology. The knowledge gained by studying post-loss constructions of self and worldview is considered invaluable for practitioners who seek to understand and aid those who are bereaved.

How an individual responds to loss of a loved one through death and the lasting impact that it has on his or her life is one of the key questions explored in bereavement research. Loss can be a life-changing event. The idea that suffering a significant loss could have major life-long repercussions and a huge impact on an individual’s sense of self was made explicit:

For none among the bereaved does recovery mean forgetting. Even after they have established new lives and regained their energy and capacity for happiness, the loss and their reaction to it will not only have been a major determinant of the people they have become, but will emerge, again and again, in their thoughts and feelings [italics added]. (Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974, p. 15)

This highlights the notion that losing a loved one can have a profound effect on our sense of self and our narrative of that self. It has the potential to lead to change and that change can be construed as positive.

Positive change as a result of loss has numerous terms throughout the literature, alternately referred to as posttraumatic growth, perceived benefits, adversarial growth and stress-related growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). It has been reported by a variety of persons who have experienced various types of losses. The current knowledge in the field has shed much light on the possible outcomes and effects of loss on one’s psychological and social lives, health and well-being, philosophy of life and recovery processes. Post-loss adjustment is conceptualized as a dynamic process incorporating a myriad of variables in all of the personal, social and spiritual domains.

Growth too is conceived of as an active and interactive process that ultimately leads to a different and by implication improved sense of wellbeing. Post-loss changes are often viewed as being the culmination of a process of meaning-making. Models designed to address this meaning-making component speak to the dissolution of previously held belief systems, core
assumptions or meaning-structures that an individual has heretofore lived by but that are now shattered, disintegrated or merely questioned as a result of a significant loss (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Neimeyer, 2000b; Parkes, 1988). Both death of a significant other by any means and a traumatic event are said to fracture one’s meanings. However, there remains a gap in the literature on theories of grieving, post-loss adaptation and growth that pertains to the continued effects of subsequent experiences of loss and bereavement on people’s sense of themselves.

The published research on multiple loss focuses on how previous losses affect subsequent grieving processes. The outcomes or changes that occur post-loss are relatively understudied. As in research on single losses, what appears to be common is the bereaved individual’s account of change. Bereaved individuals who have lost many people speak to their changed sense of self, relationships and view of life (Mallinson, 1999; Mercer & Evans, 2006; Viney et al., 1991-92). They also speak to how the deaths have led to further psychosocial losses, reiterating the point in general grief literature that a loss through death can lead to consequential changes and further losses.

The terms “multiple loss” and “previous losses” have been used synonymously in the literature to indicate those loss events that precede current losses, e.g., past deaths or other types of losses that have an influence on one’s current bereavement experience. “Multiple loss” has been used alternately in the literature to denote numerous losses that occur concurrently, e.g., in natural disasters, or massive death from fires or accidents, and those that are separated by time, e.g., deaths of many people from the AIDS epidemic. The current inquiry is interested in the effects of losses as they have occurred over the course of one’s adult lifetime, rather than those that have occurred concurrently such as in disasters or war. It ponders the questions: What is the ultimate impact on an individual of living through such losses? How is one changed by such experiences?

Rationale for the Study

The current state of the field of bereavement research exemplifies the amassed knowledge about the grief process and its effect on people. But there is still much that is unknown (Bonanno, 2001b). A recent report on bereavement and grief research commissioned in the United States provides a comprehensive and exhaustive review of the pertinent, most methodologically sound and influential research in the field up to the time of its publication. This
report identified “priority areas for continued research and theoretical clarification” (Center for Advancement in Health (CAH), 2004, p. 538).

It is proposed that the current study addresses some of these important and underdeveloped areas. For example, the report highlighted the need to understand the relevance of pre-loss experience as it relates to bereavement (CAH, 2004). Pre-loss experience includes the phenomenon of having lived through a previous loss through death. The “multiply bereaved” are likely to help shed light on the effects of prior loss, not only on how one grieved each subsequent death but also on the ultimate perceived effect or change that these experiences have had on their lives.

This report also lists the importance of specifying the developmental influences on bereavement across the life-span and identifying critical developmental variables, in addition to the need for “the identification and consideration of potential resilience and protective factors” (CAH, 2004, p. 539). The current study provides some insight into the question of how previous losses throughout the life-course impact one’s sense of self and has helped us learn about positive adaptation to loss from those people who suffer through many such losses.

Understanding how the individual conceptualizes and contextualizes multiple deaths and the implications for his or her life will help to provide the field with such knowledge as is required for a fuller, broader and most importantly more accurate description and understanding of the effects of loss in one’s life. This has implications for both theory and praxis.

Current theories of post-loss change and growth and posttraumatic growth fall short of addressing what happens when an individual encounters a subsequent loss through death. Although informative in their insights into post-loss psychological change, these theories don’t extend beyond single losses. More accurately, they do not identify how many losses are involved in their theoretical formulations of change and growth. The post-loss literature can be informed by taking this next step. If change ensues and growth is acknowledged after losing a loved one through death, how does the individual perceive that these changes and growth are impacted by his or her next loss?

In terms of praxis, the importance of understanding the experience of the multiply bereaved has far reaching implications. The report on bereavement and grief research stated as
its purpose and rationale the need to consolidate the research on grief in order to provide
evidence that would “guide the provision of high-quality, appropriate bereavement—and grief–
related care” with a particular focus on grief and its effects on health (CAH, 2004, p. 494). The
present study aims to explore the experience of the person who has survived multiple previous
losses through death thereby seeking to understand if, and how this affects people in the long
run. This has implications for mental health practitioners working with the bereaved and those
who are seeking understanding and knowledge of the experience, i.e., those who are themselves
bereaved and/or family members, friends etc. who wish to help them.

**Goals of the Inquiry**

This inquiry explores the meanings that an individual ascribes to the experience of losing
a number of significant others over time through death. Importantly, this study does not examine
multiple losses that occur concurrently, or those that are specifically the consequence of large-
scale disasters, war, or genocide. Rather, its focus is on the successive effects of losses through
death over time throughout the normative course of one’s adult lifetime. The inquiry was
conducted within a phenomenological framework, using open-ended and in-depth interviews in
an effort to uncover and explore the unique, varied and complex experiences of the individual
who has experienced repeated losses of loved ones through death. It encouraged a creative and
co-creative environment of discovery for the individual as he or she explored the meanings that
such experiences have had for his or her life.

The multiple loss experience was investigated within the context of current models and
theoretical conceptualizations of post-loss transformation. It took into account what is presently
known about the experience of loss and its outcomes, including the potentially adverse effects
and post-loss change and growth as well as the meaning-making framework within which these
experiences take place. Exploring how repeated losses through death affect people helps
augment the current theories of post-loss change and allows us to discover what is unique about
experiencing more than one devastating loss.

Working from within a humanistic, constructivist, narrative framework this study’s goal
was to explicate and expand upon the current knowledge in the grief and bereavement field by
adding to our understanding of the impact of loss on one’s sense of self and worldview. It aims
to help researchers, practitioners, and the bereaved themselves by characterizing and understanding the experiences of multiple losses on people’s lives.

The loss, through death, of cherished relationships embraces all of humanity. Most of us will at some point in our lives lose a close loved one through death. Exploring the meanings that others have derived from having encountered death multiple times has the potential to enlighten us about what this experience entails. It is believed that those who have lost more than one significant other can provide us with a rich account that ultimately teaches us something about the varied experience of loss through death and by extension the diverse nature of personal transformation.

**Definitions**

*Bereavement:* The loss of a loved one through death. It is a state that encompasses both interpersonal (i.e., it occurs between family, friends and society) and multidimensional (i.e., it includes anticipation of death, the death itself and the adjustment post-death) processes. It contains the experience and expression of grief.

*Grief:* The specific experience of bereavement and refers to the complex emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual distress and social consequences associated with loss (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & De Longis, 1986).

*Mourning:* The outward expression of grief. It is seen as being the social or interpersonal component of grief, i.e., “grief gone public”. One mourns through ritual, talking, crying, and creating (Wolfelt, 2003).

For the purpose of this study, I will consider *grief* and *mourning* synonymously, with these terms referring to both the active internal processes and the social, outward–focused expression of these that one experiences when one has lost a loved one through death.
Chapter 2: 
Literature Review

The literature review will present the theoretical ideas pertaining to meaning-making processes in bereavement. It will then describe the theoretical concepts and research on possible outcomes in bereavement, growth following adversity and post-loss growth, and multiple losses. It will conclude with an explanation of the purpose of the current study. However, it will begin by situating the present study in context by first delineating its place within the vast and varied body of research in the grief and bereavement literature.

Delimitations

The current study explored the psychological impact on an individual of having experienced multiple losses of close loved ones through death over time. As an exploratory study it asked: what is it like to lose two or more emotionally close relationships from death over the course of one’s adult lifetime? This is a broad question and by its very breadth a grand one. What does it hope to achieve and what are its limitations?

The current study was deemed to be an introductory one in that it endeavours to illuminate the experiences of living through a series of losses. Much of what we know about grief and bereavement pertains to single losses. This knowledge has been acquired both through clinical wisdom gained in working with the bereaved (Attig, 1996; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006; Lieberman, 1996; McAdams, Reynolds, & Lewis, 2001; Neimeyer, 1998; Parkes, 1996; Turco, 1982; Ween Olsen, 1988; Wolfelt, 2003; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991) as well as from empirical investigations: the latter of which incorporate one or all of questionnaires, assessment inventories, and structured and in-depth interviews (Bonanno, 2001a; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Folkman, 2001; Gamino, Sewell, & Easterling, 1998; Glick et al., 1974; Lehman et al., 1993; Neimeyer, 1998; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Parkes, 1996; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Rosenblatt, 2000; Schaefer & Moos, 2001; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Stroebe & Schut, 2001a). Information has come from diverse populations grieving the loss of varied types of relationships (e.g., spouses, parents, children, ‘others’) and deaths from different circumstances (e.g., the terminally ill, natural/unnatural deaths, sudden or unexpected/anticipated deaths). Most studies do not define the number of
losses, although some make reference to the effects of previous losses on coping in bereavement processes (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006; Rando, 1993; Sanders, 1988; Schaefer & Moos, 2001; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987).

Research in the grief and bereavement field has, from its very inception, focused on the outcomes, or consequences of grief in terms of how people adjust to and ultimately adapt to their loss. Research on coping in bereavement is abundant (Bonanno, 2001a; Davis et al., 1998; Folkman, 2001; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005; Neimeyer, 1998; Nerken, 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Schaefer & Moos, 2001; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Weiss, 1988; Worden, 2001; Wortman, Silver, & Kessler, 1993). Separating processes involved in grieving from the ultimate outcome is difficult. How one grieves affects one’s adaptation. There are numerous factors involved, each person responds in his or her own way, and the nature of the loss influences reactions. Despite having common manifestations and some universal symptoms, grief is felt and interpreted uniquely, concomitant on a number of personal, social, and event variables. Therefore, no one study can address all the variables associated with this complex and diverse phenomenon (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001).

The current study aimed to explore the cumulative or ultimate effects, i.e., the impact, of having lived through multiple bereavements. In light of what we know about the effects of single losses, what can we learn from people who have lost more than one loved one at separate times? The goal of this study was to gain insight into the effects of loss through death by exploring and understanding the meaning that people ascribe to their loss experiences. The researcher’s knowledge of what is known about the effects of single losses form the bedrock of this investigation and led to the posing of the research question: What is it like to lose a number of loved ones through death? It is believed that the data revealed in this study has enriched our knowledge and understanding in the field.

What this study does not endeavour to do is assess the processes of coping in grief, nor does it seek to evaluate any specific coping model. Yet, process and outcome in bereavement are inseparable concepts. The researcher recognized that in speaking about how one had been affected by the loss, participants related how they coped with it. The narratives reveal the extent of this holistic experience. Although not the goal of the current study, it is believed that the
information gathered in this study has helped illuminate and augment our knowledge of coping as understood in some process models.

The author’s choice of literature relates to her interest and focus for this phenomenon—what meaning do people ascribe to their loss experiences and the impact that it has had on their life as a whole? And, does living through multiple losses affect personal growth? The literature review will summarize theoretical ideas and related research of those issues and mechanisms that can occur in single losses and that may obtain in multiple loss experiences, i.e., meaning-making processes and post-loss change and growth. It will include a review of what is known about experiencing multiple losses. It does not include a review of literature pertaining to multiple deaths that occur simultaneously nor those that have resulted from large-scale disasters, war or genocide. The very horrific and traumatic nature and complexity of these latter events and their social, psychological and historical consequences are beyond the scope of this study. This review is by no means exhaustive of all the theories and conceptualizations, coping and outcome models that are in the literature. As well, historical conceptualizations which form the root of many existing theories today have been left out.

**Meaning-Making in Grief**

An overriding assumption of all models of grief processes and coping is that the bereaved individual is *struggling* to come to terms with the loss. Whether through analysis of the micro-processes associated with emotional, cognitive or behavioural responses, these theories attempt to explain *how* it is one copes and adapts to loss. Central to all theories is the idea that bereaved people are trying to understand, manage, contend with and subsist in a changed reality. It would appear that this would necessarily mean that people are reassessing their lives; seeking answers and attempting to find meaning in their loss. They are trying to make sense of it all (Attig, 1996; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Frankl, 1984; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005; Neimeyer, 2000b; Parkes, 1988; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991).

The following section will review the theoretical concepts and related empirical research on meaning-making principles in grief. Meaning-making is seen as being a process of coming to understand, cope with and adjust to a loss. This section will include the relevance of meaning-making in bereavement and trauma and will highlight how the process is said to function in terms of growth.
Peoples’ sense of themselves is a product of their meaning-making processes. The model of meaning reconstruction in response to bereavement is based on constructivist theory and takes a narrative approach (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005). It integrates many of the current theories in the field, incorporating ideas relating to attachment theory and cognitive, trauma and coping theories. The constructivist viewpoint conceptualizes bereavement as a process of striving to build a logical, plausible and apprehensible story or narrative of one’s life post-loss (Neimeyer, 2000b; Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001; Neimeyer et al., 2002). It sees loss as disrupting the continuity of our life story, our narrative. The meaning-making models of bereavement postulate that grief as a result of loss is an active process of meaning reconstruction.

Theories of meaning reconstruction posit that such processes of reaffirming currently held meanings, searching for, finding and integrating new meanings (reconstructing) are useful and helpful components of grief that allow the individual to adapt to a changed world. This adaptation occurs on the social, psychological, behavioural and even physiological levels (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005). The model of meaning-making in bereavement proposes that such search for meaning entails three processes; making sense of the loss, finding benefit in the experience, and identity change (Davis, 2001; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Davis et al., 1998; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005).

The assumption in this model is that every person has a “core of meaning structures” that guide his or her understanding of the world (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005, p. 54). These meaning structures are schemas that; inform one’s views of life and the world, comprise one’s view of self (identity), others (interpersonal relationships), one’s actions and behaviours, both intrapersonal and interpersonal (activities and priorities), and one’s philosophical and spiritual views of the world and outlook on the future. This model proposes that distress levels are predicated on the consistency or inconsistency of the death with one’s pre-loss meaning structures.

This striving to make sense of troubling and challenging events in one’s life occurs on a narrative level where people attempt to construct cohesive accounts of their experience (Neimeyer et al., 2002). Such a theory takes into account the multifaceted nature of grief and how it is understood by the bereaved person. As Neimeyer et al. (2002) state:

Human beings seek meaning in mourning and do so by struggling to construct a coherent account of their bereavement that preserves a sense of continuity with
who they have been while also integrating the reality of a changed world into their conception of who they must now be [italics added]. (pp. 236-237)

Preexisting meaning structures are challenged when one loses a loved one through death. The death may be either consistent or inconsistent with one’s meaning structures (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Neimeyer, 1998). A death that is consistent with pre-existing meaning structures will be distressing but it is more likely to “make sense” and be explainable. It is thus less likely to lead to a reevaluation of meaning structures because it fits with the pre-loss view and so is more easily integrated. In contrast, those losses that are incongruent with one’s pre-loss views will create a dissonance and challenge the individual to find a way to fit the experience into the preexisting view. The bereaved individual is forced to recognize that their way of seeing the world may not be true. In such cases the individual will engage in a search for meaning (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005).

Meaning-making in bereavement as a specific mechanism in the process of adaptation in bereavement has been investigated in studies with bereaved spouses (Danforth & Glass, 2001); parents who have lost children (Braun & Berg, 1994; Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000; Rosenblatt, 2000; Uren & Wastell, 2002); college students (Davis & McKeary, 2003; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991); families (Nadeau, 2001); and survivors of homicide (Armour, 2003). Apart from some studies with specific populations, most of the research conducted in this area amalgamates the wide and varied types of relationships and responses to bereavement, focusing primarily on the process of adaptation in bereavement regardless of the sample characteristics. This means that most studies do not differentiate the types of relationships and mode of death, using terms such as “loved one”, and/or combining cause of death, e.g., sudden versus terminal illness (Arvay, 2001; Davis & McKeary, 2003; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Davis et al., 1998; Folkman et al., 1986; Gamino et al., 1998; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Lieberman, 1996; Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Wortman et al., 1993; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991).

**Benefit-Finding and Sense-Making**

Research (for e.g., Davis et al., 1998) that has investigated meaning-making in bereavement has found that it incorporates two distinct concepts and processes. These are benefit-finding and sense-making. Benefit-finding is essentially the bereaved individual’s search
for a “silver-lining”. It considers the positive implications that loss has for one’s life, thereby minimizing or mitigating the negative implications. Benefit-finding is a way of perceiving the event as having had some positive value and significance for one’s life. There is a new view and appreciation for life, better relationships and change in sense of self that are seen as having accrued as a result of the loss. Realizing something positive about ourselves, e.g., our strength in the face of adversity and the importance of our relationships or meaning of life can aid in the process of grieving because feelings of loss and helplessness may be mitigated. This gives the bereaved a sense of purpose, worth and value (Davis et al., 1998).

Sense-making applies to the process of trying to make sense of the loss and how it fits into one’s preexisting worldviews or assumptions (Davis et al., 1998; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The bereaved find ways to explain it. The loss is measured against one’s views and assumptions of how the world works. There is a general belief in Western culture that events are controllable, comprehensible and nonrandom (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Ideas of justice, order, fairness, control and benevolence may be challenged by the death of a loved one (Davis, 2001; Davis et al., 1998; Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Loss therefore presents threats to the self and threats to one’s worldview. Threats to the self can jumpstart an individual into action, i.e., act as a catalyst for a person to reassess one’s priorities and goals. This reappraisal can be an opportunity for growth. The crux of the issue becomes less about the loss per se and more about understanding one’s responses to it, that is, how do I fair in the context of adversity? And ultimately, what has this taught me about my self and my relationships? In this formulation benefit-finding in loss is conceptualized as being more about trying to cope with the threat to one’s self concept and may be related more to one’s characteristic responses to stress, for example, optimists tend to see more benefit in adversity (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). Making sense on the other hand has been found to be associated more with threat to one’s worldviews, schemas or assumptions.

A longitudinal study designed to determine the differences between benefit-finding and sense-making and the effects on post-loss adjustment over 18 months revealed that these distinct processes have different effects on outcome (Davis et al., 1998). At 6 months post-loss 68% of the sample reported making sense of the death, 19% were unable to make sense, 10% were either ambiguous or had partly made sense and 2% were not interested in making sense of it. Seventy-
three percent reported finding some benefit in the loss, 21% were unable to report anything positive of it and 6% were ambiguous (Davis et al., 1998). There was no association between the two processes of making sense and finding benefit because benefit-finding pertains more to one’s sense of self whereas sense-making pertains to one’s worldviews and the two are not always associated. Certain variables predicted the two processes. Sense-making was predicted by age of deceased, religious/spiritual beliefs and pre-loss level of distress. The only predictor of benefit-finding was optimism.

Researchers (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001) surmise that if a death is senseless and incomprehensible mourners may have trouble making sense of it so they instead find something good that came of it. That is, some people will dwell on the positives that have pertained thereby deriving some form of benefit from the experience. Types of benefits ascribed include; growth of character, gain in perspective and strengthening of one’s relationships.

**Shattered Assumptions**

Engaging in a search for meaning as a result of challenges to our previously held worldviews and beliefs is a process that often gets activated in the aftermath of trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). At the very core of our belief system are our basic views of ourselves and our external world. These are deeply held assumptions about life and how we believe it is and should be. Our fundamental assumptions are described as, “a conceptual system, developed over time that provides us with expectations about the world and ourselves” and they form the “bedrock” of our beliefs (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 5). Although theorists acknowledge that not all people share these beliefs, they have found that most people do (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Parkes, 1996; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991).

Trauma has the potential to shatter our core assumptions. In the aftermath of trauma there is vulnerability. When the inner world is shattered traumatized individuals may see their core assumptions as mere illusions. Adjustment post-trauma is predicated on whether survivors or victims experience “profound disillusionment and despair”, or “minimal disillusionment and hope” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 70).

There are three main areas of core fundamental assumptions: 1) the world is benevolent, 2) the world is meaningful, and 3) the self is worthy. “The World Assumptions Scale” was
developed to examine these three core assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The author states that many studies using diverse and varied samples reveal that victimized people have more negative assumptive worlds than non-victims. This appears to persist even 10 to 15 years after the event. In her research she lists a number of traumatic events that are included in her studies including death of a spouse for adult populations and death of a parent for younger ones. In all cases there is a general trend for those who endorse having experienced a traumatic event towards viewing themselves and the world less positively than those who do not report experiencing a trauma. Results indicated that these people realized that bad things do happen, that events can be random or unjust and uncontrollable and that people can be bad. There was a concomitant realization that being good and decent was not a protective factor against bad events and the world was seen as less safe and secure.

For those trauma survivors who have recovered a healthy level of functioning there is a sense of knowing that their preexisting core assumptions may not always be correct. As Janoff-Bulman (1992) wrote, for them:

The world is benevolent, but not absolutely; events that happen make sense, but not always; the self can be counted on to be decent and competent, but helplessness is at times a reality. Survivors are often guardedly optimistic, but the rosy absolution of earlier days is gone. (p. 174)

Although Janoff-Bulman’s research and theoretical formulation are informative and useful in understanding the impact of trauma on one’s core assumptions it does not explicitly address deaths of more than one close loved one over time. Neither does this research speak to the effects of multiple deaths specifically. Rather, it focuses on traumatic events including natural disasters, massive events involving many people and crimes perpetrated against the person. Experiencing the death of a loved one is not always traumatic, and indeed the nature, timing and degree to which the death upsets one’s worldviews and core beliefs will likely influence the extent to which one struggles with meaning and engages in reconstruction of assumptions and meaning structures.

Reconstructing one’s core assumptions after experiencing trauma or adversity has been conceptualized as occurring in one of two ways. Trauma-related experiences are either assimilated into one’s pre-existing worldviews, or one’s worldviews accommodate the trauma-related information. Because meaning-making is considered a fundamental aspect of growth
following adversity it has been further elucidated by distinguishing the difference between *meaning as comprehensibility* and *meaning as significance* (Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997). Essentially, *post-traumatic stress* theories are more concerned with how the person comes to understand the event and why it occurred—*meaning as comprehensibility*; while *posttraumatic growth* theories are focused on how the person comes to understand the philosophical, spiritual and worldview implications of the event—*meaning as significance* (Joseph & Linley, 2006). Outcomes following adversity can have any number of positive or negative effects and in this formulation meaning-making is either concerned with coping and trying to make sense of an event, i.e., comprehensibility, or finding some benefit, i.e., significance.

Current research in this domain highlights the need for a clearer and more refined view of how meaning-making influences change and personal growth (Davis, Wohl, & Verberg, 2007). Indeed, research has found that not all people engage in a search for meaning (Davis et al., 2000). Davis and colleagues examined meaning-making processes in two samples: bereaved parents who had lost a child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and those who had lost a spouse or child in a motor vehicle accident. They found that searching for meaning was not universal and those who did not search for meaning were relatively well-adjusted; less than half of their samples found any meaning up to 1 year post-death; those who did search for meaning and reported finding it continued to seek reasons and answers for their loss years later (Davis et al., 2000). These authors reported that finding meaning does not necessarily correspond to well-being and better adjustment as assessed by standardized measures. They argued that finding meaning in loss is not necessarily critical to adjustment. Individual differences and circumstances surrounding the deaths (i.e., death after lengthy illness vs. sudden death; older age of decedent) may not shatter one’s core assumptions and beliefs and thereby substantiate a call to meaning (Davis et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2000). As these researchers noted:

> Not all losses require a substantial reorganization of one’s sense of identity or purpose in life; nor do all losses shatter our basic assumptions of worldviews upon which one’s understanding of the world rests. (Davis et al., 2007, p. 697)

**Summary and Questions**

Models of meaning-making propose that losses or traumas have the potential to disrupt our preexisting worldviews, beliefs and assumptions about ourselves, our world and the interaction between the two. Research (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Davis et al., 1998;
Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005) has also determined that meaning-making has two processes that incorporate the elements of finding benefit from the experience and/or making sense of it. It has been shown that these two do not always go hand in hand. A large proportion of bereaved individuals, even if they don’t come to make sense of their loss, will construe some benefit from the experience. Benefits are seen in one’s view of self, other, the world and in interpersonal relationships.

Much of the bereavement literature (see Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005) addresses the idea that bereaved individuals struggle with understanding their loss and the meanings and impact that it has on their life, i.e., that there is a need for them to make sense of it. Post-loss changes are often viewed as the culmination of a process of meaning-making. Models designed to address this meaning-making component speak to the dissolution of previously held belief systems, core assumptions or meaning-structures that an individual has previously lived by but that are now shattered, disintegrated or merely questioned as a result of a significant loss. Both death of a significant other by any means and a traumatic event are said to fracture one’s meanings.

The question remains whether experiencing multiple deaths of loved ones over time would have an impact on one’s fundamental assumptions about the benevolence, meaningfulness and goodness of self and world. Although current research is shedding light on the complexities inherent in meaning-making processes, including the many variables associated with the loss and how that may impact one’s assessment of the experience, it is still not known how the individual interprets the overall experience of having lost numerous close others.

What remains unanswered in the meaning-making literature is the consequent effect of experiencing another loss of a close relationship through death. Most studies were conducted with grieving individuals who had experienced a single loss, or the number of losses is unspecified. What happens when an individual loses another close loved one to death? Does he or she attempt to make sense of this loss and/or continue to find benefit in the next loss experience?

**Outcomes in Bereavement**

The meaning-making framework encompasses the vast and varied nature of and processes involved in loss experiences including the ultimate outcome or effects of this process.
The literature is replete with studies examining the effects of bereavement. For the purposes of this study, the following section will briefly describe some of the known adverse effects and common ideas of what is considered recovery from and successful adaptation to loss as well as consequential change following loss.

**Adverse Effects in Bereavement**

Grief can have detrimental effects on one’s physical and mental health. Many studies have found that mortality risk is higher following the death of a spouse, although evidence for this relationship has been challenged (CAH, 2004). Changes in the neuroendocrine, immune, and sleep systems are evident during bereavement but as with mortality, questions concerning the causal aspects of this relationship are being raised. Recent conceptualizations observe that bereavement as a stressor affects one’s immune system which affects one’s health, which could ultimately affect one’s mortality risk (CAH, 2004).

The notion of bereavement as a stressor is evident in the findings that a minority of people develop debilitating symptoms after a loss. Initially termed “complicated” grief, or mourning (Rando, 1993), it is now referred to as “prolonged grief” (Boelen & Prigerson, 2007). Studies designed to evaluate prolonged grief have found that it encompasses a “unique pattern of symptoms following bereavement that are typically slow to resolve and can persist for years if left untreated” (Lichtenthal, Cruess, & Prigerson, 2004, p. 637). These symptoms are distinctively different from those commonly seen in Major Depressive Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Adjustment Disorder. Symptoms of prolonged grief disorder (PGD) are characterized by a yearning and searching for the deceased, excessive loneliness, intrusive thoughts of the deceased, numbness and despair and fragmented sense of security, trust and meaning (Lichtenthal et al., 2004). Such complications in bereavement may have adverse consequences for healthy adaptation both physically and mentally and can be predictive of reduced quality of life, mental health and suicidality (Boelen & Prigerson, 2007).

It has been estimated that one in three persons may be at risk for developing complications in mourning (Rando, 1993) and a recent study of 276 widows found 16% suffered from what was termed “chronic” grief (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004). One study of 118 bereaved spouses assessed three times post loss (at study entry and 3 and 6 months later) found that 26% met criteria for complicated grief at all three assessment times. There were no
differences between these and ‘non-complicated’ grievers on other variables. Results showed that the complicated grief group experienced decreases in all of: mental health, sense of well-being and functioning in life-roles and an increase in problematic symptoms compared to their non-complicated counterparts (Ott, 2003 cited in CAH, 2004). The relationship of complicated grief to mental and physical health has been shown to be negative, i.e., higher levels of complicated grief are related to lower levels of mental and physical functioning.

Lower levels of functioning are indicative of poor outcomes in bereavement. There are a number of risk factors that have been identified that may potentially affect poorer outcomes in bereavement including negative health consequences and increased risk of mortality (Sanders, 1988). These risk factors are either associated with the event itself, i.e., situational factors, or with aspects of the mourner and his or her social/interpersonal environment. (Stroebe & Schut, 2001b). These include the suddenness of the death or whether it was anticipated, age of deceased, the nature of the relationship with the deceased, the mourner’s perception of preventability, their mental health, gender, religious beliefs and self-esteem, and the availability of social support (Gamino et al., 1998; Stroebe & Schut, 2001b). For example, older widows generally showed lower levels of adjustment over time and reported more physical symptomatology than younger widows (Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Sanders, 1988). Gender data is equivocal but most studies found that women reported more physical and psychological symptoms of depression than men many months and years after the death of their spouse (Sanders, 1988). In addition one’s history of prior losses was hypothesized to have an effect on subsequent losses (Griffin, 2001; Rando, 1993; Schaefer & Moos, 2001; Turco, 1982), with those being unresolved having more of a compound effect on consequent losses (Griffin, 2001; Turco, 1982).

There is no clear consensus in the literature of whether anticipation of the death leads to better outcomes than suddenness of death. Rando (1993) cited her own research and that of others in regards to anticipatory grief—the phenomenon of grieving prior to a death that commonly occurs in cases of terminal illness—and noted that the longer the period of illness prior to death the higher the risk for post-death bereavement complications, likely due to the prolonged stresses associated with tending to and coping with a loved one’s terminal illness. However, Wolfgang and Margaret Stroebe (1987) cited research that attests to the opposite, where suddenness of the death is more stressful and leads to greater detrimental health outcomes
than anticipation of death. A recent study found that “perceptions of a lack of preparedness” for the death may predispose the bereaved to complications in bereavement (Barry, Kasl, & Prigerson, 2002 cited in CAH, 2004, p. 524).

**Recovery or Successful Adaptation Post-Loss**

When a significant relationship in one’s life has been lost it is expected that the mourner will experience a considerable degree of emotional pain, especially if that relationship served attachment needs and elicited separation anxiety when threatened (Weiss, 1988). Depression, anxiety, poor physical health, and impaired social and occupational functioning can be expected, especially in the acute grief phase, the early days and months following the death of a significant other (Dutton & Zisook, 2005). Acute grief subsides at varying rates but most people move from an intense acute phase towards a lessening of concentrated painful affect where they are deemed to have recovered from their grief.

Recovery connotes health but it is somewhat misleading as it implies a return to pre-loss functioning. Trauma survivors, for example, do not return to the place where they began. Rather they return to a state of health (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This distinction is important because many bereaved individuals do not characterize their post-loss outcome as recovery. It is more akin to adaptation, reconciliation or accommodation (Weiss, 1988; Wolfelt, 2003). As Weiss (1988) quoted one widow in his report: “You don’t get over it. You get used to it” (p. 44). In this sense, post-loss adjustment is best viewed as a return to a reasonable level of functioning.

Recovery from loss is deemed to consist of the following: 1) an ability to give energy to everyday life, 2) psychological comfort, i.e., freedom from pain and distress, 3) an ability to experience gratification, i.e., to feel pleasure when good events occur, 4) hopefulness towards the future and looking forward, and 5) adequate social role functioning, e.g., as spouse, parent, member of the community (Weiss, 1988). When the bereaved individual can be hopeful towards the future, invested in the present, free of painful and disturbing thoughts, able to feel pleasure and able to sustain close interpersonal relationships, he or she can be considered to have reached a healthy level of functioning (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Despite the notion that “normal” courses of bereavement entail immense emotional pain that requires expression in order for recovery to occur, some people do not experience or express
such affect yet cope with and recover from grief just the same (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno & Keltner, 1997; Bonanno, Keltner, Holen, & Horowitz, 1995; Lund & Caserta, 1997-1998; Wortman & Silver, 1989). Recently, a distinction has been made between the concepts of “recovery” in bereavement and that of “resilience” (Bonanno, 2004). Recovery is seen as representing a return to pre-event functioning after a period of distress, with “return” connoting that the individual was operating at “normal” levels of functioning prior to the event. Resilience on the other hand reflects a pre-loss stability that is maintained throughout the grieving process. Bonanno (2004) explains:

> Resilience to loss and trauma...pertains to the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated [italics added] and potentially highly disruptive event, such as death of a close relation ... to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning. (p. 20)

Resilient individuals tended to experience and exhibit a stable course of healthy functioning throughout their bereavement, which means that they did experience some disruption and distress but it did not overwhelm them. They also had more of a capacity for positive emotions which has been shown to be helpful and healthy in bereavement adjustment (Bonanno & Keltner, 1997; Bonanno et al., 1995). Factors associated with resilience included the psychological concepts of hardiness, the use of self-enhancing cognitions, and/or repressive coping measures, and showing positive emotion and laughter (Bonanno, 2004).

**Post Loss Change**

The notion that a person can be profoundly changed by grief and that living through an experience of loss is potentially transformative is commonly reported in the literature (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Attig, 1996; Cadell et al., 2003; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990, 2001; Davis, 2001; Franz et al., 2001; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Neimeyer, 1998; Neimeyer et al., 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Parkes, 1996; Richards, 2001; Wolfelt, 2003; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006).

Renditions from the bereaved themselves attest to this phenomenon of personal change as a result of loss and/or trauma (Borawski, 2007; Dean, 2002; Didion, 2005; Frankl, 1984; Lewis, 1963; Peart, 2002). These changes are commonly conceptualized as occurring in three separate, yet related, domains that broadly defined, consist of: a changed view of self, changed...
relationships and changed philosophy of life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Joseph & Linley, 2006).

Living through a loss and/or experiencing a trauma has the potential to change people in a variety of ways. It can leave people with an increased sense of vulnerability (Franz et al., 2001; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Lehman et al., 1993; Lieberman, 1996); a revised view of one’s self in relationship with others (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001), a new or renewed sense of efficacy and competency (Borawski, 2007; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Lehman et al., 1993), a changed identity (Attig, 1996; Didion, 2005; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005; Neimeyer et al., 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Peart, 2002) and altered spiritual beliefs (Attig, 1996; Frankl, 1984; Lewis, 1963; Richards, 2001; Wolfelt, 2003; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991).

Change is not always seen to be for the better. The experience of loss can be viewed as either positive, negative or both (Franz et al., 2001; Lehman et al., 1993). Grief can have a devastating impact that leaves the bereaved with a sense that life will never be good again. Reports of no change or negative change are often manifested in greater feelings of loneliness and sadness. Indeed some people felt that a part of them had died with their loved one and they were more protective and fearful of losing other loved ones (Franz et al., 2001). Some reported feeling angry, indecisive, more fearful of death, bitter, fragile, hardened and nasty and a relatively small proportion of bereaved respondents reported that they were not changed in any way by their loss (Franz et al., 2001).

Spirituality can be strengthened or challenged after the death of a loved one. There can be a questioning of one’s faith and previously held belief systems (Frankl, 1984; Lewis, 1963; Richards, 2001). Research (Davis et al., 1998) has also revealed that a small percentage of people did not engage in seeking meaning for their loss, clearly indicating that despite the commonly held notion that grief ultimately culminates in personal positive growth, there are anomalies. The diversity in responses and outcomes points to the complexity of processes and consequences in bereavement.

Yet, when change is perceived to be positive it is often conceptualized as growth, that is, a common outcome of living through a loss experience, or any type of adversity, is said to be a changed sense of self (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Franz et al., 2001; Joseph & Linley, 2006;

Summary and Questions

Recovery from loss, successful adaptation or return to healthy functioning are terms that connote a post-bereavement state where an individual will no longer experience the acute pangs of pain and distress associated with the loss. There will be a return to healthful living and an ability to engage in pleasurable activities and meaningful relationships. Early notions of recovery tended to describe this outcome as a return to pre-loss levels of functioning: the achievement of a homeostatic state. However, bereavement is not necessarily a state that is conquered or eliminated. Rather it is accommodated. A person continues to live with their loss in many ways yet finds a way to adapt to the lack of the loved one’s presence. Complications in grief can occur and certain risk factors have been identified that could potentially hamper an individual’s process of adaptation. The notion of individual resilience to stressors challenges the commonly ascribed belief that all or most people will experience intensely painful affect and return to a pre-loss state.

Clearly, not all individuals will experience stereotypical reactions to death of a loved one. The assertion that there is a considerable subgroup of the population who are resilient in the face of grief and who show fewer of the “normal” responses in bereavement does not address the issue of subsequent losses. Resilience theory and related research has focused on single events of loss through death, i.e., exposure to “an isolated” disturbing event (Bonanno, 2004). The present study aims to explore the experience of subsequent losses on individuals and the changes they perceive that have ensued as a result of such losses.

There are many variables said to be associated with successful outcomes, yet the question of whose perception of what is “successful” is highly subjective. Outcome measures are mostly researcher-determined evaluations of what is deemed to be adaptive vs. maladaptive and are generally attempts to be objective measures of physical and/or mental health, e.g., health records or scores on standard measures. What does the individual him or herself believe to be the outcome of grief, successful or not? And if another death of a significant person were to occur, how would this subsequent loss affect one’s process? If the assumption is that one never really
“gets over” one’s loss, what changes are accruing for the individual who experiences a number of losses through death over time?

**Growth Following Adversity**

The notion that personal growth can come from adversity has a burgeoning literature base and the past decade has seen much research devoted to exploring this concept (Joseph & Linley, 2006; Park & Helgeson, 2006). Growth following adversity has been alternately termed “stress-related growth” (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), “benefit-finding” (Affleck & Tennen, 1996), “posttraumatic growth” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), and “adversarial growth” (Linley & Joseph, 2004) and it is believed to be a common experience of having lived through a traumatic event or significant loss.

Despite the variation in terms all refer to the concept of positive change as a result of adversity. Specifically, growth following adverse events is defined as one’s subjective appraisal of positive personal psychological change that the individual perceives has come about as a consequence of his or her adverse experience (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Examples of reported positive psychological change include: “increased appreciation of life, setting new life priorities, a sense of increased personal strength, identification of new possibilities, improved closeness of intimate relationships, or positive spiritual change” (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006, p. 628).

Growth implies that the individual has grown beyond his or her previous level of functioning and the experience with the crisis or event is construed as having imparted an additional benefit to one’s life, be it personal development, new life priorities, deepened sense of meaning and/or deeper sense of connection with others and/or a higher power (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Various measures have been developed to assess personal growth following adversity, for examples the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), the Changes in Outlook Questionnaire (Joseph, Williams, & Yule, 1993); and the Stress-Related Growth Scale (Park et al., 1996). However the validity and efficacy of these measures have recently come under scrutiny (Frazier & Kaler, 2006).

Research is beginning to focus on the validity of self-reported incidents of change (Frazier & Kaler, 2006; Weinrib, Rothrock, Johnsen, & Lutgendorf, 2006). Concerns raised in
the literature refer to whether or not true growth has actually occurred, i.e., that self-reports of change may not actually represent real change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Davis & Mc Kearney, 2003; Frazier & Kaler, 2006). Proposed reasons for this are that the individual may have self-presentation concerns, wanting to reflect that he or she is coping well (Carver, 2005 cited in Frazier & Kaler, 2006); they may want to appease their social networks and surrounding cultural norms, reporting change because they believe they are supposed to grow from stress (Linley & Joseph, 2004); they are motivated to have positive illusions about themselves (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000); self-reports of growth may reflect, in part, self-protective or self-enhancing factors (Davis & Mc Kearney, 2003); that reports of growth may not be sustained over time, questioning whether it in fact actually occurred (Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001); and the issue of accuracy in remembering and whether self-reports of change are reliable (Tennen & Affleck, 2005 cited in Frazier & Kaler, 2006).

Frazier and Kaler’s (2006) own research suggests that the validity of self-reported growth is questionable. Their research assesses three distinct groups in separate studies; women with breast cancer compared to matched controls, a comparison of undergraduate students reporting positive versus negative changes and correlations with measures of well-being; and the relationship of specific growth assessors to well-being in students. Their results are equivocal, with most measures not corresponding to measures of well-being or behavioural changes. However they reported that their student group in study two did have “small to medium size differences between groups” although not statistically significant, that related to life appreciation, relationship quality, life priorities and self-concept (Frazier & Kaler, 2006, p. 864). Because this group was not more likely to be involved in volunteering and sample size was small, these authors remained skeptical that actual measurable growth had occurred.

Research results such as these are fuelling an impending debate within the literature as to whether in fact true growth actually obtains as a result of experiencing trauma or an extreme stressor (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). This body of research is focused on traumas: extremely stressful events and life-altering experiences that are capable of propelling an individual into a process of reassessment of his or her life goals, worldviews, beliefs, and abilities to manage emotional distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). It does not specifically relate to loss of a loved one through death. However, personal growth as a result of
loss is a topic of considerable investigation and growth through bereavement is a well-known and commonly reported phenomenon.

**Grief and Growth**

Personal growth post-loss is commonly reported (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Aldwin & Levenson, 2004; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Davis, 2001; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Franz et al., 2001; Harvey et al., 2004; Janoff-Bulman, 2004; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Lieberman, 1996; Park & Ai, 2006; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Many people report having grown as a result of their reevaluation of their lives. Because the experience of loss can challenge previously held beliefs about self, others and the world, the bereaved often reassess their previously held assumptions and develop newer, more positive perceptions in the domains of self, relationships and philosophy of life (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Davis, 2001; Franz et al., 2001; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Yet, growth does not mean that the process of grieving is painless or without distress and growth is not always positively related to measures of psychological adjustment (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Lehman et al., 1993; Park, 1998; Tennen & Affleck, 1998).

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) has been defined as, “positive change that the individual experiences as a result of the struggle with a major loss or trauma” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001, p.158). Religious, philosophical and folk traditions have for centuries recognized that struggling through major losses has the potential to lead to positive growth. Suffering in many traditions has been viewed as reflecting a special and instrumental relationship with God (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001).

Posttraumatic growth is both a process and an outcome. Traumatic events are those that are forceful enough to break down previously adaptive functioning mechanisms (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). They challenge our basic assumptions about our future and how to move forward (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi et al., 1998). The devastation of loss can provide some people with the impetus to rebuild themselves in a different and better way. They build a new life that incorporates their new understandings of the world and their view of self and others that takes into account the reality that such losses are possible. Changes in self perceptions include seeing oneself as a survivor rather than a victim (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).
There can be a sense of feeling stronger and more self-reliant, knowing that certain coping strategies are effective in helping one get through the difficult and painful process (Schaefer & Moos, 2001). An increased sense of vulnerability can lead to a heightened awareness of one’s mortality and the preciousness and fragility of life. When this is combined with positive views of the self it can promote a change in relationships and a shifting in priorities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

The idea that personal growth can be a consequence of suffering through loss has been known by grief researchers since studies of the bereaved began (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). The idea that one is significantly changed after a death in turn presents the question of how such a transformation comes about. Why do transitions, and in particular life crises have the potential to lead to personal growth? Schaefer and Moos (2001) wrote:

> Life crises and transitions forge our identities by initiating changes that challenge our basic values, placing new demands on us, and disrupting significant relationships and established roles. (p. 145)

The idea of personal growth is commonly seen in the bereaved individual’s increased independence, self-reliance, sense of efficacy, greater wisdom, maturity, compassion and understanding of others and shifted perspectives of life and religious or spiritual beliefs (Schaefer & Moos, 2001). These authors deem that personal growth occurs when the individual’s social and personal resources and coping skills are enhanced. This generally means that the bereaved person recounts having more empathy towards others, more self-awareness and confidence, and a shift in priorities and values, i.e., vis-à-vis what is valued in life (e.g., leisure and family vs. work and money).

Researchers have repeatedly found that grieving people report that they have grown as a result of their loss and that they believe something positive has come out of it (Cadell et al., 2003; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Davis, 2001; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Davis et al., 1998; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Franz et al., 2001; Lehman et al., 1993; Lieberman, 1996; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Polatinsky & Esprey, 2000; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991). The phenomenon of personal growth appears to occur in a large percentage of people. A significant number of people have reported personal growth after experiencing the death of a child, a
spouse, a parent, divorce, illness, fires and floods, and job loss (Joseph & Linley, 2006; Park & Helgeson, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Tedeschi et al., 1998; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006).

In one study, 84% of bereaved people reported personal growth and 98% reported having learned something as a result of their loss (Franz et al., 2001). Most people reported that they appreciated life more, that they came to realize that it is short and precarious, but also precious. As a result they found themselves more readily open to sharing their feelings of love for others to whom they were close (Franz et al., 2001). Eighty-five percent of people in this study reported having changed in terms of feeling more mature, self-confident, independent and stronger. They were able to live in the moment and were more compassionate and understanding towards, and with, others. They also found they could communicate their emotions more freely. However it should be noted that personal growth does not occur for all and a minority of people reported that nothing good came of their loss. In the Franz et al study 16% of bereaved people reported that their experience had no positive value.

