

Good Grief:

A Discourse Analysis of Online Grief Forums

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Introduction

Grieving is something that most people will have to do at one point in their life or another. The loss of a family member, friend, coworker etc, is something to be expected to happen eventually. When someone dies suddenly in a way that is not considered normal, like old age or long term illness, the way people view grief changes. When stigma is attached to the death of a person the people who knew them are left behind and experience stigma in association with their grief.

In recent years online support groups and forums have been created as resources available for people experience stigma associated with their grief as well as stigma associated with the cause of death of their loved one. Stigma associated with death by suicide or overdose has effected people for generations but has only come prominently into light as the as social media and international connections have spread.

In this project I look into where grief and death related stigma, in relation with the death of people who die in a stigmatized way, comes from and its effect on people's ability to grieve in the best way for them. I go into what a spoiled identity means and the accounts grieving people create to try to save the identity of the people they have lost. Looking into where people learn how to grieve and what sources taught them it. By examining the effects of grief on people and the world around them, I saw how people's view of death can change larger groups ideas of grief. I then process what type of resources are available to people who are dealing with grief and how modern social media forums have become a key part in creating spaces for people to be able to express themselves in a safe environment.

Through coding multiple online forums I was able to answer my research questions: What are the functions of these forums? How do they allow people to overcome isolation create belonging? Why do people in these forums feel like they can express themselves freely? How do

they find hope there? How do the people who grieve on the forums create accounts for the lost? How are the identities of the lost spoiled? In what ways are the members of the forums trying to break the stigma around grieving people who have died by suicide or overdose?

Through this paper I hope to bring even the smallest amount of awareness to the stigma that surrounds death from suicide and overdose. I personally have lost several friends and family members to one of the other. Each time I watched as people turned away from what made them uncomfortable which hurt other people who also knew the person who passed, making them feel isolated or like something was wrong with them.

Literature review

Lit Review

Stigma

The word stigma comes from ancient Greece where a stigma was a way to brand slaves or criminals (Rossler 2016). Stigma is still a word used to define someone or something that falls away from what is perceived in society as normal. Erving Goffman (1963) talked extensively about spoiled identities and the stigma that is associated with that label. When a new person is introduced and it is found that they have some sort of weakness or abnormal quality people who are considered *Normal* are quick to pinpoint the reason and place stigma on it and the person it is associated with. Stigma can be attached to anything like, a character trait, a physical defect or a trait that will be noticeable in a group. Once stigma is attached to a person it discredits them, so they may do whatever is in their power to hide it and not have others find what makes them different (Goffman 1963, Pg 4).

Stigma is often associated with grief, as people grieve they want to discuss those they have lost or the cause of death and that is something that can cause tension or social awkwardness (Pitman 2018,pg 126). Death of course has a multitude of emotional reactions like fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, etc.,(Martí-García 2017, pg 630). But when someone dies in a stigmatized way, like suicide or overdose, the emotional connection to tohers may be weaker because of the stigma surrounding the cause of death, this causes a feeling of unease to those surrounding the grieving individual who then lacks the support they cracve and need (Pitman 2018, pg 127). Death is already feared by most because of the idea of not being able to continue doing what they want to do, or life being cut short (Cicirelli 1998, pg 714). Avoiding the topic of death is common because of the uncertainty about what it means, the fear of what does or does not come after (Martí-García 2017, pg 634). In the case of someone dying by suicide stigma comes up even around the word suicide and the connotation of bringing death sooner (Pitman 2018, pg 125). In certain cases it isn't uncommon to omit the true cause of death whe someone dies from suicide or overdoes as to not put stigma on to the memroy of a person or to add to the feeling of shame that the grieviers might feel (Im 2018, pg 387).

It is much easier to spoil an identity then it is to fix it. An action or phrase can be all it takes to fall away from and spoil an identity. Onces an action is made that spoils an identity it is up to the person to use *aligning actions* to bring themselves back to their previous state (Newman 2019, pg 196). When the person's identity is spoiled by their death they obviously no longer have the means to salvage their identity. Salvaging the deceased identity falls to those who loved and are now grieving for them. The grieving friends and family find accounts, statements made to explain to others the deviant or unusual behavior, so to find some way to salvage the identity of the person they have lost (Orbcuh 1997, pg 456).

