2000

Coping with loss: A qualitative study of the experience of sibling bereavement in young adulthood

Purnima Sundar
Wilfrid Laurier University

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

COPING WITH LOSS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF SIBLING BEREAVEMENT IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD

BY

Purnima Sundar

B.A. (Hons.), McMaster University, 1997

THESIS

Submitted to the Department of Psychology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts degree
Wilfrid Laurier Univeristy
2000

For my parents, Dr. P. R. Sundararajan and Mrs. K. Sundararajan.

In loving memory of my brother,
Anand Sundararajan
(1977-1996).

Abstract

Existing literature in the area of bereavement as it pertains to young persons focuses primarily upon the death of a parent, and the age groups most studied are either children or adolescents. The goal of this thesis project, therefore, has been to develop an in-depth understanding of the experience of sibling bereavement in young adulthood, looking at factors that both helped and hindered effective coping. Specifically, in-depth interviews with 7 young women who had suffered the loss of a sister or brother while between the ages of 18 and 30 were conducted in an effort to shed light on this type of loss during this stage in life. Participants shared that the loss of the sibling caused changes in their family dynamics, alterations in their physical health and psychological well-being, modified their academic or occupational goals, and transformed many of their social bonds. Helpful methods of coping with the sibling's absence included using the funeral as a means of gaining closure, remaining emotionally isolated immediately after the death, drawing on social support as time passed, striving to maintain a symbolic connection with the deceased sister or brother, and keeping active. Participants discussed denying the loss and relying on the "wrong" people for support as unhelpful ways of coping. Knowing that the sibling died without pain, being surrounded by understanding people, and the structure provided by academic pursuits were cited as having been external factors that facilitated coping, while negative circumstances around the death event, issues within the family, feeling disconnected from others, experiencing pressure from work, dealing with constant reminders of the loss, and not having the severity of sibling loss acknowledged by society were described as outside influences

that hindered effective coping. Based on these findings, a theory of sibling bereavement in young adulthood is advanced, and potential ways of providing support to such individuals are discussed.

Acknowledgments

Completing this thesis has been a challenging, yet extremely fulfilling endeavour which would not have been possible without the involvement of many important people. Firstly, I would like to thank Dr. Geoffrey Nelson for supervising this project. I remember when I began this thesis, I spoke with a student whom Geoff had advised a few years earlier and she shared with me that he is a perfect supervisor because "he holds your hand when you need it, and he lets you go when you need it". I can't think of a better way to describe Geoff. His constant support, guidance, and confidence in my abilities have helped me to make this thesis something I am very proud of.

I would also like to thank my Thesis Committee Members, Dr. Joanna Ochocka and Dr. Isaac Prilleltensky. I feel that this project has benefitted greatly from the different perspectives they have each contributed. I am grateful for their encouragement and the enthusiasm they have expressed for my work.

While I am pleased to have completed this thesis, it sadly represents the end of my time with my peers in the Community Psychology Program. I have learned so much from each of my colleagues, and feel that I have become a better person for having known and shared so much with these wonderful people.

The seven wonderful young women who took part in this study also deserve considerable attention. I am truly fortunate to have been given the opportunity to meet with and learn from each of them, and I thank them all for sharing with me their very personal and intimate stories. I will continue to draw from the strength and courage these women have shown to me.

I am also grateful for the input and support I received from Dena Moitoso (BFO, Waterloo Region) and Jill Hill (BFO, Halton/Peel Region) throughout this project. I am also thankful to have met Wendy Dean, a researcher with BFO, Halton/Peel Region, who not only helped me to see my work more clearly by looking deeply at my own experience, but who also became a very special friend in the process.

I have always believed that serious life crises teach you who your friends really are. I am very lucky to have such a strong source of support from "my girls" (Michelle Austin, Tiziana Pelusi, Tanya Tasev, and Deborah Van Zant). Through the years, I have shared both the joys and sorrows of life with these fabulous women, and I thank them for "being there" for me always.

And lastly, but certainly not least of all, I would like to acknowledge my parents, Sundar and Kumuda. When my brother died, half of my heart broke for my own loss, and the other half broke for the devastation they experienced. Their unwavering support and enthusiasm for my work is what has inspired me throughout this thesis project, and their courage and spirit will continue to inspire me throughout my life.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Personal Motivations 2

A Review of Current Literature 5

The Experience of Sibling Bereavement 5

The Sibling Bond 5

Death and the Sibling Bond 7

Coping With Sibling Bereavement 13

Definitions of Stress and Coping 13

Models of Coping 14

Commonly Used Methods of Coping with Bereavement 21

Self-Help as a Mechanism for Coping 23

Self-Help as a Means of Coping With Loss 25

Limitations of Current Research 27

Research Questions 28

Methodology 29

Methodological Assumptions 29

The Research Context 32

Participatory Action Research 33

Participants and Sampling 34

The Research Relationship 35

A Departure From the Original Research Design 36

Gathering Information 37
Methods Used in Gathering Data 37
Analysis of Data 38
Verification of the Trustworthiness of Data 39
Ethical Considerations 40
Research Results 42
Effects of the Loss 43
Change in Family Dynamics 44
Changes in Physical Health and Psychological Well-Being 46
Change in Academic/Occupational Goals 48
Transformation of Social Bonds 50
Helpful Coping Mechanisms 51
The Funeral as a Means of Closure 52
Remaining Emotionally Isolated 53
Drawing on Social Support 53
Maintaining a Symbolic Connection with the Deceased Sibling 55
Keeping Active 55
Unhelpful Coping Mechanisms 58
Denying the Loss 58
Talking to the "Wrong" People About the Loss 59
Outside Influences That Facilitated Coping 60
Knowing that the Sibling Died Without Pain 61

Being Surrounded by Understanding People 61
The Structure of School 63
Outside Influences That Hindered Effective Coping 64
Negative Circumstances Around the Death Event 65
Issues Within the Family 67
Lack of "Connection" With Others 69
Experiencing Pressure from Work 71
Constant Reminders of the Loss 72
Lack of Recognition of the Severity of Sibling Loss 73
The Experience of Young Adult Bereaved Brothers 74
The Effects of Sibling Loss on Young Adult Males 75
Coping Mechanisms Used By Bereaved Brothers 76
The Impact of Outside Influences on Coping 77
Discussion 79
Consequences of Sibling Loss in Young Adulthood 81
Coping and the External Environment 83
Resiliency or Vulnerability? 85
Theory of Sibling Bereavement in Young Adulthood 88
The Death Event 89
Efforts to Acknowledge and Deal With Grief 90
Taking Stock 92
Shifts in Personal Reality 93

Getting Used to a "New Kind of Normal" 94

Action Goals 95

Limitations of this Study and Directions for Future Research 99

Reflections on this Thesis Process 100

Appendix A (Checklist For Participant Recruitment) 101

Appendix B (Study Information Sheet) 103

Appendix C (Informed Consent Statement) 105

Appendix D (Interview Guide) 107

Appendix E (Questions for Individuals Providing Support to Bereaved Siblings) 108

Figure 1 (A Bereaved Sibling's Movement from Vulnerability to Resiliency) 109

Figure 2 (A Theory of Sibling Bereavement in Young Adulthood) 110

References 111

My favourite memory is of a walk that I took with my brother, Anand, in the fall of 1996. We had traveled to the U. S. with our parents to attend my cousin's wedding. Amidst all of the chaos and commotion that usually accompanies these events, Anand and I decided to escape from the rest of the family for a little while. Although we had always been close, it felt like we hadn't talked in ages. With both of us away at school and pursuing different things, life seemed to get in the way of coordinating our schedules to see each other as regularly as we would have liked.

While that period of my life didn't seem to be all that eventful, my brother's seemed to be full of excitement. He had recently purchased a brand new car with the money he had earned working over the summer, and had started college that fall. He was studying advertising, and had plans to start an agency after he graduated, intending to name it after our grandfather's advertising firm that had closed down fifteen years ago after he passed away. The most important news, however, was that he was in love. Anand had dated a lot throughout his adolescence, but I could tell that this girl was special because aside from the look of absolute happiness on his face when he spoke about her, he had arranged for my parents to meet her the following weekend.

For the first time in his nineteen years, my brother was truly happy. Everything that had come so easily to me (like school, or getting along with our parents) had always been a struggle for him. Finally, however, he had discovered and began to pursue a career in an area in which he was both interested and talented, and felt that he had finally won the respect of my parents. It's hard to explain what I was experiencing as I listened to all of his hopes and plans for future and I can't recall everything we talked about, but I do remember the feeling I had that afternoon. For as long as I could remember, I had this little kid following me around, wanting to do everything that I did. I realized now, however, that Anand was no longer existing in my shadow–he had moved on to make a life of his own, one that he couldn't wait to embrace. I was overwhelmed with pride at the fact that this young man was no longer just my little brother, but someone I was lucky enough to call my friend. Four days later, he died in a car accident.

Introduction

The goal of this thesis project is to develop an in-depth understanding of the experience of bereaved siblings (who were young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 at the time of the loss), with a special focus on factors that both helped and hindered effective coping.

Existing literature pertaining to bereavement in childhood and adolescence focuses mainly on the death of a parent, while the loss of a sibling has received very little

attention. Most research that *has* been published in this area pertains to the experience of sibling bereavement from the perspective of a child, adolescent, or older adult, with virtually no representation from the young adult age group. I have used these publications (or the lack thereof) as the groundwork from which to develop this project.

I will begin with a discussion of my personal motivations which have shaped and directed this thesis project. This will be followed by a review of the current literature and theoretical perspectives pertaining to sibling bereavement and coping. I will then present a description of the methodology I used in conducting this research, which summarizes the specific research questions, addresses my methodological assumptions, describes the research context (including a profile of the participants), outlines the techniques used in sampling and information gathering, and reviews the ethical considerations which emerged throughout the research process. A description of the research results, a discussion of the findings, and a summary of the limitations of this investigation will be followed by suggestions for future research and action goals.

Personal Motivations

As the values and concepts of Community Psychology are applicable to a wide variety of issues, I found that trying to select a thesis project was a complicated process. There were so many interesting themes to explore, and narrowing my focus to one area was a difficult task. In speaking with several individuals about my dilemma, I was encouraged to seek a topic that held a considerable amount of personal relevance. I was told that aside from ensuring that my interest in the project would not wane, choosing to work on such subject matter would increase the significance and fruitfulness of my

thesis. The question now became "what issues do I find personally meaningful?".

I began to look back upon the events of my life in an effort to trace the sources of my values and current belief system, realizing finally that the single most profound circumstance I had experienced to date was the death of my brother. In addition to altering my personal views and assumptions, this incident had far reaching implications for my professional growth.

At the time of the accident, I was actively working on completing my undergraduate degree. The department of psychology in the academic institution I attended stressed the importance of positivism and scientific objectivity, with an intense research focus. While I seemed to have had no problem existing within this environment for the first three years of my degree, my final semester was spent trying to negotiate my eagerness to pursue graduate studies and the fact that while I had been trained extensively in experimental psychology, I no longer found it to be a satisfying pursuit. My recent experience prompted me to reexamine my values, an exercise that pointed clearly to the incongruence between my current academic environment and my goals for the future. I realized that valuing my family and friends, and finding a career that was meaningful on both professional and personal levels became far more important to me than controlling for extraneous variables and assessing the representativeness of a sample of nameless and faceless "subjects." I even considered leaving the field of psychology and pursuing an academic area more focused on genuine experiences and real life.

At that point, I decided to hold off on applying to graduate schools. I was unsure as to whether my recent revelation was a byproduct of the emotional confusion one

experiences as a result of losing a loved one, or whether I was truly experiencing a shift in the way I viewed my life. I felt that taking a year off from school would give me the time and perspective I needed in order to make some important decisions about my future.

I had returned to school and work so quickly after my brother's death that I had avoided *feeling* too much. Those around me admired my apparent strength, but I now realize that my efforts to be "tough" merely covered up my pain. Essentially, I had put off dealing with my emotions for a time when I did not have such a demanding schedule, so during that year, I worked, spent time with friends and family, and tried to heal.

After much reflection and evaluation, I recognized that my need to integrate my personal and professional identity was not a passing whim–it was, and continues to be an ongoing pursuit. While I went through the motions of applying to several graduate programs in psychology (without much enthusiasm), it was only after I became aware of the Community Psychology M.A. Program here at Wilfrid Laurier University that I felt that a means of realizing this goal actually existed.

I have often remarked to others that I have learned more in this past year, as a Community Psychology student, than I did during my four years as an undergraduate–about the vastness of the field of psychology, the "real" world, and myself. In short, being in this program has had an incredible impact on my personal growth. The transition from studying to be a concrete and objective scientist to learning to celebrate the diversity of life experiences has been an ongoing and liberating process. This program has taught me that to detach one's personal self from one's

professional/academic work is to deny oneself a truly challenging and rewarding experience. Through this thesis project, I have been able to tangibly link my own history related to my status as a bereaved sibling with my academic goals, in a purposeful and acceptable way.

A Review of Current Literature

The experience of losing a loved one has received a considerable amount of attention in both popular and academic literature (e.g., Corr & Corr, 1996; DeSpelder & Strickland, 1996). The concept of death has been brought out into the open in recent decades and is discussed widely from a variety of perspectives. The focus of interest in this area, however, is primarily centered upon either parental or conjugal bereavement, with the experience of sibling bereavement receiving very little recognition.

The following is a review of literature currently available in the area of sibling bereavement. A description of the sibling bond will extend into a discussion of sibling loss and its effects on various aspects of the bereaved individual's life. This overview will then become more confined to issues surrounding sibling bereavement as an individual approaches young adulthood, with a particular focus on coping with sibling loss. Managing grief through self-help will then be featured, followed by a summary of the limitations of present research and the goals of this particular project.

The Experience of Sibling Bereavement

The Sibling Bond

Throughout history, the family unit has been universally recognized as perhaps the most enduring and potentially influential reference point in an individual's life. The

fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology have reflected the importance of the family system across cultures by producing an extensive literature in this area. The focus of this academic attention has centered primarily upon the bond between a wife and a husband or a parent and a child. The relationship between members of the sibling subunit, however, has yet to receive equal consideration. While this connection is acknowledged to be an independent system within the family, aside from addressing the issue of sibling rivalry or birth order, there exists no coherent body of research on the sibling bond in its totality (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Stahlman, 1996).

While parents share between 50-60% of their children's lifespan, siblings share between 80-100% (Davies, 1993), a fact which accounts, in part, for the significant effect the presence of a sibling has on one's social and intellectual development. According to Bank and Kahn (1982), the bond between siblings is "a connection between two identities, at both the intimate and public levels" (p. 15), where each sibling is a distinct entity that consistently represents a familiar presence.

The sibling bond develops as a result of "high access" between sisters and/or brothers (i.e., attending the same schools, playing with the same friends, uniting as allies against parents, etc.) (Bank & Kahn, 1982). In addition, siblings take turns serving as each other's role model and providing support to one another (Stahlman, 1996), and are known to play an integral role in defining each other's identities (Hogan & Greenfield, 1991). In many cases, skills in social interaction are acquired, and valuable lessons such as sharing and cooperation are learned through this relationship.

On the flip side of these healthy aspects of the sibling relationship, jealousy,

competition, and an overwhelming rivalry also characterize this bond. Whether struggling to win the affection of a parent or seeking approval and recognition outside of the home, sisters and/or brothers can often take on the role of each other's worst enemies.

The common thread that weaves its way through both the positive and negative features of the sibling bond is the *intensity* with which love and hate are played out, a concept referred to as "universal ambivalence" (Stahlman, 1996). This complex mix of emotions is the distinguishing feature of the sibling bond, differentiating it from all other relationships.

When such a bond, which is expected to last a lifetime, is severed physically by death, a major disruption in the family system is produced. Common sense tells us that children are expected to survive their parents, and when a child dies, the effect on the family is more devastating and enduring than that found in individuals who experience others types of losses (Stahlman, 1996). This is even more true for families today, as the average number of children in a household has decreased significantly from previous generations.

Death and the Sibling Bond

Within the grieving family, the surviving sibling is often the "forgotten mourner," as all resources are directed towards trying to relieve the anguish felt by the parents (Balk, 1991; Davies, 1993). It has been suggested that the living sister(s) and/or brother(s) may in fact view themselves as being "doubly orphaned" as a result of losing their emotionally available parents in addition to their deceased sibling (Bank & Kahn,

1982).