Growth is seen in an individual’s sense of changed relationships. They often report an increased sense of connection with others, more empathy towards others and an improved ability to express emotions, in particular through self-disclosure (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Franz et al., 2001; Lieberman, 1996; Parkes & Weiss, 1983). The bereaved also often report changes in their existential and spiritual outlook in life. This has been described as an enhanced sense of meaning and purpose (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001), a changed worldview emerging from the “shattered assumptions” that result from loss (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), a new willingness to examine life and its vicissitudes and an increased awareness of existential issues (Yalom & Lieberman, 1991).

Lehman et al (1993) interviewed bereaved spouses and parents 4 to 7 years after the death of their loved one and asked them how their lives had changed since the death. Respondents were more likely to report positive rather than negative changes in their lives. However, reports of positive changes were not related to well-being and psychological symptoms whereas negative life changes were more highly associated with outcomes. Reports of change do not always correspond to lower levels of distress:

It is important to note that the reports of such growth or gain do not necessarily imply acceptance of the loss, resolution, or successful adjustment. Research
findings indicate that self-reported statements of growth are but modestly associated with other traditional markers of psychological adjustment, including scores on standard measures of depression, anxiety, and self-reported recovery. (Davis & McKearney, 2003, p. 478)

Newer research by Davis and colleagues (2007) indicated that a fuller understanding of posttraumatic growth is best undertaken by examining the concept in a more refined manner. They found PTG, when reported, is more likely to come from an experience that is interpreted as having been a threat to self, and that growth is viewed as the development of new self-understanding. These researchers suggested that there be a distinction drawn between the concepts of personal growth and benefits.

Such ideas of perceived growth and accrued benefits are regarded as one of many possible self-enhancing appraisals in some theories of coping with adversity (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). This is because major adversities threaten our basic core assumptions about self and world (Davis & McKearney, 2003; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). These assumptions are, “seeing ourselves as having control over events and being relatively invulnerable to harm, viewing the things that happen to us as orderly, predictable and meaningful, and regarding ourselves as worthy and other people as benevolent” (Tennen & Affleck, 1998, p.80-81). Themes of psychological reorganization after traumatic events have their premise in the idea that cognitive adaptations, that is, finding the good in an event, can ameliorate the harsh effects of an event by restoring, “comforting views of ourselves, other people, and the world” (Affleck & Tennen, 1996, p. 900). Some people may see their loss as ultimately good for them in some, or many, respects of their life and growth can manifest in many different ways, not felt at all times or in all areas of one’s life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001).

**Summary and Questions**

Positive growth post-loss or post-crisis is postulated to commonly occur. The idea that people can transcend their loss and through their suffering become a better, more self-aware, confident, caring and empathic person is highlighted by researchers who study the positive effects of bereavement. Growth post-loss is commonly defined as an enhancement in the use of one’s personal and coping resources. Indeed, common wisdom, historical literature and religious and spiritual traditions have espoused the notion that one is strengthened through experiencing adversity. The extent to which one’s personality and disposition affects outcomes and growth in
particular is debated, but it is likely that such characteristics, and particularly one’s usual coping strategies, will play a significant role in adaptation.

If post-loss growth is a relatively common experience, how do subsequent losses impact one’s post-loss personality? Are the positive effects of multiple bereavements cumulative? It could be conjectured that suffering through multiple losses would have a stronger or more powerfully painful and more profound effect on the individual. If so, what are the implications for transformation? Does it necessarily follow that living through a number of intensely painful experiences of loss results in even greater growth? Does such a concept even exist? In other words is personal growth cumulative, do we get better with more adverse experience? Does living through numerous subsequent painful losses have an additive effect, creating an even stronger, more resilient personality?

**Multiple Losses**

The terms “multiple loss” and “previous losses” are often used synonymously in the literature and refer to loss events that precede current losses and that are influential in the process of a current bereavement experience. This section will review the literature that describes the experience of having lived through prior losses and the effects it is said to have on current bereavement regardless of whether the authors use the term “previous” or “multiple” losses. The only distinction to be made for the purpose of the present study is that multiple losses that occur concurrently will not be considered. Rather this study is concerned with exploring and understanding the changes that are reported by the bereaved themselves after having experienced multiple losses through death over time.

Research on the effects of experiencing numerous losses is an area of study that does not have a cohesive or integrated literature base on which to base firm conclusions. To date, there are few published research studies that examine the process and effects on an individual of having experienced numerous losses of loved ones through death. Some studies focus on multiple losses in general, with emphasis on the secondary losses and other associated or non-associated losses that a person encounters after the death of a loved one or after experiencing a traumatic event (Green et al., 2000; Mercer & Evans, 2006; Neugebauer et al., 1992). Particular attention has been paid to the numerous losses encountered by people throughout the AIDS epidemic that
began in the 1980’s (Bigelow & Hollinger, 1996; Mallinson, 1999; Martin & Dean, 1993a; Neugebauer et al., 1992; Viney et al., 1991-92).

The term multiple loss syndrome has been coined by support workers and health care professionals who work in the HIV/AIDS field (Cho & Cassidy, 1994; Jacoby Klein & Kalla, 1993; Schwartzberg, 1992). Multiple loss syndrome is described as incorporating elements of chronic bereavement, anticipatory grief and unresolved grief with the compounding effects of several concurrent or proximate experiences of bereavement (Cho & Cassidy, 1994). This means that its nature is determined by the chronicity or ongoing experience of grief; the angst, anxiety and fear that is associated with expected or anticipated future losses; and those past losses that have not been worked through or assimilated as of yet. The AIDS-related research points to the enormous psychological stressors and distress experienced by members in the gay community who have lived through a seemingly relentless round of deaths that impact all of the bereaved individual’s close personal relationships, associated secondary losses, their community and their lifestyle (Bigelow & Hollinger, 1996; Jacoby Klein & Kalla, 1993; Mallinson, 1999; Martin & Dean, 1993a; Martin & Dean, 1993b; Nord, 1997; Schwartzberg, 1992; Viney et al., 1991-92).

The psychological consequences of previous and concurrent losses on a person’s coping with a subsequent loss are often referred to in the general grief literature. Losses such as: death of a significant other in childhood (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005, 2006), unresolved grief from past losses (Griffin, 2001; Turco, 1982; Worden, 2001), and secondary losses, i.e., job loss, financial strain, social role and status change, dissolved relationships (e.g., divorce) (Mercer & Evans, 2006; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Stroebe & Schut, 2001b; Worden, 2001) are postulated to have an impact on one’s coping with a current one. Hence, the clinical literature tends to focus on the effects of previous losses on subsequent bereavement experiences, i.e., it pertains to one’s coping with a current loss and how past losses affect one’s current coping when actively grieving.

The following review will highlight the correlational studies, case studies and personal accounts of and with persons who have experienced previous and/or multiple losses. It will then review the literature pertaining to HIV/AIDS related multiple losses.
Previous Losses

The literature in the area of previous losses and crises as they affect current ones is equivocal (Rando, 1993; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987). Although it is not uncommon to encounter references in the literature to the effects of previous losses having an impact on a current loss, it is not clear where such “evidence” comes from (Harvey & Miller, 1998; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005). The issue of previous losses is usually embedded in a list of various factors that contribute to one’s current grief process and possible outcome (Sanders, 1988; Worden, 2001). Therese Rando (1993) speaks to the issue as it pertains to treatment in complicated mourning and she cites studies that reveal disparities in the literature. Most of these studies stem from the 1960’s and 1970’s. While some studies found that previous life crises and losses were related to poorer outcomes (Maddison, 1968, Maddison & Walker, 1967, Parkes, 1975, 1987 cited in Rando, 1993), others found that coping with a previous loss was associated with better outcome (Bornstein et al., 1973, Huston, 1971, Shanfield & Swain, 1984, Vachon, 1976 cited in Rando, 1993). The type of losses and crises are not defined nor is it apparent what “poorer” or “better” outcomes means. Rando’s own research corroborated the idea that previous losses could be related to poorer outcome. She found that previous physical and psychosocial losses were related to poorer bereavement outcome in parents whose children had died of cancer (Rando, 1983 in Rando, 1993).

The ambiguity in the research has been explained as resulting from the type and timing of the prior loss, the relationship with the decedent, and how often such losses occurred (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987). This means that the type of loss, when it happened, who was lost, and how it was perceived and reacted to by the bereaved will affect whether and how it impacts subsequent losses. For example, childhood loss of a parent has been implicated in adult depression in some studies (but not all) while the experience of coping with an earlier loss was shown to facilitate adjustment during a subsequent loss (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987). A person’s belief in how he or she coped with the prior loss will also likely influence his or her coping with subsequent losses (Rando, 1993). Rando also notes that an important issue to consider in the research is the difference between bereavement from a loss through death and other types of losses.

Discrepancies in the literature may be due to such differing characteristics as related to the type and nature of the loss. In effect:
Antecedent loss is likely to have differing effects on bereavement outcome depending (a) on whether it occurred during childhood or adulthood and (b) on the frequency and type (relationship to the deceased) of antecedent experiences of loss...In short, in assessing the impact of prior losses on bereavement reactions, one needs to look at the specific type and timing of these experiences. (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987, p. 201)

The issue of previous losses was examined empirically in a study designed to assess the extent to which hypothesized risk factors modified the emotional responses of mourners (Gamino et al., 1998). The study included the variable, “number of previous losses” and incorporated participants’ responses to the question in a structured interview of what other significant losses they had experienced in their lives. Regression analyses revealed that previous losses in and of themselves did not predict grief symptoms.

The idea that previous losses have an impact on a survivor appeared to be more evident in studies of individual cases (Hunt, 2004; Turco, 1982) and through the renditions of the bereaved themselves (Peart, 2002). The influence of previous life events was deemed to have had a cumulative effect on one individual’s resolution of her grief from a recent loss through death (Turco, 1982). Turco wrote his case study of a 43-year-old woman’s process of resolving her grief surrounding the death of her infant granddaughter. He took a psychodynamic therapeutic perspective. His conceptualization of her current struggle with her grief was formulated on the idea that the intensity of her grief was predicated, partly, on her difficulty in “mastering” her past losses.

A case study of a 40-year-old single black woman in Zimbabwe who experienced the deaths of four siblings and her mother within a 6 year time period was used to evaluate a coping model in bereavement (Hunt, 2004). The subject of this study was deemed to be at risk for complicated bereavement due to her use of less effective coping strategies. It was not until the death of her mother that she became dysfunctional and sought treatment for her grief reactions. The author believes she was suffering from bereavement overload and that she had dosed herself through the pain of the previous losses but that her mother’s death was more emotionally demanding. The author explained this in terms of the hypothesized processes involved in a particular coping in bereavement model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The multiple losses that this woman encountered were thought to be impeding her use of adaptive coping strategies. In other
words, it was concluded that the effects of experiencing many losses served to impede an adaptive and healthy resolution of her cumulative grief (Hunt, 2004).

Author and musician, Neil Peart, wrote of his healing journey after the deaths of first his 19-year-old daughter then his wife 10 months later (Peart, 2002). He embarked on a healing journey, a 55,000 mile road trip on his motorcycle. His grief and anguish were chronicled and he wrote that his insights helped fuel his recovery. First the shock and despair of losing his daughter then the steady regression and ultimate death of his wife from cancer led him to a state of exhaustion and desolation. He wrote:

I didn’t really have a reason to carry on; I had no interest in life, work, or the world beyond, but unlike Jackie [his wife], who had surely willed her death, I seemed armored with some kind of survival instinct, some inner reflex that held to the conviction that “something will come up” … I remember thinking, “How does anyone survive something like this? And if they do, what kind of a person comes out the other end?” (Peart, 2002, p. 10)

This deeply personal narrative did not talk about recovery or resolution. Rather, like all such accounts by the bereaved, it chronicled the author’s process of coming to a place in his life that was again manageable and comfortable. He wrote of much personal change and growth, of having relinquished parts of his old self, while embracing other parts and being open to creating a new self. This is a narrative rendition of one man’s experiences of multiple loss of significant others through death, and although not a research study it does provide a glimpse into the emotional, cognitive and behavioural worlds of a bereaved man mourning his loved ones.

An empirical, longitudinal study designed to assess grief reactions and MMPI personality characteristics on bereavement outcomes measured 18 to 24 months after the death, found an interesting connection between multiple loss and current bereavement (Sanders, 1988). This study revealed four types of reactions to bereavement, one of which was labeled a “depressed high-grief” group. This group experienced high levels of depression, tension and had high sensitivity. Interestingly, the depressed high-grief group had, “almost always had a history of multiple family losses” which the author concluded, “means that they were dealing not only with the present loss, but with former losses as well” (Sanders, 1988, p. 102). Sander’s conclusions appear to be intuitive rather than empirically derived but this study speaks to the correlation between earlier losses and depressive symptomatology and the accepted wisdom in the literature, that multiple losses over time can impact subsequent bereavement.
The question of if and how multiple previous losses affect grief processes was addressed in an exploratory, qualitative study through semi-structured interviews with 28 participants who had suffered a loss through death in addition to other stresses and losses (Mercer & Evans, 2006). These writers reported that the length of time needed to grieve a loss was related to the time elapsed between losses. In other words, those who experienced losses simultaneously were more likely to grieve for 4 to 5 years. However, the authors noted that when the losses were temporally further apart grieving occurred over a shorter period of time. They concluded that this was because the mourner was able to grieve each loss separately, i.e., one at a time. Most of the variations in grieving time were shown by those who experienced multiple losses close together. In such cases many of the participants stated that subsequent losses impeded the grieving of earlier losses (Mercer & Evans, 2006).

Interesting conclusions are drawn from this study. The authors described the impact that multiple losses had on their participants’ lives. “The participants reported that their multiple losses had a major impact on their lives, altering their health, marriage, faith, finances, jobs, emotions, and personalities” (Mercer & Evans, 2006, p. 223). Some mourners differentiated their grief from depression, expressing that for them the two were not the same, while others related that they did suffer from long-lasting depression as a result of their experiences. Changes in personality, for both better and worse were described, as were newly acquired fears about losing more loved ones. Most of these participants reflected on their experience with pride for how well they had coped with such adversity.

**AIDS-Related Multiple Losses**

Multiple loss syndrome is a term used in the AIDS-related bereavement literature to describe the ongoing experience of living through numerous losses of all kinds. However, consistency in the definition of multiple loss syndrome is not apparent in the literature and there are very few detailed explanations of this construct. For example Jacoby et al. (1993) wrote that the phenomenon comprised; how people grieve, a PTSD-like response, and a burnout effect, yet the nature of these to this concept were not adequately explained. Martin and Dean (1993b) delineated the terms multiple loss and chronic loss and reported on how each of these affects AIDS-related bereavement. The difference in terms related to the time-frame of the losses with multiple loss referring to two or more recent bereavements with no past bereavements while
chronic loss pertained to having experienced a past bereavement and a recent one (Martin & Dean, 1993b).

Despite the lack of refinement in multiple loss definitions, all these authors reported significant elevations in psychological distress. Martin and Dean (1993b) wrote that AIDS-related deaths were associated with higher levels of psychological symptoms, help seeking and substance use, while chronic and multiple losses specifically, were associated with traumatic stress symptoms and subjective threat, although the long-range effects of these phenomenon appeared to dissipate. Jacoby Klein and Kalla (1993) stated that the resolution of grief is hampered by repeated losses especially if they occur over a brief period. Because these writers are concerned specifically with the HIV/AIDS afflicted community they also wrote of complications in bereavement that pertained to societal marginalization and invalidation.

In these cases, grieving takes a unique course as individuals are affected by the sheer immensity of the experience, i.e., it is not unlike disasters which claim many lives simultaneously yet there is a continuous aspect as the deaths do not stop, the deceased are usually young and a sense of hopefulness is seriously curtailed. It was proposed that the bereaved do not bounce back from each loss, that each loss compounds the next one. There is little time between ‘traumas’ to work through the feelings of loss from each and every death and so resolution is not easily attained. Jacoby-Klein and Kalla (1993) wrote, “The focus seems to be on one major loss. After each new loss people seem to further grieve the loss that they consider most significant and that loss is dealt with as if that’s the only one” (p.1).

These authors stated that multiple loss symptoms were a form of pathological grief. There can be: “intensified guilt and rage, increased physical symptoms, denial, delayed reaction and acting out of self-destructive behaviors” (Jacoby Klein & Kalla, 1993, p. 1). In addition, a burnout effect can occur that is characterized by numbness, and an inability to experience or express emotions, increased pessimism, cynicism and fatalism, anger, and difficulty staying connected to others.

Studies have explored the coping mechanisms used when experiencing multiple AIDS-related deaths (Bigelow & Hollinger, 1996; Mallinson, 1999; Neugebauer et al., 1992). Investigators have proposed that many of the bereaved undergo an emotional process that operates like a pendulum, vacillating back and forth between emotional flooding and numbing.
Numbness and flooding are useful skills utilized by the bereaved to cope with the extreme and intense emotion and anxiety associated with losing many people in one’s life (Bigelow & Hollinger, 1996). Depressive reactions to multiple losses through death by AIDS were evidenced by affective, cognitive and somatic complaints and the bereaved individual’s level of preoccupation with searching for the deceased (Neugebauer et al., 1992). Both these types of reactions have been identified in the bereavement literature as common and normative responses to the death of a loved one to whom one is emotionally attached. Results from this study showed that preoccupation and searching rose with greater number of losses whereas depressive symptoms did not (Neugebauer et al., 1992).

Coping with AIDS-related loss was explored in a phenomenological study of the experiences of HIV-negative gay men (Mallinson, 1999). This study revealed categories of meanings as the participants grieved numerous losses. Losses became cumulative as deaths of others meant; loss of friends, loss of community, loss of self, loss of connection with others and loss of a natural course of life. How respondents managed these losses included the factors of; engaging versus self-protecting, adapting versus escaping, numbing and normalizing death, validating the losses, and finding hope (Mallinson, 1999).

The cumulative impact on bereaved men’s psychosocial functioning after experiencing multiple deaths in the gay community was explored (Viney et al., 1991-92). Two hundred and fifteen men in two groups, each from a different gay community in separate cities were compared on the basis of content analysis of interviews for; anger, depression, anxiety and other psychosocial outcomes such as sociability, perceptions of helplessness and competence. The “less bereaved” group were from a relatively newer and less established community while the “more bereaved” had existed in a longer-established and therefore more cohesive and supportive community. It was believed that the former group would be less bereaved because they would have experienced fewer multiple deaths than the more bereaved group. Such an assumption is not adequately explicated in this study. The researchers hypothesized that the more bereaved community would express more anger, depression and anxiety due to their (presumed) experiences with more deaths.

Two of these hypotheses were borne out, with the more bereaved group experiencing more anger and anxiety but the less bereaved group experiencing more depression and guilt. This
anomaly was not adequately explained in their discussion apart from suggesting that the less bereaved were perhaps anticipating more future deaths and the ensuing bereavement experience. As well, the rationale for their use of these populations and the presumed level of bereavement appear to be assumptive.

The research on AIDS-related bereavement is informative of how some populations experience and cope with the devastating impact of losing numerous close personal relationships. These studies help us understand the effects of bereavement and help elucidate the coping, or process, aspect of grieving from multiple losses. However this body of work has some limitations. The specific and unique characteristics of the AIDS-bereaved community and the extraordinary impact of the AIDS epidemic may be exceptional. The authors themselves note that the distinctive characteristics of the AIDS epidemic and the mobilization within the gay community may account for their findings. Nonetheless these studies are intuitively appealing, as they speak to what we can imagine and believe as being an incredibly difficult process with far-reaching implications for one’s life.

**Summary and Questions**

Studies (for e.g., Hunt, 2004; Jacoby Klein & Kalla, 1993) on the effects of previous losses and multiple losses indicate that multiple losses have a significant effect on people. Experiencing multiple losses, whether they involve death or not appears to tax a person’s coping mechanisms, rendering the experience that much more difficult as loss upon loss is coped with and assimilated. Time seems to play a role. The closer together the losses occur the harder it is to cope with each loss separately. There can be a sense of being overwhelmed or overloaded and resolution may be harder to obtain, at least in the short run. Much of this research (for e.g., Griffin, 2001; Mercer & Evans, 2006) includes losses of many types and does not pertain exclusively to subsequent losses through death. Most of this research is focused on how past or ongoing losses impact current bereavement and not on ultimate changes post-bereavement. Nor does it speak to the transformative nature that the person perceives for him or herself. Despite the oft-mentioned perception that living through multiple painful and adverse experiences can lead to strength and positive growth, there is little in the published multiple loss research that specifically addresses the concept of change or personal growth.
How does the current literature help us understand what the outcomes are for people who lose two or more significant people in their lives through death? Because most of the literature speaks to processes in current bereavement and the effects of prior losses on that, or is specific to a particular, epidemic-weary population, the question still remains: What are the perceived changes after living through numerous previous losses?

**Purpose of the Study**

There is much conjecturing in the literature that prior losses can have an impact on coping with subsequent losses and that the cumulative effects can be detrimental to one’s well-being. Yet, it does not specifically address the issue of what the phenomenon is like or what the effects really are. As well, much has been written about the belief that living through adversity is ultimately growth-promoting. However, the lived experiences of the multiply bereaved have not been examined in depth or breadth. There is as yet little research focusing on the changes or outcomes for the individual who loses two or more deeply valued and cherished people in their lives. We therefore do not know the nature of or even how multiple previous loss experiences ultimately impact people.

It is recognized that people report a changed sense of themselves, their view of others, and their views of the world. However what is less known is whether or how the experience of living through subsequent losses impacts the individual. Most models of grief and bereavement and those pertaining to post-loss growth do not differentiate the experience of living through one important life-changing loss from living through multiple losses. It is not apparent from this large body of research whether losses of numerous close relationships have a discerning effect in these theoretical models. The idea of personal change and consequent growth that can occur after living through one significant loss through death is not extended to account for subsequent losses through death. What transformations, if any, occur for the individual who lives through not one, but two or more significant losses through death? The current study addresses this question by examining what the experience means to the individuals and elucidates the commonalities revealed in the narratives of multiple loss.
Chapter 3: 
Methods

The current inquiry is focused on illuminating the experience of and impact on the individual of having lost two or more loved ones through death, at separate points in time, throughout one’s adult lifetime. It elucidates these phenomena through open-ended, in-depth interviews and the use of qualitative, narrative analysis methods. This chapter begins by placing the study in methodological context and describing the nature and process of narrative analyses. It highlights the relevance of this methodology for the current study. It concludes by defining the parameters and criteria of the current study and a description of the methodological procedures and the participants.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research methodology has numerous iterations and has a longstanding tradition in many of the social sciences, including psychology (Tesch, 1990). Qualitative philosophical traditions seek to understand how people make sense of their experiences and their world. This paradigm focuses on the qualities of and processes and meanings ascribed to phenomena as they are constructed through social interaction and expressed (usually) through verbal language.

The qualitative research paradigm is an interpretative tradition that despite having many diverse methods adheres to some general principles. First, qualitative inquiry recognizes that human experience is influenced by the person’s social, cultural and historical contexts. The meanings of phenomena are developed and evolve within these larger contexts and they are expressed and elucidated through socially discursive means often, but not limited to, verbal language. Second, the information gathered is of a rich and descriptive nature and is usually in the form of narratives as told in in-depth interviews. Third, the process of qualitative data analysis is inductive rather than deductive, allowing a thorough understanding of a phenomenon through the examination and abstraction of its components. There are no hypotheses to be tested; rather, the central purpose is to find new information from which new knowledge is generated. Fourth, the researcher plays a key role in both data collection and analysis. Researcher and participants form a collaborative relationship, both contributing to the process and findings of the
research. Fifth, the nature of reality is believed to be multiple, emergent and evolving. Each individual’s experience and perspective is considered valuable and meaningful and is honoured for what it is, with no one perspective having significance over another. (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Tesch, 1990).

The qualitative methodological approach is designed to explore the experiential life of people. It focuses on the human life as lived by the individual, how it is felt and how it is made sense of:

A primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness…Qualitative methods are specifically constructed to take account of the particular characteristics of human experience and to facilitate the investigation of experience. (Polkinghorne, 2005, p.138)

Qualitative researchers are interested in the nature of the interpreted meaning, the process of understanding that the participant undertakes and how that process leads to his or her understanding of the relevance of the experience to one’s life. These lived experiences have a depth to them that is not easily measured by standard quantitative methods such as short answer questionnaires and Likert scale evaluations that do not capture the nuance, the essence or the reasoning behind the interpretation of the experience.

An individual’s exploration of experience is most often conducted in the form of discourse, or “languaged data” that is comprised of combinations of words that are composed into sentence form. These sentences are combined to form the discourse. It is the very complexity of the interconnectedness and relationships of the combined forms of the words that makes it difficult to quantify and analyze with numbers, requiring a different and more appropriate means of analysis, one that uses, “analytic tools specifically designed to work with languaged data” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138).

The current inquiry uses a qualitative design conceived within this philosophical paradigm. The choice of this methodology is based on the assumption and belief that the phenomenon under question is most readily explored within the context of a constructivist, meaning-making framework. The study of the lived experience of multiple loss and the effects are felt experiences given meaning through language. It is through language that the participant and the researcher discover and elucidate that experience.
The subjective view of the participant is considered paramount in ascertaining the meanings that such experiences have for the person (Polkinghorne, 1988) and because this inquiry is an exploratory one, having no, or little precedence such an approach is deemed appropriate if not necessary (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A qualitative methodological design is invaluable for this type of study because the researcher: a) values the individual’s experience and his or her ability to articulate it; b) believes that the underlying core experiences in loss can be perceived, felt, and described by the individual and communicated to others through language; c) believes that the nature of this research question does not lend itself to a quantitative investigation and measures, d) hopes to address the dearth of information about multiple loss experiences through death by examining an individual’s ascribed meanings, and e) believes that what can be learned from an in-depth, discovery-oriented inquiry will help inform the knowledge base in the grief and bereavement literature.

Qualitative methods are frequently advocated and commonly used in the field of bereavement research (Chase, 2008; Gilbert, 2002; Lund & Caserta, 1997-1998; Neimeyer, 2004a; Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). These methods lend themselves to helping capture the many, diverse, and varied experiences that manifest in grief and indeed have been instrumental in building our current knowledge base in the field (CAH, 2004). Such designs are particularly valuable in domains where little relevant theory exists, in revealing how people make meaning of events, and in helping gain a better and deeper understanding of phenomena without attempting to make causal inferences (Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001).

Assessing the psychological reactions in bereavement can be a difficult task. Reactions to loss are complex, combining as they do all of the emotional, cognitive, behavioural, physiological and social domains. These reactions are highly variable and changeable throughout the bereavement process. The vast individual differences, contexts and overlap of symptomatology with other psychological constructs can make measuring such phenomenon a challenging task (Hansson, Carpenter, & Fairchild, 1993). Grief measures are primarily designed to characterize symptomatology of bereavement and tend to focus on social-behavioural reactions and negative emotional states in bereavement (Hansson et al., 1993; Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001). Exploring the meanings associated with loss is not easily done with such quantitative measures.
Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is premised on the notion that human lives are “storied” in nature, that is, humans have a propensity to think about, organize, recount and understand their experiences in the form of stories, with sequences of events, plots, characters and evolving meanings (Elliott, 2005; Polkinghorne, 1988). In narrative psychology, the concern is with how individuals organize their stories (the structure), the essence of those stories (the content) and the purpose of them, or the meaning they have for the individuals’ lives (the function). It is in the telling of these stories to others and to ourselves through social discourse that we interpret our actions. Through this process, “we not only shape the world and ourselves but they are shaped for us through narrative” (Murray, 2003, p. 95).

In its strictest sense a narrative is defined as a story with a temporal component, having a beginning, a middle and an end. It is a chronology of events (Elliott, 2005). Plots within narrative are the events as they are linked to each other, creating meaning. Narratives are also told in a context, to a specific audience; a listener who can play a role in the recounting of the story (Riessman, 2008). The emphasis in narrative inquiry is on qualitative, hermeneutic, inductive forms of knowing rather than quantitative, positivistic and deductive strategies. Borrowing ideas from Jerome Bruner, McAdams and colleagues (McAdams et al., 2001) describe narrative research as:

A mode of knowing that privileges ...the particulars of lived experience rather than constructs about variables and classes. Meaning is not inherent in an act or experience but is constructed through social discourse. Meaning is generated by linkages the participant makes between aspects of the life he or she is living and his or her understandings of these aspects. The role of the researcher is then to connect this understanding with some form of conceptual interpretation, which is meaning constructed at another level of analysis. (pp. xi-xii)

There are common principles that narrative research adheres to when attending to people’s narratives. These primary interests are in:

1. the lived experiences of people and an appreciation of the temporal nature of that experience;

2. the notion of process and change over time; and

3. representations of the self.
Concomitant with these interests are:

4. the researcher’s wish to empower the research participant and to allow him or her to determine the most important themes in the area under investigation and;

5. to be aware of the participation of the researcher him or herself, who is also a narrator of others’ stories (Elliott, 2005).

The hallmark of narrative analyses is its assertion that stories as told by a narrator are not necessarily accurate recollections of factual events which could be corroborated by others; rather they are developed and evolve within the course of their communication to and with another. Fundamental to this concept is the notion that narration is a distinctive mode of discourse. “A central tenet of the narrative turn is that speakers construct events through narrative rather than simply refer to events” (Chase, 2008, p. 64). It is less a description and more a construction of meaning.

Narrative knowing is not concerned with the “ultimate truth”, that which can be logically and empirically replicated and generalized. Rather, the emphasis is on a “narrative truth” with a focus on the credibility, plausibility, intelligibility and trustworthiness of the story (Gilbert, 2002). Narratives are representations of events rather than exact replicas. They evolve in their telling. They are reinterpreted and changed as they are told to another and that other has an influence on the process (Gilbert, 2002; McAdams et al., 2001; Riessman, 1993).

Narrative methods have been well suited and adequately adapted in research on personal lives in transition (McAdams et al., 2001). People make sense of their experiences by putting them into a narrative form. “This is especially true of difficult life transitions and trauma: As Isak Dinesen said, ‘All sorrows can be borne if we can put them into a story’” (Riessman, 1993, p. 4).

In grief research it is considered vital to understand, appreciate and honour the experiences of the bereaved (Bregman & Thiermann, 1995; Gilbert, 2002; Rosenblatt, 2000). The very complex, varied and diverse nature of grief experiences and the personal meaning-making that accompanies such experiences made it a phenomenon better suited to exploration through narrative means.
Narrative inquiry has a broad and multidisciplinary appeal in many of the social sciences, including psychology. Narrative epistemology incorporates diverse methods for the examination and understanding of human lives including case studies, autobiography, life history, ethnography, discourse analysis, and content analysis. (McAdams et al., 2001). There are varied and numerous methods used by researchers to interpret narratives. In keeping with the research question and the epistemological interest in narrative forms of psychology (Murray, 2003), the current study used an approach that attended both to what was being communicated—the content, and to how it was said—the process of communication and the meanings it conveyed (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2008).

The Breadth and Scope of the Study:
Defining Parameters

Rationale and Design

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of multiple loss and its impact on individuals. The research objectives were explored with two specific research questions: 1) What does the multiple loss experience mean to this person? 2) What are the common themes across all participants and how do these relate to current theory? The current study uses twelve interviews to help elucidate, explore and understand the varied nature of multiple loss as it pertains to each individual. The individual’s narrative of his or her multiple loss experiences were co-constructed in the interview and reconstituted by the researcher. Each of the informants had unique experiences that revealed the complexities in the experience and how these individuals made sense of their losses. There were also emergent themes or categories of effects that pertained as a result of their losses. These formed the basis for the model used by the researcher to describe the multiple loss experience for these individuals.

The Participants: Selection and Criteria

The study recruited adults who were at least 25 years of age and who had lost 2 or more close loved ones through death at separate times throughout their adult lifetime. The deaths occurred at separate times and the last death had to have been at least 2 years ago. The study was open to individuals of all genders, socioeconomic class and ethnicity and all the losses must have occurred in the participants’ adulthood. The minimum age requirement was in keeping with the
context of the current study’s focus of losses in adulthood. The absence of a maximum age requirement was meant to incorporate the breadth of the adult lifespan. The ages of the participants in this study ranged from 31 to 56 years of age. In addition, the focus of this study is on losses in adulthood and therefore childhood loss experiences were not explicitly sought.

Participants were recruited from the general population through notices and advertisements that were disseminated throughout a large catchment area of a greater urban metropolitan city (Appendix A). Notices were included in a local hospice and a bereavement support organization. In addition, participants were obtained through a recruitment notice that was circulated on an electronic list-serv within the academic department of the researcher’s university, a print advertisement that was placed in a local small city newspaper and referrals made by word-of-mouth.

Participants contacted the researcher via telephone or email and were provided with information about the study. Interested participants were then screened for inclusion by assessing their loss experiences and their current feelings about their losses (see Appendix B). Fourteen adult individuals were interviewed for this study. After analyzing the first 9 to 10 interviews it became apparent that no new themes were emerging and it was felt that saturation for this sample had been reached. That is to say that despite the varied nature of the stories there appeared a repetition of themes and no new participants were sought.

Twelve interviews were used in the final analysis (see Table 1). Eleven were female, one was male. The two excluded interviews were exempt for the following reasons: In one case the participant focused almost exclusively on a childhood loss and although she had experienced losses in adulthood it was this loss that pervaded her story and that had the most influence on her. Rich and meaningful though it was it was deemed to be outside the criteria of the current exploration. The other omitted interview contained a poverty of personally meaningful content. It was 33 minutes long and the participant used very little self-focused and exploratory language. Hence it was excluded from this analysis as it did not adequately address the personal experience of loss. The characteristics, demographics and narrative data of the remaining 12 participants only will be referred to herewith.

Nine participants identified themselves as Canadian, with a small percentage indicating their cultural heritage such as Aboriginal-Irish, Italian, German. One identified as Indian of
Hindu background and one of the participants was British-English. Two of the participants were known to me. Appendix C provides the full demographic information.

### Table 1

**Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of losses</th>
<th>Types of relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Father; Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Infant; Grandmother; Aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marg</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Father; Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Father, Mother-in-law; Friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Father; Brother; Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Best friend; Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mother; Infant; Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randy</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Partner; Partner; Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorraine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Brother; Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dipti</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mother; Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sister; Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Brother; Father; Mother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was expected that losses through death that had the most impact would be from those people to whom the participant was emotionally close. The criteria for inclusion as a “close relationship” were defined by the participant themselves. This included any person the participant defined as having had a significant relational influence on their life. The research in the meaning-making and growth-related literature contains varied relationships including spouses (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001; Danforth & Glass, 2001) children (Braun & Berg, 1994; Polatinsky & Esprey, 2000; Uren & Wastell, 2002), “a loved one” (Davis et al., 1998; Davis et al., 2007; Franz et al., 2001; Kessler, 1987) and “friends or family members” (Cadell et al., 2003; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Hunt, 2004). Some studies in the general bereavement literature use mixed samples of loss experiences that include all or any of spouses, children, parents, siblings...
or friends (Gamino et al., 1998; Lehman et al., 1993) The AIDS-related literature includes the multiplicity and diversity of relationships that are grieved and the impact that obtains when loss occurs through death (Bigelow & Hollinger, 1996; Mallinson, 1999; Martin & Dean, 1993a; Richards, 2001; Schwartzberg, 1992). Those who work with and study AIDS-related bereavement emphasize the need for researchers to be aware of “family-centric” and “heteronormative” assumptions. The question of “who can grieve for who” must be answered by the participant themselves (B. deVries, personal communication, April 30, 2008). I believe that the nature of the bond and its relevance for the individual’s self-concept and worldview can be, indeed must be, participant determined.

Despite this notion in order to ensure that the lost relationships had had a significant impact on the participant’s life, participants who had lost only distant relationships, acquaintances or colleagues were excluded. Screening questions were used to determine the nature of the bond with the deceased and how the potential participant viewed it in his or her life (see Appendix B). All participants in this study described relationships that had a considerable impact on their lives. The participants’ choice of inclusion was deemed to be sufficient. Types of relationships spoken of consisted of spouses/partners, mothers, fathers, siblings, a neonate and perinatal loss, best friends, a mother-in-law, a grandmother and an aunt. The relationship types are included in the demographic information in Appendix C and Table 1.

The time since last death was set at 2 or more years prior to the interview. The rationale for this pertained to a hypothesized notion commonly reported in the literature that most people experience their acute distress in the first 2 years of bereavement and that most people by the second year after their loss are functioning adaptively with little or no acute distress (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Stroebe, 2001; Worden, 2001). In addition, it was believed that the information on one’s changes post-loss would be better understood and perhaps more integrated by an individual when he or she had had more time since the last loss to reflect upon the cumulative effects. The time since last death for these participants ranged from 2 years prior to the interview to 28 years ago.

The number of losses through death of significant others was set at two or more. There is no consensus or definition of multiple losses in the current literature. This body of work is silent on how many such losses are necessary to be considered “impactful”. The literature on single
losses speaks to the effects of losing one close person. The current study proposed that the loss of a second close person, and perhaps, a third and fourth, etc. would also exert an influence in some form or other, on an individual. The number of close relationships lost and talked about in each of the interviews was evenly split with 6 participants having lost two people and 6 having lost three important, close relationships through death.

**The Interviews**

The interviews were conducted mostly in and around the area of a large metropolitan Canadian city. One was conducted in London, England. Four interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes. The others took place in a quiet office or counselling space, the latter associated with the researcher’s home university.

The participants were provided with an information letter and a consent form for signing at the time of the interview (see Appendix D). A copy of the consent letter was given to them. They were asked if they wanted their interview transcript and/or the study results. The interview began with a brief background information questionnaire designed to contextualize the individual’s information within the larger study. Questions pertained to age, marital status, ethnicity and principal language. As well participants indicated the number and nature of the deaths, the relationships, causes of death and ages of decedent and participant at time of each death. This helped the researcher understand the context of the participant’s story and allowed for comparison of contexts across participants (see Appendix C).

The inquiry conducted semi-structured, in-depth, open-ended interviews with each participant. The length of the interviews ranged from a short interview of 42 minutes to the longest which was 190 minutes. The average interview was 65 minutes long. The participant was invited to tell the story of his or her losses and the impact that they had on his or her life. In order to elicit a narrative, the opening question was purposely open-ended and broad (Riessman, 2008). The interview began with the statement: “Tell me what it’s like to have lost these people in your life.” Occasionally, and as needed, the researcher posed various questions throughout the interview to elicit further exploration of the phenomenon by the participant. After hearing all the stories of each loss, the researcher proceeded with questions pertaining to the overall impact, the effects of each loss on the next one, and asked how they would characterize the experience of their multiple losses (see Appendix E).
Interviews were transcribed and transcripts reviewed in full and edited by the researcher. Participants were contacted again via telephone approximately 4 to 6 weeks after the initial interview for a follow up. They were given an opportunity to comment, augment or edit anything that they had said in the interview. Additional information was noted at that time and included in the analysis. It was an opportunity to check in with the participant and ascertain his or her reactions to the previous interview. The follow up contact provided the occasion to incorporate any new information the participant wished to portray as well as revise any previous information deemed appropriate (Creswell, 1994). Participants for the most part did not add anything new to the data.

**Analysis of the Data**

Interviewing, transcription and analysis procedures for the current inquiry were guided by the formulations and techniques espoused by those researchers who incorporate context and process of narrative interviewing (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 2008). A characteristic of narrative is its sequential and structured features therefore narrative inquiries attend first to the whole account and treat the text (interview transcript) as a unit rather than fragmenting it into themes that are broken down into categories (Riessman, 2008). This was done by first transcribing the interview in its entirety as a first draft that captured all of the words and actions (e.g., crying, long pauses, laughing etc.) and then reviewing the transcript in order to gain familiarity and closeness with the interview and returning to the document to re-transcribe selected portions that are deemed appropriate for further detailed analysis. The goal is for the analyst to create a “meta-story” about the experience under investigation. Through this process the participant’s individual narrative was written.

The completed narratives were given to the participants for their feedback and/or editing. All but one of the informants replied. This narrative was included nevertheless because the researcher had had some email correspondence with the participant relating to the interview and the transcript. All remaining participants reported that they accepted the narrative as is. In two cases minor factual errors were corrected. Most participants expressed gratitude in and pleasure towards the written accounts.

The individual narratives are presented in Chapter Four. There was some similarity of content amongst all participants and through the analytic process there emerged a set of
categories or themes comprised of subthemes that revealed the common effects of the multiple loss experience. These are presented in Chapter Five. In addition, the process of understanding how each individual viewed and recounted his and her losses led to the creation of a model that incorporated the elements of the experience and helps explain this phenomenon. The image of a house under construction was conceptualized and this metaphor is used to further illuminate the model. This meaning-making model and metaphor of the multiple loss experience are presented in Chapter Six.

The Researcher

Qualitative research is a subjective and intersubjective exercise (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Reflexivity is of paramount importance. It is “the tendency critically to examine and analytically to reflect upon the nature of the research and the role of the researcher in carrying out and writing up empirical work” (Elliott, 2005, p.153). As such, the researcher’s own self, modes of interaction, forms of interpretation, interests, background and biases will influence the accumulation of data and the analytic processes. I bring to this research my personal and vicarious experiences of loss which have fashioned both my interest in the topic and my notions of what this journey is like. My interest in the topic of impact of multiple losses was formulated in the context of my work with bereaved individuals, my personal losses, and my familial multi-generational experiences of death that have left me with what I term a “legacy of loss”.

As a bereavement counselor, I became a witness to the deep inner focus and multifaceted experiences of meaning-making that many grieving people are prone to undertake. Theirs was an experience of searching for understanding. They were trying to make sense of their loss in the context of their lives. The focus of their meaning-making frequently oscillated between the past and future, i.e., they delved into their memories of the person, who they were, how they had died, why they had died and what it might have meant to the deceased. They would then move forward to the here and now and would consider how this death was affecting them—the bereaved. They were focused on the impact it was having and would continue to have for them in the future. Who am I now? Where will I go from here? What will become of my life, identity, roles, etc? What does this mean for me? Widows, mothers who had lost children, daughters who had lost mothers, husbands who had lost wives all pondered the question of who they were now
in light of the loss of this important relationship. I began to see this as the impact that it was having on them.

The impact of singular losses was evident in the exploratory and meaning-making journey of the bereaved and I came to ponder the question; what will happen to these people if and when they lose another close person? Personal acquaintances who had lost a number of close family members reminded me of the prevalence and intensity of these experiences. I asked myself the question: How does a person survive this? What does it do to them? My own family has suffered numerous premature deaths. Great-grandparents, grandparents and my parents all lost significant others at young ages. My father lost his parents and his grandparents in his early adulthood. He carried this legacy of loss into our family. I always wondered what it meant to him and how it had shaped his life and who he was.

The inheritance of loss continues into my family-of-origin. I lost the only grandmother I knew and was close to when I was age 20, and my own mother who died within the course of my writing the proposal for this study. And perhaps somewhat ironically, throughout the course of writing this paper I encountered a series of losses, albeit less intense and identity-changing, in the form of the death of all three of my beloved pets. I have become acutely aware of the vicissitudes of the grief experience. Although the death of my mother was the most impactful of all these deaths, I found myself reflecting on the notion of what all these losses were doing to me. Many questions have surfaced within me to which there are yet no answers: Who am I now, without my mother in my life? When my father was admitted to hospital 2 months after mother died I was faced with the notion that I may be about to lose another important relationship in my life. I have become more acutely aware of the reality that I and most of us, at some point or other, have faced: the loss of a number of our close loved ones. What does this do to us?

As I embarked upon the research project, I was aware of current theoretical perspectives in the grief and bereavement literature. I had my own personal experiences and knowledge gained through witnessing others’ losses and I had my social, historical and cultural/ethnic biases that influenced my beliefs and notions of the loss experience. My biases shaped the nature of the questions I asked and influenced the composition of the final written narrative that is this document. My tendency to think visually and use imagery in understanding led to the creation of the metaphor I used to elucidate the narratives. These stories unfolded within the context of me
as the listening other. I endeavoured to maintain a reflexive approach to my reactions to and understanding of the experiences related to me by maintaining a research journal. My emotional reactions in particular were noted. This has inevitably helped shape the meanings created and interpreted in the current study.

**Cultural Considerations**

There is much cross-cultural variation in responses to and expressions of grief. Despite research on physiological and therefore presumably universally human responses to bereavement, there are still many, often large and divergent overt reactions in different cultures. Certain cultures encourage overt and open expressions of grief while others prohibit such. Rituals and customs, as well as subjective accounts of grief, also have varied manifestations. All this points to the crucial caveat in the current study: that the accounts of the participants, in addition to being unique intrapersonal and subjective recollections, are also socially and culturally situated. They reflect the individualized perceptions as well as the participants’ cultural and social milieu and their influences. The researcher herself is culturally situated in a Westernized and specific socioeconomic class and racial/ethnic context. However, the exploration and discovery of mutual meanings in diverse experiences can provide invaluable insight into the universal nature of grief.

The demographic in this study is somewhat homogenous. Socioeconomic information was not elicited but all participants were required to be literate and they were able to effectively articulate their stories. In addition, the age range and gender bias reveals that the individuals who participated in this study were predominantly middle-aged White women of European descent. I myself am in the latter category. This study does not purport to reflect all the possible meanings and experiences encountered in multiple loss. Rather, it does highlight how this particular set of individuals has experienced their losses and it does provide us with some insight into this complex, varied and diverse experience.
Chapter 4:
The Individual Narratives

The narrative analysis of the twelve interviews revealed twelve very unique, varied and powerful stories. Each person had experiences that were distinctive to his or her life, including the type of relationships that were lost and the nature of the deaths. In keeping with the narrative tradition this chapter presents the participants and their personal narratives, often using lengthy quotes to capture the meaningfulness of the account. This is done in order to share with the reader these stories holistically with all their complexities and integrity and to provide the background, context and process of each individual’s loss experience.

Each narrative begins with a brief introduction to the participant and proceeds through the losses in sequential order. The narrative is then concluded with a précis of the meanings of the multiple loss experiences to that individual, using their own metaphor when applicable. Subsequent chapters will reveal the commonalities amongst the participants’ experiences and explain an emergent model by which the respondents made sense of and narrated their multiple loss experiences.