How Greif is Taught

For most people, their first experience with death is with a pet or maybe a grandparent. After being told or seeing a person die for the first time griefs definition changes. Children are usually taught about grief through parents or guardians. A study by Knight et al (2000) talks about how it is important for children to have death explained to them from an early age so they do not have fear or struggle with grief later on in life (Knight 2000, pg 202). Some people choose to teach children about death through books. Fortunately over the last several decades there have been more books published that talk about death in grieving marketed towards younger generations that focus on the emotional effect that may take place after losing a loved one. Unfortunately many of the books talk little to none about causes of death, leaving children to have a harder understanding of what death actually means (Poling 2008, pg 167).

The stages of grief are something that is well known to people who have ever lost anything significant. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is well known for her theory of the 5 stages of grief(Kübler-Ross 2005). The stages, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, are a framework many think is the way everyone grieves. With these stages so ingrained in people's concept and first knowledge of grief it is easy for people who are experiencing grief for the first time to feel like they are out of the norm. When someone experiences grief they turn back to what their previous knowledge of grief says and often it goes back to Kübler-Ross and it usually does not align exactly with the stages and makes them question their grief (Christensen 2017, pg 59). Because death is such a neglected area of study it creates a fear around it and leads to the continuation of lack spread of information that could take away the fear (Faunce 1958, pg 206).

Effects of Grieving

Grief has millions of different effects, most are dependent on the way the death is approached by the people close to the griever after the fact. People are usually under the impression that the point of grieving a person who has died is to eventually let them go and move on with life, that is not how grief works. In a study done by Christensen et al (2017), extended periods of grief are seen as taboo and a sign to others that someone is not healing. The study hopes to move away from the taboo of speaking about grief and allow for more conversations to be had to hopefully have an effect on how people view grief and try to help others who are grieving. Christensen refers to the DSM-5 (2013) which has stated that extended bouts of bereavement can be diagnosed as symptoms of a major depressive disorder (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 2013). As a symptom of major depressive order people who suffer with grief can finally find a legitimate resource that validates what they experience.

Many people affected by grief have a hard time finding support. By finding a bond to someone people have had a much easier time addressing their grief. Some people try to continue bonds with the deceased themselves. By creating a continuing bond with the deceased it can allow for the person who is grieving to learn to slowly adjust to life without the person they lost (Stein 2017, pg 726). Jahn in a report about coninuing bonds with deceased talks about the fact that people who experienced the loss of a loved one to suicide are more likely to experiences symptoms of Posttraumatic stress disorder and complicated grief. By trying to form a continuing bond they are less likely to feel the effects of losing someone completely all at once (Jahn 2018, pg 248). Forming bonds with close friends and family can also lessen the direct effects of grief. Albuquerque (2017) argues that with an open conversation about shared grief people can maintain healthy relationships with one another and can learn how to properly support others in

future experiences. By leaning on each other and listening to how another person struggles with grieving can differ it allows for a stronger long lasting bond in a time where it is easy to lose support and relationships (Albuquerque 2017, pg 1827).

Forums and their rules: *a club you don't want to be a member of*(Paulus 2015; Krynska 2010)

Forums create a space for people to find like minded people or people who have similar experiences as them. Forums becomes a place for people to find information and support from others. There are support groups specifically for people who have lost someone to suicide, although only about 26% of people who have lost someone find their way to them (Dyregrov 2002,pg 654). Online support groups are much more easily accessed for people in isolated areas or with decreased mobility (Keating 2012,pg 1015). Many online forums are created by survivors themselves so they can be a point of support for people like them at earlier stages in grief. Some support forums are also created by government groups or mental health professionals (Krynska 2010, pg 643).

There are rules involved when forums are created to keep them running how they are intended to, and to keep any unwanted information or stressor out. Some private groups require new members to answer basic questions in regards to their loss to make sure that all people who are in the group have actually experienced loss(Paulus 2015, pg 634). These online forums become safe spaces for newcomers looking for somewhere where they will not get stressed or triggered (Keating 2012. Pg 1015).

