A Study of Suicide Grief:

Meaning Making and the Griever's Relational World

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Doctor of Philosophy

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

_____

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to increase understanding of the critical themes and features of suicide grief through an analysis of data drawn from the lived experience of those bereaved by suicide. The theoretical context for this study is developments in new theories of grief. Specifically, the study focused on suicide grief in the context of meaning making and the influence of suicide on the griever's relational world. The study analysed data through the lenses of three relationship areas, the griever's relationship with self, the griever's ongoing relationship with the deceased, and the griever's relationships with significant others outside and within a grief group. Using an interpretive, hermeneutic methodology to analyse participant conversations, three central organising themes were identified. The proposed tripartite working model of suicide grief to emerge outlines a process of adaptation, from engaging with meaning making issues regarding the intentional nature of suicide, to reconstruction of the death story, to repositioning the suicide and pain of the deceased's life. The metaphors of "trying on the shoes", "walking in the shoes" and "taking off the shoes" are used to indicate the grief process in relation to each identified theme. The thesis argues that suicide grief themes provide a meaning making framework that assists integrative grief processes. Not all those bereaved by suicide will engage with these themes, and progression through themes is not a linear process. The study findings provide insight into meaning making and relational difficulties that increase vulnerability to complications in grief, suicidality and maladaptive relationship with the deceased. Study findings also reveal that shifts from maladaptive to adaptive relationship with the deceased are possible even when no rational meanings can be made. It is suggested that these issues are so prevalent in suicide grief as to be a normal part of active meaning making efforts to integrate grief. The working model may assist in identifying ongoing education, practice and research issues. Significantly, the predominance of relating with the deceased through reconstruction of the death story, and the relationship between this and increased suicidal ideation to emerge in this study requires further research to determine how and when these activities shift from effective meaning making strategies to become active suicidality.