This phenomenon is further complicated when an individual experiences sibling loss during her/his adolescent or young adult years. This is a critical period in the life of a young person, as s/he experiences major changes in physical, cognitive, moral, interpersonal, psychological, and social realms (Balk, 1991). The effects of the death of a sibling during this important time has far-reaching implications for the survivor's family environment, physical health, academic/occupational goals, and psychological well-being.

The family environment. Every family system functions according to a well-established pattern of rules which govern each member's duties and roles. While circumstances such as parental divorce, or children growing up and leaving home necessarily alter these family dynamics, the death of a child has the greatest and often most unexpected impact upon this structure. With regard to the effect of this change on the surviving sibling(s), her/his "response to the death of a brother or sister is to a large degree dependent on the response of the parents" (Stahlman, 1996, p. 152).

For example, faced with the loss of one child, newly bereaved parents frequently overvalue the surviving sibling (Bank & Kahn, 1982). In affording this special status to their existing child, they often "shield or overprotect (her/him) for fear that s/he also will experience events and situations that are life threatening" (Stahlman, 1996, p. 156). As adolescence and early adulthood are characterized by the individual's attempts to separate her/himself both physically and psychologically from her/his parents, this sudden increase in parental anxiety may be both suffocating and stunting to the bereaved

sibling. In addition to trying to come to terms with her/his own loss, the bereaved sibling must now work to reassure her/his parents that their concerns may be exaggerated, and without basis.

Another typical response to the death of a child is silence within the family. The societal belief that the loss of a child is the worst type of loss often results in parents finding it difficult to discuss their bereavement (Robinson & Mahon, 1997). Aside from feeling that nobody could possibly understand the extent of their grief, they may believe that talking about the deceased child may be too painful for their surviving child(ren). Ironically, bereaved siblings *also* refrain from communicating about *their* loss in an effort to protect their parents, a situation referred to as "prohibited mourning."

A final common response to this type of loss concerns the family's desire to find either a physical or imagined substitution for the deceased child (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Stahlman, 1996). If the mother is still able to bear children, parents may try for an actual replacement. More frequently, however (especially in older parents), the surviving sibling assumes the role of the deceased child in addition to her/his own duties and functions.

Overprotection, silence, and replacement are the most typical outcomes of bereavement, and may continue to characterize the family unit for anywhere from months to years, depending on a number of different factors (e.g., specific style of coping, circumstances around the death, etc.). While they may appear to be unhealthy ways of coping with loss, most families encounter them for at least a short while as they try to adjust to their new family environment (Stahlman, 1996).

Physical health. Several recent studies looking at adolescent sibling loss have endeavored to create an inventory of their bereavement process, based on typical cases (e.g., Balk, 1991; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991; Robinson & Mahon, 1997). Among the many difficulties such an adolescent encounters, a decline in physical health is often observed as being one of the major effects of grieving (Balk, 1991).

For example, in her study concerned with the long-term effects of adolescent sibling bereavement, Davies (1993) conducted qualitative interviews with 12 adults who had lost a sibling prior to their 17th birthday (a mean time of 17 years had passed since the sibling's death). When participants were asked to describe their experiences with the loss over the years, physical health was often said to have deteriorated immediately following their sibling's death. Specifically, symptoms such as headaches or other aches and pains throughout the body were often reported to have been an outcome of the grief, with greater frequency in females than males (Davies, 1993). While these findings are based on retrospective accounts of their reactions to the loss of their siblings, these adults clearly thought that their physical health suffered as a result of their bereavement.

Contributing to this general state of malaise are disruptions in eating and sleeping patterns. According to Balk (1983), interviews with 33 teenagers regarding their grief reactions following a sibling's death revealed that typically, bereaved siblings experience difficulty sleeping following their loss, finding it not only challenging to fall asleep, but to stay asleep. Many individuals also underwent disturbances in appetite, either eating very little, or too much. Although the size of the sample in this case is too small to generalize these findings to all bereaved adolescent siblings, *every* participant discussed

eating and sleeping difficulties as a concern immediately following the loss, indicating that these are, in fact, common problems deserving attention.

While these physical responses to sibling bereavement may persist to some degree for several years following the loss, most individuals recover without suffering any prolonged damage. It is important to note that these grief reactions are consistent with those of adults who experience other types of loss as well.

Academic/occupational goals. Specific to the adolescent/young adult age group is the fact that these individuals are often still in school at the time of their sibling's death. Furthermore, it is during this time that obtaining good grades is necessary for future academic or occupational advancement. Balk (1983), as discussed above, indicates that adolescent bereaved siblings report a decline in study habits, decreased productivity, and lower grades. Academic concerns usually take a "back seat" to the grief and stress the bereaved sibling encounters immediately following the loss, resulting in a lack of interest in and trouble concentrating on school work (Davies, 1993).

Adolescent reactions to academics are comparable to those of bereaved adults with regard to their careers, irrespective of the type of loss (Stahlman, 1996). In both cases, however, performance in these areas returns to normal over time, because of the societal expectation that academic/occupational goals and achievements be preserved despite any personal setback (Balk, 1983).

Psychological well-being. The initial response to the loss of a sister or brother is one of confusion, guilt, anxiety, and anger (Balk, 1991; Davies, 1993; Robinson & Mahon, 1997). While these emotional reactions decrease in intensity with passing

months, feelings of loneliness and sadness are likely to persist. Bereaved siblings also experience an overwhelming fear that her/his parents, relatives, and friends may also die, causing stress and concern for some period of time.

Davies (1991), as discussed above, offers that when sibling loss occurs in adolescence, a common sentiment is "feeling different" from peers. The experience of bereaved siblings prompts the development of a newfound perspective on mortality which emphasizes the seriousness of life. The developmentally appropriate activities of adolescence are diametrically opposed to this new frame of reference, and as such, the behaviours and concerns of their peers are found to be trivial. The end result of this process is usually social withdrawal, which increases feelings of loneliness and alienation in the bereaved sibling.

Clearly, the death of a sibling is a potentially devastating experience. The world of the bereaved sibling lacks any sense of normalcy or consistency, and s/he engages in a constant struggle to make sense of her/his life. Despite these difficulties, however, research indicates that such an event may in fact present an opportunity for personal growth (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996).

For example, Davies (1993) suggests that the death of a sister or brother serves as an ongoing reminder of the value of life for surviving siblings, prompting an increase in self-concept and general psychological growth. In addition, the change in world view which evolves over time provides the bereaved sibling with an increased awareness and sensitivity to the experiences of others (Robinson & Mahon, 1997). In general, these individuals communicate that having to "grow up fast" generates the positive

development of a psychological maturity not experienced by their nonbereaved peers (Balk, 1983).

Coping With Sibling Bereavement

Research in the area of stress and coping has flourished in recent decades, focusing on both cognitive and behavioural aspects of this process. The purpose of this section is to provide the reader with an understanding of stress and coping in general, with a view to applying these concepts to sibling bereavement. Following a description of the concepts of stress and coping, several models of coping will be reviewed. This section will conclude with a discussion of some of the most commonly used mechanisms for coping with sibling loss.

Definitions of Stress and Coping

"Stress" is a normal and healthy part of life experienced by everyone, and can be conceptualized as existing on a continuum ranging from daily hassles and concerns to severe loss and crisis. Frydenberg (1997) explains stress as consisting of a stimulus (the environmental demands placed upon the individual) and a response (the biological and psychological responses initiated by the individual to deal with these demands). This interpretation is based on the work of Hans Selye (1974) who viewed stress and the individual's reaction to it as a homeostatic process in which each stressor disrupts one's internal equilibrium, causing her/him to respond with an attempt to restore balance (Frydenberg, 1997).

The strategy utilized to deal with this stress is recognized as "coping." Coping consists of the responses (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and actions) that an individual uses to

deal with problematic situations (Frydenberg, 1997). In dealing with stress, one seeks to manage feelings around coping ("emotion-focused coping") and works to decide what action to take ("problem-focused coping"), while simultaneously using altered cognitions to decrease the threatening nature of an event ("perception-focused coping") (Levine & Perkins, 1997).

Models of Coping

If not resolved in positive ways, stress can be very destructive both to the individual's psychology and physical well-being. It is for this reason that much attention has been given to the ways in which people cope with life stressors. The following is a brief review of four theories which endeavor to account for these processes.

Bandura's self-efficacy model of dealing with stress. Albert Bandura's (1977) model of coping is not concerned with an individual's actual coping behaviour, but rather looks at how people *perceive* their capabilities with regard to dealing effectively with a particular situational demand (Frydenberg, 1997). The perception that one is unable to handle stress constructively causes an increase in anxiety which in turn interferes with successful coping. Alternatively, a high perception of self-efficacy (a strong belief in one's competency) reduces apprehensive thinking, enabling the individual to overcome the challenge and produce positive outcomes.

While this theory explains the thoughts which underlie successful and unsuccessful attempts at coping, it does not account for the role of situational demands (i.e., the environment in which the stressor exists), or the availability (or lack thereof) of resources with which to deal with these demands.

Lazarus's transactional theory of coping. The work of Richard Lazarus (1984) builds upon the Self-Efficacy Model by attending to the interaction between the individual's cognitions regarding a specific stressor and the situational demands operating during that time (Gass, 1989). Coping is seen as "the cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific internal or external demands (and the conflicts between them) that are appraised as exceeding the resources of a person" (Frydenberg, 1997, p. 29). How an individual appraises a situation (i.e., accessibility of resources, the degree of threat/challenge the situation presents, etc.) is believed to inform the actions s/he decides to take. Here, coping is bound by context, rather than determined by stable personality characteristics, and the process of coping changes over time (i.e., appraisal and reappraisal occur continuously throughout the coping effort).

This theory's strength lies in its attention to the person-environment interaction that occurs during coping, as well as its applicability to a wide variety of situations. Its weakness, however, concerns the fact that it may be inadequate in explaining coping with severe crisis, or the loss of a loved one.

Dual process model of coping with bereavement. While the previous two models have focused on coping with stressors in general, this theoretical approach seeks to describe the ways by which people come to terms with the death of a loved one (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). In this conceptualization, two types of stressors are believed to operate simultaneously during the bereavement process: "loss-oriented stressors" (i.e., the physical absence of the deceased) and "restoration-oriented stressors" (i.e., lifestyle changes that have occurred as a result of the loss).

In coping with loss-oriented stressors, the bereaved individual must concentrate on processing and accepting the loss experience. Here, s/he exhibits a wide range of emotional reactions to the separation, from pleasurable reminiscence to painful longing. When dealing with restoration-oriented stressors, the individual needs to come to terms with the secondary consequences of the loss (e.g., a reorganization of lifestyle, dealing with a new identity, etc.).

While loss-oriented coping normally occurs with greater frequency immediately following the death and restoration-oriented coping dominates later on, these two mechanisms interact in a dynamic, back and forth process throughout bereavement via "oscillation." This refers to the "alternation between loss- and restoration-oriented coping, the process of juxtaposition of confrontation and avoidance of different stressors associated with bereavement" (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 215). Oscillation forces the individual to deal with certain stressors at specific times, but also protects her/his emotional well-being by allowing her/him to put off confronting other stressors until psychologically ready.

This theory is applicable to many different types of loss, and accounts for the apparent emotional instability in those trying to cope with bereavement. However, the process of oscillation and an explanation of the impact of certain factors (i.e., the age at which the loss occurred, the nature of the relationship with the deceased, the circumstances surrounding the death, etc.) on successful coping remain somewhat vague.

A theoretical approach to coping with sibling bereavement in adolescence. This final model of coping with bereavement focuses on a specific type of loss (i.e., that of a

sibling), during a particular age bracket (i.e., adolescence). This theory (yet unnamed), advanced by Hogan and DeSantis (1996), acknowledges the fact that sibling loss during the period of adolescence can be more difficult than in any other age range. Individuals in this stage are particularly vulnerable, as they must simultaneously cope with the death of a sister or brother in addition to dealing with the typical developmental crises of adolescence.

Based on data gathered from interviews and questionnaires given to a community-based sample of 157 bereaved adolescents (aged 13-18), Hogan and DeSantis (1992) learned that sibling loss has one of two effects on surviving siblings. The first involves the bereaved adolescent becoming a "resilient survivor" who "finds meaning in life through the process of suffering over the death of their brother or sister" (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996, p. 248). The alternative to this positive outcome is where the bereaved adolescent becomes a "vulnerable survivor," who is unable to find satisfaction in life, and continues to struggle with pain and hopelessness (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996). These authors focus their theory of sibling bereavement on the experiences of "resilient survivors," and identify three main constructs which operate simultaneously and interact in complex ways to guide the adolescent from despondency to contentment.

The first construct is "grief." Prior to the death of a sibling, the average adolescent perceives the world as just and orderly. A high degree of control over one's life and life choices is perceived, and the family unit, while not always harmonious, continues to represent stability and normalcy. When a sister or brother dies, the adolescent exists in a state of numbness and shock, and goes through the motions of the

necessary death-related rituals. Once this initial response has subsided, the adolescent comes to realize that her/his sibling will not return, and struggles with accepting this physical absence. During this time,

> life becomes hapless for the bereaved adolescent. The world no longer has a plan, order, or direction. They are encompassed by hopelessness and despair and are powerless to help themselves. Their helplessness is combined with a profound state of loneliness in that they feel no one can help or understand them. They essentially become consumed by their irrevocably changed reality (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996, p. 249).

It is here that the bereaved sibling feels her/his grief most intensely, and it is at this time when the "resilient survivor" experiences a turning point. The adolescent realizes that her/his sibling *will never return*, and simultaneously acknowledges the fact that despite this, s/he must gain control of her/his life. It is through developing an awareness of these two realities that the bereaved sibling begins to resolve her/his grief, reshape her/his view of the world, and regain hope for the future.

The second and related construct is that of "personal growth." Throughout the average adolescent's life, the permanence of relationships within the family and the social world are taken for granted. The individual is driven by her/his need to acquire a sense of personal identity, with priorities and goals being shaped by her/his own needs and desires.

With the death of a sibling, however, the fragility of life is revealed, and the bereaved adolescent ceases to take others for granted. This redefinition of relationships is accompanied by the realization that her/his sibling had played an instrumental role in influencing her/his personality. The loss of the sibling prompts a revision of this identity,

> which must now be foraged in the absence of their primary referent. The quest for answers (to questions of identity) results in a reprioritization in the search for meaning in their lives and a shifting of focus from egocentrism to ultracentrism. Their transcendence of self and others is characterized by an increase in the bereaved adolescents' sense of and love for others, resiliency, faith, and the ability to receive and give help (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996, p. 250).

It is this process that gives rise to a change in world view, a reshuffling of priorities, and a new perspective on the meaning of life.

The third construct involves the perception of an "ongoing attachment" to the deceased sister or brother. While "grief" and "personal growth" are understood to be spiraling trajectories, "ongoing attachment" can be conceptualized as a type of motivating energy that guides the bereaved sibling along through these trajectories towards becoming a "resilient survivor."

If life were to follow a "normal" course, parents would be expected to die before their children. In many cases, the idea of losing a sibling never enters an adolescent's mind, and so with the loss of a sister or brother, the expectation of a shared future is destroyed. Their future, therefore, must be reconceptualized.

> The phenomenon of "ongoing attachment" occurs in response to the vital need of bereaved adolescents to find help, hope, and meaning by anticipating a possible reunion with their deceased sibling again (in heaven/afterlife). When grief is the most intense and bereaved adolescents are mired in hopelessness and feel life has lost its meaning, ongoing attachment becomes manifest (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996, p. 250).

In anticipation of this future reunion, the bereaved adolescent reformulates her/his reality to include the ongoing spiritual presence of her/his sister or brother. This presence provides the bereaved sibling with support and guidance that is not bound by time. Although the deceased sibling is no longer physically present, this continuing

emotional bond provides the bereaved adolescent with the strength and purpose required to redefine her/his life.