Sometimes members are a bit on edge and can put overly strict regulations in place. Paulus et al (2015) discusses the willingness of more senior members of the group to welcome

people into their groups and give support and advice even when not asked because they have had similar experiences. These older members can also have a harsher view of the way people post and express on the forums for fear of hurting another member, they feel they have created a norm and a structure and any variation outside of this can be harmful to others who are healing (Paulus 2015, pg 636).

Methodology

In this study I talk about the Functions of online forums based in support of grieving people, as well as the identity of the people they lost and what the members of the groups do to salvage them. I tried unsuccessfully to gain access to multiple private online forums that were focused on helping support people who have dealt with the loss of a loved one to suicide or overdose. Most of the ones who rejected me said it was to keep the forums as an exclusive place for only people who have gone through their particular type of loss. Some never gave me a reason or even a response. After getting rejected I turned to open access forums. Most of the forums I analyzed were on Facebook while a few were directly on sites dedicated to either emotional support for grieving people or memorial sites.

I took notes and coded posts going back several years on just over ten forums. Some of the forums were newer and only had posts for the last two or so years, some had posts going back for about ten years (I could not get to the beginning of two of the forums because of the sheer amount of posts). I Went through and copied posts that seemed most applicable to my research questions and then split those into groups of codes under larger themes. I went through as a non participating observer keeping track of the members who posted most frequently and how their posts changed as time went on. I spent time comparing and grouping posts from

different forums to see how they compare and differ. I found that some of the most pertinent data came from the responses to posts, I then started to keep track of the posts that had responses.

Findings and analysis

Functions of forums

There are a significant number of forums for people dealing with grief associated with the death of a loved one who has died in a stigmatized way. The overarching function of these forums is to provide a safe space for people to communicate about their loss. Within this safe space there are three specific ways that individuals use these forum: overcoming isolation and gaining a sense of belonging; Grief- expressing emotions freely; Finding a sense of hope.

Overcoming Isolation and Creating Belonging

One of the key functions of forums allows individuals to break free of their isolation and create a sense of belonging. When a person dies in a stigmatized way it is easy for the people who knew them to become isolated from the rest of the world. By hearing “I understand”(Cheryl) can bring some people experiencing grief away from loneliness and isolation. For example, one participant expressed this move away from isolation by taking part in the forum, stating:

This forum is a lifeline to help those who have forgotten how to live in that moment. I have found my peace and happiness now and I owe it all to every single person on this forum. I love each and every one of you very much!(lakerat)

In another example, two people both lost men who were very important in their lives. The person who more recently suffered this loss said, “I lost my brother to suicide almost a

month ago 8-16-19 My mom And I still don't understand why he did it or even how to move on from this we are so lost he was only 29 years old ”(Teresa). In response, the other expressed their own suffering. “I’m so sorry, I wish I knew. My husband died 7/16/19. Trying to heal”(Kris). Although we don’t have explicit confirmation, we can hypothesize that this type of supportive expression helps in finding a sense of commonality that potentially creates a feeling of belonging.

Each new post and response helps to create a cohesive strong sense of belonging in the groups. Forums are necessary for some and they may go on to create their own to help others find a more specific group to make them feel a sense of belonging “ I started this 4 years ago October when I found out my son was addicted to heroin and then come to find out many other drugs on top of Alcoholic. He was young 22 years old” (Overdose Awareness). With empathetic grief being able to flourish this can lead to more and more people who feel helpless and lost finding a sense of hope. In creating this safe space people learn that their feelings of isolation can be minimized through others experiencing similar tragedies and sharing their stories of hope and recovery.

Every step in grief can be extremely difficult to cope with when isolated. Anniversaries are a constant reminder for many members of these forums. After losing her son a mother turns to one of the forums for support on his birthday “Today is my Late Son's Birthday. Please come share a message to support me. Thank you”(Magz). Many can’t seem to stop thinking about their lost loved one but on anniversaries as one member states “I think about him all the time. But then you have the Anniversary dates my mind switches to the flood of memories of him and how much I miss him”(Glenda). Other members are close by to lend a supportive hand to allow the grieving member to know they are not alone. Some show support by simply letting them know

that what they are feeling is part of the healing process “ It will never be the same in your family and I can't even imagine what you all go through daily. I'm sure some days are easier while other days not so much...So much love and heartbreak was in that room remembering how very special your brother was”. By giving empathetic support it is easy to see that even when certain days are harder there is an active support group to lean on when needed.