The Participants’ Stories

Bridget’s Story

Bridget is a 43-year-old widowed woman who lives alone in her own home. She does not have children. She spoke about the impact of losing her husband and her father. Her father had died 20 years ago and her husband nearly 2 1/2 years prior to the interview. She worked as a pediatric nurse in a large urban hospital. She had an elderly mother to whom she is devoted and a large supportive social network. She spoke candidly and openly about her feelings and experiences. Although she was clearly struggling with her latest loss and was still very much in a process of recovery, she also articulated the desire, hope and resilience to carry on in the face of her ongoing grief.
The first loss.

Bridget lost her father to cancer when he was 56 years old and she was 20. It happened at a time in her life when she was embarking on her own, developing an autonomous life outside her immediate family.

I unfortunately lost my father when I was 20 and it was at a time in my life when my focus wasn't really on family in the sense that I was an average, normal teenage girl and I finished high school and I went to university and I had my own life. I had a boyfriend. I had all this stuff and then my dad got ill.

He had been very sick as he suffered through the disease and she feared losing him. Yet there were times when she harbored some hope that he would survive. As his disease progressed his suffering became immense and the quality of his life was greatly diminished. His death was hard to bear but his suffering had been equally distressing to witness. She coped with his death by realizing the agony of his illness was intolerable.

I felt badly about how my father had to suffer but there was relief and the fact that he was not suffering anymore…Wishing my father back in that state would have been torture and an unfair wish so I felt that I could deal with it by saying…this was no way of living…so I felt then it’s better that he’s gone and that he’s not suffering anymore.

She thinks of him now in terms of how her life changed as a result of his death. It had a huge effect on her role in the family and the family’s dynamic.

His death affected me on a personal level in so many ways. The effect of that death was huge in the sense that...my father died, my sister got married that same year. So we went from a family of four to a family of two…The loss of my father…had the effect on me and the trajectory of the rest of my life in terms of family commitments and responsibilities.

Bridget sees herself as the caregiver in the family and took on the role of looking out for her mother. She became more focused on her mother and incorporated her mother into her life.
Her wellbeing was important to Bridget and her concern for her mother stemmed from witnessing the latter’s experience of being widowed and “watching a woman not feel safe in this world anymore.” There was a sense of her mother’s vulnerability and loneliness.

The effect of my mother losing her husband affected me. Because growing up—I'm the daughter that takes care of things—so I have taken care of my mother for 22 years now. Many people didn't have to worry about if their mother was okay when they were 21, 22, so in that sense…I became very focused on my family and my mother after that…So the effect of my father's death at 20 changed my whole life in the sense of how I got through my 20's and my 30's… it's a huge impact on my life. Huge.

After her father died she quickly got back into her life and carried through with her goals and plans but she wonders how she did that in light of her loss at the time. “I don’t know how I did that. I have no idea where that energy, that fuel came from.” Because he became ill and died when she was relatively young, she missed out on having an adult-to-adult relationship with him.

“I have regret that I didn’t get to know him. I wasn’t adult enough to get to know him as an adult, to appreciate his personality and appreciate who he was.”

As Bridget coped with her new reality she continued to look out for her mother and when she met her future husband she created a new family that encompassed her mother and her husband. She reminisces about her husband and their relationship in glowing terms.

And then subsequently when I met my husband I was blessed enough to meet someone who was quite happy to incorporate (my mother) into our life…I met the man of my dreams. He couldn’t have been anything more if he was perfect. We were perfect for each other. He made me want to be a better person than I was. I made him want to be a better person than he was.

The second loss.

Bridget lost her husband suddenly and unexpectedly in a tragic accident, 2 1/2 years prior to our interview. He was 47 years old at the time and she was 40. He died in a plane crash. It was
shocking and traumatic. “My husband left and said ‘I’ll be back in ten minutes’ and never came back.” She was traumatized, “as I watched my husband die in front of me.”

The accident happened while they were away on a trip. She came home to an empty house and the prospect of going through his belongings and sorting out his personal things. She worried that she would discover a secret life unbeknownst to her. This did not happen and she is grateful for having had an open and transparent relationship. She describes a marriage that was built on companionship, trust, and mutual respect. She worked hard in her marriage to make it as good as it could be and despite stresses and hardships it was a healthy one. This marriage was one she believed in and worked hard at. This loss leaves her deeply affected. “So there is that anger where you feel, I worked at that. It shouldn’t have happened to me. Because I did all the right things.”

Bridget can’t find the words to describe the depth of the experience of losing her husband. Her entire world, her life and her sense of herself, were all affected.

There are no words to explain, your self-esteem is affected, your place in this world, of feeling like you are important to someone is affected…it’s ‘who am I in this world?’...Because the effect of my husband’s death has been incapacitating. Unable to work, unable to organize my thoughts, unable to do many, many things I used to do….because I’m not the girl that I was before.

Her husband’s death is the most salient one for Bridget. Her grief is immense. She struggles with this loss and the enormity of the impact that it has had on her life. She has worked hard at recovering and healing and has undergone counselling, participated in Outward Bound groups, traveled, and gone back to work. Yet there is a lingering pall. “I still feel like shit.” She describes her grief as coming in massive waves. There are incredible moments of pain that come out of nowhere and throw her off course. She likens the recurring grief experience to a tsunami: being hit abruptly and unexpectedly, having her life turned upside down and topsy-turvy, and then rebuilding that which was destroyed in the onslaught, only to have another massive wave come and knock it all down again.
So just at that time that you actually think ‘I’m actually feeling a little better’…then the next day you get walloped with some sort of feelings that are crushing and overwhelming.

Bridget sees the changes in her since the death of her husband as monumental, affecting every facet of her being and testing every aspect of her self.

The changes have been very profound….everything that you could count on with some predictability about yourself as a person, a woman, (is) gone … I would say devastating, far reaching effect on your life, testing every limit of patience, resilience that you have. Testing all your limits. That's what it's like…I don’t know who this person is, she’s foreign to me.

*The impact.*

Bridget experienced each loss differently and each one had a distinct impact on her due to the difference in the type of relationship she had with each person. That is, the death of her father at an earlier time in her life had different effects on her than did her husband’s more recent passing. Her husband’s death overshadows her earlier loss and it has had the most profound effect on Bridget. It is the most salient and impactful one and it shapes and informs much of her overall experience and the effects that her losses have had on her.

Bridget is continuing to make sense of her overall loss experiences and they are coloured by the intensity of the grief surrounding the death of her husband. Yet for Bridget these intense losses are about fear and feeling safe in the world.

A person’s greatest fears in their life is losing their loved ones, and so the effect of losing both my father and my husband is that two of my three greatest fears in my life came true…My ability to feel safe has changed…and if you no longer feel safe in this world it affects every single thing you do.

There is a sense of disillusionment and skepticism about life and the world and how it unfolds. She is questioning her self and her place in the world and has lost confidence in “the
goodness of life”. There is a lasting sense of the stark and sometimes harsh nature of life and a new understanding of her vulnerability in the world.

So I walk around now having lost the belief in ‘it doesn’t happen to me.’… I don’t believe that anymore…The fairy tale, I call it the magic and the sparkle is gone, and I miss it…believing in coincidences, believing in good things happening because you did other good things…all that came crashing to an end because it doesn’t just happen to other people, it actually happened to me.

Bridget struggles with the uncertainty of what will become of her and the notion of having lived through her worst nightmares and what were previously unfathomable truths come true. “What is the rest of my life going to be like?” There is a loss of the brightness and naivety of life. “I’ve begun to now not believe in, what’s the word? Magic. Sparkle…My greatest fear now is becoming a bitter old woman.” Despite her resilient nature she ponders whether this could happen to her. “Why wouldn’t it? Because the other fears have all come true.”

Bridget visualizes her current state as something akin to an empty fuel tank. She had a full tank prior to the death of her husband and when it was depleted she was able to refill it with the love, help and care of her husband and this relationship. Yet, now she feels depleted. “I have no energy…no desire to do anything and general apathy that I never had before.” The challenge for her is how to replenish it. “How am I going to fill it on my own with all the things that are important, happiness, believing in good, believing in life, feeling safe. That’s my on-going struggle.”

Bridget grapples with her inability to see which way her life will take her and what the outcome will be for her.

I don’t feel necessarily that I have the control to steer it always the way I want it to go…I want to have a good outlook on life, I want to be positive about faith in my future and I don’t want to be angry, bitter and resentful, (and full of) self-pity. But it’s a constant struggle…I’m constantly walking that fine line between how I let this affect me. Do I let this make me into a bitter old woman?
Juxtaposed with this pain and struggle is the hopeful notion that she will survive this. She believes she has experienced many cherished moments and relationships in her life and hangs on to the hope, however faint it gets at times, that she will find peace again. Bridget is able to see and appreciate the wonderful things she has had and still has in her life. She is acutely aware of the blessings in her life. Despite the enormity of the impact of the loss of her husband and the profound grief she has had to contend with she appreciates and values the relationships she had with both her father and husband.

I work very, very hard to always look at it as the fact that I’m very blessed. And I believe that I’m pretty well the luckiest girl in the world except for two major things…I have been loved through and through, totally, completely by these two men…so I’m very blessed.

**The meanings of her loss experiences.**

Bridget’s ongoing struggle is with her sense of herself and her future. She struggles with the notion of who she is now without her husband and father in her life, without the sense of security and safety afforded by having a close personal relationship and with her fears about the uncertainty and harshness of the world. She knows first hand bad things do happen and she feels vulnerable. The lingering question for her is, who am I now and where do I go from here? She believes that the hardest thing she has ever done in her life is grieving. And she wonders where it will lead.

This is by far the hardest work, and to what end? Where am I going? Really, what goal am I working towards?…Feeling safe in the world. That is what I’m working towards…and I don’t know how to achieve it…What is this for, what are we here for? Even meta-physically or spiritually talking, am I here to learn lessons about how to suffer? Is that my lot in life?

Bridget’s story overall is one of unresolved loss. Her story unfolds as one of tragedy, her losses having affected a detrimental impact on her life, her sense of herself and her view of the world and its benevolence. The experience of losing her husband has tainted her earlier experience of loss of her father and she views these deaths as having had a huge impact on her sense of herself, the world, her relationships to others and her relationship to the world. She is
left feeling disintegrated; fragmented and fearful of what she will become. She has lost the sense of cohesion and wholeness of who she is without these important relationships in her life. She is left feeling fragile in a world shattered by loss.

Despite this she is able to appreciate, if not resent the loss of, the wonderful relationships that she did have with these men. She does have feelings of resiliency and moments of hope for her self and her future. Yet she remains irresolute about the outcome of the effects of these losses and she was feeling vulnerable about her sense of herself as a frightened and abandoned girl navigating alone within an unsafe and unpredictable world.

**Dennine’s Story**

Dennine is a 41-year-old married mother of three children. She spoke of the loss of her infant son, her grandmother and her aunt. She has worked extensively with others who have suffered losses in her professional role as a minister’s wife and she credits her faith in God and her Christian beliefs in helping her understand and cope with death and loss. This helped form her beliefs around death and loss. She related how each of her personal losses was different for her and how her reaction was dependent on the relationship and the circumstances surrounding the death.

**The first loss.**

Dennine lost a newborn son when she was 23 years old. He had been born normal, an uneventful routine birth of an apparently healthy boy. There was much excitement at the time and the family was gathered to celebrate the birth and welcome this newborn son into their lives. But she began to doubt his healthiness.

Everybody was excited, but I kind of felt this feeling of something’s not right. Mother’s intuition…He was fine when he was born but as soon as he came out I felt something was wrong, even though he looked perfectly normal. Something just said, something’s wrong with his chest…Every nurse that would come in, I would ask, ‘do you think something’s wrong with the baby?’ And they said, ‘no, no, no, your baby’s fine.’ So I just kept really pushing the envelope that I was feeling that something was wrong in his chest.
As she persisted in this matter, others were beginning to question her mental health and mood and it was suggested she may have post-partum depression. She prayed to God that if something were wrong to give the medical staff a sign. Three days later, a new nurse on shift discovered an anomaly. “It was late at night and I got a new nurse and I asked her ‘can you check my baby’s heart, and she did and could hear a swishing.” They discovered he was born with a congenital heart defect that manifests days after birth. “He was born with only one chamber in his heart and that only really shows up days after…and it’s really hard for them to actually fix this, in 1989 they didn’t do that.”

She felt a sense of vindication for her assumptions and intuition. There was a feeling of relief and powerfulness that she was able to play a role in the discovery of his condition. This gave her a sense of connection with him and a better ability to accept his death.

For me there was a sense of relief, because everybody thought I was crazy up to that moment. There’s something wrong with this kid and as a Mom I caught it….there was a sense of power, even though it wasn’t me, I know God ordained it. I know that I was listening and I felt something deep and I prayed and that He directed something to catch it…It was like a sense of togetherness, like I had a part in diagnosing him and I think that was part of the freedom that allowed myself to let go.

There was much uncertainty as to how long he would live and she had to live with the notion that he would eventually die. The unpredictability of this made it difficult to live through and Dennine lived through her feelings of loss as the weeks progressed. It was a distressing time. This time of anticipated grief allowed her to come to terms with her inevitable loss.

It gave me 2 or 3 weeks where I knew it was inevitable that it’s going to come to an end. It was devastating. It was like we just had this baby and he looks normal and now you’re going to tell me he’s not going to make it. We knew he was going to expire at one point, we just didn’t know when…A lot of my mourning was played out in that whole 3 weeks. It was inevitable that we had to say goodbye.

There was talk of her baby undergoing numerous experimental operations, but the prospect of this was abhorrent to her. She did not want him to suffer. She is able to reconcile this
loss because of her belief that he is no longer suffering and she focuses on the precious time that she had with him. Despite the intense sadness, she felt at the time she has been able to resolve this loss.

Just having Nathan, that was his name, and experiencing him for 4 weeks, you know there was a lot of sadness but yet a lot of happiness too. I know that for him he’s in a better place, he’s not suffering…I didn’t want my son being a guinea pig, I want to honour his life, so for me his expiring was almost kind of a moment of relief.

The second loss.

Dennine’s grandmother died at age 76 from lung cancer. Dennine was 27 at the time. She had spent a lot of time with her grandmother when growing up, her grandmother having played a large part in raising her. “She pretty much raised me. My Mom worked and so my grandma was like the mother figure growing up.” Her death was sad for Deninne but she finds herself feeling comforted by the good memories she has of her grandmother. She recalls her grandmother’s influence on her and how important that was for her own personality development. Dennine has incorporated many aspects of her grandmother into her life today.

When my grandmother passed there was a lot of great memories that I had stored up. All the time that we spent together and the places we went…She more or less made me kind of who I am…She was a very strong lady. Her favourite line was ‘what will be, will be’, and ‘you’ve made your bed you’ll have to lie in it’, kind of thing. And I’m a lot like that personality…I’m a very black and white person…and she has shaped some of the stuff that I’ve done in my lifetime…She’s kind of still alive (for me) because of lot of her traits that she imbedded into me are still living on. It’s kind of another circle of life…she just lives with us, with me.

Dennine’s reaction to her grandmother’s death was less intense and painful. She was able to rationalize the experience on the basis of its normative nature. “Knowing that my grandparents are going to pass and my grandmother had lung cancer so she was sick. So you enjoy the time that you have left with her.”
The third loss.

Dennine lost her beloved aunt to suicide at age 59. Dennine was 40. This death was the most recent for her and carried with it a sense of confusion, regret and sadness. Dennine had talked to her aunt 12 hours before she killed herself but Dennine had no clue as to what was coming. “She seemed completely fully coherent, normal, happy.” There are many ‘what ifs’, and some regrets over what she perceives she could have done prior to the suicide. This death has left her with a sense of helplessness and feelings of guilt. She questions her role and whether or not she could have done something to affect the outcome.

I had talked to my aunt prior to her passing, she had called me on my cell phone and I was busy…I did talk to her for an hour but then I had said to her that I would call her back and she just said, ‘make sure you call me back’, and I said ‘oh ya, for sure I’ll call you back.’ But then things just got busy with the kids and I didn’t call her back, so I think I struggle with, I should have called her back.

She wonders how she could have missed the extent of her aunt’s distress and harbours some guilt over it. She has many unanswered questions and she struggles with the sense that she somehow had lost control of the situation.

I blame me, you know? What did I miss? What was she in essence trying to tell me? Maybe I could have fixed it. If I would have been maybe listening a little bit more, if I wouldn’t have been so busy, you know? Even though I knew that she wanted to talk to me, and I did, I was talking to her on my cell phone but I had control, but I felt like I gave it away. That’s the thing that makes me feel bad. I feel like I had the control to maybe, someway, I would have been able to change her mind…I had the control but yet I gave it away.

This part of her story has more of an irresolute tone to it. In her mind, she knows what suicide is about and that she couldn’t have changed the outcome, but she is still left with lingering questions and a sense of responsibility.
I understand that her mind was already previously made up. It was in essence kind of her goodbye call. So I know that I didn’t have any power to try to change it, but there’s still that inkling of, maybe I could have.

When Dennine compares the ultimate impact of these three deaths she believes the death of her aunt has caused the most emotional disturbance and confusion. There is the sense that she believes she somehow missed something and that she could have changed the outcome. The extent of her perceived control over the situation continues to haunt her on an emotional level.

The first two (deaths) were inevitable, they were sad, especially because my grandmother was going to pass because of her age. The baby shocked me, but I knew that death was coming so I was preparing myself. The third one completely caught me off guard…So I think the process of that makes it harder on me because the other two (deaths) I knew I couldn’t (change the outcome). They were going to die. There was nothing you could do about it. But this one was different. So that’s the part I probably struggle with the most.

The impact.

Dennine related that the effects on her have been different, dependent on the relationship and the nature and timing of the death. However, she did believe that there were some overall effects of having lived through numerous deaths. The most salient loss for her was her aunt’s suicide. She continues to grapple with this death more so than the other two deaths for its shock value and its unresolved and irresolute nature.

With the suicide I’m just learning what I could have done differently. So I guess I’m just trying to work through that part. But it just seems like it has a different effect on your life, like, ‘why did she do this?’ ‘What did we miss?’ ‘How could we have fixed that?’ There are just so many questions…so many missing links.

Dennine credits her Christian background in helping shape her views about life and death. She is involved in the ministry and counselling bereaved persons after a death is part of her professional life. Because she encounters loss in her work, she believes it has helped her with her philosophical outlook. Having this belief system has helped her cope with her losses as she is
able to ascribe meaning to them that fits with her sense of her self, her values and her beliefs in
the way the world works.

I do have a religious background and so that’s part and parcel of it. I believe you
are born and you die, that’s what life is. And so I guess I have a little bit more
calmness about it…Part of my professional life is that I deal with (death), so
maybe I’m a little bit more, maybe cold about it? It almost sounds matter of fact,
but I do deal with it (on a regular basis)…I think having a Christ-centred life
really helps and I think having faith is probably the number one thing that helped
me the most, and then reading books and going to grief counselling…It brings a
peace because you know your loved one has gone on and they’re with God.

She has a perspective on life and death that helps her cope with her loss and her grief
even though each individual death has a unique impact on her. For Dennine, her sense of control
or lack thereof plays a role in how she copes with and reconciles her losses:

The grief part is still traumatic…because each person is an individual and each
relationship you have with each person is different….and the way the death
happened. With my aunt I think I struggle with that a little bit more. So it’s going
to maybe take me a lot longer to go through the process of it…you process them a
little bit differently and they all have different meanings because they were
different people.

Living through these losses has had both positive and negative effects on her life. The
positive side is that she has gained the knowledge to be able to share with others and help others
who are going through similar losses. This ability to give back to others is something that she is
proud of and that she values.

I talk to all kinds of people that have lost babies. So that’s a good thing, even
though it’s a sad thing I’m able to reach out and now help people who are going
through losses of babies, or their own children. The experience that I’ve gone
through is allowing me to pay it forward and help other people.
The negative aspect pertains to what she misses about these individuals and the ongoing relationship. There are continuing losses made apparent by the lack of their physical presence and the missing discourse and sharing that could be possible.

The bad is that you don’t have them around anymore, like my son would be 20, I don’t have that relationship anymore…You’re never going to have a relationship, you’re never going to talk to them, you’re not going to hear their voice anymore or their cries or whatever, you know? They’re dead. It’s done, over.

Dennine sees her loss experiences as part of life’s process and they have taught her about life and death. She holds a Christian-centred philosophical view of life and death and has adopted a pragmatic view of life and death and the meanings inherent in existence. Despite her feelings of sadness she has not let it affect her ability to live a full, meaningful life.

You learn not to take life for granted. And that we are here for a very short period of time. You know, some people die at 1 month old, some people die at 76 years old. So for me, it’s about knowing that death can happen at any point in one’s life, young or old. It’s part of life, it’s what happens. We are born and we die…Everything for me, in my life is a process, it’s a learning process and I don’t think God gives you anything that you can’t handle…I’m definitely sad and I miss them but I don’t want it to alter my life, I need to live out my own life. After all, I’m still alive.

**The meanings of her loss experiences.**

Dennine’s story is a hopeful one. She has a belief system, partly formed by her faith and her grandmother’s influence, that life is a variable process. It consists of challenges, losses, and difficult times. Yet, it can all be borne when one realizes this and learns to cherish the good times, positive aspects and hopeful moments in life. She is a “black and white” person, implying that she sees the world dichotomously: one must take the good with the bad. These beliefs have helped her cope with her losses.

Coping with the deaths contained an element of perceived control. Those circumstances that were felt to be beyond her reach and influence, i.e., in the hands of a higher power, were
more readily understood as they fit within her frame of reference. Dennine’s understanding of fate comes from a Christian philosophical background that allows her to process her losses within the frame of such meanings. This is helpful and comforting. These deaths make sense to her.

When the death does not fit within her frame of reference, in this case her perceived level of control over the situation, she is left struggling to find a way to understand it. She acknowledges her difficulty making sense of her aunt’s suicide and is continuing to seek answers, finding meanings in her death. Dennine maintains hope that she will do so. She is optimistic that she will recover and uses her previous loss experiences, both personal and vicarious to shape her journey through this latter death.

Dennine uses her loss experiences to help others. Perhaps, again her faith plays a role in this process but she believes in the positive power of using one’s own journey through adversity to assist others who make similar journeys. For Dennine, having experienced multiple losses through death has given her a sense of being an experiential “knower”, who has chosen to use her personal experiences of adversity and loss to achieve something positive, in her case, ministering to others. As a student of life’s lessons, she has learned and continues to learn about life’s vicissitudes, sharing her teachings, and exacting a helpful and positive influence on others.

**Marg’s Story**

Marg is a 50-year-old woman and mother of two teenage boys. She is living with her boys in a house in rural Ontario. She spoke of the loss of her husband whose tragic death and the complicated aftermath left her feeling emotionally depleted. This was the most recent death, and the most salient to her. It tinged much of her current emotional view of many of the issues and challenges she was facing in her life at the time of the interview. Marg related some of what it’s like for her in the unfolding course of her journey. She also spoke of the loss of her father, its impact on her and the contrast between it and the death of her husband.

**The first loss.**

Marg was 45 when her father died. He was 90. He had been a vibrant and relatively active older man, who up to his late 80’s could be found playing the piano for others in senior’s homes. However, Marg noticed a slow deterioration of his vibrancy and his physical health as he
began to slow down in the last 6 months of his life. She began to come to terms with the realization that he may be nearing the end of his life; “I think, I already started to put it down to, you know, he’s not going to be around that much longer”.

He had been admitted to the hospital with congestive heart failure and was in for 3 days prior to his death. His breathing had become increasingly difficult. Marg was attempting to exact a bedside vigil as well as attend to her mother’s needs and her own family at home. Her father appeared to rally and his condition was apparently stable. Marg left the hospital to go to her own home and he died in her absence. “I missed him dying because I went home. And it was just, no, how could I be so stupid to go home?”

Despite this questioning and mild regret for not being present when he died, Marg relates that there was a form of relief:

It wasn’t unexpected, and it was better for him because he was experiencing so much difficulty at that point…you kind of feel, it was awful but on the other hand it was better for him.

She believes that the manner of his death, the circumstances and the process were fitting with what he would have wanted for himself: A relatively trouble-free, short-term, peaceful process, and a natural way to end a good life. It followed the natural order of things and it was relatively uncomplicated and without protracted suffering. He had been able to live in his own home until the very end and he had lived a long life. This helped make his death understandable to Marg and helped in her coping. The means by which her father died and the process as it unfolded impacted how she perceives his death. She related how his death was, to her, an acceptable and understandable process.

I felt good that we had done what we could for Dad: With my Dad, it wasn’t such a wrenching process because it was understandable…It was what I knew he would have wanted. And this is why I think that I was happy for Dad because he was able to stay in his own home…he didn’t have to go into a nursing home…endure indignities and stuff like that. I think that is why for me his death was acceptable, understandable and reasonable.
He was a pragmatic and practical man and he had carefully arranged everything in his personal life. His will was in order and his personal wishes regarding his life and death were known to the family. She believes this made the transition and the grief experience after his death so much easier to cope with and she is comfortable with how it transpired. She views this death as a normative experience and one that was conducive to his, and her, philosophy of life.

I’m very much, you know, you live, you die, hopefully with courage and compassion. And I think that because he was able to do that I felt good. I could feel good for him and I felt good for me. So I think…you’re sad of course, but in a way you’re happy for him because he’s finished with it all.

The challenges after her father’s death were mostly related to her concerns for her mother. She had promised her father that she would take care of her mother and she felt a responsibility for her wellbeing. She has taken on a care-taker role with her aging mother, attending to her emotional and physical needs. She believes that the biggest impact on her now of her father’s death is having the added responsibility for her mother and especially now with the loss of her own husband it feels more burdensome.

It was the natural order you know? A parent dies, the child helps the remaining parent. I think that is the area it has had the most effect on me is that I’ve had to accept a lot more responsibility for my mother and…because of the loss of my husband…I’ve got so much more responsibility in my own camp.

**The second loss.**

Marg was 46, when one winter day in January 2005 on her way out the door to take her boys to their hockey games, she received a phone call. She was advised to come to the hospital and have somebody drive her. It was the shocking and tragic news that her husband had been in a car accident. “It was unbelievable…a feeling of shock. I felt sick to my stomach, short of breath, like I was going to pass out and I thought ‘this isn’t real’”. There was a sense of unreality and disbelief.

He had been taking his regular route to the local market, a normally careful and cautious driver on a weekend morning, when a drunk driver struck him from behind and sent his car
spinning, across furrows and into a ditch where he upturned in a snowy field. He was 59 years old: A vibrant, healthy, physically active and youthful husband, father of two teenagers and older children from a previous marriage. It is a tragedy that has left Marg with numerous obstacles to deal with.

He had been the major source of financial and practical support for her. His death left a massive void. She was a stay-at-home Mom and they lived in a house that they had built themselves, relying on alternative sources of energy for the home. This required a lot of physical effort on their part.

So I guess my first thought was, what happens now? What do we do? Where do we go? It’s not just a case of losing the person but it’s a case of losing all form of security at that point.

Her husband’s death has been complicated by other factors which have prolonged and obscured Marg’s grieving process. There was the criminal trial for the drunk driver and a host of complications arising from her husband having died without a will. The estate is yet to be finally settled and there are issues with the insurance company and her step children waiting for their share.

I think my problem was complicated so much by the legal proceedings and I think that that does not help. It absolutely does not help and it increases your anger over the whole situation.

Through the criminal trial she had to endure viewing photographs of the accident scene, learning that her husband had not died instantly, having to listen to the testimony of the accused, his adult children, and the judge who questioned her husband’s driving ability. She had had to give her victim impact statement first before all other sides were heard which was frustrating to her as she was unable to respond to their claims. In the end, the process left her feeling exhausted and invalidated. The unresolved estate was continuing to have a negative and stressful impact on her. The anger she feels is complex, directed towards the driver who killed her husband, the court system for its uncaring and unempathic stance, and her husband for not having prepared for this possibility and for dying intestate with everything in his name. As a result Marg has had difficulty with her grieving process. She questions whether she has adequately grieved his death.
You’re dealing with a lot of things that I think push everything of an emotional nature to the back, and it doesn’t allow you to deal with it. That’s maybe another reason why I haven’t really felt like I’ve grieved enough or I haven’t felt like I’ve even grieved at all. I don’t know why. I just don’t feel that things have progressed.

There is a sense of confusion around where she is in her grieving process and she is seeking a way to understand her current experience. Marg is still in the process of coming to terms with the emotional consequences of her husband’s death.

You need a manual, Grieving 101 so you can figure it out. For me it doesn’t seem to diminish. Because I don’t know what grieving is supposed to feel like, they don’t tell you…because everybody’s so different: I guess I just wish I could come up with some way to know. I guess in a way I’ve been grieving because it feels like it’s not such a major hurt inside but on the other hand I can’t talk about it without crying… I cry and cry and cry and I never feel better.

**The impact.**

Marg spoke of her losses as two separate and distinctly different experiences. There was a calculable difference between the expectedness, or not, of the deaths. There was also a measured difference in the impact based on the type of relationship and the timing, i.e., elderly father versus youthful husband.

There’s much more of an impact with my husband’s death, like a huge impact. However there is also (an impact due to) my Dad’s death and because my mother is 92 I’m now spending more increasing time with her, which takes away from time I need to do things in my own family, because of the loss of my husband who’s not there to help.

In contrast to her experience with her father’s death, Marg found the death of her husband a discombobulating experience. She was thrown into a state of confusion. There were many complications and ramifications surrounding his death that served to magnify and obscure the
experience for her. Marg related that she is still reeling to some degree. “I’m overwhelmed probably a good 80% of the time.”

The saliency and intensity of her husband’s death overshadows all the effects of her earlier losses. This loss is immense and profound, having far-reaching and deeper emotional and practical consequences for Marg. She struggles with a sense of her self and what she could or should be doing differently to manage her situation. She feels mired in her grief.

I hate myself at this point, which is really nasty to say it but I do… I hate the way I look. I don’t like the way I act (with) my children: It just feels like a tunnel that has no light at the end of it. You are constantly going through it… because it just seems like every time I thought things were getting better something would come up and it was not better: I don’t really feel any lightening of the burden: Am I going to wake up one day and realize gee, I’m kind of through the worst of it?

Marg compares her two losses through death and she questions whether the relative ease of the transition after her father’s death is affecting her expectations of how the process of dealing with her husband’s death should unfold. She questions whether this has something to do with her and her ability to cope.

Is it a flaw in me or is it because you know you set your expectations on your first experience and then your second experience is so totally different that those expectations will just go out the door: I think it’s given me more of a knowledge of when you lose somebody unexpectedly versus losing somebody expectedly (and) what you can accomplish prior to the death: (But) what I’m wondering is, because my father’s death was so understandable, did it make John’s death seem even more bizarre? Did the one make the other one seem even more tragic and more off the wall because this should not have happened to this person?: I think with Dad it was very orderly, very natural, whereas with John it just seems very unnatural, forced upon me. It’s just frustrating…frustration, it’s probably my primary emotion a lot of the time.

Marg feels that she is carrying the emotional and practical burdens of all her family members; her self, her mother and her two sons. Her husband’s death has had an emotional
impact on her relationship with her mother. Marg believes that her mother may be re-grieving her own loss as well as empathizing with her daughter’s circumstances. This leaves Marg feeling the weight of carrying both their emotional sadness.

I wouldn’t say I’m resentful but I do feel burdened: I’m trying to stay buoyant enough, shall we say, for the both of us, and that is where I say the two of them (the deaths) combined has had the most effect: I feel like I’ve got a 300-pound weight constantly.

Despite the sense of responsibility for her mother she wonders how she will cope with her mother’s death. Marg is dreading the experience. There is a fear about how she will cope without the one person with whom she had shared all her losses.

I’m thinking, I’ll have to go through this all again and that’s going to be probably the hardest one. Even harder than my husband I think because now she’s been there for me to grieve my husband.

**The meanings of her loss experiences.**

Marg’s story is one of irresolution. Her grief is ongoing due to extenuating circumstances surrounding her husband’s death and she believes that it has not been progressing in a fashion that sees her finding relief or closure. Her losses combined feel burdensome. They have left her with a weight of responsibility, for herself and others that she is unsure she can handle. Her sense of her self is undergoing change. Her self esteem has lowered as she views herself as not coping in as functional a way as she perceives she should be, despite the fact that she is managing adaptively and adequately to a truly difficult situation. It leaves her feeling depleted.

Her losses have left her feeling alone and vulnerable. There is a loss of security and a questioning of her abilities to cope alone without the aid, companionship and encouragement of her partner. She fears the loss of her mother, the last person to whom she has been connected through these losses and although all the meanings of this anticipated loss were not explored, one wonders if she fears being alone, the last survivor left to navigate the rest of her life on her own.

There is confusion, frustration and sadness around her losses. She compares her two loss experiences and questions the connection between them. For her, the relatively simple process
and circumstances of her father’s death are complicating her latter experience. Comparing the
two leaves her without a frame of reference. The meaning of her father’s death as understandable
and acceptable serves to contrast with the inexplicable, unfair and incomprehensible loss of her
husband. There are no answers forthcoming and the continuing stressors in her life are
complicating her ability to see the outcome.

Sabine’s Story.

Sabine is a 55-year-old married woman who spoke of the loss of her father, her mother-in-law and her very close male friend. She spoke of the loss experiences as having an effect on her view of life and how she chooses to live it. Each loss exerted its own unique effect based on the relationship and the nature of the death but she also talked about the overall impact on her attitude towards life and her values.

The first loss.

Sabine lost her father from a heart attack when he was 54 years old. She was only 19 at the time. She recalls feeling shock and sadness. She was in university at the time and was already fairly independent having recently moved to a large urban city from a smaller remote city. At the time of his death she was embarking on her own life, separate from her parents. There was a sense of having to complete her goals and follow through on her, and his, wishes.

The first thing I remember is just feeling the normal wave of shock and sadness, but I actually had to get right back to university and write exams, so moving on was just doing what I knew he would want me to do and do well in school and just get through your exams, and I don't remember feeling at all depressed. I knew I had a mission and I knew that he would want me to just go back to university and get on with what I had to do.

Her father’s death meant that she had to work hard to remain self-supporting and sustain an autonomous life. She had been working since she was 14 and considered herself already self-reliant and able to financially support herself. She had been brought up to be responsible for herself and to be accountable for her actions and she managed to continue through school and support herself financially. There was a deepened understanding that she was now really on her own and had to make the best of it. Her success or failure was up to her.
I had some really good habits already set down as a result of (my parents’) values: I guess it was a deepening of the accountability that I would just expect, that you’re going to have to do (this on your own). I never thought twice about it really. I just accepted (it), well of course that’s what you’re going to have to do.

She remembers being concerned for her mother and her wellbeing. Her understanding of this loss incorporated the knowledge of the effects that it was having on the family as a whole.

I was concerned about my mother. My mother was only 50 and she was at home with the last child. There were six of us in the family. And I was concerned for her: Part of it was understanding the loss on the wife, on the spouse and then the rest of the family.

Her father’s death contributed to her sense of personal responsibility that she carries with her to this day. This includes her role in taking care of her own health. Sabine saw her father’s heart disease as partly controllable and partly uncontrollable. She believes that he was prone to heart disease and lived in an era that condoned unhealthy lifestyles but that he also failed to adjust his lifestyle in accordance with a heart-healthy existence.

(He) died young of heart disease and part of that is genetic, hereditary, but part of that was some life choices that he made, for instance smoking…not exercising…(getting) very stressed out.

This experience led her to choose a “path of health.” She is aware of the circumstances that can contribute to an unhealthy life and she has made a conscious effort to live her life in a healthy fashion. She is committed to preserving her health and living a lifestyle, through her positive choices, that will be conducive to her longevity.

I just love life so much and this life is all we’ve got so I want to stay on this earth as long as I can: My goal is to live to be 100…and I really believe that so much is up to you. If I don’t get there it won’t be for lack of trying: I have a pretty strong will about it…so I figure I should get there.
The second loss.

Sabine lost her mother-in-law in a year that was rife with losses for Sabine. The other losses, including loss of a job had an impact in terms of placing her in the midst of a life transition but she spoke of her mother-in-law’s death as being particularly impactful. Sabine was 51 at the time and her mother-in-law was 84. The death was not totally unexpected but it was meaningful for who her mother-in-law was as a person and the impact that she had on Sabine’s life. There was a closeness amongst her, her husband and his mother. It had a positive effect on her marriage relationship.

She's sort of somebody that affected my marriage relationship in a very positive way and the loss was just having someone that you really loved being with and that you'd really admired as a woman. I loved the way she thought: I loved her a lot and what she had represented to me was an unusually wonderful, loving relationship with a mother-in-law: We were this wonderful little unit of three that had great fun together: I love the way she lived her life. I admire her for the choices she made and I just have incredible respect for her and it’s so sad to lose her because that’s kind of rare.

She saw in her mother-in-law a person of conviction, who was accountable, responsible, made choices in life and lived with those choices, was resilient and who also maintained good health, had fun and participated in good healthy relationships. For Sabine this represents the values that she admires and aspires to. She is comfortable with her reactions to and feelings about this loss. She continues to hold warm memories about her mother-in-law and this death served to reinforce her notions of life and healthy living.

It’s a death that I’ve been able to digest as just one of those things in life: She lived a good life, a long life. Our relationship was the best we could have imagined and there’s nothing to be sad for: It’s all positive memories: She had a real zest for life, and that's part of what I admired: So it reinforced my own philosophy of life, my strategy for how I want to actively live my life.
The third loss.

Sabine was greatly affected by the loss of a very close male friend who suffered through and died from Lou Gehrig’s disease (ALS). He was 44 years old and had a wife and young child. Sabine was 53 when he died. She visited him daily in the latter stages of his disease, contributing to his care and helping provide the assistance that he needed. She came to share a level of closeness and intimacy that becomes necessary when victims of this disease become almost totally physically impaired.

I saw him almost every day for about 6 years, and at first it was just companionship because he needed people to do things with him. And I was living in the same condo building. So I saw him every week. And then first it was just movies. Then it was actually helping him because his limbs didn't work anymore. It was pushing him in the wheelchair. It was massaging his legs. It was helping him drink. It was helping him breathe and talk. And then at the end it was helping him to communicate, because he couldn't even talk anymore. And I had never witnessed something like this close hand before.

She was conscious of the intensity of the experience and she became attuned to the centrality of the moment. She became close to his wife and son and continues a deeply valued and treasured relationship with them.

I became of part of their lives in a way that I would never have normally done with anybody and I had never witnessed something like this close up before: I was so in the moment with every single time I was with them (because) I was so conscious that I knew one day he would be gone. So I lived every moment: So I feel blessed. I got to have a special experience that will never be repeated in my life.

She believes the circumstances of his death and the essence of who he was as a person and how he and his family coped with his illness and demise has had a profound impact on her and her view of life. She came to appreciate the preciousness of life and the privilege of being able to experience life on this profound level.
The gift of a very unusual experience to have someone allow you entry into what is the pathway to death…and to share with you their feelings as they’re going through it: I got something really special: (But) I just miss him. He gave me a lot, and I have the responsibility to live the life that I’ve been given as fully as I can.

She views the experience as rare and valuable due to its intensity, her ongoing relationship with his family, what she learned about ALS and what she learned about health and the intricacies of physical impairment. Sabine believes the death of her friend has had the most impact on her.

I’m in awe of this experience I was a participant in and the gift it gave. It was pretty special: I think David’s death will probably be one of the experiences that will have had the biggest impact on my life. Without question.

**The impact.**

Sabine processes each death independently due to the difference in the relationship and the meaning that it had for her. She ponders questions around the meaning of their death. She contemplates what it means to her and what she can learn from it. When she reflects on her multiple losses she reflects on the meaning of her own life and the meaning of their lives on her.

When the loss is one that affects you so deeply a few things happen. I can't help but reflect on the meaning of my own life, the meaning of their lives to me, and then you can't help but compare the circumstances of each of those deaths and ask yourself, well, why did they die? What couldn't they control? What could they control?: Each loss is a little bit different because each person is a different relationship to you, and they mean different things to you. You learn from every one of the experiences. You adjust your life view from each experience and, for my own part, I usually process where I go from here and what strategies I'm going to adopt for my own life that will make my life better as a result of what I learned from that person. Sometimes it's because of how they died, but sometimes it's just about the relationship and what they meant to me.
These losses have made some things clear to her and have helped her prioritize her life, especially in terms of relationships. She believes that having positive healthy relationships will help contribute to her good health and wellbeing.

It’s the clarity of understanding what you really want in life, and what I want of life is to have a happy life, a balanced life and a long life and to have that I also have to honour and respect my own needs: I’m very, very conscious of living joyously: To have fun but to take care of your health and to have positive relationships with people.

**The meanings of her loss experiences.**

Sabine sees her losses as ultimately enhancing her life. She conceptualizes her losses in terms of how they contribute to her growth as a person. Despite their sad and heart-rending effects on her, she is determined to see them for what they have given her. That is, she incorporates the admired and respected traits and values of the deceased individuals into her frame of reference for how she wants to live her life. Her story is one of personal growth. She believes she has gained something positive from these people and vows to use this in her daily life.

She has a strong sense of personal responsibility and this notion pervades her story. There is much hopefulness powered by the belief that despite life’s hardships, they can be turned into something wonderful. It is about taking what she has been given, no matter what it looks like and shaping it into something positive. It is a framework that allows her to create meaning around all deaths. Her sense of personal responsibility leads her to maintain control over that which she can control.

Sabine used the following metaphor to sum up her beliefs around life and what she has learned from living through her multiple losses. The move towards growth as a self-directed drive is evident as is the acceptance of life and death as part of the natural process:

You should really see yourself as a flower that starts as a seed, then if it gets that light, and the right amount of water, the right nutrients…it can grow to be a very healthy, beautiful plant that will flower…with the most beautiful petals and blossoms on it. And it can be a really prize-winning rose if all the right things
happen. But if it starts to lose some of those nutrients and ingredients, which it should have, and you know you need to be sure it gets, it's going to start to die and even if you do everything possible to make that beautiful rose bloom one day it's going to die anyway because there's a cycle to plants, and when that cycle is over it's going to be gone. You're going to lose your beautiful rose, but you have to expect that. But what would be really sad is if that darned little seed didn't even get a chance to grow because you weren't nurturing it properly, doing what you should be doing to give it a chance to get to be a beautiful flowering rose. That would be a real shame.

**Gail’s Story**

Gail is a 31-year-old graduate student. She talked about losing her best friend and her mother. She spoke of these two experiences as different in that one was sudden and shocking, the other expected. The first loss set in motion a process of reorganization and revisiting of her self and who she was in the world that carried through to her next experience of loss that was continuing to exert an influence on her self in relation to others.

**The first loss.**

Gail was 27 when she lost her best friend. He was 29 years old and his death was sudden and unexpected. It was due to heart failure but the exact cause of his death is unknown. It was a random event and one that Gail found difficult to reconcile.

This death particularly seemed to have no cause…They think it was basically adult SIDS: He was just sitting watching television and he keeled over and dropped dead.

His death and her grief left her feeling disengaged from her life, her work and her relationships. It was a difficult time for her. She continued to work but it was difficult for her and she sought bereavement counselling. The intense grief she felt for her lost best friend and the ensuing personal, existential-like crisis had a huge impact on her attitude towards life. She chose to search for the meaning in it.
My world is still there even though there are parts of it that are missing…but I could see the world again and from then I think I chose to say ‘OK, but this has to have meant something.’

At the time of his death she had been working towards establishing a life that was meaningful and fulfilling to her and her own values. She was beginning to consciously choose what was right for her rather than what others wanted of her. This death reinforced her notion of pursuing her own needs and goals and living in concert with her values and honouring what was important to her in life.

So the importance I guess of living life to the fullest, and day to day and trying to reestablish my values and my priorities and living the life that I want. Suddenly that all came to the forefront whereas in the past I’d gotten kind of bogged down in the day to day career path and ambition that weren’t necessarily my ambitions but my bosses’...and I had been in a position…right around the time of his death where I had begun applying for different jobs…I was already on a life plan of deciding I need to start acting more for me. But his death kind of concretized everything for me and gave me like a further kick in the butt.

The death of her best friend impacted Gail’s sense of her self and who she was in relation to others. She came to appreciate how much he meant to her and she came to realize how much of him was tied into her notion of her self and her identity. Many of the enjoyable, fulfilling, fun and enriching times in her life had been with him and she struggled with the concept of who she was without him in her life.

There was a part of me that seemed to have died. That part of me that was creative: There was a sense of loss of who I was, I didn’t know who I was anymore: Because at the time I hadn’t even realized how much he meant to me. And in the process of realizing ‘wow, every time I do something that’s fun it was with him’. So nothing was fun, and every time I found something interesting it was because I thought ‘…that’s going to be an interesting conversation’. And he wasn’t there anymore. So there was this huge absence: Part of me did die with
him. And I miss that part of myself. I mean I’ve got other parts of myself now that I wouldn’t have had. But in talking about it, it brings me back to who I was.

The questions that she grappled with had an impact on her other relationships. She became more attuned to her self as a person in a relationship, as she realized that a part of her identity was tied to her relationships with others.

The struggle to re-identify myself and try and figure out, well who am I? This removed me a little bit from my relationships with other people: This realization that perhaps part of how I identify myself is in relationship with other people.

The suddenness of her friend’s death led Gail to contemplate the apparent randomness of life and death and there was an accompanying shift in her idea of agency, that she may not have one hundred percent influence over events in her life and even in her own death. This notion is empowering to her.

And that had the effect of kind of bringing me to this realization that really I don’t have to risk or not risk, I can simply die. Through nothing: It doesn’t matter whether I am a risk-taking person or not a risk-taking person, whether I hedge my bets or not, or whether I decide to go skydiving. It’s almost irrelevant: Life can happen to you. In addition to you happening to life. And it was almost like this variable I hadn’t really accounted for. And I guess it’s because death can happen to you. As opposed to you causing your own death: (A) lack of influence—that some things are outside my sphere of influence: So it’s a difference in agency I suppose. There was a shift in that, which was actually empowering as opposed to disempowering.