The dynamic interplay between these three constructs ("grief," "personal growth," and "ongoing attachment") is believed by these authors to be the force behind becoming a "resilient survivor" of sibling bereavement. Much literature theorizes that the process of bereavement occurs in discrete, invariant stages, which ends when the bereaved individual becomes emotionally detached from the deceased (Hogan & DeSantis, 1992). This model, however, portrays the experience of bereavement as a complex, time-unlimited process in which the adolescent travels through grief toward personal growth, with the ongoing presence of her/his deceased sibling as her/his guide.

The strength of this theory lies in its rejection of previous stage-like descriptions of the grief process. Instead of conceptualizing grieving as having to move through a number of phases, eventually severing emotional ties with the deceased, it acknowledges the fact that sibling loss is an ongoing process in which the relationship is altered, but not dissolved. Another positive aspect of this theory is that it considers an often ignored age group: adolescence. Finally, while other models of grieving are based on quantitative research, this theory was developed as a result of exploring the experiences of bereaved adolescents.

Although the concepts generated by this theory are both novel and useful, it is not without its weaknesses. For example, while Hogan and DeSantis (1996) differentiate between "resilient survivors" and "vulnerable survivors," the criteria used to make these distinctions seem rigid. It may be more realistic to assume that rather than existing as

two distinct categories, these two conditions operate on opposite ends of a continuum, with individuals experiencing different degrees of each state. In addition, while these authors assert that the three constructs are bidirectional and interactive, the specific processes by which an individual resolves her/his grief is unclear.

Despite these criticisms, this theory of adolescent sibling bereavement is an excellent attempt at conceptualizing the experiences of sibling loss from the perspective of those in this age group. This theory represents an important step in the study of bereavement, as it targets a previously untouched population and provides others with a basis for stimulating future research.

Commonly Used Methods of Coping with Bereavement

The loss of a loved one is considered a severe stressor, and coping with bereavement is a complex and challenging process. Experiencing sudden or multiple losses, having had a conflicted relationship with the deceased, an unstable home environment, a lack of family or external support, or loss due to suicide or homicide have been identified as risk factors which interfere with successful coping (Clark & Goebel, 1996). Conversely, the existence of an external support system, support within the family, and general emotional stability are understood to be protective factors which facilitate the coping process (Clark & Goebel, 1996).

A variety of mechanisms are used by bereaved individuals as they work to cope with their loss. Avoidance, searching for meaning, religion, and social support are the most commonly employed techniques aimed at resolving grief. While each of them are distinct in nature, bereaved individuals may use any combination of these strategies

either simultaneously or in succession throughout the bereavement process.

Avoidance. Similar to the concept of denial, avoidance involves the bereaved individual seeking to distance her/himself from the reality of the loss and death-related circumstances. In some cases, surviving parents/children/spouses may practice a type of psychological withdrawal, but in many instances, a physical relocation may take place (Lagrand, 1986). Taking a vacation or "hiding out" from others may provide the bereaved individual with time alone to sort out feelings, truly acknowledge the death of the loved one, and make plans for a future without that person.

Searching for meaning. Following the initial shock/incredulity that occurs shortly after the death of a loved one, surviving family members and friends search for some explanation or justification which may account for their loss. With time and significant soul-searching, feelings of anger, guilt, and blame become displaced by efforts to reframe the situation to see it in a positive light (Folkman, 1997). With this reappraisal, some sort of meaning may be attached to the loss, and a positive psychological state characterized by acceptance and healing may ensue.

Religion. As spirituality affects one's lifestyle and the appraisal of events, prayer, religion, and the belief in a higher being are often used in dealing with loss (Lagrand, 1986; Levine & Perkins, 1997). All forms of faith offer possible explanations for death and descriptions of the afterlife, and as such, religion is often used as a mechanism for coping with grief (Lagrand, 1986; Stahlman, 1996). While adherence to religious ideals may not necessarily eliminate one's pain, it creates a base for acceptance and working through one's suffering (Cohen, 1988). Essentially, religiosity is not aimed at solving the

problems and challenges faced by bereaved individuals, rather it may help to alleviate their emotional burdens, allowing them to face these issues clearly.

Social support. Assistance and encouragement from family and friends is a critical part of coping with bereavement. Social support can be either "problem-directed" (i.e., seeking practical forms of help from others) or "non-problem directed" (i.e., expressing one's feelings to receive emotional support and advice) (Cohen, 1988). Sharing the loss with others helps the individual to unburden oneself of emotional pain, gain acceptance of feelings, and return to a positive psychological state (Lagrand, 1986).

While avoidance, the search for meaning, faith in religion/spirituality, and seeking social support are frequently observed behaviours in those recently bereaved, this review is not exhaustive. Other coping mechanisms include culturally specific traditions for dealing with loss, pursuing professional assistance (i.e., one-to-one counseling or therapy), or participating in a specific form of social support, self-help/mutual aid groups.

Self-Help as a Mechanism for Coping

The idea of "self-help" is one which has existed, in some form, in all cultures for centuries. Traditional societies functioned according to principles of collective responsibility and collaborative assistance, where community members supported individuals in dealing with their problems on an ongoing basis in order to diminish loneliness and psychological suffering (Lakin, 1985). The rise of individualism in the Western world, greater economic and geographic freedoms, and the development of the medical model as the theoretical basis of therapy are factors that arose over time to

challenge the emotionally supportive functions previously provided by peers and kin (Lakin, 1985).

Currently, however, the field of mental health is experiencing somewhat of a shift in focus, with less emphasis on the *medicalization* of individual suffering, and more on *support* for those who seek assistance (Levine & Perkins, 1997). In addition to questions around the efficacy of one-to-one treatment, the high cost of psychotherapy, and the lack of success in meeting the increasingly diverse demands of consumers of mental health services, people have become concerned with the decline of communal support and cohesion (Gartner & Riessman, 1984). In response to the changing needs of society, self-help groups (SHGs) evolved to reintroduce communities to notions of collective assistance and to fulfill the emotional needs of individuals in a meaningful and cost-effective way.

The development of self-help (or peer support/mutual aid) as a means of dealing with psychological difficulties has been said to be the most impressive advancement thus far in the field of mental health (Gartner & Riessman, 1984). While other associations based on volunteer participation are experiencing declining membership, SHGs are prospering (Humphreys, 1997). Values such as empowerment, choice, and activism guide the operation of SHGs, increasing their appeal for members.

The overriding purpose governing the operation of SHGs is for members to "assist and be assisted in coping with the emotions and dilemmas generated by problems in living" (Levine & Perkins, 1997, p. 304). These groups emphasize voluntary participation, with members sharing a common problem/interest, similar experiences,

and a commitment to some specified cause of ideology (Weber & Cohen, 1982). Group members disclose their histories and learn valuable coping mechanisms from others who have experienced similar challenges. Self-help groups are effective because in addition to providing a venue for sharing effective coping strategies, they work to promote a psychological sense of community, present solid role models who have "been there and gotten through it," and create a network of positive social relationships (Katz, 1993; Levine & Perkins, 1997).

Membership in SHGs has been estimated at being between 15-25 million in North America and is rising annually (Kessler, Mickelson, & Zhao, 1997; Levine & Perkins, 1997). Self-help groups are able to attend to the diverse needs of society in that there are numerous groups differentiated by their target population and purpose (Katz, 1993; Levine & Perkins, 1997). In fact, some form of mutual aid exists for individuals experiencing anything from social isolation and stigmatization to those working towards personal growth (Levine & Perkins, 1997).

Self-Help as a Means of Coping With Loss

Self-help has increasingly been used as a popular coping mechanism for those experiencing the loss of a loved one. While research in the area of self-help and sibling bereavement is virtually absent, much attention has been devoted to assessing the impact of SHG membership on parental or conjugal bereavement (e.g., Levy, Derby, & Martinkowski, 1993; Videka-Sherman & Lieberman, 1985).

The loss of a child is clearly a devastating and incomprehensible event that leaves surviving parents with feelings of emptiness and extreme grief. Both the meaning and

purpose of life in general are questioned extensively (Wheeler, 1994). Research regarding interventions for bereaved parents indicates that while SHG involvement may represent an opportunity for the development of meaningful friendships based on common experiences, improvements in social functioning or mental health of members are minimal (Videka-Sherman & Lieberman, 1985). This finding may be due to the "nature of the devastation wrought and the limits of any intervention to alter the sequelae of losing a child" (Videka-Sherman & Lieberman, 1985, p. 79).

Research in the area of self-help as a useful intervention for conjugal bereavement demonstrates somewhat more positive results. For example, a comparison of brief psychotherapy to SHGs for widows indicates that both approaches were beneficial in assisting these women in dealing with their loss (Marmar, Horowitz, Weiss, Wilner, & Kaltreider, 1988). Lieberman and Videka-Sherman (1986) reported similar findings, noting that many of the positive mental health benefits gained by widows in SHGs are due, in part, to the new relationships developed with other members. It is understood that while the negative effects of conjugal bereavement dissipate naturally with time, SHG participation serves to reduce anger, depression, and anxiety at a slightly faster rate, with the added bonus of providing the opportunity for social interaction (Caserta & Lund, 1993; Levy, Derby, & Martinkowski, 1993; Vachon, Lyall, Rogers, Freedman-Letofsky, & Freeman, 1980).

Levy, Derby, and Martinkowski (1993) offer that the effectiveness of SHGs in dealing with bereavement is often underestimated, as "objective" studies fail to capture the personal successes that are actually described by participants. In other words, it is

possible that the sometimes meager results of research looking at SHG effectiveness can be explained by the fact that "objective" research methods may fail to capture the richness and diversity of the experiences of members, thereby minimizing the reported benefits of social support.

Limitations of Current Research

While useful in orienting the reader to the issues involved with the areas of sibling bereavement and self-help, the literature reviewed here is limited in some critical ways. Firstly, as previously mentioned, research regarding sibling bereavement is simply very sparse. Possible reasons for overlooking this topic may be due to the difficulties encountered in studying such a sensitive subject, or perhaps because the intensity of parental bereavement necessarily shifts the focus of interest towards *their* grief at the loss of a child.

Secondly, there has been no study of the experience of sibling bereavement during one's young adult years (i.e., ages 18-30). With the exception of Balk (1983), Davies (1991), and Hogan and DeSantis (1992, 1996) who focus on sibling bereavement in adolescence, most existing research focuses on the loss of a sibling during childhood. As the experience of bereavement interferes with many of the developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence, the importance given to studying the effects of sibling loss during these ranges is understandable. Young adulthood, however, also possesses its share of issues and concerns whose resolution is complicated by sibling loss, and as such deserves attention as well.

Thirdly, the majority of studies in this area are quantitative in nature (e.g., Balk,

1983; Coleman & Coleman, 1984; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991). Although these studies include some qualitative aspects (i.e., the use of structured interviews), the main focus is obtaining measurable, concrete data. This heavy reliance on scales and numbers does not permit the incorporation of participants' thoughts and ideas, thereby precluding a deep understanding of this experience.

Finally, the focus of sibling bereavement research is typically concerned with *describing* grief reactions and processes (e.g., Balk, 1983; Davies, 1993). With the exception of one study looking at factors that help and hinder coping with adolescent sibling bereavement (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994), little effort has been made to 1) investigate what supports or interventions are available to bereaved siblings, and 2) evaluate the efficacy of any such supports for these individuals.

Research Questions

It is clear that the paucity of research in the area of sibling bereavement and the holes in existing studies have precluded the development of a sound theoretical model to explain this form of loss as it occurs in young adulthood. The purpose of this current research was to address the aforementioned limitations of current sibling bereavement research by combining in-depth interviews with bereaved siblings and participant observations (obtained through my own attendance in a self-help group for bereaved individuals) to fulfill the following objectives:

1) Develop an in-depth understanding of the experience(s) of bereaved siblings who had experienced their loss in young adulthood (i.e., between the ages of 18-30).

2a) Identify helpful coping strategies that were used to deal with the loss.

2b) Identify unhelpful coping strategies that were used to deal with the loss.

3a) Identify outside influences that were helpful during coping.

3b) Identify outside influences that were not helpful during coping.

4) Outline action goals towards which communities can work to assist bereaved siblings in dealing with their loss.

My intention has been to achieve these goals by blending theory, my own experiences, and suggestions for future action and research.

Methodology

Methodological Assumptions

Having decided to pursue a thesis topic in the general area of sibling bereavement, I began to consult literature in the area of death and grief. I realized that while my own experiences of bereavement were not atypical, each case of loss is unique. I became interested in connecting with other bereaved siblings in an effort to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences, and the different ways in which they coped with their grief.

There are several theoretical frameworks from which I have drawn in order to orient this research. These concepts of social constructionism, phenomenology, heuristics, and induction blend elements from sociology, psychology, and philosophy to provide a strong contextual basis for analysis.

The common thread which runs through each of these paradigms is an explicit rejection of positivism. Researchers who work from a positivist framework are

concerned with external, observable phenomena that are replicable and predictable (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Quantitative measures are obtained and used to formulate theories which focus on behaviours. Essentially, subjectivity is ignored and the impact of relationships on the human experience is dismissed, because the positivist model does not incorporate such concepts.

Critics of the objective, positivist school of thought argue that quantitative approaches are inadequate when studying human situations because these methods "strip important variables (which exert large effects and greatly alter findings) from consideration through the use of randomization and control" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). According to these critics, the meaning and purpose underlying one's actions are understood to be equally as important as the behaviour itself. The goal of social science research should therefore be to understand the complexities of human existence by accessing the world of "lived experience" from the perspectives of those who live it.

Sociologists Berger and Luckman (1967) elaborate upon this point in their discussion of *social constructionism*. These theorists view reality as "pluralistic," in that it may be expressed through a variety of symbols and languages, and "plastic" in the sense that human agents may stretch and shape it. Essentially, knowledge and truth are created through perspective and are not objective, static conditions. Therefore, "reality is the result of social processes within a specific context, and knowledge claims are intelligible and debatable only within such a context" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 125).

Social constructionism is a useful approach in this study of sibling bereavement. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), inquiry is the process by which the investigator

and participant are interactively linked so that the constructions of each party may be understood and reconstructed. Assuming the dual role of both investigator and bereaved sibling, I will serve as the "passionate participant," reconstructing my own meanings in conjunction with other participants. Applying the principles of social constructionism to this research, therefore, highlights the importance of acknowledging and integrating subjectivity (of both investigator and participant) when ascribing meaning to the experience of sibling bereavement.

Related to these concepts is the issue of *phenomenology*. The focus of phenomenological inquiry is to ask "What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?" (Patton, 1990, p. 69). Clearly, the principles of phenomenological research may be readily applied to this study, as the goal of conducting in-depth interviews with bereaved siblings is to invite them to share both a description and an interpretation of their experiences related to their loss.

While the goal of phenomenological inquiry is to bring to the forefront the experiences of the participants in the study, this research will also feature my own story. *Heuristic inquiry*, a branch of phenomenology, focuses on the personal experience and insights of the researcher (Patton, 1990). Applying heuristics to research is possible only "where the researcher has personal experience with and intense interest in the phenomenon under study" (Patton, 1990, p. 71). As a bereaved sibling, my position as the investigator in this research provides me with a unique perspective on this issue. Complementing the in-depth interviews with my own views and reflections (through my participation in a self-help group for bereaved individuals) is an attempt to increase the

richness and personal significance of the investigation.

A final concept relevant to this study is *induction*. Quantitative studies are typically deductive in that hypotheses based on some general theory are outlined prior to the start of the research, and specific findings are interpreted within this context. Conversely, qualitative research emphasizes the importance of inductive analysis, where "patterns, themes, and categories emerge *from* (italics added) the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection" (Patton, 1990, p. 390). In the case of this research, the specific experiences of each participant will not be analyzed according to assumptions that have been determined beforehand, rather the emergent themes will be used to build general patterns.

The Research Context

In searching for a research context, I thought it necessary to look not only for a setting focused on providing self-help opportunities for bereaved individuals, but also one whose values and goals are compatible with those of Community Psychology. **Bereaved Families of Ontario** (BFO) is one such group.

BFO is a not-for-profit organization based on values of volunteerism, action, and participation that works to provide support for bereaved individuals in many ways (e.g., telephone contact, one-to-one support, small group sessions, etc.). A variety of bereavement SHGs (each led by trained volunteers who themselves are bereaved individuals) exist, each targeting the needs of different people. Groups are available to parents grieving the loss of a child, individuals who have lost a loved one to suicide, children/teens who have lost a parent, and people who have lost someone special (i.e., a

spouse, parent, partner, friend, or sibling).