By having a group to assist with feelings of isolation some members realize that unfortunately others must have had similar experiences and have themselves become isolated. There has to be many people experiencing or who have experienced similar events to create an empathetic system of support. One user looks back on how much his sister has missed since taking her life, and he is sad realizing that so many others must have the same feeling:

think of the things she has missed and is missing : people she loved doing well, growing up, settling down (in moderation) , getting on with their lives; her nephews and nieces - the joy that they would have brought her and the love she would have for them. And it breaks my heart so much that so many families have a similar story to tell (Mark).

In these forums people can find others, even if it means finding each other at their lowest points. In one instance a mother talks about losing her son and how she has trouble looking at things that remind her of him “My son is 7 mths dead i havent even been able to read sympathy cards or look at photos”(Deborahm). Another mother lets her know that she has had the same experience “I know exactly what you are going through. I can't look at my daughters either. Lots of love xx...from one mother to another”(Kikidee). These support groups find their drive and power through people finding others with grief that stems from similar events, enabling them to create an empathic and healthy group setting to grieve and process

Grief: Expressing Emotions freely

In a grief avoidant society it can be nearly impossible to find a place to openly discuss experiences of grief or where feelings of depression stem from. These forums provide a space for people to speak freely about what they are dealing with, their loss and grief. Some come to simply share the date they lost their loved one “My Beautiful Son, Joel July 9, 1976~ December 16, 2006”(Lisa). Some come to the group to vent how they are feeling day by day. One member lost both of her brothers less than two months apart and created a forum to help her openly discuss her emotions:

The way I feel- They say there is no reason, They say that time will heal, But neither time nor reason, Will change the way I feel. No-one knows the heartache, That lies behind my smile, No-one knows how many times, I have broken down and cried. I want to tell you something, So there won't be any doubt, You're so wonderful to think of, But so hard to live without (Patricia)

Many flock to these groups to discuss how people in their daily life unknowingly can bring up their grief and how even small triggers can become hard to handle:

It can be as easy as someone's simple comment or a joke that can bring back everything that reminds you of your loss. Or even going to a restaurant that they loved to go to you with, the church they grew up in as your sit in Sunday mass, or even going to the school they attended as a child. While life happens everyday, it just takes that one moment to bring back their memory, even if it happened yesterday or 20 years ago (Nicole).

Members come in to talk about their hardships that may be harder to talk to people in their everyday outside of the online forums who were not as directly or severely affected by the loss, “I'm sure that they meant well, but it wasn't the right thing to say, because there's no timeline with grief. It's not that one day you wake up and you say, ‘Huh, guess what? I'm done grieving now.’ That's not the way it works”(Beatriz). Finding a place to discuss daily hardships with

others who understand can be key in understanding grief, it will not be the cure, because there is none, but it can be a kind of palliative care.

These forums allow people to discuss how others view and try to define their grieving process. These forums help normalize grief. For many individuals they feel their grief is abnormal their ups and downs that seem to never end even as time passes. One mother talks about how the first year seems much harder to handle and how her grief has taken a toll on her health physically as well as mentally:

This second year seems so much harder than the first one. I am grieving daily. Definitely keeping the kleenex company in business. His suicide has affected me physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Never have had so many physical ailments. It is my broken heart and spirit (Nancy).

In response one of the forum moderators shared from their own experience “Once I got past the "firsts" of everything, it came crashing down on me that this would be my life forever. Every day is a day without him”(Loss of a Child to Suicide). It can be seen that actual time does not matter when grief is present, grief becomes a part of everyday life and how grieving people live their life. Members of the group discuss their desire for people to discuss their grief or loss in their normal life “I just wish my friends would talk to me about my daughter. Everyone just says they cannot imagine and their voices trail off.....Well, damn it, imagine it! and help me by asking about my life now”(Marcy). In response others mention their own difficulties when it comes to talking to others about their loss “I get it as a person who has lost her brother to suicide. Not many people mention him. Or ask. They worry more about their discomfort”(Darcy). Another member tries to ease the tension and give a reminder that not all people have the same view and are trying to protect from more emotional damage “It is a hurt that never goes away.. But people

don't want to remind you of your loss. In their hearts they are being kind. It is such a sad hard journey”(Sheila).