**The second loss.**

Gail’s mother was diagnosed with cancer in October, 2004. She died in July, 2006. Gail was 29 and her mother was 57 years old. Her mother’s journey was a difficult one, particularly towards the end of her life. She suffered the usual degenerative and pain-ridden symptoms of terminal cancer. Gail was not living with her mother at the time but she visited her at least 3 times a week during her illness. Gail was with her mother when she died. Not witnessing her
mother’s struggle and decline on a daily basis made the transition relatively easier for Gail although she harbours some guilt for not being with her mother all the time throughout her illness.

The process of grieving for her friend gave her an idea of how the process would unfold with her mother. There was also the newly forming sense of agency and personal choice that she used to help her through this time. She had an experiential awareness that she needed to reserve her energies in order to be a better caregiver because she learned after her friend’s death about the process of grief and was aware of the implications of lack of self-care.

I was able to use some of those lessons to help me with the second one: The lesson’s that I had learned and was still in the process of learning due to my best friend’s death taught me that if I didn’t take care of myself I would have very little to give other people: Again it was about the choice. So if I choose to be nice it’s not that I just have to be nice. Or, I choose to be there for my mother not that I have to be there for my mother. But if I’m going to be there for my mother I have to have enough strength to be there for my Mom. So I’m gonna take today off, I’m going to do this for myself, tomorrow I’m going to go. So it helped me develop stronger coping strategies, I think, to deal with that.

Over the course of her mother’s illness, Gail was able to reconcile her sad feelings of loss. She felt confident that she had done all she could do but she didn’t feel the sudden, wrenching changes that she had felt after her friend’s death. She even wonders whether she has adequately grieved and processed her mother’s death because of this.

By the time her death arrived I felt like I had done all the things I could do. Her death was very sorrowful and it still grips me at times. But I had so long to work through this thing that it felt less personality changing. It felt less impactful. That’s why I’m wondering if there’s still something left to do, that I haven’t done related to that death.

She describes how the relationship she had with her mother had changed as her mother became progressively more ill and how that impacted Gail’s loss experience. She contrasts this
with her experience of her friend’s sudden death and explained the difference that each death had on her sense of herself and that self in relation to others.

My relationship with my Mom changed as I became more of a caregiver to her and that’s why when her death came it was not as if it happened to us. But all the parts of me that were in relation to her got to say goodbye and figure out what life was going to look like without her. And have all the trauma and tears…and I had her to comfort me through that as well…Whereas with Adam’s death I was left to muddle through that alone. And to discover the parts that I thought were me but were actually me in relation to him.

She was able to cope with her mother’s death in a way that allowed her to move on with her life and function. The existential type questions and quest for meaning that had become salient after the first death became even more prominent throughout her Mom’s illness.

The framework that I had developed from the first death…for explaining meaning and …existential kind of questions was brought into the forefront for an extended period of time (and) I think it would have receded into the background had Mom not been ill.

*The impact.*

Gail considers her losses to be life changing. Her grief experiences have taught her that she can make the choice to embrace life and its vicissitudes, despite the pain of loss. This sense of meaning was not only around the meaning of the death itself but meaning in her life, discovering her intentions and a reevaluation of what and why she chose to do things in her life. This aspect of choice was a way for her to be less self-critical.

I view my actions as intentions and therefore they have more meaning than they might have before: So before it had always been ‘well that was a stupid thing to do’ and now it was ‘why did I choose to do that?’ Did I actually perceive that I had a choice to do something differently and if not then I could forgive myself.
There was also the discovery that what she did and who she was did not have anything to do with life’s outcome. Her conscious choices to be happy, or nice or giving were her own and not dictated by a sense of duty, obligation or need to be liked.

I would say that it freed me from a lot of baggage I suppose. Like this idea that I had to do anything. It just put everything on a different page. When you could just die, for nothing. Really, truly. You can be as happy or as actuated or as miserable or ignorant as you want to be. And it doesn’t matter. Then I don’t have to be anything. I don’t have to be nice. I don’t have to be awake, I don’t have to be able. I don’t have to be coherent. I don’t have to be sad. I don’t have to do anything that I don’t inherently want to do: And that was freeing because it meant that everything that I did was a choice. And that therefore when I am nice I could take more pride from that. Before that it was almost like a duty.

It struck Gail that the process of physical death could be quite varied. She had believed that there was a line between life and death. Having experienced a sudden unexpected death, she believed the process was one of existence versus non-existence. But her mother’s death opened up another dimension of this process for her. “In the first one it was death meant life came to a fullstop. And in the second one it was like life can come to a little slow stop.” She was awakened to the notion that death is not always abrupt and that there is an, “…an element of willpower in our choice to be alive.” Gail has come to see existence on a continuum and that death can be about letting go of life. “…Life and death are on a continuum (and) there’s so much choice as to where you lie on that continuum.”

She has learned not to take her life for granted. She attempts to pursue that which is important to her and that she values in life. Her friend’s death was particularly eye opening to her as she consciously chose to live her life in a more mindful way.

So the importance of living life to the fullest and day to day and trying to reestablish my values and my priorities and living the life that I want: Choosing to enjoy the day because there could just be one more day, so that death was more impactful in terms of my attitude towards life.
Gail is less ponderous about who she is as a person. But she believes she is more accepting of and less judgmental towards herself and others. She is better able to just be herself, whatever and however that looks and is less inclined to question it.

I guess I think less about who I am as a person today…partly because I realized how temporal some of my definitions of self could be: I’m more capable of just being myself whatever that looks like. Right then and there. And I question it less.

She attributes the changes within herself to her losses. “Because there’s a whole process of rediscovery”. Living through these losses and the grieving process has left her with a sense of optimism about her life and the way she interacts with the world.

I do wonder whether I’ve become more of an optimist in some ways…Ironically because of that experience in that…I see everyday a choice in my attitude. It’s not always that I can control it. Some days I’m just unhappy and that’s the way I am and some days I’m not. I perceive that my interaction in the world is more than just the actions that I take but also the emotional relationship I have with it. And I think the mourning process was a big element in that.

The meanings of her loss experiences.

Gail’s story is a transformative one. Her losses have had a huge impact on her sense of her self. They have provided her with a chance to choose how she perceives life, the world around her and her interactions within it. The losses have catalyzed her towards a more questioning or challenging stance of herself, her actions and her intentions. There was a discovery of her self in relation and how much of her understanding of her self and her identity is shaped by important others in her life.

Her view of life has been affected. She has questioned the meaning of life and its vicissitudes. She has come to understand that she has little control over many circumstances in life and that one’s life merely happens regardless of what one does with it. She has come to accept and be more comfortable with the simple state of just “being”. However, this is not a fatalistic approach. Gail feels empowered by the notion that she can make choices and this gives her a sense of agency.
Her losses have opened up another avenue of perceiving the world and life and this has helped shape her attitude towards it. Her view of life as lying along a continuum gives her a set-point that she can use to help maintain a positive and hopeful attitude towards life. It allows her to keep going.

Life and death are on a continuum and there’s so much choice as to where you lie on that continuum…but I’d love to have something that would capture this image of how resilient one can be, really. Particularly when you’ve decided I see the continuum and I want to be here and my emotions and life keep trying to push me towards the death side of the spectrum. As long as we have this desire and we see that continuum and we have a desire to stay on the life side of the spectrum, it’s almost like you can’t be beaten down too much. You can be beaten down so you feel badly. But you feel badly because you have this desire to have something better. And I know that as long as I have that desire I will make decisions that will leave me closer to that.

Ellen’s Story

Ellen is a 42-year-old single mother of a teenage daughter. She spoke of losing her parents and her brother. Ellen had experienced other losses of friends and in the time that she participated in the research had lost another friend to cancer. During the interview, she talked about her experiences with losing her family members. Ellen was from Newfoundland and she had grown up in a large loving family. Her father was from a French-Aboriginal heritage and her mother was of Irish descent. She was keenly aware of the struggles that her parents had encountered in their lifetime growing up in an impoverished setting, and this was something she began to embrace as she reflected on the life of her parents and the effects that their deaths had on her.

The first loss.

Ellen was 31 when her father died. He was 70. She was very close to him and they had spent a lot of time together. She had her toddler daughter at the time and her father had become a loving and attentive grandfather. He had embraced the tasks of parenting and was enjoying life
with his grandchild. “He was retired and he finally had time to spend with kids, and she was the light of his life, (his) pride and joy.”

Ellen received a phone call one morning from her anxious sister asking Ellen to come see their father. When Ellen arrived and saw her father she knew that something was wrong. He had had what was termed a bleed, akin to a stroke. She approached him and held his hand.

When I walked in I looked at him and I thought, he was healthy, healthy, healthy but just something in me told me he’s not going to be here much longer: And I just looked into his eyes and he couldn’t talk…and as much as he could with his eyes he was saying ‘I love you but it’s finished’.

He subsequently had another bleed and the family was forced to decide whether to operate and remove part of his frontal cortex. Ellen did not want this and believed that her father would not have wanted it either, yet her family decided to proceed. Ellen was aghast at this decision, knowing that this would not suit his wishes. She was prepared for his imminent death despite her family’s inability to let go. “They weren’t ready to lose him. So they insisted that he be put through that and thank God he only lived another week after that.”

Ellen was deeply saddened by the loss but relieved that he did not have to live life in an incapacitated manner. Her father’s death began a process of re-evaluating her attitude towards life, developing and enhancing a new perspective that has continued to evolve through her subsequent experiences with loss. Beginning with her father’s death she began to view life differently.

And it taught me a lot about living when he died. To see how fast it could go, and how fast somebody so vibrant and active and lovely could just die. I thought whatever I’m afraid of doing I’ve got to ditch and face anything that I’m afraid of doing and not let that be a deciding factor for anything I want to do in life. So it kind of opened me up more to life.

This loss set in motion a process of change within her self, a desire to know more about her cultural heritage and a confirmation of her ability and need to be more open and authentic
with others. She embraced the qualities and attributes that she admired in him and that they shared, integrating them into her definition of her self.

The desire to know more about my heritage. I didn't have him around to ask anymore. A desire to be just more authentic with people and not be concerned with, oh, was that the right thing to say or I didn't want to make somebody uncomfortable. And I've always been a real people person, and my dad and I had that in common… So I think I became even more open to people than I was before. And that's saying something, so those are the areas that I kind of identify with my dad and I'm kind of proud of that.

Accentuating her father’s cultural heritage was a way of synthesizing who he was into her own sense of herself and of maintaining a connection with him despite his lack of physical presence.

My dad was Aboriginal and French, and I didn't have a lot of anything to do with either of those cultures when I was growing up. But next weekend I'm going on an Aboriginal retreat. I do those kinds of things now and so there's perhaps an element of honouring him as part of me. Because I can't do it verbally anymore. I can't say, Dad, ‘I love you’ and hug him: So it's kind of a way of maintaining a connection and honouring people I love very much that I can't hug anymore.

**The second loss.**

Ellen’s older brother was 38 when he died. She was 36. He had been the brother she looked up to as a child. She was very close to him but he had had behavioural problems since childhood that the family’s and school’s limited resources could not adequately address. He developed a drug addiction and Ellen tried desperately to help him. Ultimately his behaviour and addiction problems became too much for her and the family and Ellen had to relinquish her helper role. This was very difficult for her.

I tried to do everything I could to save him because…that was my place in the family, to be the nurturer for other people: (But) I just couldn’t do it anymore. So I was really conflicted.
Ellen was notified of his death by a coworker in the prison where she worked as a counselor in addictions. She was faced with the task of telling her mother. Her mother struggled with the stigma of drug addiction and was reluctant to accept that his death occurred due to drugs. Ellen attempted to explain to her mother that he had a disease, but ultimately, her mother chose to accept that he had a heart attack.

Ellen recalls that she went through a depression after her brother died which allowed her to stop and re-evaluate her life. She saw it as a signal, a message to change something in her life. Her recent losses had set in motion a call to reassess her life and how she chose to live it. The question of her resilience and coping in the case of loss was again brought to the forefront and she views the depression as a harbinger of change. Ultimately, she chose to heed the signs that she needed to do something differently in her life.

I didn’t see that depression as a bad thing. I saw it as a gift that was forcing me to stop, and all I could do was breathe one minute at a time…I had to pull in on myself and see what…do I need to do, because something is asking me to respond to life in a different way, and that’s what this is a signal of and given the experiences I had with my brother and his passing and my father and his passing and these situations, I just thought ‘how do you get through them?’

Although his death was a shock to her she had known that his lifestyle was leading him in a risky direction. She had already embarked on a healing journey after her father’s death and her brother’s death occurred along this pathway, so the sense of growth and change that had begun after her father’s death continued after her brother died. However, Ellen believes that losing her brother was very different from losing her parents.

(It was) very different from losing a parent, and I don’t even know if I can explain how: I think with (my brother) it was different because I don’t think (my changing attitudes towards life) changed that much after him. I think I was growing into a new me all along, as we are until we draw our last breath.
The third loss.

Ellen lost her mother in early 2007. Her mother was 78 years old at the time and Ellen was 41. This death was experienced as traumatic for Ellen. Her mother had been doing well, feeling fit and healthy and she and Ellen had been enjoying a new level of closeness and regular contact. Ellen had moved out of province and her mother had learned to use and embrace the Internet technology that allowed her to stay connected to her daughter and the world at large.

Her mother had suddenly felt unwell and went to the Emergency room of a local hospital. She was given a number and told to wait despite having all the telltale signs of a heart attack. When one of Ellen’s siblings insisted she be seen she was admitted but waited 14 hours to see a cardiologist. Despite the doctors confirming that she had a blocked artery nothing was done and her mother had another heart attack while waiting. She died in the hospital.

My brother's girlfriend dropped her off…at Emergency and she had every symptom you could have of a heart attack, whether you're male or female. They gave her a number and told her to wait her turn, and seconds count. She's sitting in there waiting, so 90 minutes later one of my siblings heard what's happening, rushes in and, (says) ‘what are you doing in the waiting room’? She said, ‘well, they told me to wait but I think I might be having a heart attack’. She was scared to get bad treatment and was afraid to die. So my sister went to the triage and said, ‘you know, she's got every symptom, you need to do something fast’. They got her in. Then it was 14 hours before a cardiologist came to see her.

Ellen was angry and frustrated at this delay and the perceived reasons for her maltreatment. She continues to feel much anger and sadness and this death remains salient for her.

It was ridiculous. Had she been here she would never have died. Or had she been male, because there's a very big difference between the way they treat males and females: The circumstances surrounding her death just seems so needless. It didn’t have to happen and it just seems so unfair: Anger, anger, Just so angry, and so sad because again, I was very, very close to my mother and I talked to her a
few days before…and we were in fact becoming closer in an interesting way: I miss her terribly still. That one still seems really fresh.

*The impact.*

Ellen reflects on what the loss of her parents has meant to her. In their deaths, she has become more open to their lives and how they lived them and also how their lives influenced her and who she is.

So in their passing, I would say it's maybe more reflective of how their experiences have impacted on me. Those are not things that I was necessarily open to before they died: And how their lives impacted on my own. To this day, how…decisions I make or some feelings I have, are very strongly influenced by who they were. And so their passing made me more reflective of that and more aware of that.

She also became more attuned to her cultural heritage and what her parents’ background meant to her. This included her desire to embrace her cultural and familial heritage in a positive and affirming light. There was a reevaluation of her parents’ lives and she chose to throw off the cloak of shame, instead developing a pride in her family for all that they had struggled through and endured. This validation of and reassessment of her parents’ lives led to a new willingness to talk about her family and their poverty growing up. She could openly, and unashamedly, tell others of her father’s illiteracy and the circumstances of her parents’ impoverished life.

All three sides (of my family were) filled with shame and poverty and all of that stuff…so we grew up very much imbued with that, not through any conscious effort of theirs because they loved us but it was there: I started to be more consciously (aware of) and have some pride in the struggles that they had, because when I was younger I was ashamed of it. And then after they died, it was like, ‘we did pretty good’” Yeah, more authentic about myself in that way too, because when I was younger I wouldn't have talked about the fact that my dad was illiterate. He couldn't read or write and there was a lot of poverty growing up. And now I do. I don't feel ashamed by it.
Each loss was experienced differently depending on the relationship she had with the individual. But Ellen has also come to accept that death, as an inevitable fact of life, is not something to shy away from and she is acutely aware of the reality of death. Having lost her parents Ellen has accepted the very real fact of death as a natural part of life and has gained the knowledge of what it’s like to live through it, survive and ultimately thrive. This has allowed her to be conscious of the choices she has in life.

It just becomes something that you accept. It’s going to happen: I think that’s the part where learning more about living has come into it for me. Because (death) is a definite.

Ellen developed a renewed approach to her life that affected how she chose to live it. She became less fear-oriented and more life oriented.

I started to make decisions that were less based in fear and more based upon wanting to just live, because I did not want to be lying on my death bed thinking, ‘I should have or could have, tried it.’

The overall impact for Ellen is her renewed commitment to life. Enjoying what she has while she has it; appreciating the valued people in her life while she has them: embracing the good things in life and viewing it as something precious. For her, the effects of multiple loss are additive. “Life just tastes better.” As she copes with further losses, it only serves to hone the lesson for her: “Realize today is important, don’t take time for granted, don’t miss an opportunity when you have it. Each new loss is a signal to appreciate life.”

The meanings of her loss experiences.

Ellen’s story is a hopeful one. She experiences her losses as deeply upsetting and profoundly life changing. They affect her life and how she lives it and she misses her parents deeply but she has transformed the nature of her relationship to them, from their lack of presence to one that incorporates the essence of who they were and how they helped shape her own identity. She is proud to be a part of them and she has chosen to honour their values and cherish her memories of them.
Her experience of living through loss is evolutionary, an adaptation to change and development towards growth. The pain of her losses serves to make the joys in life that much more beautiful and she relishes the good things in life. Ellen’s losses have become a part of her and have shaped who she is but this does not mean that experiencing loss is easier for her. The emotional impact of the loss never fully leaves her and there are times when she can be struck by the intensity of her loss. It is never far out of reach, reminding her of the powerful effect it has on her life. She explains her ongoing experience with loss and gaining acceptance:

It’s just the nature of growing into the loss for me, it has become a part of me because it’s been a very shaping influence. You grow into it…I always compare it to an onion. You think you’re OK and then another layer of the onion comes off and you find another raw space. It never goes away: I think I’m OK and then one day something will happen and another (layer of the onion) comes off and there’s another raw vulnerable place and then you have to kind of work through that space.

Louise’s Story

Louise is a 48-year-old married woman. She does not have children. She spoke of the loss of her mother, an unborn child, and her father. She related how each of her losses had their own unique effect on her. Indeed she is not entirely sure if and how they relate to each other. However she is aware that the scope of her experience and the effects combined has influenced who she is as a person today. There are still some unanswered questions for Louise in terms of ultimate impact, but she has become intimately acquainted with the experience of loss and has learned much about the process of grief.

The first loss.

Louise was 26 years old when her mother, who was 63, died of lung cancer. The time between her diagnosis and her passing was less than a year but for Louise her illness and decline felt as if it had transpired very quickly.

She was diagnosed with lung cancer, and then she died very quickly. She died within a year of the diagnosis, and so it seemed really fast. I think probably a year
would seem really fast to anybody, but at 26 it felt like a week. It felt like no time at all.

Louise had been married for 3 years and living away from her parents’ home. Her relationship with her mother was a companionable one. Louise would often ask her mother for guidance and would call her mother occasionally to ask for help with cooking and to get tips and advice. Louise felt this loss on a deep level. She was a young woman embarking on her own life in the world, and she was now faced to do so without her mother. She felt lost. There was anger and despair.

After she died, at the funeral, I remember looking outside and seeing cars go by and people getting on with their lives and feeling really angry about that. That people were just getting on with their lives when my world had just caved in…I felt like I’d been turned inside out and all the nerves were kind of out there, raw, and everything hurt. I just felt raw. And I felt directionless, as if, because I didn't have my mother I didn't know what to do or where to go. She was always going to be there to go to, to talk to. So I felt angry. I felt incredibly lost. I felt sad and I cried. I was surprised at how profound it was.

She was taken aback by this experience, and initially, she had trouble adapting to the fact that her mother would no longer be there for her anymore.

Part of me wanted to scream that I couldn’t reach her anymore, not scream in frustration but scream in fear and grief: So the fact that I didn't have Mom to call or to go to or to check with. It's not that I felt that I'd been living my life checking with her, but the fact that she wouldn't be there anymore was very hard to adapt to. I was surprised at the depth of that (and at)…how total it was: I felt like one wall of the room had fallen away... it was as though a conversation had stopped that I wasn’t ready to stop having.

Louise is aware that she was forced to change and adapt her life and her self in response to this loss. She had been reliant on her mother and tended to defer to her thoughts and opinions rather than sorting out her own. Her death meant that Louise was forced to work this all out for
herself and it started her on the path to coming to know herself. She was faced with sorting out the meaning of her life and who she was.

The hardest things to grapple with when my mother died was what does my life mean now? Because I think I relied on her to help me find that meaning… the fact that she was around and that I was her child and that she remembered my childhood and all of those things were meaning to me; The meaning of me being here. And so when she died, I felt like I was going to have to be the one to carry that meaning now, and I didn't really know how to do that. I was going to have to kind of grow into my own life faster than I had expected to: If my mother hadn’t died I don’t believe I would have worked as hard to figure out my own life: In a funny way it was as though it was a separation that I hadn’t started yet.

The second loss.

Louise lost an unborn child during pregnancy due to a chromosomal disorder and was required to deliver it. She was 35 at the time. She and her husband had been trying to have children over the years and had undergone fertility treatment. When that proved unsuccessful they gave up and at that point Louise became pregnant. “So we were delighted and sort of whole heartedly entered into it, but there was a problem.”

Louise made a customary and routine visit for an ultrasound. She was excited and full of questions for this, apparently normal, medical checkup. However, the visit turned out to be something quite different, indeed unexpected and shocking. She detected that something was amiss when the technician called for the doctor. After a prolonged period of silence while the doctor scrutinized the monitor, he then informed her that the baby was dead. She felt shock and disbelief, as if it wasn’t really happening.

So it was that kind of horrible moment…and then the nurse said ‘would you like me to turn the ultrasound machine off?’, and I said ‘yes’, and they went on doing what they needed to do…And I remember thinking that there was something wrong, and I thought, gee, maybe I came in through the wrong door for this appointment, because it was supposed to be so different than that. You know, I was excited. It was the check up... I had all kinds of questions, and it turned into
something quite different. And then we called my husband and then we went home to begin to start to cope with that.

There was a sense of desperation after this loss. “I felt desperate and I felt a bit crazy.” She experienced all the same physical issues and symptoms that new mothers do. “That just about made me crazy because I thought, my God I’ve got everything but the baby.” Other people tended to be uncomfortable about talking about this loss. Pregnant women especially tended to eschew her. “They were just scared and a lot of people didn’t know what to say.” Many others had trouble identifying with this loss and tended to not want to hear about it. Seeing other mothers with their newborns was especially difficult for her. Louise was able to get through these difficult times with the help and support of a good therapist.

She never had any other children after this and despite being reassured that she could have more healthy children Louise was fearful of doing so. Her marriage at the time began to deteriorate and ultimately ended in divorce, leaving her without children. For Louise there is lingering sadness and hurt surrounding the idea that she will not experience motherhood and all that that life entails. Losing the baby initiated a process of examining her place in the world and the meaning that this loss has for her and her future life.

I still grapple with that because I regret not having children: And so that sort of becomes a symbol of something lost, not just a baby who was not going to make it in this world but children I didn’t have. A life I didn’t have: That particular loss has become a bit of a focal point: What does this mean that I’ve lost this child? And then since then that question has sort of got bigger. Well I didn’t have children so what did that mean?

The loss of her baby has had a deep impact on Louise in terms of how she views her life. She struggled to incorporate the meaning of this loss into her life, pondering questions around what it means to her to not be a mother.

Losing the baby…it was more about, OK, this happened and what does it mean for the rest of my life? What will I do now? How do I make that as part of the fabric of my life?: The grief is really more about never having had children. So it’s become bigger than that person.
The third loss.

Louise lost her father when he was 84 and she was 44. It was a sudden death but not totally unexpected and she believes that she has been able to understand and reconcile this loss in a different way.

He had been ill and in the hospital for over a year. An infection had taken hold after knee surgery and many of his organs had been affected. He recovered from this and was moved to another city where he spent his remaining years. “It was quite remarkable that he actually came out of that but we became quite close in that time.” Louise had been attending to his care and his affairs at this time and through this process came to know him better.

One day close to Father’s Day she received a phone message from her sister. When she replied she learned that her father had died that morning. “He (had) died suddenly after breakfast.” She and her sisters were not told of the exact cause and to this day don’t really know what actually contributed to his death. It came as a bit of a shock because he had not been ill. She was able to spend time with him and get to know him and this death had a different, less distressing impact on her.

It was not anywhere near that kind of feeling of being hit by a bus like I had felt with the other two: I was very grateful for having had the time with him and so I had a whole different perspective on it.

Louise felt open to the grief process after her father died and was unafraid of going through it. She missed her father deeply and was sad to have lost him but it did not have the same devastating impact on her. This different reaction she partly attributes to experience and maturity and to the relationship she had with her father.

I didn’t feel afraid of feeling pain. I didn’t feel scared about the process. I didn’t feel lost. I didn’t feel directionless: I didn’t feel as though he’d been sort of taken out of my life prematurely…and I also felt very clear because I had worked hard to be his friend and to try to repair that relationship that I felt very solid in that.

After her mother died, her relationship with her father slowly changed and she became more involved in his life. As he aged and had more illnesses, she became the primary person in
his life to attend to his needs. This resulted in a rediscovery of each other and a newfound closeness. “I am incredibly grateful for that because if Dad had died first I never would have known who he was.” Through her father’s illness and her care-giving she became more aware of herself as an attentive, reliable, caring and compassionate person.

With Dad the shaping was probably not so much in the loss but in the experience of being with him when he was ill and in learning that I was a person who could be there, who could show up.

**The impact.**

Multiple loss as a cumulative experience was difficult for Louise to articulate. It had almost ineffable qualities, a sense that she could understand how it felt but could not organize the experience into a sequential whole. She was aware that her previous losses influenced her next ones but didn’t know exactly how they did so. She is acutely aware that her life without these losses would likely have been different. “I can’t imagine what it would have been like to grow up and mature and live a life and think about things without those losses.”

She ponders the question about how her previous losses may have affected her next ones and does not easily see a connection between them apart from realizing that her subsequent loss experiences would have been easier had she had the support of her mother.

I don’t know if I could connect the two, I’ve never thought about putting the two together: If I think about, would the experience of losing the baby have been different if I had not lost my mother already? Probably. First of all she would have been there. I think it's something that we might have shared, because we might have talked about her loss, and it would have been something we could have shared as adults.

Louise is struck by the notion that it seems strange not to have parents. She has consciously sought out and nurtured relationships with older adults, especially women. This helps her feel connected with the essence of her mother.

In terms of what all the deaths mean to me…I'm the youngest of three girls, and it's funny, it still feels funny to me not to have parents, even at 48: I find that I
seek people out who are older, so I have a Godmother in my life who was my mother's best friend… I love the fact that she's still alive. I love the fact that she was my mom's best friend, and there's somebody I can talk to about my mom, who remembers her… So I find that I love having those relationships, they're not my mother, but they are older women in my life and I welcome that. I look for that.

Louise believes that these losses have had a major influence on shaping who she is as a person today and there is a sense that she experiences life on a deeper, more profound level as a result.

It feels as though my life is kind of bigger or wider as a result, and so I don’t think I’d want to change it: It’s part of how I experience the world… I am out in the world and I’ve lost my mother, and my father and a baby. So it’s simply part of how I relate to the world now: I do feel as though I experience things more profoundly than I might have, that I take life more seriously than I would have and that my life feels more urgent.

_The meanings of her loss experiences._

Louise’s story is about transformation. She has been changed by her losses and she incorporates them into her understanding of herself and who she is now. The meanings of these lost relationships have profound effects on her. She is without parents and has remained childless and there is a sense of her being displaced, i.e., without familial connections. Yet, she rectifies this by maintaining meaningful relationships with others who fulfill her need to be connected to an elderly mother-like figure.

The loss of her baby represents a larger loss—one of childlessness. Louise contemplates the notion of not having children and not having been a mother. She remains sad over the loss of this potential and that course of life. Her loss of the baby is about loss of motherhood and all that that entails. Louise carries this with her and it is incorporated into her sense of being and her image of herself. As a part of her these losses have left indelible marks that are about her identity, her place in the world and her relationships. She views her losses as having affected
who she is and how she interacts with the world. “It's a wrinkle; it's part of my face now. It's part of my skin now.”

Louise is unsure how all her losses connect together in terms of how she coped with each and she ponders what would be normal maturity and what would be specifically attributable to her losses. She imagines her losses as being part of her, coursing through her veins:

Something that kind of floats around inside me. It’s more like a part of my bloodstream. … I don't mean a sad thing. Sometimes I feel sad, but it's more part of, you know, I get up in the morning and those things are still true, and I go to work and so it's part of my brain and my heart and my bloodstream.

**Randy’s Story**

Randy is a 46-year-old gay man who spoke of the loss of three partners. Randy had experienced other important losses throughout his lifetime and these too had an influence on the overall impact of losses on his life. Randy is an activist in the social and political realm and as an artist he incorporates much of his personal lived experiences into his creative life. The impact on Randy of losing three partners was profound and he spoke of how his experiences intensified his way of being in the world.

**The first loss.**

Randy was 18 years old when he lost his first partner to AIDS. His partner was also 18. It was before medications were available for HIV/AIDS and his illness and death were quite sudden. This loss left Randy with what he refers to as an “underlying layer of sadness” that he carries with him to this day. At the time he felt bereft of companionship and despaired that he would ever find love again. It challenged his notions of love and relationships and he was left feeling profoundly lonely.

It came on very quickly. He was sick and dead within 8 months. It was very fast: I always thought growing up that you fall in love in your life once. So when I lost my first partner I imagined that was it: It gave me an underlying piece of sadness that was about loneliness. It was about the perception of being alone.
There were other complications at this time including the cultural, social and familial environment that stigmatized this disease. It necessitated the coming out process for Randy and his partner and created tension between Randy and his partner’s parents. A legal dispute over personal effects bequeathed to Randy by his partner helped solidify his sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem; that he should and could stand up for himself. It also led to an enhanced relationship between Randy and his father. His father supported him throughout the legal proceedings and Randy sees this as a turning point in his relationship with his father.

His family decided to take me to court to make it not possible for me to have those things and they imagined that they would shame me into not standing up for my rights: It initiated me having a conversation with my father about being gay. And that I really should stand up for these things: It really solidified our relationship in way that I think not a lot of men have with their fathers. There was something that was really kind of magical that came out of that happening.

The death of his first partner from AIDS helped initiate a part of his identity as a gay man and influenced his choices and values as to how to live in the world. His experiences imbued him with a sense of openness and empathy towards AIDS sufferers, at a time when the disease carried much shame and stigma. He worked at an AIDS organization and was able to be non-judgmental and compassionate. It allowed him to be more compassionate towards himself.

I don’t make judgments (about myself) that I have watched other gay men make about themselves in connection to the disease. I think a lot of gay men really grapple with what that disease means and who it affects and why it affects some and it then becomes attached to part of their shame around their identity. The loss of my partner to that disease really clarified that quickly for me so that I don’t attach that to a piece of shame that’s part of my identity.

**The second loss.**

Still in his early 20’s and in a new relationship with a man in his late 20’s, Randy was surprised to find himself falling in love again after his initial loss. He found a renewed sense of hope as his sadness began to fade. But Randy was nervous about losing his new partner, feeling vulnerable to loss after his first partner had died. He spoke to his second partner over the phone
hours before he died. Randy subsequently received a phone call from the police informing him that his partner had been murdered.

My second partner…I talked to him 10 hours before he died, and as ironic as it is I had said something to him about ‘take care of yourself’ or, ‘be well’ or something like that. And we had…joked about the fact that in my relationship I was nervous about losing my partner. Because I had lost my first partner. And his final words to me were; ‘I promise you you’re not going to lose me in that way. I’ll see you soon’. And 10 hours later…I was getting a phone call from a police officer trying to find out more information of who he was and who they should contact. He was killed in London, England. And so 10 hours later my partner is dead, and beaten to death.

The tragedy of this loss rekindled his sadness and despair. He was left doubting again. The sudden, tragic and violent nature of this death also left Randy with a sense of the world as an unsafe place, and life as unfair and unjust.

When I found myself falling in love again, that was a surprise to me. It reduced the level of sadness and changed how I started to think about things. And because that second death was so tragic, so unexpected, again, it retriggered that sadness.

This left him feeling angry and more cautious about his own safety.

And so it gave me a view of the world, a perception of the world of it being a very, very dangerous place. A place where I was not safe. A place where horrific things happen to people only because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. And I think I carried myself for maybe a year of my life in a very ‘angry at the world’ kind of way…and I think in a more cautious way than I would have carried myself had this not happened.

The third loss.

Randy lost another partner, 2 years after his second loss, in an accident. Randy was 24 at the time, his partner was 28. He did not describe the details of this accident, but was acutely
aware of the impact this third loss had on him. He was deeply saddened and hurt yet he describes this loss as the catalyst for the change that was to come and the turning point for Randy in solidifying his beliefs and values.

The loss of my third partner was to an absolutely freak accident. And again, so someone’s torn out of my life in a matter of moments. And it had the opposite effect on me. Because it made me think about how valuable every moment is. And though I was very saddened and really hurt, I mean I was a mess but it made me build stronger relationships with the people around me.

For Randy there was a cumulative effect of these losses. He began to reflect on this death and the one previously. He re-evaluated the second death as also being a random, equally tragic event. This helped reduce his anger.

The third death, I think because he really was an innocent person who had died in a tragically weird situation, made me think back to the previous one: It really had nothing to do with him. It did have to do with being the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time: It made me reread myself as that angry person walking through the world, and see it differently.

This experience intensified his belief in and feelings for the awesomeness of the world. It set in motion the course that he chose to take for the rest of his life. He believes this would have come about naturally due to his inherent nature but that it was accelerated by his loss experiences. “So it feels like I was given a pretty magical gift with that loss and it made me shoot forward by 50 years of experience.”

**The impact.**

By the time Randy had lived through his third major loss through death he began to see the shift that took place within him. He became more attuned to the mystery and beauty of the world. He had always been an interested and open person, but this loss intensified that aspect of himself. His passion, his life’s work, his creativity, his compassion and drive to help others and make the world a better place were all propelled into action by this third loss.
I mean, the third death was…I think the most difficult and the one that hurt the deepest but it also was the place where shortly thereafter…the intensity of me noticing how incredible the world was happened. And the need for me within whatever I’m going to do in my life’s work, to make that evident to others, I think it’s one of the seeds that got planted that turned into what I’ve painted for the rest of my life. The seed that got planted that has grown into me wanting to do work that impacts human condition. And helps others think about how magical the world around them really is.

For Randy, losing three partners at a young age led to some anger and resentment and a questioning of why he had to suffer, but he came to realize that he was gaining something from the experiences: “Why is this happening to me?”

The depth of his experiencing and level of intensity that he feels in the world have been carved by his losses. His belief in social change, his work as an artist, his vocation and activism and his interactions with others have all been shaped by his losses. They have given him an ability to imagine and marvel at the wonder of life’s possibilities and potentialities and the motivation to act on them. Randy describes his zest for life and the vibrancy of his vocation.

I don’t view the world with the same level of cynicism as others do. I don’t view the world with the words ‘I can’t do anything about that’. I see things more in terms of ‘I might be able to do something.’: I have quite a lust for life and I take on pretty big projects and do some pretty interesting work.

He contemplates the juxtaposition of the sadness surrounding his losses with the valued lessons that he has taken from them. Ultimately he believes that having lived through his many losses has provided him with the opportunity to embrace life and grow spiritually, emotionally and interpersonally.

I do think there is an underlying layer of sadness and although I wish that each one of those partners had not died I’ve come to a place where if I could back up and take those (losses) out of my life, I wouldn’t. Because the sadness is accompanied by a sense of being insightful and a sense of really valuing the other relationships in my life: Life comes from everything. Magic comes from
everything. Each of the deaths that have happened in my life have left a space for something else really remarkable to come about.

For Randy, it is his choice to have embraced these losses in a way that has made life meaningful for him: Sometimes, a conscious choice, and sometimes a serendipitous experience that allows one to make a choice. He reflects on his losses:

I believe that happiness is a choice. I think it happens at different junctures where we can decide to stay in a place of grief or sadness or pain, or we can decide to choose the other, (more) positive (experiences): (If I think about the) losses that I’ve had in my life or other junctures where you can go the positive or negative way, I know I’ve made conscious decisions to go in the positive way. I think sometimes loss stops us in our tracks and we don’t have the ability to choose to be happy. But I think the world will keep offering us things that might help us get to a place where we’ll choose to be happy. In other situations…there is a point where you decide, ‘are you going to stay in grief forever or are you going to sort that into your life so it becomes something that strengthens who you are and make a choice to not let the loss of that relationship stop you from living an incredible life. And it is a moment where you choose. And I do think they’re moments.

In summing up his multiple loss experiences Randy, reveals the multi-faceted impact that they have had on him. He chooses to see the positive side of his multiple loss experience.

I think that it has placed an underlying layer of sadness in my life. I think it’s made me look at the world in a very different way, than if I hadn’t lost them. I think it makes me value my relationships that I have now. I think it makes me really value time. So the sadness is something that’s part of who I am. But I also think that I’ve gained a lot from having gone through these experiences that adds in a very beneficial way to the quality of my life.

*The meanings of his loss experiences.*

Randy’s story reflects a sense of powerfulness, that he has embraced his ability to choose how he acts and interacts in the world and with others, and in a way that is meaningful, fulfilling
and empowering for himself and others. He credits his losses with having helped shape this for him, although undoubtedly his nature contributes to his perceptions and his abilities to see life in a positive light. Experiencing three tragic deaths within a short time frame and at a young age catalyzed his move towards growth.

This is a story about growth and resilience. He has suffered through many losses and he has transformed the experiences into something positive, for himself and for others. He believes in embracing the beauty and wonder of the world. He is an optimist and his character reflects resilience. Yet, this does not imply that he has not felt intense and at times lingering pain from his losses. Rather, he has shaped his perspective of what the losses mean to him from one of detriment to one of enhancement. For him, it is not about recovering and getting over his losses. It is about living with them, experiencing the pain and sadness that they impart and choosing to embrace the good things that come out of them.

I think the idea of getting over a death is ridiculous. It’s about getting to a place where we see it a little differently and that painful feeling gets put into a place that feels somewhat different…I just think that I’ve had the privilege of these three major losses in my own life at a period where I was very young. So it allowed me, much earlier than I think many people, to start looking for the positive piece…There’s been so much loss in my life. And I continually find the seeds that remind me how really lucky I am.

**Lorraine’s Story**

Lorraine is 52-year-old single woman who spoke about the deaths of her father and her brother. She is the sole girl in a family with five brothers and her two parents, and she did not have any children of her own. At the time of the interview Lorraine was sensitive about the notion that she would inevitably lose her elderly mother. The significance of this eventuality to her life, her sense of self and her future was weighing heavily on her mind.

*The first loss.*

Her brother was 45 years old when he died. Lorraine was 44. The circumstances surrounding her brother’s death were heartbreaking, and Lorraine still struggles with the
complexity and emotional impact this death has on her. His death was a suicide and the circumstances were unusual and tragic.

My brother had suffered an injury at work, electrocution and he had brain damage. On the outside he looked perfectly normal but it had affected the part of his brain where he felt joy or happiness and he was living a very kind of flat life.

Lorraine was his advocate and she worked hard at getting him proper medical care and supporting him in whichever way she could. He was unable to work and his psychological condition became worse. He became more isolated and despite being offered therapy and various forms of help he continued to withdraw. He had made two suicide attempts and then was hospitalized. Lorraine and the family felt helpless at times.

And then at some point he decided that he didn’t want to live and he had attempted suicide twice and then on his third attempt he was successful: And a lot of it you feel very alone because for this kind of injury there weren’t a lot of doctors that even knew about it or could treat it and to get treatment was a long waiting list...(and wondering) can we get to the point where there’s going to be care available and he hasn’t killed himself yet. And that never happened. He killed himself before that was available.

There is some confusion around this event for Lorraine. “I mean I understand it intellectually but I still (don’t understand) just being capable of actually doing that.” Lorraine also struggles with the sense of hopelessness that he must have felt and harbours some guilt around what she could have done. “Had I done enough?”

The entire family was deeply affected by her brother’s death. There were many facets that Lorraine had to deal with. Lorraine was also trying to support her parents who had lost their son to incomprehensible circumstances. She was left with many confusing and unanswered questions about the circumstances and life in general. She felt the burden of responsibility.

And then there’s lots of fallout when something like that happens in terms of family, his adult children were very angry…and in the end they tended to have a lot of anger towards me because they felt I was withholding information from
them: And then the reaction in the family with all that going on and then to try to support my parents because they’ve lost a son, and the tremendous guilt that they felt. All those questions about life, like, why do these things happen?: I was questioning had we done enough, had we done the right thing, how could this have happened, how could we help his children try not to get angry? How do we help our parents?

Lorraine ponders the impact this had on her family. Each of her family members coped and grieved differently and there was little communication about their feelings. This taught her about the unique and protracted nature of grief.

How much people within one family are hurting…and no one able to support each other: What I found difficult was that no one talked about anything: I don’t think we did any of that very well, because I think we were all so devastated, and not very able to help each other: From my experience, each person grieves quite differently…it’s very individual and it takes a long, long time.

The second loss.

Lorraine’s father died when he was 78 years old. She was 50. He had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and had been able to live at home for 2 years after his diagnosis. When he was eventually moved to the hospital her mother continued to care for him there, visiting the hospital every day. Lorraine speaks to the slow, degenerative nature of his disease and how the loss was a progressive one. It was difficult for her to watch her father’s decline but the grieving process for the loss of who he was as a person had already begun.

We were already at a stage of grieving (the process of) losing my Dad…and my Dad was at a place, when my brother died, that he wasn’t really aware.

Lorraine was concerned about her mother and how she was coping with her brother’s death and her father’s illness. Lorraine questioned her mother’s resilience and marveled at her ability to withstand her losses.
Knowing that my Mom was supporting my Dad and feeling like ‘Wow, how much can she withstand?’…And so my Mom’s kind of on her own, dealing with it as a parent without my father to support her, but also knowing that my Dad was passing, dying slowly.

**The impact.**

For Lorraine the deaths of her brother and father are meaningful for how she perceives her family and her relationship within it. Lorraine is currently anxious about her mother who is elderly and who has suffered from strokes in the past. The predictability of her Mom’s death weighs heavily on her and she fears this inevitability. She anticipates this as meaning the end of a larger connection with intimate others, an end to her family and a loss of her place in that family, and a questioning of her place in the world at large.

I feel like I’m losing and am fearful about, when the time comes, having lost both parents: I do have a fair amount of anxiety around it and I’m thinking about it a lot especially when I see my Mom more fragile…having lost my brother and knowing that it’s inevitable that my Mom’s going to pass away: I’ve been feeling great sadness about my Mom and seeing her deteriorate, what that’s going to feel like. And knowing it was about a very good relationship, but it’s much bigger than that.

The loss of family members carries with it additional meaning beyond the loss of the beloved person. It has an impact on her sense of self and her understanding of that self through others. There is a sense of loss of deeply personal, close and intimate relationships with cherished others who know her and with whom she feels connected.

I think that with my parents and even with siblings it’s about losing some people who would know me…a kind of real personal knowledge, someone who’s really there for you and it’s something about, maybe it’s my family…that support, (knowing that) they are there no matter what.

She is feeling vulnerable as a single, aging, childless woman and she wonders who will take care of her if she gets ill or infirm. She feels alone.
I’m feeling very vulnerable. I’m not married and I also feel vulnerable about losing my parents, that there is no one, I have siblings but I do feel that there’s no one at that level. To me our parents and our spouse can be at that level of feeling – (a feeling that) there’s going to be someone there for you. And maybe that’s where a lot of my anxiety and sadness comes from, is feeling that I’m not going to have that core (support), no matter what. It’s also made me very concerned about getting older too. It’s a very vulnerable spot to be in when you’re not healthy.

She believes her empathic nature was heightened by these experiences. Lorraine was very involved in everyone’s health care, and when her Mom had a series of strokes Lorraine took time off work and cared for her. She found this rewarding. She took the initiative and ensured her family members had the proper care and advocated for them, something she is pleased to have done. The time she spent helping her mother through her illness was difficult but she believes she has gained from it. But it has also left her feeling sad.

It was something I really wanted to give my Mom. I got some gifts back in terms of internal growth: I wanted to do it… and I feel really good about it (and) I think I’m even more sensitive and empathic to lots of different situations: I think I have gained a higher level of sensitivity and empathy and I hope it’s made me a better person: (But) I think it’s also made me much more sad. I wish I could translate it into something more positive.

Lorraine searches for the meaning that these lost relationships have on her life. She questions her life’s direction and what she needs from life. She also feels pressured to make decisions in light of this sense of fragility and finiteness and she thinks about the uncertainties in life and how it can be short and unpredictable.

Like what do I want out of life? What am I missing in my life? And I’m feeling this pressure of time and making those…choices: I’ve done a lot of questioning of myself, like; ‘What am I doing with my work, my life? Would I be happier if I tried something different?’ Time’s running out. I feel like there’s not much time left.
Lorraine is still deeply affected by her losses. The notion that her family’s lives and her world were turned upside down still impacts her. Sometimes the emotion takes her by surprise. Lorraine thinks she is currently focusing on the sadness. She is feeling “a lot of weight of wishing things had been different, more positive, happier” and she is attempting to focus on more positive aspects of the family situation.