In addition to offering support to those who have experienced a significant loss, BFO focuses on increasing community awareness of its services (e.g., fundraisers, charity events, etc.) and provides information on death and the grieving process through community presentations, speakers, a resource library, newsletters and brochures, and an Internet website.

In order to attend to issues of diversity, I worked with two branches of this organization throughout this thesis project. While both BFO, Waterloo Region and BFO, Halton/Peel Region are similar in their goals, values, and practices in providing support to bereaved individuals, the latter deals with a larger geographic area, and as such caters to a more diverse range of consumers. In addition to wanting to benefit from the richness of data that could be gained through speaking with a group of individuals who differ along these lines, Waterloo Region and Halton/Peel Region are both conveniently located and easily accessible. It is for these reasons that I selected these chapters of BFO as a base for my research.

Participatory Action Research

This study was conducted according to the principles of **Participatory Action Research** (PAR). This approach has been defined as maximizing the "participation of stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the problem under study, in the systematic collection and analysis of information for the purpose of taking action and making change" (Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998, p. 888). PAR is oriented towards creating a research setting in which not only are both the participant and

researcher seen as equal (i.e., the researcher is not considered to be an "expert" gaining information from the "subject"), but both work together to share knowledge and stimulate ideas to effect change where required (Patton, 1990). In this study, participants took part in in-depth interviews with me, and were asked to provide their insight through feedback on several different occasions. The information obtained through these interviews was used to gain holistic understanding of sibling bereavement in young adulthood, with a special focus on factors which have been both helpful and unhelpful in coping. Aside from expanding the existing base of research in this area, this knowledge can assist in the identification of current gaps in support for these individuals, and provide a rationale for suggestions to address these needs.

Participants and Sampling

As existing literature focuses primarily on clinical samples or retrospective accounts of the experience of sibling bereavement many years later (e.g., Robinson & Mahon, 1997), the goal of this study was to access a community-based sample of participants whose loss had been relatively recent. Due to the sensitive nature of the experience of bereavement and the presence of an established relationship between BFO staff persons and young adult bereaved siblings, Support Group Co-ordinators from each chapter of BFO identified and approached individuals who they thought may be appropriate for participation in this study (i.e., bereaved young adults who had experienced the loss of a sister or brother between the ages of 18 and 30). Potential participants were either young persons who had themselves attended support group meetings at BFO or whose parents had utilized the organization's services.

After having received a detailed description of the nature of this study and their role as a participant from BFO staff persons (see Appendix A for the Checklist I provided to those at BFO to be used in recruiting potential participants), these individuals either declined to take part in the research, or agreed to speak with me. The names of individuals who expressed an interest in sharing their experience were then provided to me, and I contacted each of them to arrange a mutually agreeable time to meet.

The young women who participated in this study ranged 18 to 31 years of age, and had experienced the loss of a sibling between 2 and 4 years ago. Five participants currently reside in Halton/Peel Region, and 2 of the young women live in the Waterloo area. Three participants continue to live in the family home, while the other 4 are living with their spouses. Presently, 1 participant is finishing her final year of high school; 1 is working on completing a university degree; 2 have earned professional degrees and are now in the workforce; and 3 of the young women are working and attending school simultaneously. In the majority of cases, participants lost their sister or brother in some sort of accident, and in one instance, suicide was the cause of death. In all instances, therefore, the death was completely unexpected. In all but 2 cases, the loss of the participant's sibling left them as the family's only surviving child.

The Research Relationship

Each interview took place at either the Waterloo Region or Halton/Peel Region BFO office, depending on the participant's geographic location. I met participants as they entered the office, introduced myself, and led each young woman into the meeting room where our discussion would take place.

In each instance, I began by providing each participant with the Study Information Sheet and obtaining Informed Consent (see Appendices B and C respectively). I then described the topics we would be discussing, and encouraged the young woman to ask any questions she might have throughout the process. Before beginning our conversation, I spent a few minutes telling the participant about myself, sharing the details around my loss, and explaining the motivations behind this thesis project. In addition to giving the participant a few moments to become comfortable and compose her thoughts, I thought that sharing my story was an integral part of establishing trust and a common ground between us. At the end of each session (which lasted between 50 minutes and 2 hours), the young woman was asked to convey any thoughts or feelings she had on the interview process.

My association with participants did not, however, end with the conclusion of the interview. I maintained ongoing contact with each young woman through phone, mail, or email, depending on the circumstances, for the purposes of gaining feedback and simply updating them on the progress of this project.

A Departure From the Original Research Design

While the original intention of this study was to meet with 5 women and 5 men who had experienced the loss of a sibling during their young adult years, 7 women enthusiastically agreed to share their stories, while each young man who was approached declined. Due to this lack of interest on the part of males who were contacted by BFO staff persons, I attempted to access male participants through several informal means, none of which were successful.

Although bereaved brothers were not agreeable to discussing their experiences in a formalized interview setting, I thought that this research would be incomplete if it reflected only the experiences of young adult, bereaved sisters without considering the stories of their male counterparts. In order to address this issue, therefore, I modified my originally proposed method to include all 7 interviews with the bereaved sisters, and interviewed 2 service providers who work to support young adult bereaved brothers. While the overall purpose of this study has been to *directly* access the experiences of young adult bereaved siblings of *both* genders, those who work with these individuals on a regular basis can also provide valuable insight into their experiences.

Gathering Information

Methods Used in Gathering Data

As previously mentioned, the primary means of data collection in this study was the in-depth interview. While specific topics to be addressed were identified in advance of the actual interview, the *process* guided the direction of each interview, as well as the exact wording of questions. This is the basic premise underlying the General Interview Guide Approach which involves

> outlining a set of issues that are to be explored with each respondent before interviewing begins. These issues need not be taken in any particular order and the actual wording of questions is not determined in advance. The interview guide serves as a basic checklist during the interview to make sure that all relevant topics are covered...with the interviewer responsible for adapting both the wording and the sequence of questions to specific respondents in the context of the actual interview (Patton, 1990, p. 284).

Using this approach allowed the participant to determine the pace of the interview, and provided each respondent with control over the direction of the process.

The themes which were explored in each interview corresponded directly with the research questions outlined earlier. For a detailed summary of the Interview Guide used when meeting with participants, see Appendix D.

In addition to utilizing the interview method of inquiry, a secondary source of data employed was that of participant observation. "In participant observation the researcher shares as intimately as possible in the life and activities of the setting under study...the purpose of such participation being to develop an insider's view of what is happening" (Patton, 1990, p. 207). Specifically, I took part in a support group and documented my own thoughts and feelings on the SHG process in a personal journal. Material taken from these fieldnotes served as a complement to the information obtained in interviews.

Aside from these formal means of collecting data, I also had the opportunity to access much worthwhile information on a more informal basis. I attended several talks on grief and bereavement, watched videos on coping with loss, participated in workshops on providing support to bereaved individuals, and had several intimate conversations with people experiencing many different forms of bereavement. While these sources of information are not organized or structured ways of gathering data, informal conversations and observations are acknowledged as providing rich and valuable insight into a phenomenon (Patton, 1990).

Analysis of Data

Each in-depth interview was audio-taped (with permission from the participant) in order to obtain an accurate record of the session. In addition, I recorded any personal

reflections or observations throughout the interview with regard to the participant's mood, demeanor, etc. At the end of each interview, the participant's impressions of the process were also noted.

After completing each interview, tape-recorded conversations were transcribed verbatim. The entire transcript was read while replaying the audio-taped interview in order to check for accuracy and to gain a complete sense of the quality of each discussion, as well as to register any relevant changes in the participant's intonation throughout the session. These thoughts, and the personal reflections noted during the interview, were recorded in the margins of each transcription.

Each transcript was given to the appropriate participant (by mail), providing her with the opportunity to make changes, clarify information, and add any thoughts or impressions she had on the interview and/or the process. After making the necessary modifications, each final transcript was analyzed according to the principles of "open coding," a technique in qualitative data analysis. Open coding involves reducing the data and comparing categories that are formed in order to describe developing themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The analysis of data continued until each category was determined to be independent of other categories, and no new themes seemed likely to emerge.

Verification of the Trustworthiness of Data

The trustworthiness of the data in this study was established in three ways. First, an "audit trail" was developed throughout both stages of data gathering and analysis. Creating an audit trail involves documenting all of the steps taken while collecting and

examining the data. This is an important means of proving that data are trustworthy because it allows people to evaluate the consistency of the data as well as to follow the rationale behind the analysis.

A second method of ensuring that these data are trustworthy involved maintaining ongoing contact with each participant and involving them in each phase of the data analysis. For example, feedback from participants was solicited at the end of the interview, again after reading the transcript of the interview, and finally after reading the draft of this thesis. In addition, all quotes featured in the final draft were used only after being confirmed for accuracy by each participant. Involving participants in each of these phases of the study ensured that the voices of these individuals were being recognized, thereby enhancing the credibility of this research.

A final means of verifying the trustworthiness of this data involved the use of "triangulation." According to Patton (1990), triangulation refers to the use of a variety of methodologies to study a single phenomenon. Combining methods in this way strengthens the results of a study, as it can overcome the bias present in any one data source. In this case, the triangulation of both sources (i.e., having several participants share their experiences) and methods (i.e., using both interviews, participant observations, and informal conversations/observations) increased the reliability, validity, and accuracy of the data.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting a study of this nature, it is imperative that a researcher strives to respect the dignity of participants, maintains integrity in relationships, and remains

sensitive to unique aspects of each situation at all times. The researcher should not be regarded as an expert, but simply as an equal who is interested in the life and experiences of the participant. Above all else, the investigator should endeavor to maximize benefits and minimize risks for participants.

The death of a loved one and the effects of that loss are often private and emotional issues. A potential risk for participants was that they may have suffered negative psychological consequences by discussing such a painful and distressing topic. The release of these emotions could have potentially interfered with personal and/or professional functioning.

In order to minimize this risk, all interviews took place at one of the BFO offices, with a trained counselor on the premises throughout the session. The participant's level of comfort was increased by 1) performing the interview in a familiar location, and 2) having a trained counselor available for immediate intervention if necessary, and 3) debriefing at the end of each interview.

In addition, all participants were assured, both verbally and in writing that all information obtained throughout the interview would be kept confidential. All participants were also reminded that they reserved the right to refuse to speak to any issue they wished not to discuss.

The benefit of participating in this study is that by sharing their experiences, each individual contributed to the limited knowledge base that exists for sibling bereavement. By telling us their stories, these participants provided us, both on personal and academic levels, with an increased understanding of the experience of sibling loss and the ways in

which they sought to cope with this devastating event.

Research Results

In order to provide the reader with a clear and holistic impression of each young woman's experience as a bereaved sibling, the description of each major theme that emerged from the data will be preceded by a brief profile of one of the participants. To avoid repetition, a condensed version of *every* woman's story will not be included. However, the experiences of all participants will be featured throughout this section in the form of quotations in appropriate areas. As a means of safeguarding confidentiality, all of the names used here are pseudonyms. Further, any statements that could potentially reveal the participant's identity have been either altered (with her permission) or removed.

Although these vignettes have been included to offer the reader more than simply a cursory description of the outcomes and emotions surrounding sibling bereavement, it is important to note that these are not *my* experiences. While I have made great efforts to capture the true essence of their encounters in these depictions, the fact that these are not firsthand accounts limits a full understanding of the issues faced by these participants.

In speaking with these young women about their experiences with sibling loss, it became clear to me that when considering the circumstances around each death event, and the impact of the loss, each case of sibling bereavement is very unique. When taken together, however, the stories of participants seemed to have many important aspects in common. The themes which evolved around the effects of the loss, helpful or unhelpful coping mechanisms they used, and the outside influences which they felt either

facilitated or hindered effective coping, pointed clearly towards a reality that many young adult bereaved sisters likely share. This section will conclude with a brief interpretation of the experience of men who become bereaved siblings in young adulthood, as told by those who provide support to these individuals.

Effects of the Loss

Dana was 22 years old when she lost her sibling in a boating accident. Her sister Sandra, who was 5 years her junior, had been camping with friends during the Victoria Day long weekend. She and 8 friends had taken a boat out to a nearby island and on the way back, it capsized and Sandra drowned.

During the weeks and months that followed Sandra's death, Dana's life changed considerably. As the only surviving sibling, she was motivated to protect her parents emotionally, wanting to shield them from any further pain. She felt empty and alone, and experienced a sense of psychological detachment. At the time, she was studying to become a nurse. Her inability to concentrate, however, made school difficult, and so she decided to take a year off. She ended a long-term relationship, and noticed that her social circle started to shrink. This left her with only a few close friends on whom she relied.

When I met with Dana, she was back in school and in a new relationship. Her parents seemed to require less emotional attention and her family was beginning to adapt to its new structure. She had become involved with BFO, attending a support group for bereaved individuals. She had also participated in training sessions to help her become a Peer Supporter, and now provides assistance to other bereaved siblings.

I asked Dana how she was feeling about her life now that 2 years had passed since her sister's death. She shared with me that she was still trying to adjust to being a bereaved sibling and to all of the changes that occurred as a result of this experience. She summed it up by saying "I'm okay...but every day is (still) a challenge".

The death of someone special necessarily produces changes in the lives of those who s/he has left behind. In situations where a young adult loses a sister or brother, the effects of the loss extend into her family; her physical health and psychological well-being; her academic or occupational goals; and the bonds which characterize her social life.

Change in Family Dynamics

When asked to describe how their lives had been altered as a result of their losses, participants indicated that perhaps the most significant changes they encountered took place in their family systems. Specifically, these young women were often forced to take over the role of "caregiver" within the family, they experienced high levels of parental overprotection, and in several cases, participants learned to value surviving family members more.

Role reversal between surviving sibling and parents. Participants shared that upon receiving the news about the death of their siblings, their parents, understandably, often went into states of unbelievable shock and devastation. Although participants also suffered extreme emotional debilitation, in order to shield their parents from further pain, surviving siblings moved quickly into a state of numbness in order to tend to the necessary arrangements around the funeral. Important decisions which would have normally been taken care of by parents were now left to these young women. As two participants communicated:

> *"It was almost like I had to change roles with my parents. I had to be the parent, sort of. I had to do a lot of the preparations and stuff like that." (Dana)*

> *"I was completely on autopilot. I was just concerned with making sure that the casket, the stone...everything (that) my mom wanted, some of what my dad wanted, and some of what I wanted was thrown in there...because this was permanent. Whatever decisions we made, there was no going back. And (I also tried) to make sure that everybody was okay and taken care of." (Grace)*

This reversal of roles seemed to continue in different ways as the months after the loss passed by. In several instances, surviving siblings worked to protect their parents

emotionally.

> *"I've been told that I just kind of kept to myself and...separated myself from my parents. I never spoke to them about (my sister). I just found it too hard. I (would have rather gone) and talked to my friends or a complete stranger before I'd talk to them...because I don't like to see my parents upset." (Dana)*

In other cases, surviving siblings felt that maintaining close physical proximity might help their parents get through the first few months. In addition to the psychological benefits parent(s) may have gained from having the surviving sibling nearby, participants felt that they could relieve some of their parents' burden of having to perform day-to-day tasks. Some participants who had left home returned to live with parents for some time, and those who had planned on moving out on their own held off temporarily.

> *"I moved (back) in with my mom because my parents are separated, so it was just her and my sister at home. I guess...I (took) on the role of making sure she was okay." (Brenda)*

> *"I don't really like the idea of moving out immediately, because my brother pretty much doesn't live at home. I don't want to move out because then... my...parents are (left) by themselves. I don't want to do that (to them), so I figure I'll give it another year, you know...settle them in and then I can move out." (Erin)*

Parental overprotection of surviving sibling. While participants spent a lot of time trying to support and shield their parents from pain, mothers and fathers also felt the need to protect the surviving sibling. Participants conveyed that in many cases, their parents feared that their surviving child(ren) may somehow meet the same fate as their deceased child. Surviving siblings often felt smothered and overprotected as they now received all of the attention and concern that their parents had previously spread over 2

or more children.