Individuals suffering from so much grief often feel like a burden to those around them in their daily lives. Forums, therefore, allow expressions of grief, for however long, without the type of judgements or feelings of being a burden on others. That is, everyone knows why you are on the forum and there to be supportive unlike in everyday life where different types of social interaction are expected.

Finding a sense of hope

One function that can be visibly seen in these groups is the sense of hope that many gain from spending time in these safe spaces that have been created. After reading the experiences of others on forums people begin to see there is a way to feel better. One member discusses her gratitude for hearing from people at different stages of grief and how it gives her hope that she will one day get there “Through this forum I have found the most amazing allies that give me hope. I find it helps me sooo much to hear from people... that are further down the road in the grieving process”(Hazel). Other members talk about their own ability to move on in their grief which will become a resource for others to look towards. One woman named Beatriz talks about her realization that feeling sad while grieving does not require an apology to others:

When I was going through a moment of crying and talking to someone, I would say, ‘Oh, I'm sorry for getting upset.’ And now I've realized that I don't need to be sorry. It's OK for me to cry. It's OK to have these tears come out because they're tears of love (Beatriz).

This realization can be incredibly helpful to others who may also feel the need to apologize for openly expressing their grief.

Giving small bits of advice to new members or just as reminders to those who are still struggling becomes a natural part of many of these forums. Holidays can be a hard time because of their association with family time. A member named Michelle gives a small bit of advice that becomes a resource for many struggling family members during a tough season in grief:

For those of us having their first Holiday Season: Don't celebrate if you don't want to. Don't feel you have to do anything for anyone else. Do what you feel is best. Some people find comfort with others, some people don't. Some people will want to do their normal traditions, some people will not. Allow yourself to grieve your way. You'll make it through. I'm in year 3 (Michelle).

Another member lost her son who happened to have a birthday on Christmas but instead of trying to avoid the holiday it became a way for her to feel closer to her son: “my son was also born on Christmas Day. I actually put my tree up as early as possible because it makes me feel like he is with me”(Dori). This mother also made sure to make the point that this will not be the case for everyone and to do what makes each person feel their best. “For sure, take care of yourself. People understand (and who cares if they don't)”(Dori). Every shared experience and a bit of advice becomes crucial to helping people find hope in their grief that may seem endless.

Many members spread the message to just keep going that it may be hard now and there will be more hard days but there will also be good days. Lorette suffered the loss of two family members to suicide and is honest to say that “you never get over it. But you take one step at a time and a lot of prayer”(Lorette). Life continues on and hope seems very hard to come by when dealing with grief but as one group member states “very hard to deal with for a long time but you do find the strength from somewhere”(Jacquie). Time feels like it is moving extremely slow for members of these groups as they deal day by day with their grief. With other members to look towards for hope their grief does not seem as hard to manage.

Functions concluded

In a grief phobic culture, the members of these forums find trust in the fact that they will not be harassed, discriminated against or criticized. The forums create a place for the members to discuss healing in a place where they are not going to face the responses that they get by people in their life outside of the internet. They feel that they can speak their mind and be paid attention to on a more personal empathetic level. The forums are key in helping individuals find others who have experienced a similar loss, creating an environment with no fear of backlash. These spaces allow for grieving members to understand that grief is not set plan and outline in which they have to and then they will no longer feel sad. It creates a place where people no longer feel like a burden. The forums also allow people to have an open conversation with people who will listen and respond with empathetic responses. Overall these forums are an important part in helping those who are grieving feel validated and allow them to speak openly about what they are feeling about their experiences. By bringing together grieving friends and family of people who have died in stigmatized ways, these forums create a community of growth and healing, which can eventually lead to larger more open conversations about death and grieving outside of these groups.