I’m really surprised at how emotional I get, so I guess it’s still difficult: Even today when I think about it…there’s just this really deep sadness: I think I’m spending a lot of time thinking about the sad things, and maybe that’s my work, to shift things into a more positive place.

**The meanings of her loss experiences.**

Lorraine’s story remains unresolved and it reflects a sense of dissolution. Her sense of herself has been fragmented and she is seeking to put herself back into place, not knowing what shape that will take. Her identity, partly predicated on her place within her family and her relationships with important others, is undergoing change. There is a sense that it has been disrupted. The death of her father and brother and her fear of losing her mother represent an end to her family and a sense of abandonment.

She remains uncertain and doubtful of how her life will proceed. She is anxious about her future. These series of losses represent a much bigger picture for her, one of aloneness. She feels frightened by her sense of vulnerability and in talking about it, it kindles a sense of helplessness.

The person I feel like when I’m talking about this is …I think, is like a child…who still feels vulnerable but that comfort comes when you run to your mother and you’re at her knees and she can give you a hug. Because I think that when I feel this emotional I do really feel like I’m that kind of childlike vulnerability. That, that’s the only comfort, the only thing that would be comforting.

**Dipti’s Story**

Dipti is a 46-year-old married mother of two young adult sons. She spoke about her experiences of losing her mother and then her father and the overall impact this has had on her
life and her relationships within her larger extended family. Her story unfolded with the rich
details of her experience through the illnesses of her parents and the profound nature of losing
such valued, cherished and intimate relationships. Through the process of doing the interview
she found that she felt more peace and reconciliation in regards to her losses, as well as an
understanding of her process as a meaningful, evolving, and poignant journey.

*The first loss.*

Dipti’s mother died of cancer at age 63. Dipti was 38 at the time. Her mother had been
diagnosed with cancer 3 years prior to her death and from the very beginning, at the time of
diagnosis, Dipti began anticipating her loss.

My family didn’t comprehend the extent of it…I could comprehend it and I knew
exactly what that meant…I always had that feeling that my loss is beginning and
so really my loss began that day.

Her mother lived in Asia and so Dipti was faced with traveling back and forth throughout
the time of her mother’s illness. The realization of the inevitable outcome was always with her.
“I knew every time, with every passing day, and every time there was a recurrence of something
I had begun to prepare myself for that loss.” She tried to hang on to hope. “There were times
when I was giving her hope and I too was hoping for miracles.” Dipti longed for a miracle to
intervene in her family’s case but it wasn’t to be. As her mother’s illness progressed Dipti coped
with the impending loss.

I had started letting go of her bit by bit. The logical mind was telling me all the
right things to do. But I know that my emotional self had a very difficult journey.

Dipti’s relationship with her mother was a spiritual and filial one. She described a very
intense and intimate relationship that she shared with her mother. They were each other’s
confidantes and Dipti took on a protective, oftentimes defensive role with her mother, attempting
to shield her mother from the perceived inequities within the extended family.

I was very, very attached to my mother but I was attached on a different
plane…what we shared was our conversations, our time together, just being with
each other, laughing, doing little things or just going and eating out.
On her last visit to see her mother, 2 months before she died, Dipti enjoyed a wonderful, special visit with her mother. But leaving her mother was painful. However, her last memories of her are special and heartwarming.

She was quite sick at the time but she had been preparing, getting ready for my visit and we had the most beautiful visit: (But) the day I left, it was hard: My last and one particular memory always stays with me and gives me a lot of comfort. I was getting in the car to go to the railway station and my Mom gave me a hug and then as I was leaving she wanted to give me another hug and the driver said I’m going to miss my train so I’d better sit in the car, and I can close my eyes and I can still see my Mom walking towards me to give me that final hug.

Dipti was not able to attend her mother’s funeral but the morning after she died she had a heartening experience that gave her consolation.

I was sleeping and my husband woke me up. He said, ‘You had the most beautiful smile on your face and you were laughing.’ And I said, ‘Yes, Do you know Mom was hugging me.’ And it was that last hug that she couldn’t give me.

She is looking for a particular special moment when she can adequately grieve for her mother and is hoping that such a time will come, delaying the expression of her grief until she finds that moment. She struggled through her mother’s illness and did all that she could for others and continued to care for her family. Now, she wishes to have her own schedule for her grief.

I need to create a special time in my life which is unfettered, because right now my family takes bits and pieces of me and I feel that because she was always there for me in every way, shape or form, I need to find that perfect time: I want that perfect setting…I’m hankering for something so perfect to be able to do that, and I don’t let myself, it’s like an escapism. I keep myself away from those situations that I’m scared to face: I did everything that made sense for everybody else’s wellbeing and now that she’s gone I don’t want anybody telling me what makes sense to me because I did everything to make sure that everything else was normal while she was sick.
Her grief hit her full force when she returned to her home country 2 years after her mother died. The presence of her mother was overbearing. She realized that her mother’s lack of presence in the physical form was so salient in that place where she had lived and where Dipti had shared her life with her. She was overcome with her loss.

That was the hardest visit that I ever had because I could feel my mother’s presence everywhere. I could hear her voice and I just couldn’t function…It was so overbearing that I just couldn’t cope. I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t drink tea: That was my first realization that I was literally breaking under her lack, her loss.

The second loss.

Dipti’s father died of Parkinson’s related illness at age 72. She was 44. He had been ill on and off through the years and suffered from various physical problems. She had always thought that he’d be the first one of her parents to go. She had even planned how she would care for her mother after he died.

After her mother’s death, her father became increasingly ill and cognitively disoriented. The effects of his Parkinson’s became evident. He pined for her mother. As his physical and cognitive self declined Dipti tried to maintain an emotional and psychological connection with him but his deterioration made it difficult.

The disease took a toll on him. You could see it, as if he was on a plateau and then all of a sudden there was a very, very, sudden decline and he lost interest in everything: He was always searching for my Mom, missing her: When I couldn’t connect like that it pained me to see my Dad physically deteriorating, but I couldn’t connect with him.

The anticipation of losing her father rekindled her feelings of loss and her resentment over losing her parents. “Now that I had lost one parent, I’d lose another one and it just brought out more emotions in me on my loss. Like God, ‘What is this?’ ‘How come I have to lose both my parents?’”

When he died her sister called her from Asia to tell her. She felt some relief as he had been suffering both physically and cognitively. There had been little quality to his life and he had
been missing her mother. She and her sister joked about how their parents could now finally be together again.

When he passed away physically it wasn’t much of a shock because I was wanting that to happen because I couldn’t take him suffering: There was no quality of life and he was pining for my Mom so much that I really prayed and wished every day that they were together. I found his death like a relief; there was a closure because I could also feel my Mom pining for him: (My sister and I) could feel that they were finally there with each other.

**The impact.**

The deaths of her parents had a huge effect on Dipti’s beliefs about and interactions within her extended family. She found herself withdrawing from relatives and began to perceive them as ‘less than’ her mother. She was resentful that they, rather than her mother, had continued their lives. She felt betrayed by her mother’s death and struggled with the notion that others appeared to have what she herself had just lost.

What I noticed about myself is that I started closing myself off from my relatives and I started moving away from them: I started grudging my relatives their life, and I wondered why the aunts didn’t go. Why is it my mother had to go?: With my other cousins who had both parents and I had lost my mother and my father was sick and on his last legs and I started, I don’t know if I was jealous but I just hated them for having that in life and why did I get cheated out of it?

Her father’s death compounded her anger and resentment towards her family. She was angry towards them for past grievances and issues that she perceived may have contributed to her parents’ ill health. “It was the same chain of thought that followed after my Mom’s loss. That my parents were persecuted by this extended family.”

After some years of little involvement with family and limited contact, Dipti was invited to a family wedding. Something had changed for her and she was now ready to go. She has since reexamined her relationships with family members and is now embracing their presence in her
life. Time has allowed her to understand this process better. She has reevaluated her mother’s situation and created a new meaning around her life and her death.

All of a sudden I felt that I was ready. I felt as if my Mom was telling me that it’s OK to go and it was so overpowering…I had the most wonderful visit: I have been so open to rejuvenating all the relationships with all my cousins. I feel as if they were always there with open arms and they were just waiting to welcome me back…now I love each and every one of them: I’m now able to step back and see all that in perspective…I don’t find that there’s any of those feelings that I had and I love the fact that my Mom didn’t have to suffer so much and she went at the right time because I look at their lives and (I compare) to my Mom’s and I find that she had a lot more fulfilling life than any one of them.

The special connection she had with her parents included being their advocate and protector. This role that she once played within her relationship with her parents has grown to include her relatives who are now turning to her for advice and assistance in family matters. She is now in the role of being the advocate and mediator for her extended family.

I always looked at myself as this crusader for my parents. I was always the strong one and I prided myself on being able to take care of my parents and be able to connect with them: I find myself again in that championing role because now I have all my relatives calling me and wanting to confide in me and ask me or tell me things and want me to come back and visit with them…So now my aunts and uncles because my mother is not there, they are finding it easier to access me and so I have really found myself back in that role.

Dipti came to shift the meaning of her relationship with her parents. Years after her losses she has been able to reconcile and reposition her relationship with them. She can keep their essence alive within her. She realizes her connection to and special relationship with her beloved parents will always be there and that she can again have other meaningful relationships in her family.

I do think that finally at the right time I became accepting of my loss and somewhere in my mind I did start believing that I will always have my parents
and hence don’t have to be worried about losing them: I’m going to always have them and nobody can take them. They are mine and I’m protecting them. But it’s OK to have other relationships, and that fear left me: They are mine and now I have the security that I know how to keep them…I’m safe in having them but I can have other relationships and they are OK with that. So I’m not dishonouring them.

Her knowledge of loss makes her acutely aware that she will eventually lose these relatives and is valuing and cherishing the time she has remaining with them.

I am OK to tell myself that I have that loss and even though that type of relationship I had with my mother was precious it’s OK to have that type of relationship with my aunt or uncle…Now I am able to say that that was very special but I can still have something special again: (And) I don’t want to have any regrets. I don’t want to miss out on these relationships: I don’t want to lose them and hence I’m making a connection.

She has noticed changes within her, especially in the way she interacts with family and connects to others. She has a need to feel connected to her family and is open and active in nurturing that. Recent experiences have shown her that she can act on her needs to connect and others can be welcoming of that. She attributes this change to her losses.

I would attribute all of it to my losses because the whole process stems from me becoming more accepting of my losses, and not blaming other people for my losses: It was within me all the time. But I chose to believe what I believed and I was not forgiving of my relatives.

_The meanings of her loss experiences._

Dipti’s story reflects transformation and growth. She has undergone a painful and life-changing event with the loss of her parents and it affected her relationships within her family. As she progressed through this process, she came to shift her perspective towards a new more positive outlook. The meaning of her losses is important. The death of her mother was particularly significant as it represented the loss of a powerful connection. Dipti was forced to
make a premature separation and this left her feeling angry and abandoned, a sentiment she took out on her other family members. But after a time she was able to reconcile her feelings of loss and incorporate her mother into her sense of herself, transforming the relationship from one that included her physical presence to one that was ethereal and that embraced her essence. The redefinition of her relationship with her mother allowed her to free herself of the anger and resentment she held towards others.

These losses had a huge impact on her and she sees them as playing a fundamental role in her life. It is the change within her that helped change her view of others and the world. Her growth is a process of discovery, a journey that evolved and is still evolving.

I think the magnitude was huge because I’m able to classify my life as chapters and it was like a milestone sort of thing: It was a process. It was a journey and I had to go through that journey…and my entire shift in thinking really comes from my journey, my process. I went through these peaks and valleys where I found I had my emotions towards my relatives and anger, and then slowly as acceptance came and I found a way to keep my parents and honouring their memory, I found a way to move on. So it’s really a journey.

**Beth’s Story**

Beth is a 52-year-old single woman. She is British and lives in England. She does not have any children. She spoke of the loss of her sister in early adulthood and her mother. Beth had lost her father when she was a child and this death figured prominently in her discourse and in her perceptions about and views of loss and its effect on her life.

**The first loss.**

Beth lost her sister to cancer when her sister was 25 years old. Beth was 24 at the time. Her sister was married and had an infant daughter. It took the entire family by surprise and the unexpected and unforeseeable nature of this loss astounded the family.

It was a shock. She had cancer and it was 5 months from beginning to end when it was first diagnosed: It was quite traumatic for everyone, and at that age, you
know it’s not something you’re even considering happening to anyone in your family…so it was very traumatic for all of us.

Beth’s sister was nursed at home for a period of time by Beth and her other sisters, and her mother. During her sister’s illness Beth felt a sense of helplessness and fear. She was desperate to help her sister and prayed that her sister would survive. She had grown up in a faith-based home and although she was not actively practicing at the time, she had turned to her religion in her time of need.

If you come from a faith background like we had, even though I was not practicing, I really wasn’t interested in it, it’s something you fall back on to some extent…and you feel yourself sort of bargaining, that as long as this doesn’t happen you’ll be a better person…I suppose it’s desperation, you’ll do anything.

When her sister died, Beth found herself feeling angry. There was a sense of unfairness and injustice over this loss of a young, vibrant person who had an infant daughter. “I think I felt very angry about it for a very long time…I was just very angry that she was such a young person to have died. It shouldn’t have happened. Very unfair.”

She was left with the sense of having lost a part of herself and she experienced it on a physical level.

It was a physical loss and it felt like something that you took for granted, was always there, and then wasn’t there. I know that is a very, very strong feeling …It was almost like an amputation. That’s how it felt.

Beth is unsure exactly how her sister’s death affected her except to say that it changed her somehow. There was much that the family had to contend with and they were primarily concerned about the welfare and upbringing of her sister’s little girl.

It did obviously affect me. (But) I don’t know quite how it affected me…I know I wasn’t quite the same afterwards: There were other things to deal with. We had her child, her little girl to sort out. What was going to happen with her? So there were quite a lot of practical things to deal with.
In hindsight she believes that she did not cope well with her sister’s death. She attributes much of this to her age and lack of support at the time. She tended to keep her feelings to herself or avoid them altogether and she did not want to share her experience with others.

I was at that age in your 20’s and you just try to get on with things I suppose. I probably didn’t sit down and try to analyze it or anything like that and I would just push things away...looking back now I can see how I did that…so I don’t think I coped with it very well. I didn’t talk about it: It’s something I didn’t want to share with other people…I didn’t really deal with it very well at all: I suppose that’s not unusual at that age (and) we didn’t get any sort of counselling at all. It wasn’t offered to us…I know now that that should have been something that could have helped us all.

Beth and her other sisters were concerned for their mother. “We were all so concerned about my mother, fussing around her and hoping she was okay.” Her mother was Irish and on a visit to Ireland to see relatives, Beth was angered by the openness and frankness around death that she witnessed. She believed it was a private matter that needn’t be shared with others and in fact had not even talked about her sister’s death with her mother.

Over there they are very open about everything, about death and they speak openly about it and she would speak openly about it, but I felt quite angry: I didn’t want to speak about it because it was a very personal and private thing: (My mother and I) weren’t speaking about it. We’d just gone through this thing and we didn’t actually speak about it very much but she could speak openly to her relatives over there. I think that helped her but I found it very difficult to deal with.

Beth reflects on the impact on herself and on the rest of the family of having lost her sister at such a young age. Despite the initial shock and inability to communicate with each other about the loss of their sister, the practical issues around the little girl and who would care for her helped forge a closer relationship among the sisters. Over time, this has culminated in a closer sibling affiliation.
I think in its own way it made us closer with my other sisters. I definitely think that but it took quite a while: Down the line we did get closer as a result…after some years…I mean for a long time I don’t think any of us could talk about it for quite a while, because it was such a shock what we’d gone through.

*The second loss.*

Years later, when Beth was 43 and living outside her home country of England, her mother died. Her mother was in her 80’s. She had been generally healthy but suffered a heart attack and died within a relatively short period of time. Beth was living abroad when her mother fell ill and was able to return to England in time to see her in the hospital before she died. Beth was struck hard by this death despite knowing that her elderly mother would obviously pass on. Beth felt a sense of guilt and regret for not being there and not seeing the signs of her mother’s illness and impending death.

That was quite a shock to me as well, even though my Mom was quite elderly and we should have really seen that…It was so much more traumatic even though it was a death that one should expect at that age: I wasn’t here at the time so that didn’t help at all because I’d get a lot of guilt feelings. Should have been there. Should have seen signs. Should have, you know, lots of should haves.

Her mother’s death hit her particularly hard, partly because of the unprocessed feelings around her sister’s death and partly for what it represented in terms of her family. Having lost her father in her childhood, she became acutely aware of the dissolution of her family-of-origin and the feeling of being without parents.

It was much more traumatic in the long run and I think it might have been the accumulation probably of things I hadn’t dealt with when my sister died, perhaps, or that I didn’t really grieve going through that as I should have: I think it might have been partly events of our father when we were a child so it almost felt like being an orphan…when one parent is there you don’t feel like an orphan. You feel you’ve got a parent and that’s your centre of origin. But when the second parent is gone you really feel that attachment is gone, completely.
She returned to live in England 18 months after her mother died. This was driven by her losses. She had been feeling rootless and unsettled around her grieving over her mother and wanted to return to her home. But she soon realized that her sense of home was predicated on her mother’s physical presence. However being back in England helped her understand her feelings around her loss of her mother.

Once I got back here I suddenly realized my mother’s not here, I still don’t feel at home anymore because she’d gone. And I was dealing with that. So it wasn’t being in a physical location, but I think it helped to be back (in England) to go through the process of what you have to go through.

Her mother’s death embodied a sense of having lost a part of her self. She was left with an empty space, a physical feeling of being bereft of something integral to her self. This death too left her feeling as if a part of her had been severed.

It felt like an amputation. It felt like a hole, right in the centre. Again it’s like a physical feeling and that’s the only way I can describe it. Like a huge hole, something gone: I felt like something very central inside had just disappeared, I think that is just a symbolic feeling but that was a very physical feeling as well...in analyzing it I know the centre here is the centre of emotion and that all makes sense now. I can quite understand that sort of physical feeling of something disappearing in that core strength.

Beth has sustained the connection with her mother despite her lack of physical presence. “The connection with my mother, I still feel it has never gone away. I don’t think you ever get over it.”

The impact.

For Beth, the effects of these significant losses and their impact on her sense of herself and family are greatly influenced by the death of her father when she was a child. This loss was pivotal in the family’s development and she believes it impacted her responses to loss in adulthood. Her father had leukemia and had been very ill. As children, she and her sisters were
sent away to stay with relatives during his last days at home, where he ultimately died. When she returned after he had died she felt anger.

I think it’s the loss of my father as well…the way it happened when we were children, it was a very, very negative experience and I think it did affect me as an adult in losing my sister and my mother: I suppose (there was some anger) towards my father but in a child’s mind his leaving us did have quite a lot of an effect (on me). Did he want us around? You know, things like that.

Years later as an adult Beth found herself, quite coincidentally, living and working abroad in the same country where her father had been stationed during the war. Her uncle had given her a photo album with pictures that her father had taken while he was there. It had a profound impact on her and her feelings about her father.

So I started to go to all these places to see what they looked like and I did go through a very positive experience where I actually felt a physical connection with him. I don’t know how, I can’t explain it more than that. It was like suddenly I felt his presence…and that helped me think about my father in a more positive way.

This reconnection with her father years later was healing and she ponders how it affected her process of dealing with her mother’s death. She believes it may have impacted the effects of losing her mother. There is also a heightened sense of her spiritual self and the meanings she ascribes to life and its vicissitudes.

I wonder about the way things happened, whether that actually helped me in some way when my mother did die. I don’t know how different I would have reacted, when my mother died if I hadn’t gone through that experience: I think it did help because it made me feel, after going through what I was going through with my father over there, it made me feel a lot more spiritual in lots of ways…and it made me think there’s always a reason for things or why things happen to us, very much so: I still know that in the long run things are going to be okay. And whether I would have gone through a more depressive stage after my mother died I don’t
know. I think maybe I would have if I didn’t have this more spiritual experience, which helps me I think.

Beth believes that her losses have changed her emotionally. She is more sensitive to people and issues around loss than she was in the past. There has been a shift in how she experiences her emotions around loss.

It’s made me much more sensitive to things…and more emotionally aware also. More empathetic to what other people experience as well…Because I (used to be) very good at cutting off. If I felt something I could quite easily switch it off and not go there. But now it’s more difficult to do that and maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe it’s not good to switch off your emotions. So yes, I accepted that as a good thing.

She hesitantly accepts this as positive change although this sensitivity to loss in general sometimes troubles and even overwhelms her at times. Other’s losses can bring up her feelings for her mother.

It brings up the emotion, back when my mother died. It’s like re-enacting in a way…I feel it would be nice to be desensitized somewhat from that…So I don’t know if it’s positive or negative at the moment. I’m not sure. I think it’s a process: I think it has over-sensitized me a little bit, somewhat, to other people’s bereavement: Maybe I’m more empathetic than I would have been but it’s almost too much. I’d rather be able to be a little bit more detached.

Beth is still contemplating the meaning of these deaths. “I’m still working through that one”, and she continues to consider the lessons that her loss experiences have provided. She is still trying to make sense of her losses and the meaning that they have for her, as well as their impact on her.

**The meanings of her loss experiences.**

Beth’s story reflects her process of transformation. She contemplates the effects her losses have had and there is a sense of uncertainty around the changes that have resulted. She
recognizes the ability to be empathic and connect with others, including forging closer relationships with her sisters, but she is not entirely comfortable with this acquired sensitivity. It is unfamiliar and uncomfortable to her.

Her story is one of searching for an identity as one who has lost both parents and never really knew her father. Her spiritual connection with him years later has greatly affected her response to her mother’s death, indeed has ameliorated it. Yet, there is a lingering sense of being abandoned, an orphan adrift without a sense of place. She moved back home to rectify her sense of being rootless, but has yet to fully feel at home.

She remains philosophical about her life, life in general and death. There is a notion that hardship and struggles as part of life are to be borne and they offer important lessons to be heeded.

Life is a learning process. I think there is a reason why we’re all here and I think that we’ve all got to go through different struggles…I think perhaps you’re just given what you’re able to cope with…you’ve got to accept and make the most of what you’ve got I suppose, and going through things like that, I think it makes you more aware…It certainly does make you feel philosophical about life.

Susan’s Story

Susan is a 51-year-old divorced mother of two young adult boys. She related the stories of the deaths of her brother, her father and her mother and the overall impact these losses have had on her. Susan is the oldest in a family that consisted of her parents and four children. These losses had a significant impact on her in terms of how they influenced her life’s decisions and ultimately affected the choices that she made. At the time of the interview, she was lamenting how her life unfolded as a result of these familial losses.

The first loss.

Susan was 22 years old when her younger brother died in a drowning accident. He was 18. Susan believes it was the start of a series of unfortunate events in the family. The death of her brother by drowning was tragic and imbued with much angst and fear. He had been missing and
his body was not recovered until weeks after his disappearance. The intervening time was tortuous on the family and took a toll on the family’s emotional and physical resources.

My brother drowned accidentally when he was 18 and he took with him his two best friends and that was the beginning of crappy decisions and other deaths happening: My brother died in June but because he was missing he wasn’t found until July, so that was just an awful 5 weeks…there was just so much horrible sadness and also guilt.

The family pieced together the likely events that led to his death. He had been partying with friends at the family cottage and he and his two best friends went out in a small boat. They never came back.

I mean we don't know one hundred percent what really happened, but we figured that the party was in our camp and there were guys coming. There was beer. I'm sure kids were smoking pot…But anyway they got in our little aluminum boat with a five motor, and we think that he went to the public campground, which would have been about, oh, maybe a 15-minute boat ride…And I don't know what happened. You know, they didn't come back.

Susan remembers this as a difficult time. The ensuing days were nightmarish as the family coped with the uncertainty, media attention, and police presence as the search for her brother proceeded. Her parents were deeply affected, her mother being strong and stoic and her father retreating into himself. She believes he harboured some guilt around her brother’s death.

Then that was just the beginning of police and…search and rescue and helicopters and planes and, literally, walking the shores of (the lake)...I don't know what we were looking for. I guess I was looking for, I don't know, I think we had to do something, and so we were just walking the shores and our house was just full of people for 5 weeks. Police and neighbours and friends and strangers and the parents of the other kids, and my mom was an amazing, strong person, and my dad just completely shut down. I don't even remember him at that time. I just think he just totally went into his own world.
Eventually, evidence of her brother’s whereabouts began to surface and the family coped with the inevitable tragic news.

One night the police came and they had his jacket. So they had found the boat…and then Emily’s body turned up. So this was the girl…and then Lisa was found a week after that a little farther down the river…then a fisherman found my brother floating about 5 weeks after he went missing, and he found his body way past the locks.

This tragedy happened at a time when Susan was about to embark on her own to lead what she hoped would be a vibrant, adventurous and exciting life. She had just finished university and had been working but her dream since she was 14 years old was to move out West. After her brother’s death she broke off with her boyfriend and moved to Vancouver to start her new life. But a sad turn of events would lead her to return to her hometown.

For me it was a horrible, horrible, summer. I had a boyfriend and I had sort of broken off…and I knew also that I still wanted to go out West and I did go: My parents were happy for me to go. They wanted me to have my life and I think they were kind of proud.

Susan still feels some sadness surrounding her brother’s death and some resentment about the unfairness of his early demise. She questions whether she has adequately dealt with his death and she harbours some anger towards herself for not doing what she perceives she should have done and anger at the circumstances surrounding his death.

I know I still grieve my brother and can be really sad about that: I’m resentful that my brother’s life got cut short like that and that there’s two other families. I’m mad at myself that I could have, should have, could still connect with these other families who lost those kids. I haven’t done that. And I guess there’s just a lot that I haven’t done in terms of my brother’s death.
The second loss.

Susan remained in Vancouver until hearing that her father was ill. Initially, her mother had thought that he would recover and so did not wish to worry Susan but he had a massive tumour in his breast that had spread to the bone. He was 64 years old when he died. Susan was 25 at the time.

I went out for a year and a half and I came back. I came back when my father was dying of cancer: My mother had chosen not to tell me…how sick he was because she knew I would come back right away. She was thinking that he wouldn’t die from this.

For Susan this was the start of a series of decisions that she made that she laments to this day. She believes she would not have returned home had her father not been sick. “I don’t think I ever would have come back. I would have stayed in B.C…but when I found out my Dad had been in the hospital…I quit my job. I came back.”

Her father stayed at home until almost the very end of his life and she and her mother nursed him. The family had to convince her father to take treatment for his cancer and it extended his life by many months. This time was treasured by Susan as it allowed her to talk to him about things that she might not have otherwise done. Yet, she recalls his final days and his death as woeful.

My dad died a miserable, horrible, horrible death…We kept him in the middle room and we administered this cocktail of morphine and codeine. I know we overdosed him because of the pain…We just took care of him: He was not an affectionate person but we always knew that he loved us…and when he was dying he went back to his childhood. He didn’t speak English anymore and he started speaking Italian all the time: (But) it was certainly good for me because for the first time I had some conversations about stuff, life, or whatever.

Susan wonders whether she could have intervened earlier if she had been living close by and holds some regret over her perceived responsibilities. Yet she also knows that she may not have had as much influence as she would have wished.
Sometimes I think if I would have been at home I would have maybe noticed or somehow I would have noticed his cough and said ‘Dad, time for a checkup’, and then they would have found the lump and then he would still be alive. I entertain that crappy vision (which is) so unhelpful…because really if I had stayed home how do I know I would have…dragged him to the doctor?

She sees the deaths of her brother and father as having an influence on the decisions she made. She married shortly after her father’s death for reasons that she now sees as unhelpful. The series of tragic events and the loss of her family left a sense of insecurity that she sought to rectify in her marriage. She thinks about the loss of her family and how it led her to choose a man that may not have been the right person for her.

I married him because I wanted a calmer, peaceful life, with some predictability: We (my family) never thought anything bad would happen to us, and then like this really horrible tragedy happens. My brother and his two friends die and then it was just kind of like this big black huge thing that happened and then my father…So I believe I probably married the wrong guy thinking that I’d have a more predictable, secure life.

Susan feels that she may have been depressed after her father’s death and this led to some decisions that were ultimately not what she wanted. She sacrificed many of her own needs to satisfy her husband’s. She had the capability and the aspirations to pursue graduate school and the confidence to pursue her own career and she remains resentful for having sidetracked her career to follow that of her husband.

I think I gave up on my own goals and plans for myself: I didn’t marry into a family that gave that kind of support that would have let me, so I guess I’m bitter about that choice I made. I was going to get my Master’s. I probably would have gone to law school or at least do studies in journalism and I didn’t do any of those things.

Susan has much sadness and some anger about not having her father in her life now. She finds it particularly sad that her father never knew her two sons and was never there to be a
grandfather to them. Her father had cherished his own son, her brother, and Susan believes that
had he known her two boys he may have been a wonderful grandfather to them.

   It’s wildly sad that I ended up having two boys because (they are involved in
many sports) and my Dad would have totally loved that: I think he would have
been a great grandfather and I’m really bitter about that.

_The third loss._

Susan lost her mother in 1989. Her mother was 62 when she died and Susan was 32 at the
time. Susan retains some anger and resentment about how her mother died. Her mother struggled
with illness for many years. “And all these years, I still am so upset that she died the way she
did.” Her mother had been treated for kidney nephritis after giving birth and this was likely the
start of her illness. Later in life; “My mom was very sick. She was always struggling with the
aspects of systemic lupus and ended up succumbing to that.”

   Her mother was in the hospital for 5 months prior to her death. Susan reminisces about
the time of the death and there is much anger, frustration and resentment along with sadness. Her
experience of her mother’s final days is imbued with bitterness for how it transpired and anger
towards her husband for not being supportive. She had not been happy in her marriage and it
ended soon after. She remains angry about the inadequate treatment received from the health
care system.

   She died awfully. She was so sick. She was in the hospital for 5 months. She got
cryptococcal meningitis. She lost her mind and was misdiagnosed because they
thought she had dementia. But she had meningitis that was inflaming her brain:
Every now and then I go back to the night that she died and I guess I’m mad at so
many people, myself, my husband, because I was by myself down there you
know, I drove myself home from the hospital: I blame the system. I work in the
system because of this…I’m just so resentful that we still don’t have the care after
all these years (up North) for people who have lupus and other inflammatory
forms of arthritis.
The impact.

Susan has some regrets about the way her life unfolded and believes these losses had an effect on some of the choices that she made and the direction that her life took. She forsook many of her life’s goals and today still regrets not following her original dreams. She believes the decisions she made were based on her sense of duty as a result of losing family members. “I made decisions back then that I wouldn’t have made if I hadn’t lost half my family like that.”

After marrying her life course followed that of her husband’s goals and aspirations and she resents this. When her husband found work in Southern Ontario they were forced to move but Susan did so reluctantly. She was happy in the North and was on the track to a successful and rewarding career. She was also close to her mother and she has lingering doubts about whether she should have left. “The number one thing is I left my mom and I think we shouldn’t have done that. She died 2 years later.”

There are regrets about the way her life transpired at this time. She wants to be able to forgive her husband for the way things were. Susan struggles with her family losses and the ensuing losses that accrued thereafter.

When I look back I think if I hadn’t lost my brother and my dad in the way that I did and felt forced to move to southern Ontario, then (I wouldn’t have had) to deal with all that guilt. I still blame my husband for all that, although I try not to: I’m interested in looking at forgiveness because I really don’t know if I can ever forgive him for some of the stuff.

She has some lingering anger and sadness over the loss of her parents. She wonders what life would have been like had her father and her brother been alive to see her children grow up. Indeed she wonders if she would have made different decisions had her brother been alive.

My Dad smoked since he was about 8 years old. Of course he’s going to get cancer and die. But I think I’m mad about that too but less so than the other two, my mom and my brother. I’m just really sad that I don’t have my mom: When I go to a (kid’s) hockey game and I look around and see grandfathers and grandmothers at the game I’m just so sad about that…I’m just so sad that my kids didn’t have their grandparents and their uncle: I’ve looked back and thought
(about) many of the decisions I made. Would I have made different decisions if my brother was alive?: I’ve just thought about the kind of relationship that my brother would have had with my boys.

Susan is acutely aware of the realities of life and that tragedies can happen to those who least expect it. She is a worrier as a result of these events. She is not concerned about herself dying tragically but does feel that it may have influenced her parenting style with her own boys. She carries within her the legacy of loss and the resultant fears, anger and sadness that it has left her with.

My boys have said to me, ‘Mom you’re so neurotic because you always think something bad is going to happen.’ And I said well, you know, bad things do happen: What’s happened has made me more neurotic…I am a worrier, paralyzed by it…I don’t sleep so well sometimes because I think stuff is happening.

*The meanings of her loss experiences.*

Susan’s story is one of regret. It has a sorrowful and lamenting tone. She views her losses as being ultimately detrimental, having had a negative impact on the course of her life. Each individual death is characterized as tragic and preventable. There is a sense of powerlessness and helplessness in regards to these deaths.

She is trying to accept her losses and the effects they had on her life and wants to move on and heal from the lingering frustration and disappointment that has pervaded her. Susan believes she sacrificed many of her own needs in order to help others, many of these due to the deaths of her brother, father and mother. There is a sense of having lost herself. She hopes to rediscover that person she was and be the person she wants to be.

I didn’t make decisions that were in keeping with my own aspirations and my own talents and I would suggest to people that they don’t put their own life on hold like that, because I’m just thinking now for the first time in 20, 25 years about doing some things that I used to think about when I was 25. I’m going to be 52, I do feel that I’ve lost 25 years for a number of different reasons.
Chapter 5:
Common Themes in the Narrated Multiple Loss Experience

The previous chapter presented the individual respondent’s stories, verified by the participant him or herself, shaped into a narrative by the researcher and presented in a sequential format. The meanings of each individual’s multiple loss experience were then summarized for each narrative.

The second of the research questions, i.e., what experiences are common across all participants, was addressed by focusing on the content of the narratives. Each participant’s story was varied, diverse and unique to that individual. Yet, key elements emerged that were indicative of the multiple loss experience as narrated by these individuals. Despite the distinctive and varied nature of each story, there were common experiences and key elements described. These are the common themes of the narrated multiple loss experiences of these participants and are the focus of this chapter.

These participants, sometimes in spontaneous oration, and oftentimes, in response to direct questions, described the overall effects of having lost so many close and valued relationships through death. As participants related their stories, further questions were presented to them, i.e., was there something about having experienced the previous death or deaths that affected the subsequent one? Informants did tend to view their subsequent losses as having an additive or compounding effect on them. In other words, although each death was processed separately and distinctly they did believe that there were some aspects of the experience that were cumulative.

These cumulative effects cluster under two broad categories comprising relevant sub-categories. They are:

1. Experiential Knowledge, consisting of:
   a. Knowledge of Grief, and
   b. Knowledge of Death, and
2. Perceived Change, pertaining to,
   a. View of Life,
   b. Sense of Self, and
   c. Self in Relation to Others.

The following section will describe and elucidate these themes using relevant quotations from individuals whose discourse help convey the meanings of the concepts. The reader will note that some quotes from the previously presented narratives will be repeated in the contexts of the labeled categories.

**Experiential Knowledge**

The effects of living through multiple losses were often accumulated through the process of having actually lived through the experience with all its attendant emotional, cognitive and spiritual effects. Participants related that they had a newfound knowledge of what it’s like to lose close loved ones that was gained experientially, i.e., they had to live it in order to really understand it. Their understanding was a felt one and not always easily articulated but they acknowledged that having lived through a number of losses had given them an understanding that they had not had before. They were also able to compare the deaths and grieving process across their losses thereby coming to understand their experience on a deeper level. This experiential knowledge pertained to their knowledge of grief and loss and their knowledge of death and dying. Figure 1 illustrates:

![Experiential Knowledge Diagram](image)

*Figure 1. Common effects: Experiential knowledge.*
Knowledge of Grief and Loss

Participants spoke of how the death, loss, grief and bereavement experiences had contributed to their felt knowledge of what it’s like to lose, grieve and cope. They expressed a sense of knowing what the process was like and how they would cope with it. Living through a previous loss through death had provided them with a reference from which they could relate to their subsequent loss experience. Participants were able to compare and contrast their diverse losses and this gave them a felt knowledge that was accumulating. They were becoming more familiar with the process, what to expect, and what kind of effects these experiences were having on them. This provided either a positive or comforting sense or a discomfiting one and it was described in a number of ways.

For two of the participants, there was a sense of peace in knowing how the process of grieving would unfold. These respondents recognized that having lived through it a number of times was helping them cope with subsequent losses. This knowledge was often associated with a philosophical understanding and acceptance of life and death as a natural component of our existence.

Even though in those crazy moments of death, it's crazy, in some ways knowing how it's going to roll makes me feel at peace. Kind of in some weird way, I feel at peace because I already understand all this…I know from all the death processes that I've gone through that you can't let it absorb your life. I can't be like this every single minute of the day, every hour of the day, every day: You learn how to handle it. I guess with every death I've gotten to handle it a little bit better.

(Dennine)

When you lose a few people…you kind of figure out how to do it after a while, and come to a place of acceptance that this is going to happen and you don't have to know how or why, and this is going to happen to everyone of us. So kind of a place of acceptance. (Does it get easier?) No, just different…Like, we're all going to die right? So but there's more immediacy to it I guess. Once it happens a few times...And you just kind of (know) it's going to happen. And then you know what it's like to have it happen…I’m very comfortable around grief now. (Ellen)
Louise believed that having lived through previous losses gave her a sense of what the grieving process is like. She described her multiple loss experiences as being part of her, creating an experiential knowledge that was incorporated into her sense of herself. Her losses formed an important aspect of who she was as a person. This knowing imparted a sense of harmony that despite not knowing exactly what she would feel she knew she would feel something and this was acceptable to her.

Do you think living through the first loss helped you? I think it helped because I guess I had the experience of a profound emotional response…It's as though that time, that feeling of loss…those days and those moments that I remember are still right there. I know that I'm not 26 anymore, but I can recall it so clearly, and the feelings so clearly…So it's as though it's sort of living inside me like a little room that I can go into. (Do you think having lived through the earlier losses would have affected you in this grieving process?) Oh I think so because I guess I was kind of prepared for it. (What were you prepared for?) I was prepared that it would take time, and that I didn't know how much time. And that I didn't know how I would grieve or how that would feel. So I knew that there would be some kind of experience that would take place over time. I knew that I would feel sad. But I didn't really know what to expect, and that was okay. You know, it was okay. (Louise)

Randy too became familiar with the feelings of loss and all that is entailed in grief as his experiences led him towards an understanding of the progression of grief. After his third significant loss, he was able to shift his perspective from the painful feelings associated with the loss towards a positive, affirming view of life and regain a sense of awe in the world.

I was able to make some quicker shifts to the positive side after the second loss because…that hurt that was grief, that hurt that was sadness…made the second one (familiar). I knew those feelings more and I also knew that I would grow through them…to a point where it’s more bearable. And I really did look at the more magical things really quickly…when I went into working within support services work and in an AIDS organization I mean people asked a lot of questions about why would you want to do this and isn’t this going to be depressing and so
on and so forth. And other people asked ‘how did you get this job?’ ‘You’ve got a degree in Fine Arts, how are you doing support service work?’ Well I’ve lived through and watched and been a part of grief and death and dying. And so I have a level of knowledge that I couldn’t have gained from a book and a degree. I have a level of knowledge that allowed me to be able to be present in the midst of all of that. (Randy)

Experiential knowledge of grief was not always comforting and respondents didn’t always believe that they had learned how to cope with death. For some, there was an understanding of its course and process but not necessarily an acceptance of grief. These respondents felt their previous losses taught them how difficult it was to lose someone special and that the process was a long, hard, even “nasty” one.

You think you can imagine what it's like to lose somebody, but when it happens it's, well, it's basically unlike anything you know: You think you can, but there's just no way: I think that I learned that loss is a lot nastier, a lot harder on a person, than you can imagine. (Marg)

*What do you think you’ve learned about grief?* Holy moly! That it's very individual and it takes a long, long time. (Lorraine)

Family and friends who have lost people will call me because somehow they think I have the goods on this. But I don’t think I have the goods on this dealing with death thing. (Susan)

Bridget became attuned to the fear of losing someone dear to her and she was aware that memories of her father had faded and become less salient which created anxiety around the waning of memories of her husband.

I unfortunately get it…and I don't know how you quantify that or qualify that, I just understand…I understand fearing losing somebody…I do know that parts of my grieving for my dad are gone and that translates into having lost my husband...a huge fear about losing my memories of him. So if I don't remember that my dad died…with years passing and new layers of memories happening
whether they're good or bad…2 1/2 years have passed since my husband died. I have new layers of memories…But with the new layers of memories I’m worried about…the loss of memories that I have. And I know that because if you want to know the effect of losing my dad it’s that I know that, I learned that from losing my dad. (Bridget)

These respondents expressed their belief that they have gained a felt knowledge of the grieving process, for better or worse. For some, the ability to know what the experience entailed was comforting, providing them with a framework that although specific to that loss would guide them through the difficult process. Knowing how grief would unfold and how it would affect them provided a sense of certainty in an uncertain time. For others that knowledge was frightening. It did not provide them with a sense of security in knowing rather it became part of their anxious awareness of the negative aspects of what might come.

Despite this learned knowledge respondents knew that each future loss would present them with new and different experiences. They were aware that the experience was variable and that each individual death would affect them differently. The unique manner of each death and the particular relationship they had with each loved one would dictate the nature of and progress of their grief. They knew that there would be sadness in future losses and some knew that they would continue to seek meaning in the death and learn the lessons of loss.

But for every additional person that will die in the future, that is important to me, each one will hurt just as much but in a different way. It will have some other kind of meaning and learning for me. There's no question. Yeah, there's no question about that. (Sabine)

(It) makes me think that if that happened again, which obviously people do go through grief, once again, how I'll feel with another bereavement I don't know, how I would cope with that. (Beth)

And I don’t think until I die I haven’t fully matured to the whole death process yet. That’s the final lesson. I don’t think I’ll ever obtain all education. You can always learn, and so…I don’t want to give you this (impression) that ‘OK I’m a
guru of death now’, because in the next death I will grow and I will learn even something more than I did in the last four deaths. (Dennine)

Knowledge of Death and Dying

Some of the participants talked about how living through the deaths of a number of loved ones had given them some understanding and practical knowledge of the death process. They had some familiarity with the practicalities surrounding death such as funeral arrangements and document processing. In some cases, there was less fear of death and dying, including the contemplation of their own deaths. For some, death itself was less frightening regardless of the meaning that was construed from it.

I don't feel negative about death at all. It's not something that I worry about myself either, to be honest. Personally, I just see it as a process and I do think there is something after death. I don't believe in what we were taught as children, but I do know that there is something there. And again it’s something that I’m learning about all the time. But it doesn't worry me. No. (Beth)

What do you think you've learned about death, if anything? It's not that frightening. It's frightening to lose somebody suddenly, but the event of death itself is not as scary to me…I don't feel as afraid as I might have. And that I don't know what the experience of death will be like or what it is like, or maybe it's different for every person. (Louise)

So going through the first one gave you some insight into what needs to be done on a practical level? Yeah. Definitely. Because there is a lot of paperwork to fill out and stuff like that and the Canada Pension benefits and things like that that you have to apply for. So it does take quite a bit of planning and paperwork and I've learned. I had to do it. (Marg)

I guess each death isn’t easy...but the concept of losing someone gets easy. I understand the whole concept. I mean they die, you have a funeral, you get a coffin, like the ins and outs of the whole death process I completely understand…But every time you go through one, I think (I become) more rational. Even when my aunt died it was such an unrrational thing that she did, but because
I’d gone through so many other deaths prior to it, it helped me to stay more focused and be more rational… I think I’m getting death maturity. I’ve gone through a lot of deaths. I’m not saying that I’m like a guru of death! I don’t want to say that. But I think, in the death experiences, I think I’m a lot, maybe a lot more mature. (Dennine)

Two respondents spoke of coming to understand that there is an element of choice in regards to life and death and a degree of control over how one lives their life and even on whether one lives or dies. Gail spoke of understanding that life and death are points along a continuum and that the dying process could occur anywhere along that spectrum. Her two loss experiences led her to view death as a facet of life and that one has a choice as to how they live that life.

So what has this taught you about death? It makes me think that there is an element of will power in our choice to be alive. That being alive even is a choice. I’ve never understood that when people have said you know ‘my grandmother died and then my grandfather died 3 months later’. And people say ‘oh, he died of a broken heart.’ OK I don’t know what that means but it was probably health problems, don’t know. But now I’m thinking well no I can see how you can choose to give up life. You can choose to take a path into death. And perhaps actually that has made me more aware of the impact…it’s that your psychology plays in your health and in your engagement in life. That you can disengage from life to the extent that you die… I suppose…it’s that life and death are on a continuum. There’s so much choice as to where you lie on that continuum. (Gail)

Sabine too believed that one makes choices that ultimately impact one’s survival. In talking about the deaths she’s experienced Sabine related that she understood some deaths were beyond the person’s control as in her friend with ALS and some were related to choices especially as pertains to health and wellness as in her father’s circumstances.

Well, David dying and then 2 years before all those other people plus my mother-in-law dying, some things have become crystal clear to me now. That you control what you can do to live healthy…I don't have to have what happened to (my
father) happen to me. I can control that. I'm blessed with good health…I'm going to choose to go down a path of health because I can do something about that, and he didn't manage to somehow do that. So that's the part that I can control. That was the learning...There's also a maturity of understanding the parts that you can't control… some people are dealt some pretty bad cards… But other people are dealt some bad cards but they don't control the other things that they can…So I could discern the things that (my father) couldn't control versus the things that he could control and what path I wanted to take, just in terms of that sort of wellness issue. (Sabine)

For some of the respondents, knowledge of death and its processes was better understood, whether that was a practical knowledge or an emotional and spiritual one. For many, there was a concomitant reduction in their fear of dying and their own eventual death, yet they did not see themselves as experts. Rather, they were acutely aware that despite their understanding of their particular experience that there were more lessons to be learned. They knew that each future loss would present them with new and different experiences and that each will have distinct and separate impacts on them. The unique manner of each death and the particular relationship they have with each loved one would dictate the nature of and progress of their grief. The lessons of loss were evolving.