> *"I kept (the fact that I had hurt my foot playing soccer) a secret for 4 months. When I told my mom, she was like 'Oh no! It's a neurological problem! It's MS...it's...' and she just went off the deep end. I mean, my foot is fine, but if anything ever happens to me, my mom will kill herself." (Felicia)*

> *"For over a month or so, I didn't go out anywhere because I knew they were going through this, and they didn't need to worry about me (on top of everything else)." (Dana)*

Valuing family more. In many cases, participants reported that they and other family members seemed to gain a clearer and stronger sense of family as a result of their losses. While the family unit is usually the most familiar and enduring bond in one's life, the stability of these relationships often gets taken for granted. These women indicated that the loss of their siblings prompted family members to value and appreciate each other more. One participant described the experience of her family:

> *"I think we're closer in some ways. We cherish each other more, and we don't take each other for granted. We don't argue as often because (we) know that you never know what's going to happen." (Angela)*

Changes in Physical Health and Psychological Well-Being

Another important effect of sibling loss was changes in health, both physical and psychological. Participants described feeling physically overburdened immediately following the death of their siblings, a condition that was usually short-lived. Feelings of depression, grief, and guilt, however, plagued them psychologically and often persisted for some time.

Strain on physical health. During the time right after the loss up until weeks after the funeral, participants reported feeling physically exhausted.

"It's (the experience of sibling loss) just so draining and you never want to do anything. You're always just tired." (Angela)

This physical fatigue was generally attributed to not eating properly, having to shoulder many of the responsibilities around the funeral, and a lack of rest. Sleep was often impossible for one participant who experienced recurrent nightmares around her brother's death.

"They put me on sleeping pills right away. I spent the entire first night after it happened, wide awake. I was afraid to close my eyes because even though I didn't see him die, I pictured how it would have happened." (Grace)

Consequences for psychological well-being. The psychological aftereffects of the loss lasted much longer than the physical impacts of the loss. Many surviving siblings experienced strong feelings of depression that sometimes continued for months.

"I kind of went through cycles where I would be okay, and then I'd get depressed again and need help." (Brenda)

Some participants felt uninterested and apathetic towards things that were previously important to them, whether it had to do with schoolwork, socializing with friends, or simply taking care in their general appearance.

"(When I went back to class, people immediately knew something was wrong). I hadn't brushed my hair, and I wasn't wearing makeup. I (never) leave the house without some kind of makeup on. And I had my glasses on, and I usually don't wear my glasses outside the house." (Erin)

These feelings of listlessness and despair were the obvious result of the sibling's absence. This depression, however, was exacerbated by two strong factors that further added to their grief. Firstly, participants not only grieved for the loss, but they also mourned for the future that their siblings would never realize.

"I'm sorry for my loss. I'm sorry that I don't have a sister to talk to anymore. I'm sorry that when I get married, my sister won't be there to be the maid of honour. I'm sorry that she won't graduate this June." (Erin)

Secondly, some participants expressed feeling guilt over not having worked at maintaining a closer relationship with the sibling. One participant explains the regret she felt about the distance that seemed to exist between herself and her brother:

"I wish that I would have had more (of) a close relationship with him. When he died, I looked through some of his diaries...some of the things that he felt, for example with respect to (our) parents' divorce, were things that I felt as well. We had never really spoken to each other (and) had always just carried our own pain. I think that if we had come together, we could have helped each other. If I had taken my head out of my books for a while, I could have spent more time with him." (Cheryl)

Change in Academic/Occupational Goals

A third area of participants' lives that was significantly affected by the loss of their sibling involves their academic/occupational pursuits. Participants recounted that when they returned to either school or the workplace after their bereavement leave, they initially experienced deficits in concentration and found it difficult to return to their old patterns of studying or working. With time, however, they became more determined to succeed, and in most cases, changed their goals along the way.

Lack of concentration. Participants shared that having to deal with all of the changes that occurred as a result of the death of a sibling (e.g., in family dynamics, health, etc.) left them without much energy to concentrate on work or school. These women were both frustrated and anxious about the fact that it now took much longer to accomplish tasks that were previously performed with ease.

"It's hard to get up and go (to school) and concentrate (on getting)

your work done." (Angela)

"I've handled (a lot) in the past, but (the loss) has sort of slowed down my learning process because I find it more difficult to concentrate." (Cheryl)

Participants were concerned about their inability to return to their old academic/occupational routine. They often felt discouraged about the lack of fit between their new work/study habits and the goals they had set for themselves prior to the loss.

Increased determination to succeed. After some time, as participants began to adjust to the changes in their lives, their feelings of defeat with regard to their original academic/occupational expectations were replaced by an increased determination to succeed. In many instances, focusing on school or work was a productive distraction from their grief.

"I was 27 (years old) when my brother died, I got (this) new job when I was 28, and I was a manager at 29. I'm positive that's because I had to throw myself into ***something*** *(so) I threw myself into my work and I basically jumped over 5 years of my life." (Felicia)*

"I'm more goal-oriented (now). Before my sister died, I (didn't care too much), but now all I care about is making a good impression, doing my job to the best of my ability, and getting the most out of it." (Erin)

Newfound need to attach meaning to goals. Although participants responded to their inability to perform as they once did in school or work with a strong resolve to achieve success, the goals which they strived to reach changed. Since becoming bereaved siblings, these women came to the realization that going through the motions of school or working towards a career that would be financially lucrative but personally unsatisfying was no longer acceptable. Bearing witness to the instability of life prompted them to want to get as much out of their time as possible. This caused them to develop a

newfound need to attach meaning to any goals they set for themselves.

> *"Before (my sister) died, I did a lot of math and science and was pretty good at that. I liked art, but I was going to major in math, because it's a good thing to major in math. After she died, I just had no use for it. It just didn't mean anything at all anymore. With art, I could express myself... it just meant more to me than it did before." (Angela)*

> *"Part of me still wants to be a doctor, but part of me also says 'Do you really want to spend the next 5 years attached at the hip to medical school (and) have no life outside of that?' I look at my new house, and I look at my husband, and I think 'If I spend the next 5 years in med school, by the time I get out, I'll be 29...then within 5 years after that, I may want to have kids.' (If I go to med school), there's no time for doing anything else." (Grace)*

Transformation of Social Bonds

A final area of participants' lives that was significantly affected as a result of becoming a bereaved sibling involved their friendships. This was perhaps the most disappointing change participants spoke about. These women were both surprised and hurt by the lack of support they received from people who they thought would always "be there" for them. This resulted in participants eventually drifting away from these individuals, ending close friendships that had in some cases, spanned several years.

Lack of support from friends. Participants learned that having to deal with a devastating loss tested their friendships. In some instances, friends were understanding and helpful. In the majority of cases, however, while friends were sympathetic at first, with time they often became uncomfortable around these women, and lacked the patience required to provide support and sustain the relationship.

> *"I had a lot of friends and they were there for me (to a certain degree) when it happened...but only for so long. They can't really understand. I don't expect them to, and I know that I'm different from then since it's happened, but they're not really 'there'. They'd send me flowers and*

stuff, but it's not the flowers that I need. I just need them to sit and listen, and they're not so good at that. And (their understanding) gets less and less the longer ago it happened." (Angela)

Drifting away from friends. Participants thought that the main reason why many of their friends were unsupportive was that they simply could not understand how becoming a bereaved sibling had changed their lives. Although painful, many of these women either ended these friendships that were no long fulfilling, or simply allowed them to dissipate with time.

"We've (my friends and I) drifted apart in a sense. I didn't really know how to relate to them. I find we're taking our own separate paths... our personalities are changing." (Felicia)

"I have seemed to gravitate away from my friends who are very social because sometimes I'll make plans to do something, but (then) I don't feel like being social. I'm just not as bubbly...as I was (before), and they tend not to really understand." (Brenda)

The effects of losing a sibling appeared to touch many important areas of participants' lives. These changes within the family, health, academic/career goals, and friendships were often harsh and difficult to deal with at first. Each young woman tried several different strategies, some helpful, some unhelpful, to cope with their new circumstances. With time, they found successful ways in which to confront these challenges, and were eventually able to adapt to their new realities.

Helpful Coping Mechanisms

Angela's older sister Mary died in a car accident 2 years ago. Two days before Christmas, Mary was on her way home from work when her car skidded on ice and spun out of control, killing her instantly. Angela was devastated. In addition to being Angela's sister, Mary was also her best friend. While they had their share of disagreements, Angela describes them as being each other's closest companion and confidante.

While nothing could fill the hole that her sister's absence had left inside her, Angela tried to cope with her loss in a variety of ways. Early on, she viewed the funeral as helpful in making the experience seem more real. As the months progressed, she found comfort in discussing her feelings with her family and also by attending support groups at BFO. She visited her sister's gravesite regularly and often spent time in Mary's bedroom as a way of remaining close to her. She also discovered a talent for creating art and poetry, hobbies which allowed her to express her emotions and brought her a sense of inner peace and contentment.

Currently, Angela is completing her last year of high school, and is looking at her options in terms of university for next year. Although at 18 years of age she was the youngest participant that I met with, I was greatly impressed with the maturity and confidence she exudes. I was fortunate enough to meet with Angela on several subsequent occasions, and each time I spoke with her, it became clearer to me that her sister's death, while terribly unfortunate, caused her to develop a unique type of poise or self-assurance, and a keen awareness of her aspirations for the future, qualities not normally characteristic to those in her age group.

Participants described a variety of coping mechanisms they used in an effort to manage their grief and contend with their new status as a bereaved sibling. Throughout the initial weeks following the sibling's death, these women found the funeral helpful in gaining closure, and felt that staying emotionally isolated was beneficial during that time. As the months progressed, drawing on social support, maintaining a symbolic connection with the deceased sibling, and keeping active were effective ways of coping with the loss.

The Funeral as a Means of Closure

While participants acknowledged that attending a funeral is not the most pleasant event to have to attend, especially when a close family member has died, being at this ceremony was a valuable means of gaining closure. In addition to making the loss seem more "real", seeing how important the sibling was to others was very emotionally comforting. Two participants shared their experiences:

"I would have much rather been (at the funeral) than not because I hadn't seen (my sister) since the accident, and I wanted to see her again. It was helpful because it made me realize that it was real. It made me realize that she really is gone. I think that if I hadn't been there, I would have been in denial...I'd still be thinking about it and wondering." (Angela)

"We had about 1200 people at the funeral. It was nice to see that kind of love, and we had an outpouring of support from his friends particularly. We tried to be strong in those days...I thought that the funeral helped with some closure." (Grace)

Remaining Emotionally Isolated

During the initial months following the loss of the sibling, participants, understandably, felt emotionally overburdened. In an effort to protect themselves psychologically, these women went through a period in which they isolated themselves emotionally from others. They avoided discussing both the life and the death of the sibling with friends and family, essentially keeping their grief to themselves.

"It was very hard to talk about it. We would just talk about other things, which was fine for me at the time." (Brenda)

"I've been told that I just 'dropped out'. I just didn't feel. I pushed it away and (went) on with whatever task was next." (Dana)

"I didn't want to talk about it. I'd (just) go to my room and cry." (Erin)

Drawing on Social Support

In most instances, participants' psychological withdrawal was only temporary. Within months, these women began to talk about the loss. Whether they relied on informal or formal means of support, they found that sharing their thoughts and emotions with others allowed them to vent their frustration and express their grief.

Informal support. Participants indicated that much of their sadness was alleviated

by communicating their feelings with family or friends.

> *"I like to talk to (my mother) about memories about my brother. (At one point I couldn't), but now I find that makes me feel very good. We can laugh...and it makes us happy." (Brenda)*

> *"I've got 2 pretty good girlfriends. They're really amazing. They don't ask me to talk about it, but they will sit down and listen to me (whenever I need to talk about it)." (Erin)*

In many cases, these women did not always need to experience a verbal exchange in order to feel better. Simply taking the opportunity to socialize with friends or knowing they were understood and supported was often enough.

> *"A lot of time was spent with my friends. That was helpful for me." (Dana)*

> *"My best friend...was fabulous. She came over for two and a half years and watched me sleep on the couch because I wouldn't go anywhere...I wouldn't go out. She is second to nobody when it comes to a friend." (Felicia)*

Formal support. Whether in addition to or in place of receiving comfort and encouragement from friends and/or family, participants sometimes sought some type of formalized support. One woman found that speaking privately to a therapist helped her put her feelings in perspective:

> *"I went to see a psychologist. That was helpful. He talked to me about enjoying every second of life that you have because you don't know when your time is up." (Brenda)*

Others preferred to attend support groups where they were able to meet and be supported by others who had also experienced significant losses and who shared many of the same emotions and challenges.

> *"My main coping strategy was coming to BFO and talking to other people about it. It was helpful...because I knew that at that time, I was going to talk about my brother...and about my grief, and it was a (good) way to deal with it.*

It was a specific time that I could talk about it and no one would say 'You're talking too much about this' or 'You're depressing me' or 'You're making me uncomfortable' or whatever. I think it made me cope better." (Cheryl)

"I really liked coming to group at BFO. I found it really good because I had all these feelings about my mother, and I felt like a bitch. I was angry at my mother for doing all these stupid little things, but I wasn't the only one. Almost every other person had the same feelings toward one of their parents. (It helped) to find out that I'm not the only one that has all these feelings. Everybody in the room...knew how we all felt." (Dana)

Maintaining a Symbolic Connection with the Deceased Sibling.

Another effective way in which participants coped with their grief was to maintain a symbolic connection with the deceased sibling. In some instances, these women felt that being physically near to the sibling's belongings or visiting the resting place helped them feel symbolically close to her/him.

"I go down to the cemetery and that helps. I like going there by myself because I feel like I have time alone with my sister. I also (use her bedroom) to do my art in...I enjoy that." (Angela)

In other cases, participants and their parents worked to establish new family traditions that would keep the sibling's memory alive. This was seen as helpful in dealing with the fact that the sibling would no longer be physically present at family celebrations and holidays.

"We actually say a prayer for (my brother) at Christmas. We even sometimes set a plate (at dinner)." (Felicia)

By creating new customs around special occasions, participants were able to maintain a symbolic connection with the sibling, and ensure that s/he would continue to always be "present" at important events.

Keeping Active

A final coping mechanism used in some form by all participants was keeping active in a meaningful way. Maintaining a busy schedule worked to keep their minds occupied and helped them feel productive. Immediately after the loss, much time was spent on making funeral arrangements, and in the weeks and months which followed, participants spent time on hobbies, focused on school or work, and volunteered in community organizations.

Organizing the funeral. As previously stated, participants often took control of co-ordinating the funeral preparations. In doing so, these women shouldered a great responsibility, yet they did not view this as a burden. Rather, it helped them get through the first few days by keeping them distracted from the shock and grief they were experiencing.

> *"(Taking care of) the funeral arrangements for my parents was good. That helped me through a lot." (Dana)*

> *"I tended to be kind of like the co-ordinator, and I was overseeing everything. That...helped me not have to deal with emotions." (Brenda)*

> *"I was completely on autopilot. I was just concerned with making sure that the casket, the stone...everything (was set) because this is permanent. Whatever decisions we made, that was it." (Grace)*

Focusing on school/work. In the majority of cases, participants viewed devoting time to concentrating on school or work as both an effective and productive way of coping with the loss.

> *"I went back to work and I focused on work...that was what kept my mind busy." (Brenda)*

> *"I don't think I could have handled not having school. I spent a lot of time studying because I needed any way to get away from (thinking about the*

loss)." (Grace)

Spending time on hobbies. Participants also spent time on enjoyable activities to divert their attention away from their grief. While the range of interests varied considerably, these women felt that taking part in recreational ventures provided them opportunities to clear their heads and feel more centered.

> *"I think exercising has been a good outlet for me because it's something that I can do just by myself." (Felicia)*

> *"I went crazy cooking. Cooking is my stress outlet...cooking and walking. What I (also) found comforting at the time was just reading general books on spirituality. Until that point, I hadn't really had any personal need to really 'understand'...but after my brother died, I needed to understand what happens after life." (Brenda)*

Becoming involved in causes within the community. Volunteering time to organizations within the community was also described by participants as being a helpful means of coping with their grief. These women found that becoming involved in community work helped them to keep busy, help others, and meet new people. In some cases, the cause was directly related to the participant's loss, in which case the venture became even more meaningful.