Identities of the lost

When discussing death and grieving the identity of the lost family member or friend is usually left as just that, the place they held while in life in relation to the person who is grieving. Little is discussed about the person and their identity after death, especially when they have died in a stigmatized way. Put in other terms, those who have committed suicide, especially when

young or healthy, marks them as problematic, stigmatized or having “lost face” – they have, in Goffman’s terms, spoiled their identities. Spoiled identities of these lost ones are salvaged in these online forums through accounts made to justify their actions.

Account

Accounts are made to explain behaviors that may deviate from normal, socially acceptable choices and actions (Orbuch 1997, pg 456). Accounts are a way in which grieving people can try to find a way to cope with their grief and find a reason as to why something like this could have happened. Finding something to put blame takes the blame away from the lost individual and thereby saves their identity. In particular, I found two accounts worked to salvage identities – bullying and addiction. These two, while serious and truly problematic, can also be understood as ways to redeem these individuals identities.

In some cases blame is put on bullying “Yes. I agree our daughter was bullied in the work force. Only what she told us, we have no direct evidence. She took her own life 2 years ago”(James Duffy). While many use the cause of death as an account others find blame in the catalyst leading up to their death like bullying.

Addiction is another account in these forums and it becomes a way for people to find some way to attribute the death of their loved one away from the actual victim:

lost his battle to addiction on 5/3/19. Bryant was the most caring person. He loved his family friends and would do anything he could to help them. He was a brother, father, son and uncle. He will loved and missed by us all forever!(Stormy)

Addiction becomes the murderer, the thing to blame. Drugs are the cause and the grieving friends and family want people to understand that it’s not the person who did this but the force of

the addiction “I lost my 21 yr old on 3/21/19 to m30s a lot of kids are dying to this murderer make awareness In loving memory”(Cecilia).

The members of these groups want it to be known that addiction is not something that is chosen by the person. Many who were lost hated the addict in them like Mitch whose brother Ryan had this to say about his brothers addiction “He hated the addict in himself and wanted nothing more than to be "normal" just didn't know how to be”(Ryan). Grieving someone who has died from addiction should not be silenced, this leads to a lack of healthy conversation around addiction and overdose that can lead to misinformation and cause people to be less likely to look for help. Stephanie, who lost her son, talked about wanting to lose the shame around death by addiction and how the victims should have as much value as others who have died in different ways, “I am not ashamed of how my son lost his life. I'm ashamed of how people pick and choose who has value”(Stephanie). These accounts of addiction and bullying help explain stigmatizing behaviors and redeem the death of the people they love.

Spoiled identities

Stigma is defined as “a mark of shame or discredit”(Stigma, Merriam-Webster). When a person has stigma associated with them their identity may get spoiled. When a person dies in a stigmatized way stigma becomes part of their identity. The grieving friends and family of people who have died in stigmatized ways have to deal with the stigma associated with the person that they loved for long after the death. Heather lost her stepbrother to addiction and made a post that addresses his battle with mental illness and marks it as part of his identity:

I was stunned. My little stepbrother was only 21, and a junior honors student at Stanford. He was a brilliant young man, equally good at school and sports, and

well-loved by his family and friends. But he also suffered from bi-polar disorder, and he had fought a valiant battle against depression – and lost(Heather)

Another member named Liam shares that people who suffer from addiction are not just sick or addicted, they are people who were at one point in time something besides what they are labelled as “Every addict was once a child, addiction can happen to anyone, pray for them”(Liam).

Although their identities may have spoiled it does not mean they deserve to be forgotten. Friends and family hope for recovery in life and sometimes it just doesn't happen. For some, like Kelly Jo, they come to the groups knowing the spoiled identity of their family or friend won't be judged and they will be able to express their grief surrounding the horrible situation:

We hoped when you were arrested for drug charges and were facing a year in prison that THIS would be the moment. That this time you would wake up.... We prayed that you being away from everyone, that you being sober, would actually wake you up(Kelly Jo)

Spoiled identities are hard to eradicate when there is such a strong stigma around a large part of a person's life. These forums allow people to discuss and hopefully find ways to relieve their grief and find a way through others to help salvage the identity of their lost loved one.