*Perceived Change*

Respondents in this study spoke of how they believed they had been changed by their multiple losses. They had been deeply affected on a personal level, their sense of themselves, their views of the world and their relationships with others were all changed by their losses. Changes were not always perceived to be for the better. This was consistent with current knowledge in the field of grief and loss and reflects what we know often pertains after a single loss but because this study is not designed to address causal explanations it is difficult to ascertain whether such changes are more robust or additive in these cases. However, there was poignancy in these narratives that suggested these changes were especially compelling in light of the multiplicity of the experiences. The following excerpts illustrate this. Changes were perceived in various areas and they tended to cluster into three different areas of life as corroborated by current theory. These are Changed View of Life, Changed Sense of Self, and
Changed Self in Relation to Others. These are presented visually in Figure 2 and will be discussed in turn.

Figure 2. Common effects: Perceived change.

*Changed View of Life*

Participants spoke of how their multiple loss experiences had taught them something about life and given them a perspective on life and death that they would not otherwise have had. These segments of discourse had more of a philosophical tone to them. They were the respondents’ efforts at understanding these events in their lives and how they ultimately had affected the way they viewed life.

You learn not to take life for granted and that we are here for a very short period of time. You know, some people die at one month old, some people die at 76 years old. So for me, it’s about knowing that death can happen at any point in one’s life, young or old. It’s part of life, it’s what happens. We are born and we die... I do have a religious background and so that’s part and parcel of it. And so I guess I have a little bit more calmness about it. (Dennine)

I do feel as though I experience things more profoundly than I might have, that I take life more seriously than I would have and that my life feels more urgent…It feels as though my life is kind of bigger or wider as a result, and so I don’t think I’d want to change it… It’s part of how I experience the world… (It’s) something that kind of floats around inside me. It’s more like a part of my bloodstream. (Louise)
Realize today is important, don’t take time for granted, don’t miss an opportunity when you have it. Each new loss is a signal to appreciate life… Life just tastes better. (Ellen)

It's the clarity of understanding what you really want in life, and what I want of life is to have a happy life, a balanced life and a long life and to have that I also have to honour and respect my own needs. This is a responsibility because I've been dealt the cards of health. I've been blessed. And some of these other people didn't (have that)… So it's reinforced my own philosophy of life, my strategy for how I want to actively live my life. I'm very, very conscious of living joyously: I don’t take life for granted. Life on this earth on this planet is all we have. It’s such a little miracle. (Sabine)

Life is a learning process. I think there is a reason why we're all here, I think that we've all got to go through different struggles. So you've got to accept it and make the most of what you've got I suppose. Going through things like that, I think it makes you more aware. It certainly does make you feel philosophical about life, to look at life. It's a shame that you have to go through that in order to think that way but maybe that's why these things happen. You've got to open yourself up to how it does affect you, how it does change you, perhaps, in a positive way, hopefully. (Beth)

There was often an expression of wanting to live their own lives differently now. Having experienced these losses, there was a renewed commitment to life and a changed perspective on how best to navigate through one’s life with all its wonders and vicissitudes.

I thought whatever I’m afraid of doing I’ve got to ditch and face anything that I’m afraid of doing and not let that be a deciding factor for anything I want to do in life. So it kind of opened me up more to life... I started to make decisions that were less based in fear and more based upon wanting to just live, because I did not want to be lying on my death bed thinking, ‘I should have or could have, tried it.’ (Ellen)
I view my actions as intentions, and therefore, they have more meaning than they might have before: So, the importance of living life to the fullest and day to day and trying to reestablish my values and my priorities and living the life that I want. Choosing to enjoy the day because there could just be one more day. (Gail)

It made me see what I refer to as the magic in the world. And to look for it…I’m constantly pointing out to people the beauty in the world. And I think that comes from the succession of these three deaths. (Randy)

For some participants there was a disillusioned tone to their narrative as they expressed a belief in the fragility and negativity of the world and life. This included an awareness of the realities of life and that tragedies can happen to those who least expect it.

My boys have said to me, ‘Mom you’re so neurotic because you always think something bad is going to happen.’ And I said well, you know, bad things do happen…What’s happened has made me more neurotic, a worried person….and I am a worrier, paralyzed by it…and you know I don’t sleep so well sometimes because I think stuff is happening. (Susan)

Bridget’s narrative in particular had a tone of disillusionment. She expressed having a lasting sense of the stark and sometimes harsh nature of life and a new understanding of her vulnerability in the world. Having experienced what were two of her greatest fears, she now fears her own responses to and attitudes towards the world. There is a sense of powerlessness and she ponders life and its meaning. She wonders if this is a test of her mettle and she is grappling with her inability to see which way her life will take her and what the outcome will be for her.

What is this for, what are we here for? …Am I here to learn lessons about how to suffer? Is that my lot in life?: I don’t feel necessarily that I have the control to steer (my life) always the way I want it to go….I want to have a good outlook on life, I want to be positive about faith in my future and I don’t want to be angry, bitter and resentful, (and full of) self-pity. But it’s a constant struggle. (Bridget)
Most participants believed that their losses have had a fundamental or profound effect on them that affected their outlook on life. There was a realization that life was precious, yet transitory and that it could be precarious yet gratifying and meaningful. For some, there was an acceptance of death for what it is—the reality of life’s ephemeral and impermanent nature. For others, this knowledge was disturbing and they were trying to find peace of mind, stability and security in a world that seemed unsafe, uncertain and capricious. These respondents were seeking a sense of calmness about their lives and life in general. Overall, participants’ changed perspectives about life, their understanding of its vicissitudes and fleetingness were concomitant with a changed view of themselves and how they interacted in this world.

**Changed View of Self**

Respondents expressed their beliefs that they had been changed significantly as a result of their multiple losses. Sometimes the change was prominent as a result of one of their losses, but when they considered all of them combined, participants had a sense that the effects had an overall cumulative effect on their sense of themselves. Respondents believed that the intensity and depth of the felt changes were concomitant with having experienced more than one loss. That is, although cognitive shifts were made after each loss and a particularly significant loss was often responsible for initiating the most meaning-making, these participants felt that the profundity of the change was due to having experienced all their losses.

They often spoke of how they had made conscious choices to live their lives differently after experiencing their losses. They believed they had learned something about themselves and made changes in how they interacted in the world.

I’m seeing the world differently because I’m seeing myself differently. Because you know, the world was still the same but because I was not so giving, and not so accepting and I was so closed inside that that same world seemed different, and now that I have been able to get rid of my negativity and I can see the positivity in people…I don’t need to blame any of my relatives. Because they are the same people. They have not changed. It’s just my thinking that has changed… It was within me all the time. But I chose to believe what I believed and I was not forgiving of my relatives…I would attribute all of it to my losses because the
whole process stems from me becoming more accepting of my losses, and not blaming other people for my losses. (Dipty)

I have changed from the striving, achievement-oriented person…I still strive and I’m a very goal-oriented person but my horizon line has changed now. Now I live for the moment. (Sabine)

Randy believes that these losses have had wide-ranging and long-lasting effects on him. They have left him with what he describes as an underlying sadness that is a valued part of who he is.

I do think there’s an underlying layer of sadness and although I wish that each one of those partners had not died I’ve come to a place where if I could back up and take those (losses) out of my life, I wouldn’t. Because the sadness is accompanied by a sense of being insightful and a sense of really valuing the other relationships in my life…The sadness is something that’s part of who I am. But I also think that I’ve gained a lot from having gone through these experiences. (It) adds in a very beneficial way to the quality of my life. (Randy)

Maturity about death was gained from living through the losses and from natural aging. Respondents often spoke in terms of growth, that they were different and better as a result of living through a number of losses.

It helped me grow. It helped me to be very compassionate for other people that go through it: I can use what I’ve encountered to hopefully get better and each time it does help you grow in a different way. It helps you to mature: I think my age is helping me but…I think every death has brought some type of maturity to the table for me. It’s marked me. It’s changed me. It’s done something for my life. And I’ve chosen to use them for good marks. I don’t want them to be things that hold me back. (Dennine)

It’s made me much more sensitive to things…and more emotionally aware also…Because I (used to be) very good at cutting off. If I felt something I could quite easily switch it off and not go there. But now it’s more difficult to do that
and maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe it’s not good to switch off your emotions. So yes, I accepted that as a good thing. (Beth)

It’s just the nature of growing into the loss for me, it has become a part of me because it’s been a very shaping influence. You grow into it… This shitty experience is kind of like fertilizer that promoted a whole lot of personal growth… (It) encouraged a lot of growth tendency. Ya, investment in my own growth. (Ellen)

Randy’s losses have given him the ability to push forward and take chances in life. They have augmented and honed an innate sensitivity and creativity, resulting in a greater depth of being. It has changed how he experiences life’s everyday moments and helped him strive towards initiating change in the world as a whole.

In conversation I speak about the intensity with which I feel things and how I act upon that intensity. And although these losses are immense … I think (they) added to that level of intensity in which I was willing to take risks and feel things. And because of that I can be incredibly saddened or incredibly pissed off by something that’s happening in the world that will make me do something about it. (Randy)

The notion of resilience was inherent in these dialogues. There was a positive self-affirming tone from having lived through and survived difficult circumstances.

You become more self resilient, I think. Not consciously so, but I think looking back I think that it did make me feel self resilient. (Beth)

Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I marvel at the resilience that I have. I know that with tragedy most people close down. Build walls and protect. Fortify their safety in whatever way safety is used in that sense. And though that happens to me for short periods of time, it makes me more open rather than makes me closed. (Randy)
For Sabine, she was consciously taking the lessons learned from her experiences of loss and incorporating them into her sense of herself.

I am very, very intensely aware now of the things and experiences that give me joy and how good that makes me feel. I am consciously committed to filling my life with more joyous moments because it feels so good and it actually contributes to my life goal, which is to live as long as possible. My philosophy is the more joy I can stuff in these veins of mine, the more likely my body is going to stay healthy: I'm not a person who would become numbed or I wouldn't start seeing multiple, more deaths as something that would cause me to just take a more casual, cavalier attitude about death. (Sabine)

Gail discovered that she has the strength and ability to cope with these painful events and that she could accept herself more easily. She gained an acceptance of herself through self discovery. She believes she is better able to just be herself, whatever and however that looks and is less inclined to question it.

But I think the other lesson I learned is that I’m pretty resilient. And I guess particularly given how hard Tom’s death had hit me I wasn’t so sure of that…So ya I feel resilient. I feel like I can make decisions and if I fail I’ll be OK. I’ll feel like crap and then I won’t feel like crap one day and that’s that: I guess I think less about who I am as a person today…partly because I realized how temporal some of my definitions of self could be: I’m more capable of just being myself whatever that looks like. Right then and there. And I question it less. (Gail)

There was a sense of self-efficacy for some. Marg relates that she has learned a lot about her own abilities and what she can accomplish. She has gained some self-confidence in dealing with her daily life and in getting things done that she had hitherto not done on her own before.

I would say that I’ve learned I can do things…when you…accomplish something that you’ve never done by yourself before…you should give yourself a pat (on the back) because you’ve managed to do something you always relied on somebody else to help you with. (Marg)
Despite these changes in her sense of efficacy, Marg was uncertain about her emotional self. She wasn’t sure whether or not she was a stronger person, indeed she believed she had become a lot harder, more determined and even “nastier.” She even expressed a self-loathing.

I hate myself at this point, which is really nasty to say it but I do… I hate the way I look. I don’t like the way I act (with) my children: It’s harder to say emotionally. Am I stronger? I don’t think so. I think I am more fragile at this point. I think eventually I might be: I don’t think I’m a nicer person. I think I’ve probably become a much more hard person…not necessarily to everything or everybody but to certain things…it made me more intolerant. I’m much more intolerant. (Marg)

For some of these participants there is a belief that they have changed negatively and for the worse. For Bridget and Marg there is a continuing struggle to regain a sense of coherence and continuity. The ongoing nature of the losses for these two widowed women was complicating their recovery process and delaying their ability to re-integrate themselves. Bridget’s overall loss experiences are overshadowed by the impact of her husband’s death and this has left her feeling alienated from herself.

There are people who would say I bounced back from the death of my father very well…I don’t know how I did that. I have no idea where that energy, that fuel came from. Because the effect of my husband’s death has been incapacitating. Unable to work, unable to organize my thoughts, unable to do many, many things I used to do….because I’m not the girl that I was before. (Bridget)

Bridget can’t find the words to describe the depth of the experience of losing her husband. Her sense of herself is greatly affected and she grapples with finding her place and purpose in the world that has been shattered by her losses. For Bridget the experience of multiple loss and particularly her husband’s death has been “devastating”, and she is still uncertain of where she is on her grief journey.

There are no words to explain, you’re self-esteem is affected, your place in this world, of feeling like you are important to someone is affected…it’s ‘who am I in
this world?': It tests every facet of your being…and the hope is that you’ll come out of it OK: It’s not clear to me whether I’ve made it. (Bridget)

These respondents believed that they had changed as a result of their losses. Oftentimes, the perceived change was considered positive and hopeful, a move towards being a better and more fully integrated person. The loss experience had influenced their perceptions of themselves, their actions and their beliefs about who they were and how they should be in the world. There was an implied belief in their strength as they often referred to feeling resilient and many believed they had changed in a positive way, affirming their sense of themselves as empathic, agentic and strong individuals. But for some this perceived change was detrimental. They perceived that the person they once were and whom they once knew was now gone and the person left behind was unknown to them. These respondents were struggling to regain a sense of themselves after being shattered and fragmented by their losses and at the time of the interview were still contemplating the shape and form that their new self would take.

**Changed Sense of Self in Relation to Others**

Participants’ changed sense of themselves was also affecting their interactions with others. They spoke of how their loss experiences had led them to view their relationships in a different way. They came to appreciate and value the important and nourishing relationships they had and many chose to reevaluate those that they deemed unhealthy. There was more discernment in their choices in relationships. Participants were more apt to make their intentions and feelings with and about others explicit. They credited their lost relationships with their intensified appreciation for the loved ones in their lives.

Randy made conscious efforts to connect with and openly communicate with others, and was adamant that his loved ones knew how he felt about them.

I think it’s made me look at the world in a very different way, than if I hadn’t lost them. It makes me value my relationships that I have now…I want to be sure that the people around me know how much I care and I am in those relationships…I will not go through something where I wonder if they knew how much I cared about them. They know how much I care about them…It’s risky to have some of
the conversations that we have. But we have them. Because I’m not willing to have those moments that are magic go unacknowledged. (Randy)

Dennine too has learned of the importance of speaking openly and honestly with the ones she loves. Particularly after the sudden and tragic death of her aunt from suicide, she values even more the time she has with her loved ones and the need to share with them her loving feelings towards them.

I guess after my aunt died then I started to prioritize more and think about which people really mean a lot to me in my life and that I haven’t really been open with them and shared all the things with them. Since her death I’ve put myself into an ‘anybody can die at any point’ kind of thinking, and that we need to say what we want to say to them…So to be even more vigilant about my feelings about people that are in my life and then sharing those feelings. (Dennine)

Dipti came to terms with the idea that she could continue to have meaningful connections with other family members after her parents died. She became aware that she will eventually lose these relatives and is valuing and cherishing the time she has remaining with them.

I am OK to tell myself that I have that loss and even though that type of relationship I had with my mother was precious it’s OK to have that type of relationship with my aunt or uncle…Now I am able to say that that was very special but I can still have something special again…I don’t want to have any regrets. I don’t want to miss out on these relationships…I don’t want to lose them and hence I’m making a connection. (Dipti)

Respondents commonly spoke about how they have become more discerning in their interpersonal relationships. They are choosing to focus more on the positive, nourishing and healthy relationships in their life, and sometimes weeding out the less healthy ones.

I really cultivate positive relationships, and I'm very aware from the reading that I've done that one of the biggest factors that contributes to longevity is people who have positive networks and relationships…So there's the lesson. I will continue to do that. (Sabine)
It does make you think about …what’s important to you, relationship-wise.
Who’s important to you. (Beth)

I have a history of successful relationships in my life and I can tell you that they
have all been put to the test since my husband died: If it’s not worth the time now
I will much more quickly just terminate them as opposed to putting up with that.
(Bridget)

There were frequent references in these narratives to the ability to feel empathy for others
who go through losses through death. The experiential knowledge gained from their own
experiences had given them a changed perspective and a deeper understanding of what it is like
to suffer through the pain of loss. They were then better able to communicate that understanding
to and with others.

I think you gain much more ability to empathize with somebody who’s
experienced loss because you know what it’s like to be without. (Marg)

I learned about trying to share this experience with others so that perhaps they can
support someone else, in a better way. (Bridget)

I was just talking with someone today…and she said, “well, I guess you get it”…I
do know what it feels like to lose a parent and so it’s sort of out of that that I
could go talk to somebody. It’s something I can now offer to other people because
I understand. (Louise)

I think I’m even more sensitive and empathic to lots of different situations…I
think I have gained a higher level of sensitivity and empathy and I hope it’s made
me a better person. (Lorraine)

Beth believes she has become more sensitive to loss and the painful emotions associated
with it and she’s not sure she likes that aspect. She finds herself empathizing with others’ losses
and although she appreciates her openness to the losses of others she is uncomfortable with its
lingering effects on her.
(You become) more empathetic to what other people experience as well...I think (I’m) loss sensitive…I mean two of my friends who lost their parents, one lost her father and one lost her mother, and the emotion I felt, even though I didn't know their parents very well, I could almost over empathize with both. I went to both funerals, and I just found it almost too traumatic to be at their funerals. Before my mother died I don't think I would have felt that, so I think it has over sensitized me a little bit, somewhat, to other peoples' bereavement. And, okay, maybe that might change with time perhaps, but I have noticed that definitely. (Beth)

For some of these participants their losses and their ensuing experiential knowledge of the experience led them to reach out to others through their choice of work, expression of creativity and volunteering. Ellen, Susan, Randy and Louise all believed that their loss experiences allowed them to empathize with and work more closely with others who were suffering through similar circumstances and led them to choose vocations that embodied this connection with others.

The experience that I’ve gone through is allowing me to pay it forward and help other people. (Dennine)

I’m very comfortable around grief now…it’s helped me to be in a place where I can hold hope for somebody who feels like they don’t have any hope: It’s very much influenced the work I’ve chosen…(I) was able to work more compassionately with the people I was working with in the prison system. (Ellen)

I chose the social work profession…so I currently help people to cope. My life for the past 15 years has been devoted to help people cope with the effects of the chronic illness. I work in the system because of this. I chose to work at the (Society) thinking that I'd make a difference. (Susan)

I started to do some volunteer work in a retirement home, because I would see when I would go to see Dad in the hospital and the places he stayed, the people who didn't have anybody to visit, people who didn't have daughters who showed up. And so that has continued to be an important part of my life. So that's a way that it's shaped me, and that's probably partly influenced by losing my mother so
early, too. I would have loved to have sat with her when she was 85 and helped her drink her cranberry juice. (Louise)

I think as an artist the work that I’ve done, the work that I’m most known for is work that is incredibly politically active and dangerous and really challenging and really helped move some things forward. And I don’t think I would have done the level of belief that I could change the world, I wouldn’t have been as naïve, and went at things with such a vigour, if I didn’t have this loss as part of my experience of who I am. I come away from presentations that I’ve done and (people) sometimes will say ‘that’s the best presentation I’ve ever seen, you are inspirational in making people believe they can do what they can do’. And I’ve become used to people saying that. It doesn’t fill my head and make me think something grandiose about myself. It’s that intensity. (Randy)

Gail believes she is more accepting of and less judgmental towards herself and others and that she is better able to understand others.

I think I have more grounds for understanding other people, not in that I know where they’re coming from but more that I’m willing to accept that I don’t know where they’re coming from. But that they’re coming from somewhere. (Gail)

Louise sums up her perception of what her multiple losses have given her. For her, it is the importance of and valuing of her relationships with others that she has learned to appreciate. Her knowledge of death and loss has taught her that we have but one chance in our lifetimes to make our connections with others and for that they need to be heeded.

I guess that really the most important thing is the relationships that you have…that having a good job and being able to pay your bills and a nice place to live are all very important things that you want to have, but ultimately the thing that you have to live with is the relationships you have with people, and when people die you're left with the relationship as it was…so I understand the importance of relationships. (Louise)
The essence of what these participants convey is that they have learned to appreciate and value their relationships. There is a changed view of themselves and life that affects how they choose to interact with others. This includes scrutinizing their relationships and choosing how and with whom they want to connect. They have increased empathy which they use to work with and hope to benefit others. The valuing of life’s preciousness and its fleetingness has left them with a renewed vision to embrace others with an intensity that they may not have previously felt prior to losing their loved ones.

**Summary of the Common Themes**

The common effects of multiple loss experiences are those that pertain to one’s increased knowledge of grief and death and an experiential understanding of what it is like to have a close loved one die. Living through a number of deaths allows a comparison between the experiences but also provides a repetitive experience that serves to hone the lesson. Attendant with this knowledge are the modified perspectives that ensue. Participants believe they have been changed by their loss experiences. They feel like different people. They also see the world in a different way. For some these changes are beneficial and welcomed. For others the stark realities of what life can offer leaves them feeling vulnerable, defeated and alone. It is the meaning of their losses that predicates the changed perspectives. The next chapter will elucidate an emergent model of the process of meaning-making in narrating the multiple loss experience.
Chapter 6: Understanding the Multiple Loss Experience: An Emergent Model

The two previous chapters have presented the individuals and their stories, the meanings that are attached to their experiences and the common themes that were discovered through the examination of their narratives. Attending to the structural component and how participants considered their experiences of loss led to the conceptualization of an emergent model for understanding the impact of their multiple loss experiences. That is, the process by which their story unfolded combined with the content of their story served to illuminate what the experience of living through multiple losses was like for these respondents and what kind of an effect it has had on them. Through the examination and synthesis of these processes and the key elements found across interviews, an emergent model was created that describes the framework by which participants explain and understand their multiple loss experiences. This model is intended to help elucidate the processes involved in the multiple loss experience for these participants.

This model does not represent results as commonly understood in empirical research. Nor is it intended to represent causal explanations. Rather, it focuses on the structure of the narrated story as it unfolds and is used to help render the meanings of the story. Because narrative explanations are concerned with representing the particular case, emphasizing the richness of the information and helping us understand the meanings of the individual’s experiences (Elliott, 2005), the model as presented here is used as a descriptive and explanatory representation of these participants’ multiple loss experiences. It is possible that these experiences although diverse reflect similar meanings as may be ascribed by others who have lived through such losses.

A visual display is used to help the reader conceptualize the organization and flow of the multiple loss experience. Figure 3 depicts a process whereby these individuals made sense of their experiences. Although this model has been presented in a somewhat linear fashion, it is a multidimensional, dynamic, interactive and flowing process and does not necessarily adhere to a temporal component. This process of making sense can be thought of as a framework for meaning, a schema created, evaluated, used, adapted and/or modified as and when necessary as the individual confronts and copes with each new loss. The image is that of a house under
construction and this metaphor is used to help illuminate the process. I present the metaphor following an explanation and explication of the model.

Figure 3. Model of the multiple loss experience.

Participants interviewed in this study made sense of their losses by:

1. Processing each loss independently from the others, i.e., one death at a time which included understanding the meaning of and the effects of each loss on them, often based on the significance, or salience of a particular death;

2. Making comparisons amongst the losses, i.e., understanding the meaning of the deaths in relation to each other. This often involved contrasting sudden with expected deaths, or by making meaningful connections between the deaths;

3. Understanding the overall impact of all their losses: Respondents’ reflections on what their overall loss experiences mean to them was evident in the prevailing characteristic tone of their narrative.
This chapter will explain and discuss the components of this meaning-making model.

**Processing Each Loss Independently:**

**Understanding the Meaning of Each Loss**

In response to my opening query, “tell me what it is like to have lost these people from your life”, informants engaged in a thoughtful exploration of their experience which incorporated their individual loss experiences and the meaning that each death had on them as well as comparisons amongst all their recounted losses. Respondents described the nature of the experience and explained that it was dependent upon the individual relationship that was lost. Participants qualified their responses by indicating that each death was processed differently and each loss had a different effect. In fact when asked about their losses in the opening query many participants were apt to describe their experiences one death at a time. That is, all of the informants viewed each of their losses as distinctly different and each and every single death was processed and made sense of independently. Because each death was experienced uniquely, each had its very own impact on them. Respondents expressed this in various ways:

*Tell me what it's like to have lost these people in your life.* That's a really good question…Very hard. Very difficult to lose people you love. It leaves a big empty space in your life that doesn't… I wouldn't say it gets easier. You just get better at accepting that it's there, maybe, over time. (But) I think it's about how connected you feel to the person. (Ellen)

Each loss is a little bit different because each person is a different relationship to you, and they mean different things to you...Sometimes it's because of how they died, but sometimes it's just about the relationship and what they meant to me. (Sabine)

I guess for me personally every situation is a little bit different. But it's like you've been through it so it's just like ‘here we kind of go again’. I guess it doesn't get easier it's just like, in some ways it's kind of easier, because for me I've encountered it since I’ve been seven so it's just like oh, ‘here we go again’. *(So there is that sense of here we go again. And what is ‘here we go again?’)* Because I think you've experienced it, and death is a fact of life. It's part of life,
it's what happens. We are born and we die…I think you have some deaths that are shocking, and some deaths that are inevitable. It's part of life. (Dennine)

There was an understanding of the hardship of losing that was often about the independent losses. Respondents reactions to and descriptions of the effects of their overall losses was related to their individual losses. It included not only the nature of the death and the relationship of that person to them but also the meaning that each particular death had for the informant. In particular, it was the meaning of usually one specific death that had the most impact and that shaped the tone of their narrative.

**Saliency: The Significance of a Particular Loss**

As participants recounted their loss experiences, it became clear that there was usually one death in particular that stood out for them and was especially impactful. It formed the basis for their understanding and knowledge of all other losses and it was particularly significant in terms of its effects on them. Respondents spoke more frequently and in-depth about this death and it tended to elicit more sadness and emotion in the telling. It was the most salient loss for the participant and it shaped the tone of the respondent’s story. The relevance of this salient loss was generally predicated on the type of relationship lost and the nature of the death and the impact that it had on the participant’s sense of self.

The salient loss was often the primary focus of the narrative. It sometimes had an unresolved tone, for example in the narratives of Bridget and Marg as they talked about the deaths of their spouses, and Dennine, Lorraine, and Susan as they recounted the predominantly tragic deaths by suicide and drowning. The salient death also had a resounding effect on the way the participant thought about herself, her life and life in general, as when Dipti, Beth, and Gail spoke of the profound shifts that occurred in their views of themselves when they lost their mothers and a close friend respectively. These salient losses were the ones that shaped their perceptions of and understanding of the meaning of their cumulative loss experiences.

For examples, both Bridget and Marg had lost spouses in tragic circumstances and at a young age and they were both focused on the effects that this loss had on them. Indeed arguably they were still actively grieving these deaths at the time of the interview. The sheer magnitude of
the impact on them—e.g. further losses, fear and anxiety, hopelessness and anger—coloured their narratives and shaped the meaning they ascribed to their overall losses.

You know the effect of my husband’s death on me...there are no words. There are no words to explain, your self-esteem is affected, your place in this world of feeling like you are important to someone, is affected. I'm not married anymore…I'm childless as well so I'm not, none of those roles that people have…Or being able to cling to positions that you hold, I don't have that. So... it's who am I? Who am I in this world? (Bridget)

So you go through that and then you lose your husband. Yes, still, again, disbelief. More a case of absolute total disbelief and shock. He basically was everything to us because I was a stay-at-home mom. We were building our own house. So I guess my first thought was …what happens now? What do we do? Where do we go? What happens? It's not just a case of losing the person, but it's a case of losing all form of security at that point. (Marg)

Dennine was grappling with the suicide of her aunt and was trying to find meaning in her perceived uncontrollability of that death. This death above all others she had experienced was particularly troubling.

The suicide of my aunt, that was devastating because it was like I talked to her the night before, like, I just talked to her 12 hours prior to her doing this. She seemed completely fully...coherent, normal, happy…It was just like what did I miss? For her death, I blame me...what did I miss? What was she in essence trying to tell me? (Dennine)

Lorraine too was seeking to understand the tragedy and meaninglessness of her brother’s suicide and the impact that this had on her family.

I mean I understand it intellectually but I still don’t understand being capable of actually doing that…and I think a certain amount of guilt from me…you know had I done enough? Then the reaction in the family with all of that going on and trying to support my parents because they’ve lost their son. The tremendous guilt
that they felt…I think it’s all those questions about, just life. Like why do these things happen? (Lorraine)

Susan spoke of her brother’s untimely and tragic death as having set in motion a chain of unfortunate events and poor decisions that she regrets to this day. She saw it as the beginning of her troubles that set the course and disconsolate tone of the next leg of her adult journey.

My brother drowned accidentally when he was 18 and he took with him his two best friends. I just think of it as the beginning of a stream of just crappy decisions and other deaths happening. (Susan)

The profound effect of Gail’s best friend’s death and its suddenness and apparent randomness stood out for her. It forced her to seek meaning both in his death and in her life.

*Tell me what it was like to have lost these people in your life.* Awful, very life changing. I’d say the first death which was my best friend at the time and his death was quite sudden. It was random, nothing, he was just sitting watching television and he keeled over and dropped dead. And that had the effect of kind of bringing me to this realization that really I don’t have to risk or not risk, I can simply die. Through nothing. So the importance I guess of living life to the fullest, and day to day and trying to reestablish my values and my priorities and living the life that I want. Suddenly, that all came to the forefront. (Gail)

Sabine found the steadily debilitating disease and eventual death of her friend particularly difficult yet awe-inspiring and it was an experience that served to augment and solidify her values about life, health and choice.

So it's just the intensity of it. That's why it was just a little harder. But he had ALS, and that's just a rotten luck of the draw. It's nothing that he did…he just got a really rotten set of cards dealt to him. But what I got out of it was the most precious exposure to a human being in a situation that I would never have had, it was like a gift...So, I feel blessed...He gave me a lot, and so I have a responsibility to live the life that I've been given as fully as I can. (Sabine)
Dipti’s mother’s death was the beginning of a stark separation from the faithful, loving, soul-mate with whom she had a spiritual connection and this left her feeling isolated and withdrawn from other potentially nurturing familial relationships.

I was very, very attached to my mother, but I was attached to her on a different plane. What we shared was our conversations, our time together, just being with each other, laughing, doing little things or, you know, just going and eating out…I started closing myself to my relatives, and I started moving away from them. And a lot of my reasoning behind that was that…my mother in my mind was the best thing that ever happened to me and, also, when I looked at my entire relative roster, I always felt my mother was the best. And I started grudging them. I started grudging my relatives their lives. (Dipti)

Beth too found herself feeling adrift and disconnected after her mother died, leaving her with a sense of being orphaned, as she navigates life without her mother.

I can't explain why, I don't know why. If it's because I lost my father when I was very young, whether that's what made it …such a big thing that my mother died? I feel I've gone through something…it's affected me…in a much more traumatic way… the connection with my mother I still feel it has never gone away. I don't think you ever get over it…it's something that will never go away. You never see the end…there's no end to it and then you carry on. It's always there, I think, definitely. (Beth)

Individuals recounted their losses one death at a time. Each death and its ensuing loss experience affected them in a unique and singular manner, predicated on the type of relationship that was lost, and on the nature of the death. It was the meaning of the relationship and its loss that affected their reactions to it. For most participants, there was one loss in particular that was salient and it had a resounding impact on them. This effect was based on what it was they perceived to have lost, e.g., Bridget and Marg a sense of safety and security, Dipti a soul-mate and a role as advocate and protector. For Sabine, the salient death reinforced her commitment to life. The saliency or significance of the death shaped the tone of their narrative. It formed a basis
for understanding their reactions to death and its associated meanings and it was the framework with which other losses were compared.

**Comparison of the Deaths**

Participants’ losses were compared and contrasted to each other and meaning was derived from the individual’s understanding of each loss and its connection to his or her other losses. Participants did not systematically and methodically make these comparisons and analyses on their own. Respondents were engaged in a co-constructed process in the research interview with the interviewer and it was in this context that they came to verbalize their experiences in a manner that allowed them to thoughtfully consider their losses and make comparisons and connections amongst and between them. As is characteristic in qualitative research and narrative inquiry, the interviewer played a part in the creation of the meanings; i.e., meanings were co-created and understood in the context of relating their stories to the researcher as the listening other. It was a dynamic process.

Comparisons were made primarily on the basis of the type and nature of the death, i.e., suddenness versus expectancy, the effect on their sense of family and their sense of themselves in relation to the world. Some respondents were pondering the interconnectness of their experiences, wondering how they related to each other and how the effects of each death influenced the subsequent losses. Connections were often made on the basis of the meaningfulness of each loss, that is, losses that held similar meanings were more readily seen as having a compound effect on them.

**Suddenness Versus Expectancy of the Death**

Participants often compared the impact of the death on the basis of its nature, particularly the expected versus unexpected character of the death. This contributed to the saliency of the loss, with sudden, tragic, unforeseen and non-normative deaths being paramount in the respondent’s mind. These often had an unresolved tone, e.g. Bridget, Marg, Lorraine, Susan. For these participants the sudden and traumatic nature of these deaths left them with a sense of powerlessness and ineffectiveness. They were deaths that appeared unreasonable, unfair and incomprehensible. These participants could distinguish the death experiences across all their
losses and they made comparisons based on the contrast. That is, they knew what it is like to live through a slowly debilitating terminal illness and that of an unforeseen and instantaneous loss.

I think it’s given me more of a knowledge of when you lose somebody unexpectedly versus losing somebody expectedly (and) what you can accomplish prior to the death…What I’ve learned the most is you have to go through life prepared. You can't go through life thinking, oh, I'll do my will next week. I'll do my stuff next week. You know, because next week may not be there…it's not just practical but it's just plain good common sense to have things prepared for whoever you leave things for because it's a God-awful mess to try and wade through the paperwork at the time when you really most don't want to do it. (Marg)

Gail made comparisons between the two losses through death and attributes much of her learning and understanding of the grieving process and its attendant meanings to the contrast that these experiences provided. When considering the two types of deaths that she experienced, one being sudden and unexpected, the other expected, Gail finds it hard to separate the two experiences in terms of their impact. “It’s hard to disentangle the two, the process of dying and the impact of death.” Her friend’s shocking death was in contrast to her Mom’s slow, debilitating illness. She poignantly recounts how the experience was different in terms of its effect on her sense of herself in relationship to others.

Tom’s death was a shock…I felt dumbfounded for months. Mom’s death…was awful while it was happening but then I was able to integrate it while it was still happening so by the time it actually happened, it didn’t feel like there was a lot further to go. So it felt quite different: (Because) in the progressive death you get to reevaluate who you are slowly, and still in relation to the other. So those aspects of myself that are in dialogue with someone else, that are really a product of my relationship with someone else. It gave them a chance to change. It gave them a chance to do it gently, to gradually redevelop so that it was a seamless kind of journey. My relationship with my Mom changed as I became more of a caregiver to her and that’s why when her death came it was not as if it happened to us. But all the parts of me that were in relation to her, got to say goodbye. And
figure out what life was going to look like without her. And have all the trauma and tears ...I had them then and I had her to comfort me through that as well. Whereas with Tom’s death I was left to muddle through that alone. And to discover the parts that I thought were me but were actually me in relation to him (Gail)

Dennine contrasts her three important loss experiences, including sudden unexpected deaths and expected ones and their impact on her. The prospect of witnessing someone else’s suffering is painful to Dennine partly for how it incites a sense of powerlessness. Yet she acknowledges that sudden deaths leave her with unanswered questions and no last words.

It’s hard to watch somebody slowly die, and yet dying (suddenly) has its own complications too. Because there are no goodbyes. When somebody slowly dies at least you have time to slowly share your heart with them...Watching somebody go through sickness and slowly change in their look and slowly have the life sucked out of them, it’s so sad because for me, I had no control. I couldn’t help them so there’s no control there. So...when it ended it was like finally, they’re in peace. (Dennine)

For some participants having the time to spend with ailing loved ones was helpful in their grieving process as Gail eloquently related. As well, accepting the death of an aging loved one as normative and understandable helped make the death experience easier to assimilate. There was less of a shock factor in the latter deaths.

It was different with my father, because it was much later, but it wasn't a sense of having lost the sign post or having lost the fence. He was 84. We had had time to actually put a relationship together and he knew I loved him and so I was sad that he died and it was sudden, but he was 84. And so... it's not that it was easier, because I still felt sad, but it was not devastating. (Louise)

My mother-in-law dying was a big impact but it wasn't a surprise and a shock like my dad. She was 84. It was kind of expected. (Sabine)
Well with my dad, it wasn't such a wrenching process because it was understandable. It was what I knew what he would have wanted. He left express wishes, like, no resuscitation, no, you know, extraordinary measures… I would say it wasn't unexpected with my dad because of his age. With my husband it was unbelievable….obviously, there's much more impact with my husband's death. Like a huge impact. (Marg)

When (my Dad) passed away it wasn’t much of a shock because I was wanting that to happen because I couldn’t take him suffering… because I didn’t feel that any new emotions came in because it was just like, it was just more loss added on to my existing loss. (Dipty)

**Making Connections Between the Deaths**

When all losses were recounted, the respondent was asked about the interrelation between their losses and whether they believed their earlier loss experiences affected their later ones. Not all participants were able to make or at least easily articulate connections between their multiple losses. Some of the participants were unsure of the interrelatedness of their loss experiences. The narratives of all the respondents– with perhaps the notable exception of Randy– did not relate to a unique, separate and discrete entity called “my multiple loss experience”. Instead, losses were considered independently of each other and connections between the experiences were not always made, even when prompted by the interviewer. This is reflected in the following passages:

*(So when you said you had been through a profound experience- let's go with this metaphor- was there a window from that room that was opened or a door or?) I don't know if I could connect the two. I might, but I would like to think more about that. It's not forthcoming right away. *(Not something that you've thought about I guess prior to this maybe.*) No, I don't think so…I never thought about putting the two together. I don’t know if I could connect the two….I do remember thinking how can a baby that I never even met feel as devastating as losing your mother. And at the time it did. (Louise)*
I’ve never really quite made any connections there to be honest. I’m sure there is but I don’t know. (Beth)

Marg made direct comparisons between her two experiences and was struggling to understand the latter death in light of what she had already experienced with the previous one. Her loss experiences had been so different for her. This was partially due to the incomprehensibility of one and the understandable nature of the other combined with the level of preparedness in terms of practicalities. That is, her father had died with a will and his wishes were known to the family. Her husband died intestate leaving many loose ends. These practicalities and their inherent complications added to her stress and left her emotionally and physically drained.

Marg contrasted the relative ease of the transition after her father’s death with the incomparable complications of her husband’s death. She contemplates the difference between the elderly dying parent and the sudden tragic accident of a younger husband and she wonders whether the two extremes of the types of death are affecting how she is dealing with her husband’s.

What I’m wondering is, because my father’s death was so understandable, did it make John’s death seem even more bizarre? Did the one make the other one seem even more tragic and more off the wall because this should not have happened to this person?: I think with Dad it was very orderly, very natural, whereas with John it just seems very unnatural, forced upon me. It’s just frustrating… frustration, it’s probably my primary emotion a lot of the time. (Marg)

When comparing the ultimate impact of the three deaths she spoke of, Dennine believes the death of her aunt by suicide caused the most emotional disturbance and confusion due to her perceived failure to control the situation.

The first two (deaths) were inevitable, they were sad, especially because my grandmother was going to pass because of her age. The baby shocked me, but I knew that death was coming so I was preparing myself. The third one completely caught me off guard…So I think the process of that makes it harder on me because the other two (deaths) I knew I couldn’t (change the outcome). They were
going to die. There was nothing you could do about it. But this one was different. So that’s the part I probably struggle with the most. (Dennine)

Although not all informants were able to connect their losses, some participants made comparisons between their losses and linked them in a meaningful way. They saw the deaths as being connected, as forming a chain of events that were tied together by their relevant meanings. This was common when respondents spoke of losing family members.

**Effects on Sense of Family**

Many of the respondents who spoke of losing family members, especially parents, related stories that reflected a sense of family disruption or dissolution. Bridget, Marg, Susan, Dipti, Ellen, Louise, Lorraine and Beth all spoke of how losing family members changed their roles and often the dynamics within their families. There was for some a concomitant sadness and fear around feeling any or all of isolated, abandoned, disconnected and “orphaned”.

When there was the loss of a parent there was a focus on and concern for the surviving parent. Many of these respondents took on a care-giving role, worrying about and attending to the needs of the remaining parent. Marg felt somewhat burdened by her added responsibility towards her mother, especially as she struggled to cope as a grieving widow herself.

My mother is almost 92. I'm now spending more increasing time with her, which takes away from time I need to do things in my own family because of the loss of my husband, who's not there to help. I'm trying to be a mother and look after all the physical work around the house… I keep looking at that and then I also have to take on my mom and her household because she's still in her own house…I think that is the area it's had the most effect on me is that I've had to accept a lot more responsibility for my mother and now I've got so much more responsibility in my own camp. I wouldn't say I'm resentful, but I do feel burdened, shall we say. I understand that, you know, I made a promise to Dad on his death bed. Don't worry. I'll look after Mom. It'll be okay. (Marg)

It's every day, waking moment, first person I'd think about was my mother…I mean my mother is in my mind all the time. Is she okay today? When was the
last time I had a dinner with her? And then because I live close by and because I'm a more nurturing person than my sister, the onus fell on me. I often wonder what it's like to have parents who do stuff together and the children don't actually have to think, if they're okay. (Bridget)

There was also the fear and sadness in anticipation of the inevitable death of the remaining parent and how the respondent would cope with that.

Things are happening, the overlap, my Dad, my brother and then my mother. You know very personally, selfishly, I feel like I’m losing (her)...I think I’m very fearful about having, well when the time comes I will have lost both parents. (Lorraine)

I mean, honestly I would expect to lose my mother within the next year...and she's one of my best friends...So I'm sitting there thinking, okay, I'll have to go through this all again, and that's going to be probably the hardest one. Even harder than my husband I think because now she's been there for me to grieve my husband. And I'll have all of her paperwork. I'll have her house to settle because I'm her executor, and I'll have all the practical and all the emotional baggage. I keep thinking, oh, please no. Not yet. Not yet. Because I need her. You know I'm kind of dreading, shall we say, when she goes. With a huge capital "D." (Marg)

For some participants the sense of loss of family led them to seek alternative relationships and roles within the remaining family in order to assuage this sense of loss of family and role.

I keep in touch with my mother-in-law because we became quite close. So I find that I love having those relationships...they're not my mother, but they are older women in my life, and I welcome that. I look for that. (Louise)

So now my aunts and uncles, because my mother is not there, they find that they are finding it easy to access me. I have really found myself back...in that role and I'm able to develop that closeness now...I am okay to tell myself that I have had that loss and even though that type of relationship I had with my mother was so
precious, it is okay to have that type of relationship with my aunt or my uncle. I
don’t want to miss out on these relationships. I don’t want to miss out on their
warmth. They are reaching out to me and I am going to reach back and reach out
myself. (Dipti)

Randy’s loss experiences allowed him to forge a closer and more intimate relationship
with his father and although he had yet to lose his parents at the time of the interview he was
acutely aware of the value, importance and preciousness of these family relationships, a belief
that he attributes to his losses.

If the death of that first partner hadn’t happened, I don’t think my father would
have understood me as a young gay man as well as he did. It really solidified our
relationship in a way that I think not a lot of men have with their fathers, and
certainly not a lot of gay men have with their fathers. I’m very close with all of
my family but it strengthened it in a way that there was something that was really
kind of magical that came out of that happening…I think about this past weekend
when I held my niece’s child for the first time and I think that the love that I felt
for that child and the love that I feel for my niece is much more intense because of
the fact that I’m very aware at any second they could be gone. So I’m not going to
waste a second when I’m with them. And I want to be clear that you don’t hear
that as a paranoia of me losing, because that’s not how I feel about it…I think I’ll
have long lasting relationships with all the people that are in my life at present.
But you know, holding on to that child happened at a family gathering where we
all got in cars and drove in different directions. And we have no idea what
situation could happen on the road on the way home. So I want to be sure that I
feel and I know what my relationships are like, and that the people around me
know how much I care about them. (Randy)

Making Connections to Change in Sense of Self

Other meaningful connections were made. Some respondents thought of their loss
experiences in terms of what they meant to their sense of self and how they impacted their way
of being in the world. Randy, Sabine and Gail all spoke of how their losses have had a profound
effect on them and changed the way they looked at the world, themselves, others and how they lived with and within that world. These respondents derived shared meanings from their multiple losses that contributed to their understanding of the cumulative impact that their losses have had on them.

Randy’s losses were fundamental in shaping who he is, and how he interacts in the world. They helped carve a depth of sensitivity that allows him to engage with others and in the world in an impassioned and deeply felt way. It was the cumulative effect of all his losses that he believes catalyzed this evaluation for him. He was the only participant who spoke explicitly in terms of his collective losses.

And though these losses are immense. Though I would love to have these three people standing beside me and maybe be able to introduce you to them, I think their loss added to that level of intensity in which I was willing to take risks and feel things. And because of that, yes I can be made incredibly saddened by something or incredibly pissed off by something that’s happening in the world that will make me do something about it. But I think that when I’m at a family gathering and I’m surrounded by people that I adore I think the intensity in which I feel those relationships is stronger than anyone else in the room. Because they were not given the gift of those losses. (Randy)

Gail’s first loss propelled her into a process of self discovery and self evaluation that gave her a framework from which to draw upon when she encountered her next loss. This is a structure for understanding her self that is not always prominent in her mind but that she calls upon when needed. Indeed, this framework was helping her understand her responses to and actions taken in regards to other stressors in her life.