> *"Well, my mom spearheaded this...we collected money for the Hospital for Sick Kids (as a way of remembering my brother). My mom did some paintings that she donated to a variety of places in the city, and my brother's friends at school collected a lot of money. Doing that...knowing we helped the Hospital and how much they appreciated it was helpful in getting through the first year." (Brenda)*

> *"I've done the Peer Support Training (at BFO) so when someone has lost a sibling, I get a call asking if I can talk to that person. It helps a lot just to let someone else know that they're not alone and that they're not the only one in the world that this has happened to...because you feel like you are at the time." (Grace)*

While participants used a range of helpful coping mechanisms which assisted them in dealing with the loss of a sibling, the path towards resolving grief is never a simple one. Many of the strategies used were effective. However, participants also experienced ways of coping that were not so helpful.

Unhelpful Coping Mechanisms

Felicia was a 27 year-old professional when her older brother James was killed in a biking accident in 1995. James, who was an experienced dirt-biker, was at an indoor bike track with friends one Saturday morning. As he went over a jump, he lost control of the vehicle and tumbled to the ground where he suffered a broken neck. To this day, Felicia and her parents are not clear about the cause of the accident.

In trying to cope with James' death, Felicia discovered that many of her friends did not provide her with the understanding she needed, and so seeking assistance from her peers proved to be a frustrating and unhelpful experience. As she had been raised in a family that stressed the importance of relying on each other to deal with challenges, Felicia tried to turn to her parents for support. She found, however, that this too was also an ineffective way of dealing with her loss, as they were too overwhelmed by their own pain to assist her. Although Felicia struggled to cope, she eventually found a positive source of strength and encouragement in her brother's best friend, John.

At the time of our discussion, Felicia and John had recently been married, and she was full of excitement about their new life together. While the pain of her brother's death still feels very raw at times, she is extremely thankful that she and John, as the two people who knew James best, are able to support each other and deal with their grief together.

In searching for positive ways to manage their grief, participants tried a range of coping mechanisms. Some of the things they initially attempted were, however, quickly abandoned because they were found to be unhelpful. Specifically, these women found that either trying to deny the loss, or talking with the "wrong" people about the loss only exacerbated their pain.

Denying the Loss

While during the initial period of bereavement many participants isolated

themselves psychologically from others, they soon discovered that avoiding thinking or talking about the deceased sibling was not a helpful way to cope.

> *"I tried for a while to push (my sister's) death to the back of my mind, or deny that it (had) happened, but (that didn't) help. It just built up and got worse until I felt like I was going to explode." (Angela)*

Aside from their own denial of the topic, these women often found that having others evade the subject was even less helpful.

> *"People pretending it didn't happen didn't (help)." (Grace)*

Participants felt that by denying the loss, or having those around them pretend that everything was "normal", they were doing a disservice to their sibling's memory. These women believed that the deceased sister/brother was valuable and should not simply be forgotten. Basically, participants felt that the siblings they had lost *deserved* the time and energy it took to think about and remember them, regardless of how depressing or disturbing that might be for themselves or others.

Talking to the "Wrong" People About the Loss

Although participants viewed talking about the loss as emotionally beneficial, it depended on *who* they discussed their feelings with. In addition to being disappointed by the lack of support found in particular friends (as described in a previous section), these women sometimes experienced more drawbacks than advantages when speaking with certain others.

> *"They had a psychiatrist come and talk to me...and it was terrible. I felt like I was like this little rat that she was amazed with. (It didn't seem like) she was really interested in helping me. She was more interested in the fact that my brother (had) committed suicide and that there's a family history of it." (Cheryl)*

*"I can't cry out (for help) because as soon as I do...(when I try and tell my mom how much I miss my brother), she'll say to me 'Well, he was **only** your brother. I was his mother...I delivered him.'" (Felicia)*

In these cases, it seemed to participants that those whom they tried to communicate their feelings too were less interested in listening to the bereaved sibling than in meeting their own agendas. Once these women realized that they could not rely on such individuals for empathy, they had no choice but to turn elsewhere for the emotional support they required.

In trying to manage their grief, participants went through a "trial and error" process in which they attempted to use a variety of coping mechanisms. Things that were not effective were discarded in favour of those which made participants' experiences easier to deal with. It is important to note that whether helpful or unhelpful, the success of the various coping mechanisms that participants adopted was influenced by a number of external factors. The focus of this section will now shift to a description of these outside influences and their impact on participants' ways of coping.

Outside Influences That Facilitated Coping

Twenty-two year old Grace was busy studying for finals during the spring of 1997 when the police knocked at her door to notify the family of her younger brother Adrian's death. Adrian had gone into the city to buy his mother a birthday present when he fell off the subway platform and was hit by a train. Although the cause of the accident is still unclear, Grace believes that her brother, who often experienced severe migraine headaches, had suffered a sudden blackout which caused him to lose his balance and descend onto the tracks.

Grace found that the fact that she was surrounded by many empathetic people during the time following her brother's death helped her cope with her grief. In addition to being with understanding friends (both her's and Adrian's) and a supportive fiancé, she found that the structure of school also enabled her to deal effectively with her loss.

Meeting with Grace was a very valuable experience for me, both within the

context of this study and also on a personal level. While I have found that bereaved siblings share many of the same experiences, talking with Grace felt like I was talking to myself. Our time together was filled with phrases like "I know exactly what you mean!" and "I felt that way too!". I found Grace's honesty and strength both refreshing and admirable, and I am delighted that we were able to share our stories and connect with each other in a unique way that appeared to go beyond simply the interview process.

In this context, an outside influence may be understood as being a person, event, or state of being that was not within the scope of the actual death event, but affected (either positively or negatively) the way that participants coped with the loss. Participants shared that knowing that the sibling died without pain, being surrounded by understanding people, and the structure received from school were all outside influences that made it easier for them to cope.

Knowing that the Sibling Died Without Pain

Every participant lost her sibling in some sort of accident, and in all but one case, the death was relatively immediate. This was very important to these women, as they were glad that the sibling's last moments were not spent in physical or psychological agony:

> *"(My sister) was killed instantly, which was better than if she had suffered. It was very fast." (Angela)*

Knowing that the death was so quick that their siblings did not have time to realize what might be happening or suffer too much pain beforehand helped participants to deal with the loss.

Being Surrounded by Understanding People

Another outside influence that these women felt contributed positively to coping involved surrounding themselves with people who seemed to understand what they were

going through. In some cases, participants received encouragement from their friend or a partner, any surviving brothers or sisters, or friends of their deceased sibling.

Support from friends or a partner. As previously described, these women were often disappointed by their friends' lack of understanding or their inability to "go the distance" in terms of providing support. In many cases, this was perceived to be due to the fact that sometimes, friends simply don't know what to say or do, and therefore they say and do nothing. One participant describes how in her situation, her friends and her partner managed to "be there" for her despite not having all of the answers:

> *"My friends were great...and (so was) my husband (who was my fiancé at the time). A lot of people say things like 'You'll be fine...' or 'Think of the good times...' and all of those typical greeting card lines. The people that helped me the most were the ones who came to me and said 'I don't know what to say. I don't know what (you're) feeling, but I'm here for you.'" (Grace)*

The most valuable type of support was that which came from friends and partners who were honest enough to know that there would be *nothing* they could say to take the pain from the bereaved sibling, but who were willing to lend an ear to listen or a shoulder to cry on anyway.

Sharing the experience with any surviving siblings. In three cases, participants had another surviving sibling on whom they relied, and in turn supported as well. These women gained strength from the fact that there was someone else who was also experiencing sibling loss within the family.

> *"I think that having my sister was a big help, even in a silent way. I think that on a subconscious level, having another person who has gone through the same thing...lost the exact same relationship that I did...was a comfort." (Brenda)*

Knowing that the other sister/brother was feeling similar things and talking about some of the challenges they had in common as a result of their shared loss helped these participants feel less alone in dealing with their grief.

Staying connected with the deceased sibling's friends. In several instances, participants found that being close to their deceased sibling's friends was a truly beneficial source of support. Although friends of the sibling experienced a different type of pain, they were extremely encouraging and empathetic to these women.

> *"They were (with us) the whole time (right after my brother died), which was great...it was comforting to have them there and (it was) great to be able to be protective of them. (After the funeral was over), they would come over to the house every couple of days to see how we were doing. Staying connected to them helped a lot." (Grace)*

Time spent with the deceased sibling's friends benefitted not only the surviving sibling and her family, but the friends as well. In general, we, as social beings, are defined primarily by our families and the company we keep. Therefore, participants and their families viewed the deceased sibling's friends as a constant reminder of the loved one's life, and friends regarded the family in the same way.

The Structure of School

The final outside influence that participants indicated as having facilitated coping involved their attendance at school. For those still in school, being able to immerse themselves in a structured setting consisting of classes, tests, and assignments proved to be a positive force. The daily routine allowed them to keep busy and think about things other than the loss.

> *"(School) kind of took my mind off things. I was glad I was in school,*

because what (else) would I have done?" (Cheryl)

"The structure of school was great. It was really good to know that (I couldn't) fall behind because I had a paper due every week. I couldn't just veg out. I still wanted to do well, and I was a fairly conscientious student, so it kept me motivated to keep doing things. I never had a 'down time' where I (could) just roll up in a ball and sleep for a few days. I had too many (commitments)." (Grace)

As participants tried to manage their grief through the use of several coping mechanisms, these outside influences worked to facilitate that process. However, they also identified many external factors which made dealing with the loss much more difficult.

Outside Influences That Hindered Effective Coping

Cheryl's older brother Joe committed suicide a year and a half ago. Joe, who was 24 years old, had just returned home after spending the summer working in Europe. He had spent the evening visiting with their mother and then had jumped in front of a subway train, taking his own life. While in retrospect Cheryl was able to identify some possible reasons why Joe might have wanted to end his life, he left no clear explanation behind.

In trying to deal with her brother's death, Cheryl found that many things complicated her coping efforts. For example, the fact that Joe killed himself, and the value judgements that accompany a suicide were hard to come to terms with. Her family situation was also quite difficult, as her parents, who were divorced, were neither supportive to her nor to each other. She felt like her friends did not understand and were not sensitive to her situation, and so she began to withdraw from them. Finally, the fact that family, friends, and even strangers did not acknowledge the severity of her loss presented the biggest challenge to Cheryl as she tried to cope with her grief.

Of all of the participants in this study, Cheryl's loss was the most recent, and so at the time of the interview, her pain was still quite fresh. She was in the process of dealing with many of the immediate after effects of Joe's death, and trying to adapt to the many changes it brought about. Currently, she is concentrating on finishing her undergraduate degree, and is trying to find a satisfactory balance between the many aspects of her life.

The women in this study outlined several outside influences that had an adverse effect on how well they coped with their grief. Having to deal with negative

circumstances around the death event, issues within the family, feeling a lack of "connection" with others, pressures from work, being faced with constant reminders of the loss, and not having the severity of the experience of sibling loss recognized by family members and society at large were all factors which hindered effective coping in participants.

Negative Circumstances Around the Death Event

Participants described that having to deal with negative circumstances around the death event was an extra pressure they could have done without. Specifically, because in most cases the loss was the result of an accident, these women and their families were unsure of the events leading up to their loved one's death. This uncertainty, coupled with the fact that the media had deemed these circumstances newsworthy, left participants even more psychologically drained.

Being unsure of the actual events leading up to the death. Once the shock of hearing about the death of the sibling began to subside somewhat, participants and their families were often left with many unanswered questions around the actual events which had caused the loss. "What happened?", or "Whose fault was it?", or "Why was s/he in that situation in the first place?" are examples of the kinds of answers these women searched for. One participant described that when her brother died, the authorities had determined the cause of death to be suicide, yet she could find no evidence to support that claim. In addition to missing him terribly, not knowing *why* or *how* he had died made her feel even worse:

"All of the signs you (usually see in a suicide case)...symptoms of depression,

signs of being suicidal...none of them fit. He was happy, he was doing well in school, he loved his job, (had) tons of friends...none of the traditional signs of anything going wrong." (Grace)

In some instances, the families became involved in legal proceedings in an effort to unearth this type of information:

"I'm still not too clear about what happened...we're involved in litigation, just to try and find the truth." (Erin)

When these efforts were successful in producing answers, participants were often troubled when faced with the facts:

"Going through the inquest was very hard because I had to listen to (the man responsible for my brother's death) tell his story and I was very, very angry. I had a hard time dealing with that." (Brenda)

Dealing with media attention. In most cases, the death of the sibling had earned some level of media attention. Participants felt that reporters were insensitive in approaching family members during this difficult time, and viewed the whole process as an extreme invasion of privacy:

"We had reporters calling...I felt like I'd just been dropped into some sort of movie. All this attention on our family...it was terrible." (Felicia)

For one participant, the death of her brother received an extensive amount of attention from the press because he passed away in an accident at his school. Both the school and the family were targeted by the media for several months following the incident:

"We did a couple of interviews...you hope that they have your best interests in mind, but it's an intrusion of privacy." (Brenda)

In time, participants either dealt with the answers they received around their

sibling's death, or learned to live with the fact that they may never know what really happened. Although they understood that reporters and the news media were not necessarily ill-intentioned in their questioning, they felt that they were not as respectful of the family's grief as they should have been.

Issues Within the Family

The second external factor that participants outlined as having complicated their coping process involved issues within the family. Dealing with the different coping styles of each family member, not feeling supported within the family, and experiencing extreme parental overprotection were all cited as outside influences that had a negative effect on how these women dealt with their grief.

Different coping styles. Participants shared that one of the most difficult hurdles for the family to overcome after losing the sibling was to find some middle ground that would accommodate the different coping styles of each surviving member. A father dealing with the loss of a child is unlike a mother dealing with the loss of the same child, and is even further removed from the experience of a bereaved sibling. Since each individual within the family had a different relationship with the deceased sibling, it follows that coping with the *loss* of that relationship would be handled in unique ways.

> *"We've always had pictures in our house, but (after my sister died), my mother **flooded** our house full of pictures of my sister. All over. Everywhere I went, there she was. I would never tell (my mom to remove the pictures because they bother me), because it helps her...but it drives me crazy." (Dana)*

> *"I constantly hear about the death of my brother. It's not that I don't want to hear about it...I think about him everyday–he's always crossing into my mind... but my parents are constantly bringing it up (and) my mind can't handle it. It's too much. I always think that if the tables were turned, I wouldn't want my*

brother to have to go through the 'on and on and on' of it." (Felicia)

These different ways of coping with the loss coupled with the fact that the process of moving through grief is so individual (i.e., nobody follows the same timelines) made it hard for participants to exist within the family at times.

> *"It's hard (in our family) because we're all at different stages...it's hard to find somewhere in between. So that's when there's distance between us." (Angela)*

Absence of a supportive family environment. In some cases, participants felt that trying to deal with the loss was often made more difficult by not being able to find support within the family.

> *"My mom did go (on her trip right after my brother died). That was very hard for me because I needed my mom. After the divorce, it had always been me, my mom, and my brother...so to see her just going off on a flight...(I felt like) I had been abandoned. It was very tough for me." (Cheryl)*

This lack of support was made even worse if the family was experiencing serious problems prior to the death of the sibling.

> *"I wanted (my parents and I) to come together and talk about him...about his life...I mean, we knew him best. They were just not willing to do that. My parents are divorced and don't get along...(that) made the situation worse, and that was very painful because I (had) to deal with it on my own." (Cheryl)*

> *"(We had to fight) over everything with my father. He wanted to make all of the decisions...the funeral home, the casket, the visitation...and he wouldn't listen to anything I had to say. Anything I wanted, he didn't hear, and anything my mom wanted, he wanted the exact opposite." (Grace)*

Parental overprotection. Although participants understood the motivations underlying their parents' extreme fear and worry regarding their surviving child(ren)'s safety and well-being, surviving siblings often felt that parents became *too*

overprotective, to the point where they felt smothered.