Dispose of stigma

Identity is as important in death as it is in life. Members in these forums don't want to forget the cause of death because they want to teach others, and by speaking up a lesson can be learned and hopefully less people will be stigmatized in the future. Kas, whose cousin passed away, talks about keeping her memory alive she can have a voice even in death:

my cousin passed away of a overdose March 28 2019. this is really hitting me hard. I grew with her. but I think her story needs to be told that way we can save one life just life. I'm trying to paint the sky purple and the ground on April 18 2019. in memorial for her and all those we lost to overdose. she has a voice and it needs to be heard. all of them lost to this epedemic. The ones we lost to this were meant for (Kas)

People who have not experienced losing someone to suicide can try to understand the grief it can cause, but they may never know the full effect it can have and how complicated it can be. A member named Cheryl chose to share about her experience losing multiple people to suicide and how it can vary so drastically even within one family. She discusses that people need to know that suicide is not cut and dry, there are nuances and different reasons to each, none of which makes any other less valid:

“Dad, brother, nephew. All these deaths were different, understandable (Dad had Alzheimer's and wanted to avoid the inevitable), inevitable (brother had long-term, ongoing psychotic breaks with multiple previous attempts), impulsive (nephew was overwhelmed with loss - girlfriend, job, pets, home - and added alcohol). Suicide isn't simple”(Cheryl)

Terminology is a very important part of creating an understanding of how to have conversations around traditionally stigmatized subjects. When it comes to suicide, certain terms may be triggering, or harmful to people who are dealing with grief associated with the death of a person by suicide. In a post by a woman named Karen, she discusses her hatred of the word *Committed* because of the connotations the word usually has:

What do you think of when you hear the words, "he COMMITTED robbery" or "she COMMITTED a crime" ? Most people think they've done something bad or terrible. So why does everyone say, "he committed suicide" ? From now on, I am saying he died from suicide... Committed makes suicide sound like a terrible, law breaking act. Yes, it's awful, but it is awful because the person thinks they cannot handle one more day of the pain they're in. People with mental health problems don't need judgment. They need support and understanding from the people surrounding them...(Karen)

Creating a better vocabulary around stigmatized death can move the taboo away from discussing death. Conversations around death and emotions should be more acceptable. After grieving for someone it is clear that starting conversation is important to stop future loss. For example Patricia talks about the need for more conversations that involve open honest emotions especially with men because of the stigma surrounding men showing emotion:

Dear (man) I know you probably were taught to man up and grow some balls but let me tell you now "THAT WAS WRONG" It's okay to talk about your emotions and it's okay to cry. Your feelings are important and never should you feel that alone that you feel suicide is your only option. Talk to your Mum, a friend or anyone you trust. You will be surprised with the support you will receive. Please reach out speak out and please above all TALK to someone if suicide ever pops into your head. *Dont man up, SPEAK UP!!!*(Patricia)

By starting conversations and allowing people to discuss their grief it seems possible to take away the stigma around the death of people who die in ways that are considered shameful. By taking the stigma away from the identity of people who have died, conversations can start that may be a catalyst that can trigger an end to the considerable amount of loss that comes from stigmatized death that may have started from a lack of conversation.

Identities Concluded

Accounts are made to justify actions. Identities are labelled and defined by these actions. Stigma is created by not discussing taboos and allowing judgements to be made and spread. If conversations are had that demystify stigmatized death, then the identities of people whose character has been spoiled no longer need accounts to justify their death because it will no longer be seen as out of the norm.

Conclusion

In conclusion I found that the online forums function as a helpful place for people to find other people who had experienced similar experiences with death and grief. By joining these forums the members can find a sense of belonging and move away from their feelings of isolation. I also found that members of the forums were adamantly trying to break away from the stigma associated with suicide and overdose. Through positive interactions, like responses and

honest support members can find a sense of hope. In these communities people are able to make accounts for the loved ones who they have lost and hopefully work towards fighting their spoiled identities. Many members of the forums are working on fighting against stigma associated with grieving openly and talking about causes of death that may be stigmatized.

As discussions of so many more private parts of life, like mental health, becomes more and more mainstream it is about time that people begin talking about an aspect that is one of the largest events that will happen in everyone's life, death. With death comes grieving and as long as there are people in the world there will be grief, so let's talk about it.

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