Then with my Mom’s death, even though she was a much bigger person in my life, it seemed like I had found a framework that would also encompass her death, and give meaning to it, so I didn’t have to go through this quest again…Because of the need that I had to use the framework that I had developed from the first death, to help cope with Mom’s illness, I think there was a period of time in which the framework for explaining meaning and for understanding the
connection between day to day life and overall life plan, you know, the existential kind of questions, was brought into the forefront for an extended period of time. I think it would have receded into the background had Mom not been ill. Because now that I’m away from those things I think it’s begun to recede a bit. But it still has power. As other traumas happen in life, for example I had a crazy landlord and that was quite traumatic. So it pops back up again to give me some ownership. And it probably does evolve. In this case I had to learn about conflict, which I hadn’t before. (Gail)

Sabine also connected her loss experiences into a framework of self and how she chose to live her life. She took the lessons from each loss and integrated them into her framework of “growth from loss”, asking herself—what does this mean to me? Then, she actively and consciously incorporated that meaning into her framework. Her loss experiences were building blocks in her sense of self as a responsible, driven, compassionate and optimistic person.

When the loss is one that affects you so deeply, you can't help but have a few things happen. I can't help but reflect on the meaning of my own life, the meaning of their lives to me, and then you can't help but compare the circumstances of each of those deaths and ask yourself, well, why did they die? What couldn't they control? What could they control?...My mother-in-law, that was an expected death and a nice ripe old age. My father's was a shock, but not inexplicable. David’s was inexplicable. Just rotten, rotten luck. So, you have to kind of choose, well, what is the meaning in these lost relationships? And is that going to cause you to do something different? And the answer for me is you're damned right it will. Take the good from the good examples and the part that person couldn't even do anything about well, you just chalk that up and, frankly, it makes you that much more thankful and grateful that you're one of the lucky ones. I feel very grateful. (Sabine)

These participants compared the deaths to each other by virtue of the nature of the deaths and the type of relationship it was. Meaning was construed on the basis of what the loss meant to them, i.e., what it signified and what the consequences were and the meaning behind it Although the salient death overshadowed others, these informants still sought to find meaning in the
overall experience by making comparisons amongst all their losses. The act of comparing and contrasting their experiences helped some to build a framework of meaning around loss, e.g. Sabine, Randy, Gail, Ellen. Others were contrasting their experiences and adjusting their framework to include the new and unfamiliar experience, e.g., Dennine, Marg, Bridget and Louise.

**Understanding the Overall Impact:**

*Reflections on Meaning*

The last component in this model for understanding the meaning-making process in multiple loss experiences involves the reflection on the meanings of the overall impact that losing a number of close loved ones had on an individual. As participants told their stories, accentuated the salient or most significant loss, related the effects of each death on them and pondered the interconnectedness or not of subsequent deaths, they were constructing a framework for meaning of all their losses. Some were able to fit each experience into this frame of reference, while others were forced to reconsider and adapt their framework in order to accommodate the novel and nonconforming nature of the subsequent loss. It was a dynamic and interactive process. The process of meaning-making in multiple loss is not static. Rather, it involves a flowing, reciprocal movement between the individual death experiences based on the assessment, juxtaposition, and evaluation of the meaning of each loss.

Participants reflected on the overall impact of their losses in various ways. The summaries of the impact in each individual’s narrative as presented in Chapter Four are indicative of the way participant’s viewed the overall impact of their losses on them. It is apparent that these independent stories carry certain themes or threads that embody a characteristic tone or quality to the meaning that the experience has had for the participant. The tone of the narrative and the overall impact was often expressed by the respondents with the use of metaphors, images, or summations of their experiences. These will be included here to elucidate the point. Some quotes will be repeated as they most accurately reflect the nature, tone and meanings of the participant’s discourse.
The Meanings of the Losses: Characteristic Features of the Experiences

The tone of the narratives of these participants had characteristic features that embodied the quality and nature of the overall meanings to the individuals. These features can be clustered into three types reflecting the prominent tenor of the narrative. Some participants’ stories had a primarily unresolved tone, some a transformational one and some an enhancing or growth-related tone. Adjectives and verbs are used here to describe the tenor because the character of the narrative, although showing a predominant tone, is fluid and somewhat amorphous. There is overlap between them with all narratives reflecting a touch of each characteristic. Yet, each story has a dominant discourse. Figure 4 illustrates these discursive features.

![Figure 4](Image)

*Figure 4. Characteristic features of meanings in multiple loss narratives. (Note: Overlap amongst the circles indicates the non discrete nature of the meanings.).*

The meanings of the losses: Unresolved / Primarily detrimental.

Some participant’s narratives had more of an unresolved tone. They believe their losses have had a primarily detrimental impact on their lives. These individuals for the most part, believe their numerous losses have had a negative impact on the trajectory, quality, and/or outcomes of their lives. The term “primarily” is used in the title of this particular narrative type because it qualifies the adjective. These experiences were not perceived as being universally injurious or harmful. Rather, the nature or ethos of the plot was one of viewing their losses as
having left them with “less” in life. The narratives of Bridget, Marg, Susan and Lorraine reflect more of this tone.

Bridget used the following metaphor to explain her experience of her grieving for her husband. However, it represents the tone of her entire discourse and how she views her multiple loss experiences overall, i.e., the cumulative effect of losing her father and husband.

I liken it to you’re sitting on your little beach house, you've got a little beach house and you're having a little meal on the deck and the tsunami comes. And then the water is everywhere, you don't know which way is up which way is down which way to air-nothing. And then, when you finally get out, you're a mess, everything that you had is upside down, topsy-turvy... you dust yourself off, you say, ‘OK I'm going to set the chairs back, I'm going to put the table back.’ And you sit there...and then it happens again. And you're just lost each and every time. (Bridget)

The apparent endlessness of Marg’s ongoing experience is leaving her with a feeling of exasperation, uncertainty and weariness about the outcome of her losses.

You don't get to the end. It just feels like a tunnel that has no light at the end of it. You’re just constantly going through it. You keep thinking there's a glimmer, and then, ‘Oh, no. Keep going. Keep going.’ Because it just seems like every time I thought things were getting better something would come up and it was like, not better. Definitely not any better…and because it started with Dad's death and then John’s 18 months later and then I think because the court case was over 2 years coming to trial...I said to myself once the trial's done I'll start to feel better. And I didn't. And I thought, okay, when the estate is done, or the insurance…And now we're finished that process. I might feel a little bit relieved, but I don't really feel better…I think that's what I'm looking for. To feel better as opposed to feeling more relieved. (Marg)

The tone of Susan and Lorraine’s narrative is one of disappointment and sadness. They view their losses as having left them with less in their lives.
I made decisions back then that I wouldn’t have made if I hadn’t lost half my family like that…I think I didn’t follow my own dreams and I didn’t make decisions that were in keeping with my own aspirations and my own talents…and I do feel that I’ve lost 25 years for a number of different reasons. (Susan)

Even today when I think about it…there’s just this really deep sadness: I think I’m spending a lot of time thinking about the sad things. (Lorraine)

Four of the participants in this study viewed their losses as having had a primarily detrimental impact on their lives. The narratives had an unresolved tone to them. These participants assessed each loss and found that cumulatively they imparted a negative effect on them. This does not mean that they have adopted universal negative attitudes towards their lives and their losses. It is reflective of a framework for meaning that embodies a sense that their losses have left them feeling depleted and contributed to the tone of the narrative as primarily irresolute.

**The meanings of the losses: Transformational.**

Many respondents’ stories reflected more of a transformative tone. That is, the impact of the multiple losses has had a major effect on them and they believed it had changed them in many ways but they did not explicitly articulate the changes as being unequivocally detrimental or growth-related. These narratives had more of a transitional tone. Respondents were processing their experiences, feeling the emotions associated with the losses including sadness and loneliness and integrating the effects of their losses into their sense of themselves. There were acknowledged benefits and perceived positive changes from having lived through the experience. The losses were being integrated into their sense of themselves and the direction was towards one of growth. Yet, the overall tenor of their stories was contemplative and the lessons were still being understood and processed. Both positive and negative effects of loss were articulated but these narratives were biased towards growth, reflecting the non-discrete nature of the meanings being ascribed.

Gail embarked upon a “process of rediscovery” that involved developing a framework of meaning and addressing the existential type questions that she was asking of herself.
My world is still there even though there are parts of it that are missing…but I could see the world again and from then I think I chose to say ‘OK, but this has to have meant something.’ (Gail)

Louise is uncertain how to discern what would be normal maturity and what would be specifically attributable to her losses. Yet she is acutely aware that her life has been made more profound and that without these losses her life would likely have been very different. They are integrated into her sense of herself.

I can’t imagine what it would have been like to grow up and mature and live a life and think about things without those losses…I do feel as though I experience things more profoundly than I might have, that I take life more seriously than I would have and that my life feels more urgent…So it’s simply part of how I relate to the world now. (Louise)

Dipti’s losses were being understood and integrated. She came to accept them as being fundamental in affecting the changes she was discovering in herself. Although she spoke of her changes in past tense, she reported coming to understand this during the course of the interview.

It was a process. It was a journey and I had to go through that journey…and my entire shift in thinking really comes from my journey, my process. I went through these peaks and valleys where I found I had my emotions towards my relatives and anger, and then slowly as acceptance came and I found a way to keep my parents and honouring their memory, I found a way to move on. So it’s really a journey. (Dipti)

Some of these participants have adopted a philosophical and resolved approach to death that is part of their framework of seeing it as a normal, unavoidable and inevitable part of life. Losing loved ones is still heart-wrenching and painful but it is understandable. It fits within their frame of reference.

Do I want to do this over and over again? I don’t look forward to it. I hate it. But I understand that it’s a fact of life. And I think we need to think in reality, and
reality is that people are going to come into your life, they’re going to be a part of your life and then they’re going to go on. (Dennine)

Ellen too has come to accept that death, as an inevitable fact of life, is not something to shy away from and she is acutely aware of the reality of death. She has gained the knowledge of what it’s like to live through important losses, survive and ultimately thrive. This allows her to be conscious of the choices she has in life.

It just becomes something that you accept. It’s going to happen…I think that’s the part where learning more about living has come into it for me. Because… (death) is a definite. (Ellen)

Beth considers the lessons taken from her experience and accepts that her losses and adversities have some meaning even if she is unsure what that meaning is.

Life is a learning process. I think there is a reason why we’re all here and I think that we’ve all got to go through different struggles…I think perhaps you’re just given what you’re able to cope with…you’ve got to accept and make the most of what you’ve got I suppose, and going through things like that, I think it makes you more aware…It certainly does make you feel philosophical about life. (Beth)

_The meanings of the losses: Growth / Enhancing._

Two of these participants narrated their stories in a way that specifically indicated growth and intensification. They had an overriding positive tone and reflected the tenor of “loss as primarily enhancing”. Again, this does not imply that they did not experience distress, pain or sadness over their losses. Rather, the overall impact for them was that despite, or perhaps because of, their adversities they had developed an affirmative, positive view of their own lives and life in general. Their stories were optimistic and they explicitly focused on their belief that they had grown from their experiences.

Randy has made the choice to embrace these losses in a way that has made life meaningful for him: Sometimes a conscious choice and sometimes a serendipitous experience that allows him to make that choice. His words reflect this process and are worth repeating here.
I just think that I’ve had the privilege of those three major losses in my own life at a period where I was very young. And so it allowed me much earlier than I think many people to start looking for the positive piece...I believe that happiness is a choice. I think it happens at different junctures where we can decide to stay in a place of grief or sadness or pain, or we can decide to choose the other, (more) positive (experiences). If I think about the losses that I’ve had in my life or other junctures where you can go the positive or negative way, I know I’ve made conscious decisions to go in the positive way. I think sometimes loss stops us in our tracks and we don’t have the ability to choose to be happy. But I think the world will keep offering us things that might help us get to a place where we’ll choose to be happy. In other situations...there is a point where you decide, ‘are you going to stay in grief forever or are you going to sort that into your life’ so it becomes something that strengthens who you are and make a choice to not let the loss of that relationship stop you from living an incredible life. (Randy)

Sabine too related that she felt blessed by her experiences. They contributed to her positive sense of her self, her sense of self-efficacy and responsibility and her views of the world. She chose to embrace life for all it is worth.

I really think that you have to count your blessings, and I count mine every day. It's better to concentrate on blessings you have versus the ones that are no longer around. Because we all have loss and we just have to concentrate on seeing them and be mindful of them more, and I think that that will give your life more joy. It'll certainly make you emotionally more healthy. I have my check list of my blessings upper most in my mind all the time and I give thanks to them a lot. They start with my good health, which it's my job to continue to nurture, and my very happy marriage, which I must continue to nurture because it's like that rose, and good family and friend relationships. I'm very blessed at having a very satisfying career, but I've had to cultivate that, too. It didn't get handed to me. So there's a bit of work in there, but there's a lot of just recognizing the blessings you have. And loss does that to you. (Sabine)
The Framework of Meaning in Multiple Loss: A Metaphor

The framework of meaning that individuals create, augment, adjust and alter as they encounter more losses through death is a dynamic, fluid and iterative process. The immersion into the structure and content of the participants’ narratives allowed the researcher to visualize this framework as an actual physical structure, a literal frame that respondents were using to build their knowledge, understandings and beliefs around death and loss. They were designing and building a framework of knowledge that incorporated their actual lived experiences. The image that evolved from this process resembled the shell of a house; the skeletal frame comprising the outline and edging of a body that would support the walls and ceilings. The image guided the analysis and helped the researcher formulate ideas around what this concept is and how it is created. Each person’s individual building was their “house of meaning” around their multiple losses. Indeed, participants themselves used metaphoric language when describing their experiences. Louise explicitly referred to her grief experiences in terms of an actual place, a house with rooms and windows, and Gail herself provided the term “framework” as she discussed the effects of her experiences with loss.

Continuing in this genre and using the symbolic image of a house to describe and elucidate the model of meaning-making in multiple loss a metaphor is presented here. The use of such imagery is a powerful tool in illuminating the concept, especially as it pertains to a somewhat nebulous and amorphous concept. As Bridget herself related sometimes, “there are no words” to describe a profound emotional and spiritual experience and the use of imagery provides a powerful representation of the process. The feminine pronoun is used throughout this explanation for ease and flow of narration and reading.

Imagine the individual as she experiences her first loss. We see her creating a structure, the beginnings of her house, with wooden timbers and crossbeams which serve as the frame for her dwelling. She is coming to understand the effects this loss has had on her and she builds her house in a way that most likely follows a standard blueprint. There is a set way to build a structurally sound house—shaped by her society and culture, her pre-existing beliefs about death and loss, her personality, her previous experiences of other types of losses and how others around her are making sense of it. She places the timbers and frames her house with these plans in mind.
As she encounters another loss, she is now faced with the task of “renovating” her house. She stands facing her unfinished yet framed-in house and she asks: How does this new loss fit in here? That is, how best to finish it? What rooms do I need to add? Take away? The nature of this second loss through death will have an impact on how she proceeds. A sudden, untimely, tragic, traumatic or unbelievable death may leave her standing and staring at a structure that is completely unworkable for her. It may even destroy the structure altogether like the hurricane that leaves a tangled splintered mess in its wake. She is forced to rebuild from scratch.

She stands staring into the destruction that was her house, her framework for meaning. What now? How do I rebuild this house without the essential materials I need? Without the floor plan I had, without the resources to carry through with it? The task seems daunting and without the blueprints she doesn’t even know where to begin. After all, the structure she had built before is not appropriate to her life now. She no longer needs that kind of house but she doesn’t yet know what kind of house she does need.

On the other hand, the death may be one that appears to add to her house. It is an addition, a new room perhaps, different yet still part of the plan. It conforms to the overall vision and design of the house. It may require some minor changes or major ones but it can be assimilated into the existing structure. The house starts to come together and the essence of what it will be and how it will function for her is beginning to take shape. She is working within more solid foundations.

What of these foundations? What holds the house upright and together? Her accumulating experience is imparting a felt knowledge of grief and coping, death and dying. She is familiar with this process. For better or worse, she knows what she will likely encounter. These are the bricks and mortar. She may not even be aware of the fact that she has been laying the foundations as of yet but the structure is becoming more substantial. It is sitting on firmer ground and the walls are becoming a little more solid. Her experiential knowledge is helping her shape, transform and indeed stabilize her structure.

Her pre-existing beliefs are also building blocks in her foundation. What she believes about life and death, the reasons around our existence, her overall stance towards the world and how to live within it will form part of her structure. They will help her build her house. Sometimes, these preformed ideas will be tested. They may not fit into the pre-existing plans and
the framework is questioned. A particularly significant loss will stop construction in its tracks causing the builder to step back and reassess what she is in fact building and how she is going about it. For some, this may be a delivery of new materials that don’t seem to fit within the existing structure. How do I build with these? For others, it will be a time of reflection: A forced “shut down” in the construction to reassess how best to proceed. Perhaps, a redesign is in order, or perhaps she will choose to stay with the old design—find a way to fit the meaning of the new loss into the old meanings. Sometimes, she will look at it as “another brick in the wall”, perhaps a different coloured one but one that will find a place within the structure.

No matter how she proceeds or what she decides she will be learning something new about her house and her abilities to build it. She is reassessing her competencies at house-building. Indeed, these experiences have the potential to hone her skills. She may not even be aware of it but she is in the process of becoming a capable craftsperson. Her “apprenticeship” is providing a changed sense of perspective on herself and the world. She is changing as she encounters new challenges, utilizing her shifting perspectives of self and self-in-relation to help in her task of rebuilding, reshaping, and eventually, decorating her house.

This metaphor of a house under construction is useful to understand the process by which these participants created a framework for meaning in their multiple loss experiences. We can see that some of these participants e.g., Bridget and Marg, were faced with a reconstruction project. Theirs was an experience of having to rebuild a house destroyed by their tragedies, without the blueprint, without the resources and without the sense of what they needed in their new house. They both struggled with the sudden tragic deaths of husbands that left them with a shattered sense of themselves, the world and their place in it. Their previous death experiences had presented them with an understanding and knowledge of death and loss that did not stand up when they encountered the next one. Their salient losses were so discombobulating as to leave them searching for a new, albeit unknown design for a new house. Bridget’s framework saw life as harsh and cruel and a world that is unsafe and insecure. As she rebuilt her house, she was fitting the meaning of her father’s death into her framework of meaning for her husband’s. Both losses left her with a sense of the world as dangerous. Marg was flummoxed about how to fit her husband’s death into her pre-existing meaning structure as she asked how one could be so much easier to “build” while the other did not seem so.
Many of these participants were in the process of rebuilding, incorporating their new experiences into their old ones. Theirs was a process of reconstruction and renovation but they had not rebuilt their new structure as of yet. Theirs was a work in progress, i.e., meaning in process. Gail used her framework of knowledge to carry on understanding and shaping her life after her mother died, asking herself how best to fit her experiences into her evolving frame of reference. Ellen, Louise, Dipti, and Beth, were redesigning their houses, using the old foundations and adapting them as necessary. This could include major changes or minor ones but they were progressing towards a structure that was relatively stable, i.e., their meanings were evolving.

There were those who had firmer foundations and who were continuing along a path of design that incorporated their beliefs about life, the world and loss. Randy, Dennine and Sabine were using their loss experiences to strengthen their resolve and the foundations of their beliefs. Each new loss was incorporated into their framework for meaning, i.e., that life is precious and can be precarious so one must embrace it with vigour and find the good within it. Susan and Lorraine were also building upon old foundations. Susan’s accumulated losses shaped the design and style of her house. Her framework of meaning saw her losses as having set her on an unrewarding trajectory, one that left her feeling resentful and mournful for opportunities lost. Her house was built using ineffective frames and she was now taking a new and fresh look at how to fix that. Lorraine’s cumulative losses left her with a sense of insecurity and aloneness. Her frame encompassed the notion of her sense of family dissolution and her place in the world. The blueprints for her house were written by her family and without them she could not foresee a new design or style that would fit her and her future needs.

The metaphor has become rich as it is used here to illuminate the process of meaning-making in multiple loss. The imagery is one of construction and design, renovation and renewal, adaptation and augmentation. Individuals create their frameworks and continually reassess, change, add to and take away from their original plans. They are not static. These houses are never completed. Rather, they stand as testaments to the ongoing, variable, and ever-changing process of meaning-making in loss.
Summary of Meanings in Multiple Loss Narratives

This chapter has examined and explained the process by which individuals made sense of their multiple loss experiences. When relating their personal stories, these participants tended to view their losses independently. They processed each death singularly and came to understand the meaning that it had on them. This was most often done primarily with the death that had the most significance to them, the salient loss. Saliency was predicated on the nature, timing, and relevance of the death to the individual’s sense of self. Meaning was then construed by comparing the losses to each other. They pondered the interrelatedness of the deaths, asking themselves how these deaths relate to each other. Many of these respondents made comparisons based on the type of death. Sudden and unexpected, tragic and untimely deaths were contrasted with those that were more readily assimilated over time, i.e., deaths from terminal illness and those of elderly persons. Sometimes connections were made on the basis of meaningfulness, that is, if respondents believed the losses were indicative of similar meanings.

Participants were constructing a framework of meaning for their loss experiences that is neither static nor complete. The framework of meaning is shaped, adapted, altered or augmented after each loss. The meaning of each loss was part of the framework for the meaning of the overall losses. Through the process of comparing, contrasting, evaluating and adjusting their thoughts and beliefs around each death, the structure of their framework was built. It was this structure that imparted the characteristic tone of each participant’s narrative. The tone of the narrative reflected the overall meaning of the cumulative loss experience. There were three characteristic tones in these narratives reflecting the overall meaning of their losses. Although not discrete entities, as all narratives comprised elements of all three features, these tones were distinguishable.

There was a tone of unresolved loss that reflected the effects of multiple losses as primarily detrimental. These participants viewed the effect as having had a mostly negative impact on their lives. More often, participants were equivocal as to the overall effects, continuing to contemplate and process the effects and their meanings. There was a mixture of positive and negative effects. A minority of these respondents spoke of their losses solely in growth or enhancement terms, believing that despite the pain and sadness their losses had a primarily positive impact on their lives.
Meaning-making in multiple loss is a complex, dynamic and evolving process not readily 
enunciated. Yet the emergent model as described here goes a long way in helping us understand 
and appreciate the diversity, complexity and profound nature of experiencing the deaths of a 
number of loved ones over time. A metaphor was used to help illuminate this complex, yet 
sometimes ineffable, experience. The following chapter will discuss these findings in light of 
current knowledge in the field and argue their relevance to theory and practice. It will discuss the 
strengths and limitations of the current study and suggest directions for future research.
Chapter 7: Discussion

The goal of this study is to explore the impact on an individual of having lived through numerous deaths of loved ones. The study is unique in the field of grief and bereavement research because it expands upon the extensive and vast knowledge gained from research on single losses to account for the continued experience of living through subsequent losses from death. The current study asks: What is it like to lose a number of close relationships through death and what kind of an impact does it have on a person?

The narratives of 12 individuals who had lost a number of close people from death were elicited and explored for their content and meaning. The analyses revealed a set of common themes that pertain to the multiple loss experience as well as a structure that contains the meanings and impact of these individual’s loss experiences. These findings were combined to form an emergent model for understanding the framework of meaning that individuals create in multiple loss.

In this chapter, findings from the current study are first reviewed by laying out the key points in brief summaries that serve as an outline for the reader. Headings for these précis refer to the common themes addressed in Chapter Five and the emergent model presented in Chapter Six. The subsequent section considers the implications of these findings for current theory and discusses an enhanced model of meaning-making in loss that augments current theories in the field. Succeeding sections present the relevance of these findings to practice in the field of bereavement and address the strengths and limitations of the study. Suggestions and ideas for future research are presented and a brief conclusion comprises the denouement of this study.

Summary of the Findings

The current study added to our knowledge of effects of losses by revealing the underlying themes that are common to those who have experienced more than one loss through death. Individuals had gained an experiential knowledge of grief, death and dying that informed their subsequent loss experiences and their anticipated future loss reactions. Individuals also related their perceptions of change in all of the global, intra- and interpersonal domains. The study
revealed that individuals engaged in an iterative and recursive process of meaning-making. The progression towards understanding one’s multiple losses transpired on a macro, or higher-order level with individuals conceptualizing the meanings of their overall loss experiences in increments, assessing each loss individually and then collectively. Respondents were building *houses of meaning*, i.e., they were creating representations or schemas of loss that were flexible and transmutable.

*The Common Themes*

*Experiential Knowledge*

1. The process of living through a previous loss through death provided participants with a reference from which they could relate to their subsequent loss experience. This gave them a felt knowledge of what it’s like to lose, grieve and cope.

2. Experiential knowledge could be one of a positive or comforting sense or a negative or unsettling one. Knowing how the process would unfold was helpful to some and frightening to others. Four participants understood and accepted the pain associated with loss and this was helpful to them in their healing after subsequent deaths. Four participants were uneasy about this experiential knowledge. Their knowledge of the pain of loss overshadowed other parts of the experience and familiarity with the process was not comforting to them.

3. Respondents learned that the experience was variable and that each individual death in the future would affect them differently. Five participants stressed that their experiential knowledge of the grief experience was not making them experts.

4. Participants became increasingly familiar with the process of dying and death itself both from a practical perspective and a philosophical or spiritual one. Two respondents noted gaining a sense of calm around the prospect of their own deaths. Two participants described understanding the death process and were incorporating an existential view of its course and inevitability, while two other respondents spoke of how they had learned to manage the many practical and administrative aspects of death including knowing how to fill out legal paperwork and plan funerals.
Perceived Change

5. Seven participants spoke of how the cumulative losses had given them a renewed sense of priorities in life and an understanding of its inconstancy and three of these expressed their desire to live their lives differently now. There was a renewed commitment to life and a changed perspective on how best to navigate through life with all its wonders and its unpredictability. Three participants expressed a belief in the fragility and negativity of the world. This included an awareness of the stark realities, a heightened notion of the possibility of tragedies occurring, a perception of the austere nature of life and a sense of vulnerability.

6. Eight participants spoke of the positive changes they perceived within themselves including learning how they interact with others and in the world, what they are capable of and not capable of, knowing and affirming their affective, cognitive and inter-relational self, and their sense of resiliency or strength in the face of adversity. Three respondents spoke of their losses as being a part of them, a physical manifestation resembling a thread that runs through their bodies or courses through their veins. Four participants were left feeling defeated and burdened by their sadness, frustration or legacy of their losses. They came to see sides of themselves that they did not like or felt regret over decisions they had made.

7. All respondents perceived changes in their sense of themselves in relationship to others. This included who they choose to interact with and how they do so. All of the respondents questioned unhealthy relationships and focused more on healthy and nurturing ones. They had an understanding of and empathy for others that was honed by their loss experiences and many used this to help others in any or all of their personal, vocational, leisure and creative lives.

An Emergent Model of Multiple Loss Experiences

1. Each death was processed and talked about separately and each had a distinctive impact on the individual. All the respondents made sense of their losses one death at a time.

2. Meanings were ascribed on the basis of the particular death and were dependent on the relationship that was lost, the nature of the death, the timeliness of the death and its relationship to ensuing losses.
3. Eight participants emphasized a salient death that carried particular significance for the narrator. The salient death tended to shape or temper the meaning that the respondent made of the overall experience.

4. Participants’ losses were compared and contrasted to each other and meaning was derived from the individual’s understanding of each loss and its connection to his or her other losses. All participants had experienced various types of deaths and the majority had experienced an untimely, sudden, or tragic death that was compared to a normative, or not unforeseen one.

5. Eight participants described a sense of family disruption at best and family dissolution at worse. Roles and family dynamics were shifted as a result of the loss of two or more important family members. Two of these respondents were dreading the inevitable losses of their mothers. Interfamilial relationships were enhanced as a result of his losses for the one male participant.

6. Similarities of meaning were often found in the interconnectedness of the meanings of the losses. Shared meanings included both sense of family noted above and reflections on what their loss experiences meant to their sense of self and how they impacted their way of being in the world.

7. Each narrative had a characteristic tone that reflected the overall impact of all his or her losses. The characteristic tone in the stories reflected discernible, although not discrete, elements of meanings. Narratives tended to cluster in one of an unresolved or detrimental tone, a transitional or transformational tone, or an enhancing or growth-related tone.

8. Participants created and modified a framework of meaning for their loss experiences that encompassed a fluid, dynamic, non-linear, and interactive cognitive, affective and spiritual or existential process. The framework was changing over time and experience. Meaning-making in multiple loss is an evolutionary process.

**Implications for Theory**

The findings presented here will be discussed in terms of their implications for theory in the field of loss, grief and bereavement. The study discovered some processes that will aid in our understanding of the experience of loss through death. This study enriches our knowledge of and current theories about loss by contributing an emergent model that enhances the existing models.
in grief and bereavement. It reinforces and strengthens our present understanding by contributing supplementary aspects that have not been considered in research on single losses. It also challenges the assumptions commonly made in the literature about the deleterious effects of previous losses. It will explain these findings in the context of current theories of meaning-making in loss, post-loss growth, resilience factors and previous losses and describe an enhanced model of meaning-making in loss.

**Meaning-Making in Loss**

Participants in this study were engaged in a dynamic process of meaning-making as they recounted their losses and made sense of their experiences. They created and modified a framework of meaning for their loss experiences that encompassed a fluid, non-linear, interactive cognitive, affective and spiritual or existential process. The process resembles that which has been hypothesized to occur in bereavement as one adapts to a single loss, however, it extends the adaptation process commonly seen during grief to the overall experience and understanding of one’s cumulative losses.

These findings are consistent with current meaning-making models of grief and bereavement. Constructivist theory of meaning-making in loss posits that people search for, create, adjust and reconstruct their ascribed meanings after a significant loss (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005). Individuals construct a new reality, one that must reflect the world as they now know and experience it, without the lost person and with the new views of themselves and how they interact in the world. They are searching for meaning in their losses and this tends to involve three major processes: sense-making, benefit-finding and identity change.

Respondents in this study engaged in a similar process of meaning-making that involved the three major processes of sense-making, benefit-finding and identity change. However they did this on a larger scale or macro level. By reflecting on their past loss experiences and the interrelatedness or not of each loss to the other they came to ascribe an overall meaning to their macrocosmic experience of loss through death. The narratives, as reflective acts of meaning-making, were vehicles for sense making. As the participant related each death and its meaning and compared it to subsequent deaths, he or she created an overall framework of meaning for the effects of his or her losses. Through the process of narration of the experiences the individual
constructs and shapes his or her experience into a cohesive whole that encompasses the individual meanings.

This is consistent with the constructivist conception that individuals have a tendency to create narrative accounts of the disturbing events in their lives by “fitting them into a meaningful plot structure” in order to organize and make sense of them. As one encounters major losses, the self-account is disrupted and the individual embarks on a process of creating or reconstructing the “coherent self-narrative” (Neimeyer et al., 2002, p. 239). Making sense of a loss is the process whereby individuals “…strive to find reasons for what has happened”, by questioning and seeking answers for their bereavement experience (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005, p. 37).

The participants in this study reflected on the meanings of their individual losses, compared and contrasted the separate losses to each other and proceeded to formulate a reason or reasons for their overall losses. They were making sense of their cumulative multiple loss experience by making sense of their individual loss experiences and then comparing them to each other. It is as if they examined each loss as a piece of a puzzle and then arranged it into the larger picture. This was an ongoing and dynamic process, often evolving in the process of narrating their story. For half of the participants the meanings were more easily attributed, evident in the prevailing positive or negative valence of the narrative’s tone. The other half was formulating the meanings and was continuing to seek reasons and outcomes. They were continuing to search for meaning in their losses.

The search for meaning after a single important loss is documented in the literature and is considered a central component of grieving or recovery from trauma (Davis et al., 1998; Frankl, 1984; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Neimeyer et al., 2002). It involves the tasks of coming to understand why the death happened and the meaning that it has for the bereaved survivor. Deaths that are normative and timely tend to make more sense to people than deaths that are unexpected and out of sequence. Sense-making is more readily attained when the death is perceived as normative and when people report having religious or spiritual beliefs about death, i.e., the older the decedent at time of death and the more one reports adhering to a religious or spiritual belief the more likely they were to make sense of the loss (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001).
The findings from these narratives reflected the individual participant’s process of coming to understand the death, why it happened and how it affected the respondent. Consequent with the research on meaning-making in single loss these narratives revealed that normative deaths and ones that fit within a participant’s realm of religious, spiritual or existential meanings were more easily made sense of. There was a cognitive, affective and philosophical understanding of the death. When respondents compared all their losses, they considered these independent meanings and sense was then made of all the deaths in terms of the larger picture of life. That is, the respondent’s beliefs about the transitive nature of life or his or her beliefs about the world and its nature. “Making sense of loss, then, seems to require a fit between the characteristics of the loss event and the preexisting worldview of the bereaved person” (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001, p.734).

The findings from this study reflect this theory and extend it one step further. These narratives revealed that similar principles are at work when individuals consider all their losses combined. The additional component added is that of how people make sense of the succession of deaths. Each loss is made sense of, or not, and one’s accumulating loss experiences are made sense of within the realm of one’s evolving worldviews. Preexisting views may have already been changed or challenged after the first loss or losses. Therefore, worldviews and beliefs have already been subject to scrutiny and depending on the outcome of that analysis may or may not be as tenable as they once were. Individuals are creating and modifying their beliefs and worldviews after each death, using experiential knowledge and the cumulative changes. Changes to beliefs and making sense are dependent on the extent to which the subsequent death challenges the ascribed meanings. It is argued that sense making and disruptions of previously held beliefs after each death are accruing and overall meanings in multiple losses are adaptive meanings. They are evolving and emerging into the larger framework of meaning.

Participants in this study, along with making sense also recounted the benefits that they perceived to have accrued as a result of their experiences and made reports of significant personal change, reflecting the two other components of the tripartite process in meaning-making. Respondents reported having gained something from their losses. These gains were in all of the personal, social, global and spiritual domains, mirroring that which has been found in other studies (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Cordova, Cunningham, Carlson, & Andrykowski, 2001; Davis, 2001; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Franz et al., 2001; Frazier et al., 2001; Lehman et
al., 1993; Lieberman, 1996; Mercer & Evans, 2006; Tedeschi et al., 1998; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991). They reflected on their sense of growth in many areas of their lives. They recounted feeling more empathic towards others, having gained an appreciation of life, a renewed sense of commitment to their values and relationships and a better understanding of life, death and dying.

These changes were attributed to the cumulative effects of their losses. Participants were creating and modifying their frameworks of meaning around loss which included their sense making, their change in outlook and sense of self and their regard for the positives that had come out of their loss experiences. The current study revealed that individuals’ creation of meaning in loss involves the cumulative, accruing and evolving understandings, perceived benefits and changing sense of self. It extends the meaning-making model in bereavement to encompass the cumulative effects of experiencing many significant losses over time.

The overall meanings in multiple loss tended to have a particular character that was primarily negative in tenor, ambiguous or transitional, or positive in its tone. The tone was often predicated on the extent to which one significant loss experience challenged the participant’s meaning structure. This is in keeping with the theory on meaning-making processes. Even though respondents in this study related each death and its impact on them some deaths were particularly meaningful to them and there was often a salient death that had the most profound impact on them. It was the death that they attempted to make sense of independently and also in relation to their other losses. Regardless of where the salient death occurred in their sequence of losses, i.e., whether it was the first, middle or last death experienced, participants focused on the intensity of its influence on them. These salient deaths were those that challenged the individual’s beliefs and their evolving meanings about the world. The process is explained through the lens of trauma and loss-related challenges to one’s assumptive world views.

The notion that people’s assumptive worlds can be shattered after traumatic or significant losses and that these events can challenge one’s global beliefs thereby creating distress that sets in motion a reappraisal of global meaning (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Park et al., 1996) is highlighted here to discuss the especially impactful influence of the salient death discovered in these narratives. These theories posit that traumas and particularly significant losses or “seismic” events can shatter one’s core beliefs about the world, themselves and their interactions within it (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 2004). These are events that
have the potential to render our previously held meanings and beliefs untenable. Yet, it is not the event itself so much as one’s psychological reaction to it that is deemed to make it significant.

It is not the recognizable, readily apparent external losses—of one’s health, home, community, or a loved one—that define an experience as traumatic, but rather the internal disorganization and disintegration that follows from our psychological unpreparedness...Traumas are shocks to our inner worlds. (Janoff-Bulman, 2006, p.83)

Our fundamental assumptions comprise our model of the world and ourselves, are formulated by our past experiences and shape our perceptions, interactions with and expectations in our lives. They are a “cognitive-emotional guide for effectively planning and acting in our world” (Janoff-Bulman, 2006, p. 83). This theory posits that traumatic events that shatter one’s worldviews and assumptions are those that comprise extreme threats to one’s sense of safety and security and leave one feeling powerless and vulnerable. When extreme events shatter our preexisting beliefs they are felt as senseless or meaningless. We are forced into a process of attempting to make sense of it.

The salient losses referred to in this study were ones that had a particularly significant impact on the individual in his or her narrative. The salient loss was one that challenged the individual’s sense of self and worldviews. The salient deaths reported in this study included suicide reported by 2 participants, murder reported by the male respondent, tragic accidents related by 3 respondents and one each of a perinatal and infant death reported by 2 other participants. All of these challenged the individual’s previously held beliefs about life and the world, its fairness and predictability. The narratives of the two widows for example reflected a sense of disruption of previously held beliefs about the natural order, safety, security and justice. These women were struggling with a sense of vulnerability and with how they were going to survive and thrive in their new reality. Their sense of themselves was profoundly challenged.

Other deaths reported in this study were tragic and untimely, yet they did not appear to shatter the individual’s previously held beliefs and core assumptions. For example, the reported murder and one participant’s aunt’s suicide were disturbing, confusing and unsettling. However, meanings were being ascribed as these participants integrated their troublesome experiences into their framework of meaning. Randy’s beliefs in a fundamentally just and beautiful world were challenged but not discarded after the murder of his partner. Dennine’s religious views of life and death and her notions of controllability of events were queried and challenged as she
attempted to understand the apparent senselessness of her aunt’s suicide. She was still in the process of formulating and adapting this loss into her views and beliefs.

Thus, the findings in this study are congruent with Janoff-Bulman’s (2006) description of the effects of traumatic events. For those respondents who struggled with a salient loss, the extent of the impact of the salient death was likely predicated on the degree of internal disorganization and disintegration. That is, not all respondents’ inner worlds were shattered by their significant loss experiences and not all losses set in motion a process of reintegration and reorganization. Individuals adjusted to, absorbed and adapted to their losses on both a case by case basis and by taking into account their overall perspective on all their losses. They modified their frameworks of meaning as necessary, fitting some deaths into their larger meaning frames and making concessions and adaptations to others as and when necessary.

The overall framework of meaning that these participants created and adapted with each new loss resembled the process of accommodation and assimilation purported to occur after major losses or trauma (Joseph & Linley, 2006). These participants were engaged in a process of coming to understand their losses by integrating or reviving their conceptualizations of their experiences. Their frameworks of meaning were undergoing scrutiny, being built upon, reorganized, reinvented, strengthened, or discarded as they encountered each new loss through death. The act of accommodation or assimilation was taking place.

Accommodation occurs when people revise their assumptive worlds to take into account the traumatic experience while assimilation is evident when they revise their perception of the traumatic experience to comply with their assumptive views (Joseph & Linley, 2006). In this model there are three possible outcomes: a) assimilation—a return to pre-event beliefs and functioning where previously held beliefs are restored; b) negative accommodation—a changed perspective that is pessimistic; c) positive accommodation—a changed perspective that is affirmative (Payne, Joseph, & Tudway, 2007).

Payne et al. (2007) explain:

Imagine a person picking up the pieces of a shattered vase. He or she can attempt to put the vase back together exactly as it was (assimilation), but now the vase is more fragile, covered in fractures and held together with sticking tape. Alternatively, the pieces can be discarded and placed in the trash (negative accommodation) or be used to build
something new, perhaps a beautiful mosaic (positive accommodation). (Payne et al., 2007, p. 76)

This is a remarkable analogy because it mirrors the intent of the metaphor used in this study to elucidate the notion of a framework of meanings. Participants in this study created and modified the meanings associated with their losses on an individual basis, working towards an overall understanding of the impact their experiences had on them. For these respondents, each death was either assimilated or accommodated dependent on the effect it had on them and each experience was assimilated or accommodated to previous losses. They were, to elaborate on the vase analogy, reconstituting not the individual vase but the collection of vases which had been shattered in turn. And, not unlike an artisan, they were becoming skilled at the art of repair and restoration (experiential knowledge of grief, death and dying). However, each broken vase was assessed independently with some posing more of a challenge to repair than others.

Four of these respondents at the time of the interview had affected a negative accommodation. These were the participants who viewed the impact of their overall losses as primarily detrimental. They were adjusting worldviews and beliefs to reflect the perceived unfairness, unkindness and unsafe nature of the world. Indeed, two of these connected all their losses through death to such injurious and harsh meanings. Two of the respondents had developed positive accommodations. They had reevaluated and redesigned themselves in a growth-promoting and enhancing way as a result of their cumulative losses. The remaining participants were in the process of accommodation. The transformative narratives reflected meanings in progress and beliefs that were in transition yet there was a pervasive positive tone to these. They were making changes where needed, augmenting or deleting where necessary and reflecting on their progress.

Thus it appears that the theory of adaptation following loss espoused by various theorists (Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997; Joseph & Linley, 2006) was evident in these participants narratives. What makes this discovery especially compelling is that the process of accommodation or assimilation here was not predicated on an individual “catastrophic” or “seismic” event (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 2004). Rather, meaning-making for these participants was ongoing and was a function of the cumulative series of losses encountered. It would seem that individuals do not always need a particular shattering of core assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The effects of numerous losses of close loved ones over
time can have a similar impact on one’s meaning structure. It was the accumulation of losses for these respondents that contributed to their beliefs about and adaptation towards their losses.

**Outcomes in Bereavement: Post-loss Change and Growth.**

The current study has provided ongoing evidence of the notion of personal change after loss. It substantiates our knowledge of individuals’ reported sense of change and how they perceive their losses have impacted them. All participants in this study believed that their losses have had a profound effect on them. They all perceive that they are different now after losing their loved ones. Changes were perceived in their outlook on life, their views of themselves and their relations with others.

All respondents see the world in a different way. There is an understanding of the precarious yet precious nature of life. For the majority of these participants, these changes are valued and embraced. Seven participants spoke of how the cumulative losses had given them a renewed sense of priorities in life and an understanding of its inconstancy and three of these expressed their desire to live their lives differently now. Yet 3 participants expressed a belief in the fragility and negativity of the world and life. This included an awareness of the stark realities in the world and the heightened notion that tragedies can and do happen. They perceived the austere nature of life and this left them with a sense of vulnerability.

Associated with the renewed life perspective was the respondent’s shift in their sense of themselves. Eight participants spoke in positive terms about the changes they perceived within themselves, changes that included learning about how they interact with others and in the world, what they are capable of and not capable of, knowing and affirming their affective, cognitive and inter-relational self, and their sense of resiliency or strength in the face of adversity. Three respondents spoke of their losses as being a part of them, a physical manifestation, resembling a thread that runs through their bodies or courses through their veins. However, there were 4 participants who were left feeling defeated and burdened by their sadness, frustration or legacy of their losses. They came to see sides of themselves that they did not like or made decisions that they regret.

All respondents perceived changes in their sense of themselves in relationship to others—this includes who they choose to interact with, and how they do so. All of the respondents were
apt to question unhealthy relationships and focus more on healthy and nurturing ones. They had an understanding of and empathy for others that was honed by their loss experiences and many used this to reach out, connect and help others either in their vocational life, volunteering or through their creative interactions with the world and others.

These findings are not surprising in light of the consistent results found in research on loss in the grief and bereavement field. The notion of perceived change has been corroborated in both quantitative and qualitative studies of the effects of loss (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Davis et al., 1998; Dutton & Zisook, 2005; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Franz et al., 2001; Frazier et al., 2001; Lehman et al., 1993; Lieberman, 1996; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Maren & Bonanno, 2007; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). The transformative nature of grief and bereavement is commonly reported in the literature and forms a fundamental part of many theories in the field (Attig, 1996; Davis, 2001; Dutton & Zisook, 2005; Griffin, 2001; Harvey et al., 2004; Janoff-Bulman, 2004; Joseph et al., 1993; Lieberman, 1996; Neimeyer, 1998; Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Park & Ai, 2006; Parkes, 1996; Weiss, 1988; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991). Changes are construed as related to one’s changed view of self, changed relationships and changed philosophy of life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Joseph & Linley, 2006). This study has corroborated such theory and replicated the research in the field as well as contributed another dimension to the model. Changes reported in this study were perceived to be additive, resulting from the succession of losses.

The level of intensity of and depth of felt change found in this study was associated with having experienced more than one loss, for even though participants had made cognitive shifts after each loss, particularly if it was a significant one, they were apt to attribute the profundity of the change to having experienced multiple losses. This finding is compelling in light of the current literature base in the field because it accredits much of the perceived change to the cumulative or additive effect of having experienced numerous losses.

As in research on single losses individuals in this study were apt to describe the changes as being both positive and negative. Even though some narratives clustered on opposite ends of a spectrum, having one of a primarily detrimental or enhancing tone, all these individuals had experienced change that was considered both good and bad. Narratives were imbued with “micro-stories” that reflected aspects of their experiences that were depreciative. For example,
Despite both Randy’s and Sabine’s overall positively ascribed meanings they both recounted elements of their story that left them feeling depleted, whether this was “an underlying layer of sadness” or a melancholy for missed loved ones. Others could juxtapose the effects of their experience, noting the good that came of their loss and the bad. Dennine was grateful for the reinforced connections with remaining loved ones but lamented the absence of what would be her 20-year-old son in her life.

These findings reflect previous research that has examined outcomes in loss. Most published studies find a range of responses to loss that are dichotomized into positive or negative effects. (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Franz et al., 2001; Frazier et al., 2001; Lehman et al., 1993; Lieberman, 1996; McAdams et al., 2001; Mercer & Evans, 2006; Rosenblatt, 2000). Some studies found that people report both positive and negative effects in the same areas of their lives, i.e., they report “both growth and depreciation on the same dimensions following a stressful event” (Baker, Kelly, Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2008, p.450).