> *"I guess the term could be 'in your face'. (My mother) doesn't mean to be intrusive...she just wants to have one of her children (around). She's just gotten extra-maternal." (Erin)*

> *"When I was living at home (and wanted to go out somewhere), my parents wouldn't want me to go. (They'd constantly ask) 'Where are you going? Why are you going?' Since I've moved out, they call me all the time because they're afraid to lose a second child. They're just...they bother me. I don't know how to articulate it any other way. I mean, I love my parents, but they don't (allow) me to have my own life." (Felicia)*

In terms of the various outside influences participants reported as having had a negative effect on their coping, these issues within the family were perhaps the most painful for them to share. These women often felt that when the sibling died, their family unit seemed to crumble as well.

Lack of "Connection" With Others

Another outside influence that these women found complicated their coping process involved their relationships with those in their social circles. Participants felt that as the weeks and months passed following the sibling's death, they seemed less and less "connected" to those with whom they used to share their lives. They reported feeling disappointed by the shortage of support received from friends, having to constantly deal with people's insensitive remarks, and simply not being able to relate to certain others any longer.

Disappointment in friends. As described in a previous section, participants often received little or no support from friends. The disappointment and feelings of alienation and resentment which resulted from this was cited by these women as having a

detrimental impact upon their coping. Having to figure out who their friends really were was often a discouraging process which gave them yet another matter to feel badly about.

> *"People don't know what to say, so a lot of the time, they just don't say anything. And that hurts too, when they pretend it never happened...like she was never around. It's really frustrating when you bring (up her name) and they...just shut up. (Losing someone close to you) really makes you learn who you can (count on) and who you can't. Sometimes it's really disappointing." (Angela)*

Dealing with people's insensitivity. Also having a negative effect upon their ability to cope was the fact that participants regularly encountered many instances where people would respond to their predicament with uncaring and insensitive remarks.

> *"My ex-boyfriend on a few occasions would say stuff like 'You have to get over this'. And (I felt like saying) 'You don't know what I'm feeling, or where I'm coming from, or anything'. It drove me crazy." (Dana)*

> *"My boyfriend, for the most part, has been supportive, but there are times when I have problems. For example, last year, I had trouble concentrating (on assignments for school) and he would say 'Oh, just get it done' or 'Are you going to get **another** extension'? He would kind of taunt me that way. He doesn't mean to hurt me, but he does. I've lost confidence in myself, and in my abilities, and I just need reassurance. I find that sometimes I don't get it." (Cheryl)*

Not being able to relate to others. Most of the women in this study remarked that having become a bereaved sibling made them feel "different" for the first time in their lives. This inability to relate to others caused them to experience an emotional isolation which, in turn made it difficult for them to cope. Their interests, goals, and concerns had changed significantly, and they often found the problems other people complained about to be trivial and unimportant.

> *"At the time, I was a head cashier, so it was hard having to deal with things like people (complaining about) having to wait in line, or not answering the*

phone quick enough, or if the schedule wasn't done right...(I had) no patience...no tolerance for (those kinds of problems)." (Dana)

Having to face the lack of support provided by friends, dealing with their insensitivity, and being unable to relate to others as they had done for most of their lives troubled participants, even in cases where a considerable amount of time had passed since the loss. These women often questioned themselves, feeling like perhaps they had become hypersensitive or that they had come to expect too much from their peers. This absence of a comforting connection with others made their grief journey more alone, and therefore more uncomfortable.

Experiencing Pressure from Work

Participants also communicated that the pressure they experienced from work was another external factor that impaired their ability to cope. The standard bereavement leave in Canada is 3 days, regardless of the type of loss. Participants were irritated by the fact that the expectation is that someone who loses a loved one, even if that loss is in the immediate family, should be ready to return to work after only 3 days. These women felt that this amount of time did not allow them to even get *used* to the loss, let alone begin coping with it.

"My bosses weren't...well, not unsympathetic, but...I mean, I was only allowed to take 3 days off work, and for any more, I had to get a doctor's note. In a case like this, that's just ridiculous." (Brenda)

"Luckily, I had (already) booked 10 days off of work for exams. I got penalized for taking another day off because I just wasn't ready to go back." (Grace)

Once back at work, participants were further pressured, as they felt forced to be

as productive as they had been prior to the loss. While the routine of having to go to a job each day helped alleviate some of their grief, once there, dealing with the daily stressors and hassles they were presented with prevented these women from coping in a positive way.

Constant Reminders of the Loss

Being confronted with constant reminders of the sibling they lost was also identified by participants as being an outside influence that hindered coping. In particular, these women's thoughts about the sibling's absence were prompted on a daily basis by even the most ordinary cues. In addition, they found that dealing with special occasions caused them to remember and think about their loss more deeply.

Dealing with everyday reminders of the loss. Participants struggled constantly with the everyday reminders they were faced with. While they did not suggest that they didn't *want* to be thinking about the sibling, seeing and hearing things that made them remember her/him sometimes brought on overwhelming feelings of sadness which pulled them further into their grief.

> *"We were talking about Pericles, because it was a Shakespeare class. In Pericles, the family loses a daughter. By the end, the daughter comes back to life–(that) freaked me out entirely." (Erin)*

> *"It was like immediately after (my sister died in the boating accident), every TV channel I turned to, somebody was drowning..." (Dana)*

> *"I couldn't listen to sappy much because anything emotional made (me) think about (my brother's death). If I was shopping and I'd go into a store that had (a certain sappy) song playing, I'd have to go home immediately." (Grace)*

Dealing with special occasions. As time passed, participants felt that the good

days were starting to outnumber the bad ones, and they were able to develop a routine that helped them to keep their distress at bay. This sentiment, however, lasted only until the next special occasion or "first". Particularly during the initial year following the death, these women went from being "okay" to feeling awful again with every first holiday, birthday, or anniversary.

> *"We were kind of numb for like...well, the first 6 months. And then my birthday came up in May, and then Mother's Day...then every month, there was some reason to be even more specifically reminded (that she was gone). She was always the one who made such a big deal about all these celebrations, and now..." (Erin)*

Even in cases where years had passed since the loss, holidays are still difficult. Christmas, of course, is the worst season for all bereaved siblings.

> *"Stuff like Christmas...well, it's just not Christmas any more. We had a lot of fun before, my sister and brother and I. We loved Christmas, but now it's...we can't really have fun with anything, because anything (we) do, (we) want her there. I don't look forward to it, and everyone's talking about it all the time...it's just so stressful." (Angela)*

During the first few years following the death of the sibling, these women found that having to deal with daily reminders and being confronted by all of the special occasions and holidays at which the sibling would no longer be present, made coping extremely difficult. They did, however, acknowledge that although they still felt sad when they were reminded of the loss, and empty on special occasions, with time it became somewhat easier to manage.

<u>Lack of Recognition of the Severity of Sibling Loss</u>

The final external factor that participants identified as having had a negative effect on coping had to do with the fact that *their* pain was rarely acknowledged. When a

family experiences the death of a child, most of the attention and concern is directed at the grieving parents, while the pain of the surviving child(ren) is often overlooked:

> *"It's like your parents are the focus, and you're just kind of* ***there.*** *" (Dana)*

> *"I'm 22 years old, and I've lost my only sibling. My parents both have 8 brothers and sisters each...they don't appreciate the extent of the loss for me." (Cheryl)*

Participants were repeatedly told by friends and extended family that "You need to look after Mom and Dad". While these women were more than willing, out of love for their parents and respect for the pain they must have been experiencing, to provide that care, the question that was often disregarded by others was: "If the surviving sibling was attending to the needs of parents, who was taking care of the surviving sibling"?

The Experience of Young Adult Bereaved Brothers

As stated earlier, I was unable in this study to directly access the experience of young adult men who had lost a sister or brother. I, therefore, spoke with two service providers who deal with young bereaved males on a somewhat regular basis (see Appendix E for the questions used to guide these discussions). The first individual I consulted was the Executive Director of the Waterloo Region chapter of BFO. Among her numerous responsibilities in this position, this person works to provide support to bereaved persons both in individual and group settings. I also met with a Behavioural Consultant with the Waterloo Region District School Board who works with bereaved youth through the public education system, assisting them in a variety of administrative ways as well as through individual or group counseling.

Using my discussions with these service providers, as well as information I

obtained by attending a panel discussion on "Men and Grief" offered through BFO, I will describe below some of the effects of sibling loss on young adult men. These details will then be followed by an account of the types of coping mechanisms that are often used by bereaved brothers in this age group, and how their coping efforts are affected by the outside influences to which they are exposed.

The Effects of Sibling Loss on Young Adult Males

In addition to experiencing many of the same outcomes that young women encounter, support providers find that young men develop a serious lack of trust in life after having lost a sister or brother. This newfound awareness of their mortality and that of their loved ones has a large effect on the two major developmental tasks characteristic to this age cohort: finding a mate and starting a career.

The young adult years are usually the time in which people endeavor to develop intimate, long-term relationships. However, having gained firsthand experience with the frailty of life (particularly with a death that is chronologically out of turn) often causes young men to avoid seeking out or maintaining these connections. The bereaved brother's attitude becomes one of indifference where he begins to think "Why should I expend the energy to nurture a relationship and place myself in an emotionally vulnerable position when my partner could *also* die and leave me in such pain"?

The second major task for people in this age range is to make attempts to complete school and start a career. For a bereaved brother, this appears pointless as well. Knowing that his sibling was alive one minute and gone the next causes him to acknowledge that this may be a realistic possibility for his own life. Based on this

rationale, many of these young men avoid making serious decisions about his future. After all, why put too much effort into making plans for the coming months or years if he doesn't know how much longer he'll be around?

The consequences of this lack of trust in life that develops in bereaved young men is clearly harmful to these individuals and their future prospects. While this outlook evolves shortly after experiencing sibling loss, parents and service providers are unsure as to how long the young man may continue to feel this way, and what needs to happen to prompt them to invest in their lives again.

Coping Mechanisms Used By Bereaved Brothers

According to service providers in the area of bereavement, there are noticeable differences in the ways that women and men cope with grief, regardless of the type of loss. The main distinction is basically that women are more likely and willing to talk to others about their grief experiences while men typically keep to themselves. Although there may be many possible explanations for this phenomenon, those in this field believe that the root causes of this behaviour stem from the way that society socializes its members. Specifically, from the time they are little girls, women are encouraged to deal with their feelings and share their emotions. Young boys, however, are conditioned to develop a type of "task orientation" to handle their problems. Instead of talking about something that bothers them, men become involved in activities to avoid confronting a psychological challenge. Bereavement counselors believe that this socialization is so deeply ingrained that during times of intense stress or trauma, women and men utilize these forms of coping instinctively.

When considering bereaved brothers, becoming immersed and distracted by a hobby or task appears to be their main method of coping with their grief. Focusing on school, work, or participating in sports activities are commonly used ways of escaping the pain of the loss. Time spent with friends is also quite helpful. While they seem hesitant to discuss their feelings with their buddies, simply being with them and "hanging out" is often enough.

Although being preoccupied with various activities appears to assist these young men in dealing with the loss, escaping reality may in some cases be unhelpful. In trying to avoid thinking about their sibling's death, individuals may become involved in harmful pursuits such as engaging in risky behaviours, drinking excessively, being sexually promiscuous, or using drugs. Clearly, the *type* of activity that the bereaved brother engages in to try and neutralize his pain will determine whether his form of escape will have positive or negative repercussions.

The Impact of Outside Influences on Coping

In the case of bereaved sisters, it was clear that having structure or a routine was an important external factor that affected how they dealt with their grief. In some instances, it helped coping, and in others it hindered it. This situation appears to be similar for bereaved brothers as well.

Having a structured school day often provides bereaved brothers with a purpose and makes their day seem meaningful. Attending classes, completing assignments, and spending time with classmates keep these young men busy. The structure of a school day gives them the opportunity to focus on something other than their loss, which affects

coping in a positive way.

In some cases, however, the strict organization of a day at school can impede effective coping. A student's life is designed to keep the person busy with a daily optimum load. When individuals have suffered a severe trauma, however, they soon become overwhelmed with such structure and are unable to maintain these obligations. In these instances, a cycle may develop, where the bereaved young man is incapable of concentrating on schoolwork and feels swamped by his courseload. Not knowing where to start to try and tackle his responsibilities, he withdraws from them. This causes him to fall further and further behind, prompting him to avoid his work even more. Clearly, this pattern, created because of structure, sets a bereaved brother up for failure, and adds to his problems rather then helping to alleviate them. It is for this reason that school counsellors work to modify timetables and make schedules more flexible for those experiencing these types of difficulties.

The effect of structure on coping seems to differ depending on where the young man is with regard to his grief. Early on, structure is an unhelpful outside influence in that it constrains the individual and does not afford him the energy or time required to adjust to his new situation. With the passing of weeks or months, however, structure can be an external factor that assists bereaved brothers in dealing positively with their grief.

The purpose of this section has been to describe some of the characteristics of sibling bereavement as they pertain to the experiences of young adult males. Although the experiences of males and females has been somewhat dichotomized in this study, it is important to note two important details which became clear to me as I became more

familiar with this issue. Firstly, when I was unable to find any young men who were willing to participate in this study, I was not surprised, because the general perception around bereavement and the resolution of grief is that women discuss their feelings and men do not. After speaking with many bereaved individuals and service providers, I realized that I may have made an assumption. I came to understand that the reality is that all bereaved persons exist on a *continuum* with regard to communication. Whether female or male, some individuals are comfortable with sharing their emotions verbally, and others are not.

Secondly, I also recognized that while the idea of talking about one's grief is commonly seen as the best way to deal with it, this may not always be the case. In managing bereavement, there are several different ways in which both women and men confront this challenge. Many find it helpful to share their feelings with friends or family, others seek solace in religion and spirituality, some stay psychologically isolated, etc. The expression of grief, therefore, is not necessarily different for women and men, rather it varies from person to person.

Discussion

As the end of this project drew near, I was compelled to present all of my findings in a meaningful way. I sat down on the floor, surrounded by my research results, the journal I had kept documenting my experience with the support group at BFO, and what seemed like a million pieces of paper with little notes to myself about the various people I had met and the things I had learned during this thesis process. In trying to organize all of these materials, I felt overwhelmed by the remarkable amount of information to which

I had been exposed over the past year. How in the world was I going to make sense of all of this?

I had lived and breathed this project for the past 10 months, concentrating fully on little else, and so I decided to detach myself from it for a time, hoping that some distance would provide me with a fresh perspective. I pondered and reflected, waiting for some brilliant inspiration that would sum up the significance of my work to descend upon me. I realized, however, that the central idea of this research is really quite simple: while the experience of losing a loved one is universal, and will undoubtably touch every single human being at some point, the *type* of loss and the *stage of life* that the bereaved individual is in at the time of the death event makes the grief process and its resolution different for everyone. In the case of sibling loss in young adulthood, the quality and consequences of this form of bereavement are both unique and critical.

The purpose of this section, therefore, is to use current literature, the findings from this research, and my own experiences as a base from which to demonstrate that when this type of loss (i.e., the death of a sister or brother) occurs during this stage in a person's life (i.e., the years between ages 18-30), it is has important implications on several levels (i.e., for her/his social relationships, family, and individual beliefs and goals). Further, as they endeavor to adjust to these changes, bereaved siblings utilize three different forms of coping strategies, each of which may be influenced by an external environment which is particular to the young adult age range. The focus will then turn to the issue of resiliency versus vulnerability, and a theory highlighting the process through which a bereaved sibling travels in order to resolve her/his grief will be

presented. As a means of providing the reader with tangible examples of the ways in which one deals with the consequences of sibling loss, I will share some of my own experiences as a bereaved sister, in appropriate areas, to explain this theory in further detail. This section will conclude with a presentation of action goals towards which communities can work to provide support to bereaved siblings, a description of the limitations of this study, and suggestions for the direction of future research in this area.

Consequences of Sibling Loss in Young Adulthood

The ecological approach to studying a system as it exists within a particular environment is useful in explaining the effects of sibling bereavement on the various aspects of a person's life (see Figure 1). This model describes the individual as being surrounded by several tiers, each of which affect and are influenced by one another (Levine & Perkins, 1997). When a sibling dies, the consequences of this loss for the surviving sister or brother can be conceptualized as occurring at four interdependent levels: the first is the *individual*, which encompasses her/his personal characteristics and worldview; the second is the *microsystem*, composed of family and friends; the third is the *exosystem*, referring to the community within which the individual exists (i.e., her/his academic or occupational activities); and finally, the fourth level is the *macrosystem*, which involves society's beliefs not only about death and the grieving process, but also regarding the appropriate behaviours and responsibilities of each age cohort within the culture.