The two evaluative aspects of the loss experience exist side by side, not unlike the figure-ground pictures that reflect disparate images based on the perception of positive and negative space. Janoff-Bulman (2006) has used this metaphor to describe responses to trauma. Just as we initially perceive only one image in a reversible figure, so too do we see our losses (or traumatic experiences) as singularly negative, at least initially. As time passes we become aware of the other figure, or the positive appraisals of our experience. The two are then viewed intermittently as we are able to focus in and out of each picture at our discretion.

The current study corroborated the notion that individuals experience both positive and negative effects when they lose a significant other, and these effects can exist in tandem. Viewing one’s major losses retrospectively can present an individual with a reminder of the dichotomous nature of the effects of the loss. Participants who narrated their multiple losses were able to conjure up both the good and the bad. Janoff-Bulman (2006) compares this process to the perception of the reversible figure and how people are initially only able to perceive one image (the vase—or negative effects) and then become aware of the other (the faces—or positive effects). Once we are aware of the second image, we don’t forget the first one. Rather, we are able to revert to either one on the basis of our awareness that both exist. Similarly when respondents
reflected on their losses they were able to conjure up both “images”, i.e., the positives and the negatives.

Janoff-Bulman (2006) elaborates:

Both ways of viewing the trauma are available to the survivor, just as both reversible images are available to the viewer. The earlier, initial perception gives way over time to an alternative, but the alternative does not replace the previous image. Even when the trauma is perceived as a basis for growth, its painful negative representation is nevertheless ever-present, ready to dominate the survivor’s psychological world. (pp. 81-82)

The current study has replicated findings from the vast and varied research on outcomes in loss and corroborated the writings in the literature and in personal renditions of post-loss change (Dean, 2002; Lewis, 1963; Lieberman, 1996; Peart, 2002). The complexity of experience seen in single losses is extended to multiple losses as people considered all the effects, both good and bad of their cumulative losses.

There is currently much debate in the literature as to actual, measurable change and questions around the validity of such self-report perceptions of change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Davis & McKearney, 2003; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2004). Increasingly, investigators are attempting to tease apart the various aspects of perceived change in order to verify its legitimacy (Frazier & Kaler, 2006; Weinrib et al., 2006). The current study does not weigh in on this debate, relying instead on the narrative structure, and therefore personal meanings ascribed to these individuals’ experience. It places the value and significance of such meanings on the individuals themselves, allowing them to make sense of their losses and to honour that logic. However, the study does contribute to established concepts of perceived growth following loss. Eight of these narratives reflected positive gains and personal growth following an accumulation of losses over time.

The individuals in the current study reported growth on some, or all levels. Growth was seen in their expressions of positive change in all the intra- and inter-personal and global domains as noted previously. Two of the narratives embodied a characteristic tenor that reflected a growth or enhancing tone. These stories were primarily positive and indicative of the individuals’ perception that their loss experiences had added to the quality of their lives providing a different and better dimension to the way they lived.
Theories of growth following adversity refer to the positive effects of having lived through an adverse event and are a person’s subjective appraisal of positive psychological change that transpires as a result of having experienced the event (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 1998; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Growth is said to occur after an individual encounters a stressor that is strong enough to challenge one’s beliefs about the self, the world and others, setting in motion a reevaluation of one’s beliefs and values (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

These findings lend some credence to the idea that personal growth does pertain and persist after a significant loss. These individuals reported growth in all of their intra and interpersonal lives and global views of the world. They attributed these changes to their losses and they reported these at least 2 years after the last death. Certainly, it appears that living through a series of significant deaths of loved ones can have positive, life-altering, lasting and significant effects on an individual.

These reports of perceived growth are reflections of all the loss experiences. Although this study may not be able to confirm or disconfirm the validity of such reports, or whether in fact the succession of losses, i.e., the cumulative effect has had an additive effect on their perceived changes, individuals themselves believe that their collective losses, informed by their experiential knowledge and framework of meaning have contributed to their growth. This adds to the knowledge base in the field by establishing that individuals do continue to report lasting and sustainable change over time.

**Resilience in Loss**

The current study adds another facet to our understanding of the nature of resilience in loss. The literature on resilience speaks to some people’s tendency to remain relatively stable emotionally throughout their bereavement and to be largely unaffected by their significant losses. Resilience theory also addresses the issue of absent grief, the apparent lack of mourning and negative affect in some bereaved people (Bonanno & Keltner, 1997; Bonanno et al., 2004). Bonanno and colleagues (Bonanno, Boerner, & Wortman, 2008) argued that lower levels of common grief reactions and depressive symptoms were likely indicative of a resilience to loss. These are individuals who despite the pain and sadness they experience after their losses appear
to have adaptive coping mechanisms to help them deal with important stressful life events, such as social and instrumental support, acceptance of death and beliefs in a just world (Bonanno et al., 2008).

Of the 12 participants in the present study, 8 individuals’ stories contained a positive and/or transformative or affirming tone in their narratives of loss. Six respondents’ experiences were characterized as transitional or transformative and these narratives were interlaced with resilient-related language that reflected the flexible and recuperative nature of the meanings they ascribed to their experiences. As one participant (Gail) related, “I feel resilient. I feel like I can make decisions and if I fail I’ll be OK”. Some talked of renewed commitment to life and others, a strengthening of a sense of accountability and responsibility and an acceptance of death as a natural and unavoidable part of life. Indeed, 2 participants were particularly cognizant of their abilities to cope with, and ultimately, thrive after their multiple losses. They saw their experiences as important life lessons that helped shaped who they are and how they interact with the world and consciously chose to embrace the positive aspects of these life lessons.

These findings are interesting in light of the research being conducted on resilience to loss. Prospective studies of bereavement and grief trajectories revealed that a substantial percentage of people did not suffer prolonged grief or depression following the death of a significant other (Bonanno et al., 2002). Indeed, in these longitudinal studies conducted up to 4 years after the death, data revealed that approximately half (46%) the sample exhibited what the investigators labeled stable low distress or resilience (Bonanno et al., 2002). These are individuals who show low levels of pre-loss depression that continues throughout their bereavement and up to 48 months post-loss. Additional studies have substantiated this finding in samples of bereaved spouses, parents and gay men (Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa, & Folkman, 2005) and bereaved caregivers of Alzheimer’s patients (Zhang, Mitchell, Bambauer, Jones, & Prigerson, 2008).

The current study is interesting for resilience to loss theory because it revealed that two-thirds of these respondents despite the numerous and often tragic losses they encountered managed to adapt adequately without long-lasting detrimental effects mirroring the results found in the resilience literature. What makes this most compelling is that these participants were showing the resilient pattern over the course of their numerous losses extending the concept beyond the single conjugal loss that is currently examined in the published studies.
Bonnano and colleagues (2008) stressed the importance of understanding how resilient individuals assimilate their major losses. This study extends the notion of resilience to loss by revealing that the majority of these individuals “weathered” their losses well, making sense of each loss and modifying a framework to encompass all their losses. This framework helps guide their subsequent experiences. The emergent model proposed here is an initial step towards helping us understand the concept of resilience in loss. The model is a structure that can help theorists and researchers understand how the bereaved come to conceptualize and assimilate their multiple losses and the overall meaning that they impart on their lives.

Previous Losses

The current study addresses the conjecturing about the effects of previous losses and its findings present a challenge to some of the reports in the literature. The ambiguity in responses to antecedent losses was debated in the literature (Rando, 1993; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987). There was much speculation about and often unsubstantiated reference to the notion that a person’s previous loss experiences can affect his or her grief reaction in a negative way (Harvey & Miller, 1998; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005; Sanders, 1988; Worden, 2001). Research that has been carried out to test this hypothesis was also equivocal, with some studies finding little or no effects of previous losses on subsequent grieving processes (Gamino et al., 1998) and others determining that grievers who experienced considerable tension, sensitivity and depression had a history of previous familial losses (Sanders, 1988). More recently, a published study on the outcomes on children who have suffered disasters found previous losses were a predictor of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptomatology (Osofsky, Osofsky, Kronenberg, Brennan, & Cross Hansel, 2009).

While the current study does not assess grieving processes, it does help shed some light on the question of effects of previous losses. Four participants in this study narrated stories of loss that reflected their overall losses as having a detrimental impact on their lives. These individuals viewed the effect of their losses as primarily negative. Two of them were dreading future anticipated losses. For three of these respondents, their experiences with previous losses had taught them of the difficult and painful process of grief, creating a sense of vulnerability to loss that was informing the overall meaning they ascribed to having lost numerous close others. However, the majority of these participants’ narratives had a mixture of positive and negative
effects and two believed the effects were primarily positive. For these participants, previous losses were not having a hampering or harmful effect on them.

We can only conjecture what the grieving processes were like for these respondents after their losses but if we consider that the meanings in their losses are informed by their previous losses, we see that the prior loss in and of itself does not influence consequent losses. For example, for two of the “loss as detrimental” narratives, it was the last death that was the most painful and difficult to assimilate. The individual’s assessment of and understanding of her losses was predicated more on the effect of a particularly significant and impactful loss, the salient loss, rather than the fact that she had encountered the experience before. This is an important point as it has significance to both our theoretical perspectives towards risk factors in bereavement and our clinical applications. That is, previous losses per se are not necessarily affecting subsequent experiences. It is the meaning of and impact of that loss that will determine its influence and effect.

One study concluded that previous losses actually had a positive effect on individuals as they contribute to people’s coping resources (Nelson, 2000). This study found that the more losses through death an individual had experienced, the shorter his or her grieving time during a subsequent loss. The author concluded:

The results confirm that loss experiences in adulthood facilitate coping with the subsequent death of a loved one. Said another way, experiencing a previous loss may be a rehearsal for future stressful life events [italics added]. (Nelson, 2000, p. 72)

The present findings, although similar in revealing the complexity and multiplicity of results of other studies, challenges the oft-noted conclusion that previous losses necessarily impede subsequent coping processes. Indeed, it challenges the notion that they certainly facilitate subsequent grieving processes. Instead, this study proposes that inasmuch as living through a previous loss is a rehearsal for future losses, it does not always assuage the subsequent loss experience nor does it inevitably hinder it. It was found that some individuals’ familiarity with grief was not comforting to them and they feared future anticipated reactions. Their painful experiences helped inform their meanings and created a story of “loss as primarily detrimental”. Yet others were assessing their independent meanings of each loss and were using the accumulated felt knowledge to help them understand the meanings and effects of their overall
loss experiences and their anticipated future losses. They were gaining a loss maturity that was seen as beneficial and enhancing in helping them cope with subsequent losses.

This study showed that irrespective of the respondents’ reactions to and expectations around grief experiences, they were accruing knowledge around grief that contributed to their understanding of the experience. All these respondents were insightful about loss. They were acutely aware of the experience, its many manifestations and its repercussions. Six of the participants expressly attributed this knowledge to having lived through more than one significant loss through death. Learned knowledge about grief provided a felt experience that made respondents aware that the experience was variable and that each individual death would affect them differently. Five participants stressed that having lived through multiple losses was not making them experts. They knew that each future loss would present them with new and different experiences. Individuals are not loss experts.

In effect, this study concurs with the notion that previous losses may be a rehearsal for future stressful events but that the experiences may be construed as affecting a negative impact on them or a positive one. The difference in effects of previous losses is dependent on the framework of meaning that has been created and how the subsequent death fits into that framework. It is argued that those who view their experiences as having had a negative effect on them are perhaps guided by the salient loss, the death that was particularly meaningful to them. In the current study, the narratives with a primarily negative tone were those of the two widows who had lost their husbands in traumatic and unforeseen ways and the two respondents whose loss experiences included tragic and meaningless deaths and a sense of family dissolution. These narratives attest to the numerous secondary losses that the participants experienced including loss of security, finances, sense of safety, sense of family and sense of self, all of which have been acknowledged in the literature (Dutton & Zisook, 2005; Harvey et al., 2004; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Mercer & Evans, 2006; Neimeyer, 2000b; O'Leary, Alday, & Ickovics, 1998; Viney et al., 1991-92). Together, these losses contribute to their framework of meaning around loss which for these four respondents is mainly unfavorable.

Yet, despite this notion there were other participants whose narratives also contained tragic deaths through accidents, murder and debilitating disease. These deaths were also salient ones but the overall tone was usually a transformational one or as in one case, a growth or
enhancing tone. The former narratives depicted meaning in transition. The participants were weighing the positives and the negatives and adjusting their meaning frameworks. The latter growth related narrative revealed that the participant had assimilated her salient loss into her overall framework of meaning around loss which was primarily positive. Accordingly, not all tragic deaths can be said to contribute to difficulties in adaptation after loss or to the inevitability of making negative attributions about one’s loss experiences.

Thus, the writings of eminent and prolific researchers Margaret and Wolfgang Stroebe (1987) of 20 years ago appear to hold true. The type of loss, when and how it happened, who was lost, and how it was perceived and reacted to by the bereaved will influence whether or not it affects a subsequent loss experience positively or negatively. The current study has expanded this argument by showing that it is not about previous losses per se, but the meaning that the individual makes of each loss and its connection to the next one that will determine how it will affect subsequent meanings.

An Enhanced Model of Meaning-Making in Loss

An enhanced model for understanding meaning-making in loss is presented and summarized in Figure 5. The enhanced model adds to the current knowledge of meaning-making by taking into account the effects of having lived through one or more previous losses. It improves our current understanding by accounting for the accruing knowledge, acquired through experience and antecedent losses through death that the person incorporates into his or her subsequent loss experience.

Changes that have been activated and/or attained after the first significant loss are evaluated against and modified by consequent experiences. Information learned from previous experiences contributes to one’s overall framework of meaning. Perceptions of both growth and depreciation are considered in one’s overall assessment and attribution of meanings in multiple loss. The process of accommodation or assimilation is continued as each new loss presents the individual with new challenges (or not) to his or her beliefs and worldviews, affecting his or her framework of meaning around loss. The process of meaning-making in multiple loss is a macro process of what occurs after single losses.
Figure 5. Enhanced Model of Meaning-Making in Loss: Multiple Losses.
The top half of figure 5 presents a modified version of the key points in meaning-making models of recovery from loss adapted from Park (2008) in her description of models of coping with loss. After a significant loss a person makes appraisals of the experience and weighs these appraisals against his or her global meaning system. If the loss is concordant with global meanings, i.e., it does not challenge or shatter currently held beliefs and worldviews then he or she makes sense of it and proceeds towards a healthy adjustment. However if appraised meanings are discrepant with global beliefs, i.e., it does not fit into one’s previously held beliefs, he or she will experience distress. That distress incorporates the cognitive/affective/spiritual process of meaning-making as he or she attempts to make sense of the experience. New meanings that evolve from this process are then reappraised against global beliefs. The process can ensue until the individual finds a way to fit the experience into the evolving meanings and ultimately adjust to the loss, or continues his or her search for meaning. Even when sense cannot be made, people find benefits. That is, even though they don’t understand the whys and wherefores of the death they can still perceive that some positive changes have come about.

The middle section of figure 5 illustrates the effects on an individual after a single important loss. He or she has gained some experiential knowledge of grief, death and dying and has experienced some changes within him or her self and in the realms of relationships and worldviews. There may also be a resilience building. The individual perceives both growth and depreciation in some and similar domains of his or her life. The framework of meaning has been created.

The last part of figure 5 depicts the effects of the subsequent losses. As the next significant loss is encountered, the person undergoes an appraisal of the meaning of that loss and all its attendant effects. As in the first part of the model, he or she checks this against global beliefs but this time also has a fund of experiential knowledge to draw upon. He or she will consult his or her schema of loss or framework of meaning when appraising the meaning of the individual loss. If the second loss is concordant with the framework, it is assimilated. The framework may be modified or reinforced. If the second loss is discrepant or shatters one’s assumptive world, then a reappraisal of meaning is needed. One’s framework may need reassessment, revision or rebuilding, i.e., the framework will be adjusted in order to accommodate the experience.
The description here is necessarily simplified referring as it does to a reflective, recursive, dynamic and varied process of consideration of meaning. The model was formulated within the context of retrospective and reflective considerations of participants’ experience and does not assess the grieving process. Nevertheless it lends an additional dimension to the meaning-making frameworks as currently hypothesized in the literature. This strengthened and deepened model enriches our current knowledge in the field by substantiating what we already know and adding elements that we previously did not. This model takes a formidable step towards accrediting the current theories of meaning-making processes in loss.

**Implications for Practice**

This study has contributed to our knowledge of counselling in grief and bereavement and it has practical applications for those working with the bereaved. These findings can be useful to helping professionals in their work with people who have experienced multiple losses and to those who wish to support and understand the multiply bereaved. Notably, it has helped illuminate the nature of people’s reactions to and meanings that they ascribe to their cumulative loss experiences. The findings reveal that people respond to and understand their losses as having varying effects on their lives. The consequences of having lived through many deaths of cherished loved ones are not uniformly negative or positive. They are varied and dependent on the meaning that the individual has made of each loss and its impact on other losses. This has implications for how practitioners work with individuals who have suffered numerous significant losses.

**Avoid Assumptions**

Practitioners whose theoretical backgrounds adhere to certain concepts may find these theories inadequate when working with the multiply bereaved. A practitioner’s theoretical understanding of past losses and a belief in their negative impact often inform his or work with the bereaved (Rando, 1993; Worden, 2001). Indeed, one participant in this study related that all therapists whom he had seen in the ensuing years following his significant losses insisted he revisit these losses, implying that his adaptation to such tragedies was somehow not complete. However, this study showed that making assumptions about the presumed deleterious effects of previous losses and insisting on the need to work through them may be unwarranted.
As well, research studies have begun to reveal that not all bereaved people undergo a painful process of confronting their pain, nor do they necessarily always search for meaning (Neimeyer, 2000a). Some of these people are showing signs of lower distress and higher functioning, in specified time-frames post-loss, than those who spend more energy and time confronting their pain (Davis et al., 1998). The research on resilience speaks to the notion that not all people suffer terribly as a result of their losses and the current study extends this view. Helping professionals must take extra care and the time to assess whether in fact a client’s multiple losses are impacting him or her in a uniformly negative way.

A practitioner who believes that previous losses need to be worked through may misjudge an individual’s meanings. When writing about therapy with a bereaved woman who had experienced a number of deaths, psychoanalytic therapist Ronald Turco (1982) stated:

I wanted her to recognize that she still experienced the impact of feelings regarding previous losses and traumas which might complicate the resolution of her current grief. (p. 145)

The current study revealed that such conceptualizations may be problematic if not checked with the individual him or herself. Responses to previous losses are varied and the overall effects they have had on a person do not always warrant such interventions. Indeed many of these respondents showed that despite their numerous losses and painful and life altering experiences, they were viewing their experiences as transformative, or growth-enhancing.

The current study indicates that people attribute meaning to their losses on a case by case basis and these meanings are compared and contrasted amongst all the losses leading to an overall meaning assessment. It is argued that distress levels and sense making are largely based on the individual death and the sense that is made of each experience. The characteristics of the individual him or her self likely play a role—reflected in the cognitive schema or framework of loss and the overall tone of a multiple loss story—but this study clearly reveals that one individual who experiences different types of losses will relate to them on the basis of the relationship that was lost, the manner of the death and its impact on the survivor’s identity. Simply said, it may be less about the individual’s propensity to shape and make sense of experience and more about the actual loss situation.
The need to work through one’s losses, based on a practitioner’s theoretical assumptions, could have consequences to the client that are deleterious at worst or ineffective at best. Practitioners need to be aware of their clinical assumptions about loss and its proposed consequences, instead relying on the individual’s narrated experience and the meanings that he or she makes of his or her experiences.

**Beware of Pathologizing**

Responses to loss have been discussed and analyzed in the literature for decades and treatment in bereavement evolved from concepts traditionally based on psychoanalytic conceptualizations of grief (Miller & Omarzu, 1998) and later adapted to incorporate the grief-work hypothesis. The grief-work hypothesis posits that the painful experience of loss must necessarily be confronted and worked through in order for healing or “recovery” to occur. “Grief work” became the *sine qua non* of grief theorists (Stroebe, 2001, p. 855).

There have been numerous models devised that postulate on a series of steps, defined phases or tasks that bereaved individuals need to negotiate in the process of grieving (Bowlby, 1980; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Worden, 2001). One such model expounded by Worden (2001) states that individuals must work through a set of hypothesized tasks in grief. The model’s intention is to aid helpers in their work with the bereaved and it proposes that adaptation to loss requires the accomplishment of such tasks in order for mourning to be complete. Failure to complete them is deemed to hamper one’s growth and development.

The problem with the grief-work hypothesis and stage or task-based models of grief is that they leave the door open to pathologizing about grief and a person’s adaptation to their loss. The present study showcases the narratives of individuals as they recite their multiple loss stories. A reading of these narratives reveals a complex, varied and multifaceted process of meaning-making in grief. When we read these stories we witness the profundity and intensity of each individual’s experience. It could be argued that adherents to task-based, stage, or psychoanalytic models would be particularly troubled over the narratives of the four women whose losses were felt as being detrimental. Yet, when seen through the lens of narrative understandings, we realize that all these respondents are functioning in an adaptive way in light of their circumstances.
To elucidate this point: All of the narratives of Bridget, Marg, Susan and Lorraine are evidence of struggle and adaptation in the face of adversity. All these women were self-described caregivers in their families. They were rehearsed at attending to and taking the responsibility for the care of others, be they children, ailing and dying parents, or patients and clientele. Their narratives may reflect a detrimental tone yet, their responses are not surprising. They have little choice but to carry on and continue to care for others. Susan may have regrets but her actions at the time were not surprising, nor abnormal. She was looking for a sense of safety, security and connection in a marriage. She returned to aid her ailing father out of respect, duty and commitment to her father and her family.

Bridget is an acute-care nurse in a pediatric hospital. She is required to take responsibility and care for the needy and helpless and she looks out for her mother’s wellbeing, all without the ongoing support of her now deceased husband. Marg has no choice but to look after her boys and her aging mother and find ways to financially support them all. Lorraine tries to keep the family together and wonders who will be there for her when she needs help. All these participants are functioning *adaptively* in light of their losses. They are managing as best they can in a world shattered by loss that has left them without important connections, social support from the deceased person, an uncertain future and the love and acceptance from those who loved them and knew them best. Adherents to task-based models may find these stories dysfunctional. Practitioners need to be aware of their preconceptions and tendency to pathologize the adaptive and evolutionary processes of meaning-making.

Indeed, determining whether an individual actually needs counselling during bereavement has been discussed in the literature (Davis et al., 2000; Neimeyer, 2000a). Neimeyer’s (2000a) meta-analyses of controlled grief therapy outcome studies revealed some sobering statistics that showed that treatment is only marginally effective and can even have detrimental effects on a mourner. The assumption that people seek meaning in their loss, find that meaning and move on and that this process is necessary for adjustment and healing has also been challenged (Davis et al., 2000). Results for treatment of traumatic losses (i.e., untimely, violent or sudden deaths) are somewhat better than for more “normal” bereavement reactions”, leading researchers to hypothesize that grief therapy is appropriate when the bereavement is complicated or traumatic but that in relatively normal circumstances it is not warranted (Neimeyer, 2000a, p. 546).
The current study discovered that despite the fact that these individuals had experienced a number of significant losses through death and some of those could be considered traumatic, the response to and meanings ascribed were varied. Some respondents were continuing to seek meaning; others had derived meanings that were either positive or negative and most incorporated both good and bad elements of meaning in their conceptualizations of their experiences. Their level of adjustment, it could be argued, varied. It provides yet further evidence that adaptation to loss cannot be assumed on the basis of a certain type of death or relationship lost or even by number of deaths experienced. Rather, it is the meaning that is ascribed to the loss and the succession of the losses that determines the outcome.

**Help Facilitate Meaning-Making**

This study corroborates the ideas espoused in newer models of adaptation to bereavement that emphasize the importance of attending to the meanings that people make in and about their loss (Neimeyer et al., 2002). These models stress the importance and relevance of attending to the bereaved individual’s conceptualization of and processing of their losses (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, 2004b). This study extends this notion, suggesting that helpers need to attend to the independent meanings of each loss and the overall meaning that the individual ascribes to all their loss experiences, including the variations within each narrative. As revealed here, individuals undergo an evaluative and evolutionary process, assimilating, accommodating, juxtaposing and comparing their separate losses and their overall meaning to one's life. This finding is reflective of the meaning-making process during bereavement. As Neimeyer (2000a) wrote:

Counselors would do well to remember that meaning-making is more an activity than an achievement, as early, provisional meanings of the death tend to be revisited as the reality of living with loss raises new questions and undermines old answers. (p. 550)

These narratives are evidence that practitioners need to attend to the meanings that individuals make of their experiences, rather than forcing them through a series of tasks that the helper deems to be necessary for adaptation. Therefore, therapeutic interventions need to be, indeed must be, predicated on the individuals’ own understanding of their losses and what they ultimately mean to them. As each story of loss will have a characteristic tone based on the overall meanings assimilated from the collective losses, practitioners can attend to this tone and
ascertain if, and where negative meanings are being attributed that are hampering a person’s recovery. Practitioners can ask themselves: What is the overall meaning of these losses for this person? And is there one loss in particular that is shaping, hindering or contributing to the framework in a way that is affecting a healthy adaptation?

Help Identify Positive Change

Narratives of multiple loss are characterized by both positive and negative intonations. People will likely speak of the negative effects of having lost numerous others. The pain, the loss of future hopes and goals, the missing presence of the loved one, and the underlying sadness that permeates their lives are all aspects of their experience. If they have lost a number of family members there may be a sense of family dissolution. Effects on one’s sense of self can accrue with some people wondering how they will cope in the future without their cherished loved ones.

However this study showed that there will likely be explicit references to having gained something beneficial from the loss experience as people report that despite the pain of loss they have come to accept that something good has ultimately come of their experience. This may be in terms of depth of understanding and maturity towards death, strengthened relationships or increased insight and appreciation of life and the world. It is as though participants are able to experience both the positive and negative elements of their losses. They are able to perceive both what good has come of it and what bad has pertained.

As helping professionals work with clients who have experienced multiple losses, they can help assist those who may be having difficulty seeing the “figure over the ground”. That is, clients who are stuck with one perception and who cannot visualize the other aspects may need help conceptualizing all aspects of their experience. This is not to imply that practitioners display an overly optimistic “look on the bright side of life” attitude, but rather that they can help clients visualize and incorporate the other, more affirming side of their experience. The balance of positive and negative impacts of loss as revealed in the narratives of transformation and growth indicates a healthy adaptation to their adverse experience. Such a notion can be empowering and helpful when assisting those clients who are embedded in their negative perceptions and meanings.
Identify Risk Factors

These findings have implications for practitioners working with clients showing signs of complicated or prolonged grief reactions, i.e., the inability to adjust to a loss resulting in continued impairment or unhealthy functioning. The current conceptualization of prolonged grief disorder proposes that such symptoms fall into two categories, symptoms of separation distress and symptoms of traumatic distress, both of which are distinctly different from normal grief, bereavement-related depression and anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Lichtenthal et al., 2004).

Notwithstanding the previously mentioned caveats pertaining to pathologizing, practitioners need to be aware if and when their clients are experiencing prolonged distress around their cumulative losses. The present research revealed that losses of numerous significant family members can result in a sense of abandonment and dispossession as one carries on in the world without the love and support of those to whom one was bonded. Separation anxiety is a possibility for those who are forlorn and experiencing a sense of desolation without those family members who served attachment needs. Attachment theory postulates that we will have a strong emotional reaction when separated from our attachment figure(s), or when these bonds are threatened or broken (Bowlby, 1980).

Individuals who, at least 14 months after the last death, are experiencing separation anxiety characterized by intense longing, yearning or pining for the deceased and who are also experiencing at least four of the following symptoms: a) difficulty accepting the truth of the death, b) distrust of others since the death, c) bitterness, d) unease with moving on, e) detachment, f) meaninglessness, g) agitation, or h) hopelessness towards the future, may be suffering from prolonged grief disorder (Rubin, Malkinson, & Witztum, 2008). Practitioners working with the multiply bereaved need to attend to the impact and effects of a particular loss that may be contributing to an individual’s distress and adaptation.

Assessing the reaction to a salient death, using the criteria specified by current theorists and researchers in the field (Prigerson, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008) will aid the practitioner in understanding the effect of that loss. Inasmuch as individuals are making sense of their losses one death at a time, understanding the meanings that people make of their individual
losses through death will help practitioners unravel the significance and influence of each death and its effects on the individual.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

**Strengths**

A notable strength of this study is its qualitative design. Such techniques are invaluable for unraveling and understanding the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005) and is especially conducive to explorations of grief and loss (Gilbert, 2002; Neimeyer, 2004a; Stroebe et al., 2001). The current study has contributed to our knowledge of adaptation to loss by examining the meanings that people place on their loss experiences. Such meanings are significant for understanding how the individual perceives the overall effect of his or her losses.

The emphasis on the individual’s narrative and his or her felt meanings allowed for a deeper and more refined exploration and understanding of the phenomenon. The exploratory nature of the current study necessitated such an approach and this cooperative co-construction of meanings (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2005) allowed for a novel and unique perspective on the multiple loss experience.

Further to this strength is its conceptualization and execution within the philosophical realm of narrative analysis. Narrative philosophy holds that individuals themselves must be allowed to dictate what they talk about and the researcher attends as much to how they talk about it as to what they talk about (Riessman, 1993). These participants were invited to tell their stories of loss and the researcher noted the emphasis, intonation and nuances of the discourse. What they chose to speak about and how they did so contributed to the attributions of meaning discovered in this study. This is a shift from a researcher-derived emphasis on important foci (Riessman, 2008). Permitting these participants to dictate their stories in an unhindered fashion allowed the researcher to access those elements of meaning that may not have otherwise been accessible. This was valuable in discovering new information and generating theory.

An additional strength of this study is its focus on long-term outcomes. Most research in the field assesses grief processes and coping in loss, attending to the short term reactions to,
adaptations and functioning in bereavement thereby necessitating an early post-loss examination. The current study takes a longer view, looking at the outcomes of one’s cumulative loss experiences. The last lost was at least 2 years prior to the interview. Some of the losses reported occurred years and even decades prior. This was valuable because it allowed the participant to reflect on meanings while not acutely grieving. It also allowed for reflection after years of assimilation and/or accommodation. As the participant pondered his or her experiences, he or she was able to understand them from a distance and to put them in a meaningful place in his or her life.

Another strength of the current study was its varied and wide-ranging content. The types of losses recounted encompassed many types of deaths, those that were sudden and those that were expected and various types of relationships and ages of decedents. The ages of the respondent at the time of the deaths were also varied, with some spanning the person’s adult lifetime and others occurring at specific development stages of one’s life. This cornucopia of experiences provided a diverse sampling of events that contributed to the richness of the data.

Finally, a further strength of this study is its important contribution to the literature in grief and bereavement. There is a dearth of published studies on the phenomenon of multiple loss as defined in this study. Published research in the field focuses on the experience and effects of single losses or have an unspecified number of losses. This study helps fill the void in the literature and has provided the field with valuable information that addresses the effects of having lost numerous others through death.

Most notably, it has provided additional information that helps clarify the role of previous losses on an individual’s adaptation to loss. The oft cited assumption that previous losses will negatively affect future ones is challenged by the current study’s findings. Instead, a broader and deeper understanding of how one makes sense of those past losses will be more helpful in determining how they are affecting subsequent ones, as well as people’s perceptions of the overall impact of all their losses.

The present study contributes an enhanced model of meaning-making in loss that strengthens and augments the current theorized models. It has revealed a process of meaning-making in multiple loss that is similar to that seen after single losses but that occurs on a macro level. It has uncovered a framework of meaning, a structure that people use for understanding
and incorporating their numerous losses. As an exploratory study, it has discovered and illuminated much about the multiple loss experience and its perceived impact on individuals.

**Limitations**

The study is not without its limitations. First, it is a descriptive study that explores and relates the experience as dictated by the individual. As such, it cannot make causal attributions. The study was not an experimental one designed to assess the relationships amongst the variables and so the data cannot speak to the issue of cause and effect.

Second, it is interpretative. The researcher brought to the study her own biases and history, theoretical perspectives and focus that influenced the collection and analysis of data. The researcher’s subjectivity played a role in the generation of meanings in this study. These influences were monitored by the researcher’s maintenance of a research journal that allowed her to note any personal reflections and feelings that emerged throughout the research process. As well participant’s feedback on their narrative as written by the researcher was solicited and any changes or comments were incorporated.

Another limitation is a corollary of its strength. That is, the study is a retrospective one. Individuals relied on memory influenced by current perspectives when relating their stories. The study sought stories that necessarily embody personal meanings rather than actual facts, leaving the establishment of truth outside the realm of possibility. We cannot know for sure if these events unfolded as the participant dictated even if this was not the goal of the study. The study does not purport to make claims of validity as is commonly attributed in quantitative research designs. Rather, the truth of a story lies in its credibility, plausibility, intelligibility and trustworthiness. “The historical truth of an individual’s account is not the primary issue” (Riessman, 1993, p.64). Therefore, this study cannot establish the facts of the story.

As a narrative study, the findings here are not intended to be generalizations, results that can be attributed to the population as a whole. These narratives are explanations of the particular case and are not intended to be applicable beyond that. Data acquired here are not generalizable beyond these particular individuals, and therefore, are not capable of explaining phenomenon that “capture and elaborate some timeless essential reality ‘behind’ the world of human events” (Hinchman & Hinchman cited in Elliott, 2005).
Finally, the study has limited diversity. Participants were from a homogenous subset of people who, with two exceptions, were mostly middle aged, Euro-Caucasian women. For the exception of one male participant, they were all female. The sociodemographic background of these individuals was not determined, therefore the study does not provide any insight into the educational, economic or socio-relational history of these respondents. However, all participants were necessarily literate and sufficiently articulate. A key component of this limitation is the self-exclusion of those who were overwhelmed by their losses, or too emotional to talk about them. Two prospective participants declined to be interviewed in the recruitment phase due to their professed emotional sensitivity when speaking about their losses. These 12 participants were self-selected and the resulting narratives come from individuals who were open, comfortable and capable of discussing their stories with an unfamiliar other. All this has limitations for generalization of the experience of living through multiple loss.

Directions for Future Research

The present study is an exploratory one that has provided the field with helpful and valuable information about the multiple loss experience and is a significant segue into future studies of this phenomenon. Findings presented here can be used to generate testable hypotheses around the impact of multiple loss. Both qualitative and quantitative studies can contribute to this undertaking. Although not always practical, the ideal next step would be to incorporate a longitudinal design that would assess participants after their first loss and follow them through the lifespan as they encounter subsequent deaths. This would help researchers track changes in beliefs and adaptations to loss as they occur.

The research question posed here can be extended to gain supplementary in-depth information about the phenomenon. For example, qualitative studies can continue the exploration by posing additional questions such as:

1. How do you make sense of these losses?
2. What gives your life meaning now?
3. How do you incorporate these losses into your life?
Continuing the elaboration, individuals can be asked process and outcome questions, for example:

1. When you compare all your losses, how do they fit together, or not?
2. If you could draw a picture that represents all your losses, what would it be?
3. How did you use what you learned after the first loss when coping with the next one?

The effects of the many other variables that contribute to adaptation and meaning-making should be considered in future investigations of this phenomenon. Characteristics of the person need to be assessed. This can be achieved by assessing additional variables that may help researchers understand the factors associated with certain narrative types. For example, personality factors, attitudes towards death, attachment styles, and mental illness symptomatology, locus of control and level of spirituality.

Exploring the connections and comparisons that are made amongst the losses will aid our understanding of multiple loss. Quantitative measures that include specific statements designed to test hypotheses are needed. Generalization to populations cannot be achieved without these measures. In order to understand the causal effects of previous losses on subsequent ones, empirically derived quantitative studies need to be conducted. Hypotheses about the experience of multiple loss can be derived that include the examination of factors that influence how one’s previous experience with loss, i.e., their experiential knowledge, is determined and what contributes to a person’s perceptions of their experiences as either positive or negative.

The current study has proposed a model for understanding the process of meaning-making in multiple loss. Creating a model helps explain the process by which people narrate and make sense of their multiple losses. Such a model, with its structural component can assist researchers in further investigations via the creation of quantitative measures devised to target the specific facets of the model. For example, instruments can be designed that measure the interrelationship of the losses, i.e., the comparisons and connections that people make between their losses. A future instrument could include the following statements, as examples:

1. “My first loss taught me about how to cope with my second one.”
2. “Having been through other important losses through death, I found I was better prepared for the next one.”

3. Living through many significant deaths has taught me about the process of death and dying.”

4. Each time I lose a significant person through death I find myself understanding what it’s like to grieve.”

A 5 point Likert scale would provide a range of responses allowing researchers to gain an appreciation and understanding of the effects of previous losses on subsequent ones that can be given to larger samples thereby taking a step closer to generalization.

Finally future research needs to include a more diverse sample. Males in particular are conspicuously absent from this study as they are from much of the research in the field. Reactions to loss can be diverse and the experiences of males are not always captured. The same is true of different cultures. Culture can have a huge influence on perceptions of loss and future studies need to include a diversity of cultural backgrounds. The present study’s age demographic was somewhat restricted with a mean age of 46. Future research could benefit from including a larger age range that captures the experience of both younger and older participants.

**Conclusion**

Stories of multiple loss are stories of individual losses. They are narratives of relevance of each death and its impact, as told in succession. Individuals construe the meanings of their losses on the basis of each and every one, and how these impacted each other. Just like a photo album that contains pictures of a particular life, the individual explains and describes each experience, i.e., each death in the context of the overall event—one’s life.

In reciting their stories and making comparisons and connections amongst the losses, meanings become apparent. This is the process of meaning-making in multiple loss. It takes into account the perceived changes that the individual believes have accrued and the experiential knowledge that he or she has acquired through the process of living through previous losses. Combined, these elements comprise the “multiple loss experience” for the individual. Individuals
build “houses of meaning” when processing and understanding their many losses. It is a
dynamic, fluid and recursive process.

The current study has provided the field with an emergent model for understanding the
meaning-making process in multiple loss that enhances our knowledge of these processes in grief
and bereavement. It is believed that what has been learned from this study contributes relevant
and valuable information for both theory and practice in the field of loss, grief and bereavement.
References


Positive changes in the aftermath of crisis (pp. 127-151). Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.


WHAT IS IT LIKE TO LOSE A NUMBER OF LOVED ONES THROUGH DEATH?
HOW HAS LOSING A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE AFFECTED WHO YOU ARE?

I am a PhD student in Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I am interested in exploring the effects on a person of having lost a number of significant relationships through death.

I am interviewing adults who are willing to talk about the impact on their lives of having lost **2 or more close loved ones through death, at separate times throughout their adult lifetime.**

If you:
- Are 25 years of age or older
- Have lost **2 or more** close loved ones, **over time**, in your adult lifetime- i.e., The deaths did not occur at the same time
- The last death was at least 2 years ago
- Are willing to talk about the losses and how they have affected who you are today
- Are willing to spend approximately 2 1/2 hours of your time participating in a one-to-one interview
- Are willing and interested in participating in psychological research and are willing to have your interview tape-recorded
- Would like more information on this study

Please contact: Pam Elmslie
Research Supervisor: Dr. Charles Chen
416 436-3741
AECP Department at OISE/UT
email: pelmslie@oise.utoronto.ca
email: cpchen@oise.utoronto.ca
Appendix B:
Telephone Screening Form

Introduction of myself and brief synopsis of the research study:

Screening Questions:
How many people that you felt very close to have died? __________________________
What was their relationship to you? Rel 1:______________________ Rel 2:_________________
Rel 3:______________________ Rel 4:_____________________
On a scale of 1 to 10; 1 being “not emotionally close at all” and 10 being “the closest person in
my life”, what “degree of closeness” would you give to these relationships?
Rel 1:______________________ Rel 2:______________________
Rel 3:______________________ Rel 4:______________________
On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being “very little” and 10 being “very much”, how would you rate the
effect that losing these people had on you?
Rel 1:______________________ Rel 2:______________________
Rel 3:______________________ Rel 4:______________________
When did they die? ______________________________________
How old were you when they died? ______________________________________
How are you feeling about these deaths now? _________________________________
What age are you now? _________________________________
Would you be willing to talk candidly about these deaths now? ________________
Would you be willing to spend approx 2 hours of your time for this study? Participate in an
interview plus a follow-up telephone contact, approx. 4 weeks later? ________________
## Appendix C:
Demographic Information for the Participants

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Appendix D:
Information / Informed Consent Letter

(On OISE/UT Letterhead)

IMPACT OF MULTIPLE LOSSES RESEARCH STUDY:
INFORMATION/INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Contact Persons: Pam Elmslie, Principal Investigator
416 436-3741
Dr. Charles Chen, Research Supervisor
416 923-6641 Ext 2485

Dear Participant,
I am a PhD student in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. My research thesis is centred on the effects on a person of having lost a number of close loved ones through death, at separate times, in the course of their adult lifetime. I will be speaking to adult individuals who have lost at least 2 important people from death, at different times- that is, the deaths occurred at separate times and the people did not die together. In addition the last death was at least 2 years ago. My interest is in understanding the impact that living through such losses has had on a person’s life and their understanding of who they are now as a result of having lived through these losses. To this end, I would like to individually interview approximately 15 people who are willing to talk about their experiences and the effects they have had on their life.

As a volunteer participant you will be asked to take part in an interview lasting approximately 1.5 hours. The interview will consist of filling out a very brief paper and pencil questionnaire that asks for background information. Following this I will be speaking to you about your experiences with your losses and how they have affected who you are today. Throughout the interview you will be asked to speak candidly and openly about your losses and your experiences.

The interview will be tape recorded and later transcribed. These audiotapes will be erased once they are transcribed. Your name or any other information that may identify you will not be used on the questionnaire, transcripts or final written materials. Instead codes will be used to mark information and pseudonyms will be used in the final write-up. All materials will be kept secure in a locked filing cabinet that only the principal investigator and the research supervisor have access to. Materials will be kept for 7 years after the completion of this study and will then be destroyed. A copy of your interview transcript will be provided to you should you wish it. It is possible that information from this study will be used in future publications and presentations but confidentiality will be maintained. No names or identifying information will appear on any such materials.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Should you wish not to discuss a topic raised in the interview you are free to decline to speak about it. You may refuse to answer any question on the questionnaire or in the interview. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, either during the interview or to request withdrawal of your data from the study after the interview, without consequences. It is possible that talking about your losses may bring up unexpected or unwanted emotions. If you decide at any time during the interview that you do not wish to continue to participate or answer any questions, you are free to terminate the interview and/or withdraw your information. The investigator will understand and there will be no negative
consequences. The investigator will provide information for supportive services in the community and should you choose to seek counselling she will assist you in finding a counsellor. Participating in this study is unlikely to provide any direct benefits to you. However, some people have found that participating in interviews allows them a space and opportunity to talk freely and openly in a non-judgmental atmosphere about their experiences and in doing so to appreciate and understand their own experiences in a different light. In addition the knowledge gained through understanding your experience may contribute to a richer and more meaningful understanding of your self, your relationship to your deceased loved ones and the impact that these losses have had on your life. Your confidentiality will be protected at all times, however there are exceptional circumstances that require me to break this agreement. These circumstances are as follows: 1) If you indicate that you are going to hurt someone, or yourself; 2) If you advise me that you are aware of a child being abused or neglected or in danger of being hurt; 3) If you report that you were, or are being, sexually abused by a registered health care professional.

Should you wish to participate in this study, you are requested to sign 2 copies of this form. You will keep one copy of the signed form. Any questions about this study may be addressed to Pam Elmslie at 416 436-3741 or Dr. Charles Chen at 416 923-6641 Ext 2485.

This study has been reviewed and accepted by the University of Toronto’s Ethics Review Office which Oversees ethical conduct in research. If you have any questions regarding your participation in this study or about your rights as a participant you are invited to contact their office at 416 946-3272; email: ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

I have read the above information form and agree to participate in this study.
Name: ____________________________
Signature: ____________________________ Date: _____________

* I am interested in a copy of : (please check)

_____ My interview transcript.

_____ The final synopsis of this study.

The researcher will forward this to me at the following:

Email address: _______________________________________________________
Postal Address:

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________.

___________________________

* This will appear on the researcher’s copy of the Informed Consent Letter.
Appendix E:
Interview Protocol

“The purpose of our meeting today is for me to hear you talk about a certain part of your life. In particular, I’m interested in hearing about what it has been like for you to have lost X number of people from your life. As we talk here today I’d like to explore how you have changed as a person as a result of having lost these people in your life.”
The opening statement from the researcher was:
- Tell me what it is like to have lost these people in your life.

Participants were invited to engage in a narrative exploration of their experiences. Follow through questions were used as needed:
- Tell me about how it has affected you.
- How would you describe yourself now, after losing these important people in your life?
- What role did these losses play in shaping who you are as a person today?

Participants were asked about their multiple loss experience specifically if it did not come up spontaneously:
1. Then you lost R2.
   - Tell me about that.
   - How did having lived through the first loss “prepare” you for the next one?
   - What did you learn from these experiences?
2. If applicable: then you lost R3?
   - Tell me about that.
   - Were there any changes from what you talked about after losing R2?

The following questions served as guides in helping the participant think about the losses and their impact:

3. When you now think and talk about all these losses in your life, what can you say about how they have affected who you are as a person today? OR

4. How would you describe what the personal impact on you has been of having experienced not one but several [number] deaths of people close to you?

5. How do you think the impact of a single loss in your life would have been different from the impact of your multiple losses, if at all?
6. If you were to try to help someone understand the impact these multiple losses had on you personally, (to teach someone about it), what would you tell them? What images or metaphors or phrases could you use to help them understand?

7. Was any part of you (or your life) unaffected by these losses? How so?

8. What else would you like to say today about what we have talked about and your experience of loss?