It has been well-documented that sibling bereavement produces significant transformations at each of these levels, altering the individual's social relationships,

family system, and personal ideology (Balk, 1983; Hogan & DeSantis, 1994). Further, when this loss occurs in young adulthood, the impact of these changes can often have profound effects on the future goals (i.e., academic or occupational plans) of those who are bereaved (DeMinco, 1995), and how these individuals deal with the developmental tasks characteristic of this stage in life.

One of the main objectives in young adulthood is to create for oneself a positive social environment in which the individual can feel connected to others and both give and receive support (Egan & Cowan, 1980). When one experiences the loss of a sibling during this time, s/he is often unable to maintain these attachments. In many cases, s/he finds that friends and family members are either unable or unwilling to support them, and as a result, s/he dissociates her/himself from these persons (Davies, 1991; Robinson & Mahon, 1997), seeking to be surrounded only with those who understand her/his situation.

Achieving autonomy from family is another developmental task one is faced with during the young adult years. The individual seeks both physical and psychological freedom from her/his parents, working to live effectively and solve problems on her/his own (Egan & Cowan, 1980). When the family experiences the loss of a child, however, rather than extracting her/himself from the family unit, s/he is forced to assume the "caregiver" role and/or is the target of intense overprotection from parents, both of which make her/him less and less independent. In neither case is the young person able to focus on developing an individual identity separate from that within the family system.

Perhaps the most important task of moving into adulthood involves developing

and implementing values. During these years, an individual chooses a set of personal values which will provide meaning and direction in her/his life (Egan & Cowan, 1980). It is these beliefs which will be used to guide her/his decisions about career aspirations and other future endeavors (e.g., committing to a marriage, starting a family, etc.). Losing a sister or brother at this time forces the bereaved sibling to re-evaluate her/his ideals in this new light. In many cases, this results in a changed worldview and a psychological growth or maturity different from that of their peers (Balk, 1982; Davies, 1991; Hogan & DeSantis, 1992; Robinson & Mahon, 1997).

Coping and the External Environment

According to Moos and Schaefer's (1986) theory of coping with life crises, when confronted with a critical challenge, individuals employ three different types of coping strategies. This conceptualization is useful in describing the ways in which bereaved siblings in this study have reported handling their feelings of grief.

The first category of coping strategies often utilized by bereaved siblings are those which are "appraisal-focused". This involves analyzing issues around the death event, and processing cognitions around the loss. Early on in the course of bereavement, gaining closure through the funeral and separating oneself physically and/or psychologically from others provides the surviving sibling with the opportunity to reflect on and make sense of their sister or brother's absence (Lagrand, 1986). As time progresses and the individual begins to feel the need for social validation, these thoughts and reflections are shared in informal and/or formal support situations, allowing the bereaved sibling the opportunity to have these ideas and thoughts recognized and

substantiated (Cohen, 1988; Lagrand, 1986).

The second domain of coping skills involves "problem-focused coping". This type of coping mechanism concerns seeking information and support, identifying alternatives, and taking action. In trying to deal with their emotions around the loss, bereaved siblings work to diminish their sadness by searching for and engaging in activities which allow them to either express or take their minds off their grief (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994). Focusing on school work, occupying oneself with enjoyable hobbies, becoming involved in community causes, or discussing the loss with others are the most commonly used forms of this type of coping.

The final way in which bereaved siblings cope with the loss consists of dealing with their emotions around her/his sister or brother's death. These "emotion-focused coping" skills seek to manage the individual's feelings of grief, depression, anger, despair, etc., helping them to find positive ways of releasing these sentiments. In many cases, surviving siblings seek to maintain a symbolic connection with the deceased individual. This allows them to preserve a part of the sibling relationship, and as such, they are comforted by the idea that "death ends only a life; it does not end a relationship" (Bank & Kahn, 1982).

An individual's personal characteristics and background factors exert a large effect on the success of these coping skills (Balk, 1996). This present study has shown that the environment which surrounds the young adult bereaved sibling is also a powerful determinant of how well s/he manages her grief. For example, at the level of the family, a lack of support, feeling smothered by parental overprotection, and the sometimes

incongruent styles of coping each member uses make handling the experience of bereavement difficult for the surviving sibling. With regard to the individual's social relationships, while being surrounded by understanding people helps coping, bereaved siblings often feel disconnected from peers, and this impedes their ability to resolve their grief. At the community level, bereaved siblings recognize structures such as school or work as being either helpful or unhelpful for coping, depending on the degree to which these systems were capable of acknowledging the severity of sibling loss. Finally, the larger social system within which the individual exists may either facilitate or hinder effective coping, based on the degree to which their ideals with regard to grief resolution during these years are compatible with those of the bereaved sibling.

Clearly, the external environment of the young adult poses several challenges to an individual who loses a sister or brother during this stage. Whether the outside influences originate from the family system, social group, academic/occupational structure, or even society at large, they play a significant role, either positive or negative, in how well the surviving sibling copes with her/his loss.

Resiliency or Vulnerability?

In dealing with sibling bereavement, the coping skills the individual exhibits as well as their surrounding environment are important in determining her/his ability to effectively manage the loss. These, combined with her/his personal characteristics, lead the bereaved sibling to exhibit either a "resiliency" or a "vulnerability" when working to resolve her/his grief (Frydenberg, 1997).

While several different definitions for the term "resiliency"are used throughout

the field of psychology, in this context, resiliency can be understood as the ability of an individual to form in her/his mind a goal and create and adhere to some plan to successfully achieve that objective (Frydenberg, 1997). In the case of a bereaved sibling, her/his aim is to work through her/his grief and come to terms with the loss of the sister or brother, and the set of coping strategies which is employed in order to achieve that end constitutes her/his action plan. Conversely, a bereaved individual is considered to be vulnerable when s/he struggles with the hopelessness and the pain of the loss due to a lack of skill in coping and an inability to identify or work towards the desired outcome (i.e., grief resolution) (Hogan & DeSantis, 1996).

While the work of Frydenberg (1997) and Hogan and DeSantis (1996) is useful in providing a clear and important distinction between the different ways in which bereaved siblings deal with grief and loss, these authors present resiliency and vulnerability as two *dichotomous* states of being. However, by looking at the experiences of the participants in this study, and by evaluating my own encounter with the grief process, it has become clear to me that this differentiation may not be accurate. Rather than dividing bereaved individuals into two different groups based on their apparent success or lack thereof in trying to cope with a loss, I believe that with time, as they travel through their own particular grief journey, these persons *move from* a state in which primarily vulnerable qualities are exhibited, *into* a state featuring predominately resilient characteristics (see Figure 2).

In this study, for example, the majority of bereaved young women interviewed appeared to exhibit the qualities of resilience in their lives. They had effective coping

mechanisms in place, and they had worked out ways of dealing with their external environments so that these outside influences did not hinder their efforts to manage their grief. One participant, however, seemed to be particularly vulnerable. She expressed to me an absolute dissatisfaction with her current lifestyle, and had yet to find any form of coping that was useful in relieving her feelings of depression and grief.

As I tried to conceive of some reason for the apparent differences between the levels of resiliency between most participants and this one individual, I realized this particular young woman's loss was the most recent of all who were interviewed. Having lost her brother only two years earlier, and keeping in mind the individuality of each grief process, it seemed that perhaps enough time had not yet passed in order for her to establish a coherent, effective set of coping mechanisms which were able to withstand any external pressures in her surrounding environment. Presumably, as the distance between the time at which her loss occurred and the present grows larger, these capabilities will develop.

With this passage of time, in addition to being able to cope productively with the loss of a sibling, one is also able to find some "reason to go on". Aside from this one participant, the majority of young women I spoke with had discovered some sort of meaning or motivating force in their lives. Working towards a fulfilling and meaningful career, developing rich and satisfying relationships with family and friends, or even providing support and understanding to other bereaved individuals are examples of activities which inspired these bereaved young women to carry on with their lives despite their devastating losses. While they could never view their sibling's death in an entirely

positive light, finding a "reason to go on" was perhaps the catalyst behind their movement from vulnerability to resiliency. It appears, therefore, that the moment that one is able to discover some purpose or meaning in her/his life, the suffering begins to subside, and the healing is able to begin (Folkman, 1997; Morse & Carter, 1995).

Theory of Sibling Bereavement in Young Adulthood

In any theory which seeks to explain the experience of bereavement or loss, there are two main issues that limit its explanatory potential. Firstly, dealing with grief is a very personalized process that does not follow a strict time line. It is important to recognize that in the case of sibling loss, each surviving sister or brother brings with her/him a unique set of personal factors which determines the ways in which s/he manages this crisis. The idiosyncratic nature of the grief journey, therefore, precludes the development of a clear and universally applicable scheme which is capable of explaining this experience in its entirety.

Secondly, in addition to being a highly individualized process that is not bound by time, movement through grief is by no means smooth or linear. Early research on death described the bereaved individual as moving through a series of "stages" during her/his grief journey, with the final goal being "acceptance" of the loss (e.g., Kubler-Ross, 1973). In order to progress from one stage to the next, this person would be required to successfully complete some "task" particular to each of these levels. Contemporary studies of bereavement acknowledge that while these explanations are useful for providing a normative description of the grief journey, using such terms implies that this process is made up of discrete, invariant stages (e.g., Sanders, 1992). Dealing with death

is messy and disorganized, filled with both successes and setbacks, therefore, we must acknowledge this "back and forth", topsy-turvy quality of the grief process when considering sibling bereavement.

Despite these theoretical constraints, I was able to revisit the stories of each participant and reflect upon my own experience with loss to develop a general picture of the course of grief in young adult, bereaved siblings (see Figure 3). In this conceptualization, rather than dealing with "stages", the surviving sibling encounters a series of *challenges*. In place of having to accomplish some "task", when faced with each challenge, the bereaved sibling works to acknowledge and develop ways of handling the particular elements. The grief process, therefore, is made up of this series of encountering, assessing, and arriving at ways of managing each challenge that accompanies the loss of a sister or brother. As discussed earlier, as time progresses and lessons are learned, the surviving sibling becomes more resilient, and exhibits fewer and fewer vulnerable qualities. It is important to remember that although each component of the grief journey is presented here in a linear fashion, depending on individual circumstances, the surviving sibling may confront these challenges either out of sequence, or in tandem.

The Death Event

For as long as I live, I will never forget waking up to my mother's screams on the morning of November 27th, 1996. I bolted out of bed and ran into the hallway to see what was going on. My mother was slouched against the wall at the top of the staircase and my father was sobbing, struggling to hold her up. I looked down and saw two uniformed police officers standing at the front door, holding their hats in their hands. Everyone turned to look at me, but said nothing. I had no idea what was happening, but I knew it was something terrible because I had never before seen my father cry. I yelled

"What the hell is going on?", to which my father responded "Anand died in a car accident last night". I felt like I had been punched in the stomach.

My brother had been attending college in Oshawa, and was driving back to his residence at two o'clock that morning. His car had skidded on black ice, causing him to lose control of the vehicle. It flipped over several times before landing in a ravine, upside down. He died instantly of a broken neck. My cousin drove us to the hospital in Oshawa to identify the body. The whole way there, nobody said a word. I remember hoping and praying that someone had stolen his car and it was that person that had died and not my brother. Unfortunately, however, that was not the case.

At the morgue, I stared at his lifeless body covered with a white sheet, lying still on top of the steel table. I couldn't believe that someone who had been in such a serious car accident could look so peaceful. There were no cuts, no bruises, no blood. He looked like he was sleeping. All I felt was sadness. I couldn't believe that my baby brother had left me.

There were over a thousand people at the funeral. Many of my friends told me later that it was the most beautiful ceremony they had ever attended. I, however, didn't notice anything but the fact that this would be the last time I would ever see my brother. I don't think I will ever feel as much pain as I did when I watched them take his body away to be cremated.

Coming to know of the death of the sibling is the force which propels the grief journey into motion. The surviving sibling and her/his family struggle to comprehend the events leading up to the death of the loved one through a lens of shock, numbness, and agony. The bereaved sister or brother goes through the motions of dealing with the funeral and its aftermath, making every effort to defend her/his parents against any unnecessary inconveniences or details which might cause them further pain. Trying to assess and manage the information and emotions around the death of the sibling is often next to impossible early in the grief process, as the reality of the loss is incomprehensible.

Efforts to Acknowledge and Deal With Grief

The weeks following the funeral are a blur to me now. Friends and family were at the house from the time we woke up in the morning, to the time we went to bed. I was so numb that I couldn't even cry anymore. Christmas came and went without any

celebration, and the New Year was especially painful because 1997 would be the first year my brother would not see.

In January, we all tried to get back into some sort of routine. I went back to university to finish off my final year, and my parents went back to work. I kept myself busy with school, and started back to work again as well. I was determined to get back into the land of the living.

During the months and years which followed my brother's death, I sought to cope with my loss in a variety of different ways. I tried desperately to make sense of the situation. I spent endless hours wondering why my 19 year-old brother was taken from us so suddenly, when he had his whole life ahead of him. I questioned how we were supposed to get past this incredible hole his absence had left in our family. Although I never came to any rational conclusions about these and thousands of other issues, I found that taking the time to think about these details helped me to sort out some of my emotions.

I also read a lot. I had always loved to read for pleasure but while I was doing my undergrad, with my busy schedule, I didn't take too much time to do so. While I didn't necessarily seek out books specifically on grief and bereavement, I found that reading allowed me to take a break from thinking about my brother. Perhaps the best thing I did to cope was to spend time with my friends. I separated myself from those who weren't able to support me, and I surrounded myself with people with whom I felt encouraged and comforted by.

Finally, with time, I coped by acknowledging the fact that my brother was never coming back. For the first year after his death, I was so numb that I don't think I fully realized that he was dead. A song would play on the radio that would remind me of him, and I would burst into tears as if I had just heard of the accident. It has only been recently that I am able to truly face that he is gone, and that has helped me to smile at his life rather than cry for his death.

As I tried to deal with my loss, I discovered that my surroundings had a large effect on how well I was able to cope. During the year that I had taken off between completing my undergrad and starting in a graduate program, I lived with my parents and took a job working at a restaurant as a manager. I found that being at home was difficult, as I was constantly having to face so many memories of my brother. I was also unhappy with my job, as I had worked for that company through both high school and university, and was very, very bored. To make matters worse, I had worked there with my brother for several years, and it was hard to be there without him. Returning to the places that reminded me most of Anand, therefore, did not help me manage my grief very well. Once I left home again and started back at school, I began to cope better. Having a meaningful focus in my life, and separating myself, somewhat, from the past put me on the road to healing.

With the passage of months the initial shock begins to subside and the bereaved sibling comes to acknowledge the pain and grief s/he feels around the loss. In trying to

come to terms with her/his new emotional circumstances and altered family/social environment, s/he seeks out a variety of potential coping mechanisms. Through a process of trial and error, s/he utilizes those forms of coping which are helpful, and leaves behind those which are unhelpful.

The familial, social and academic/occupational environments within which the bereaved young adult exists has a considerable impact upon her/his ability to cope. When these systems are both cognizant and sensitive to the surviving sibling's situation, they are external factors which facilitate or assist in coping. Conversely, if these outside influences do not work to support and appreciate her/his grief process, coping is hindered.

Taking Stock

Being faced with a challenge that not only is itself emotionally draining and painful but which causes a re-examination of one's life and goals is difficult at any age, regardless of the circumstances. I found, at 22 years old, my life simply didn't feel right anymore. Not only was my brother gone, but his absence had caused me to reassess and make changes in the 3 major areas of my life: my friendships, my family, and my plans for the future.

While it may sound crass and unfeeling, I've often said to people that after my brother died, I did a major "spring cleaning" of my friends. Although I had always been very outgoing with lots of friends, I noticed that there were only a select few who called regularly, or who encouraged me to talk about my brother. Most people seemed to treat me either as if I was broken and needed to be coddled, or they avoided the topic altogether for fear that if someone said my brother's name, I might spontaneously combust. I completely disconnected myself from those who disappointed me in these ways, but the friends who had stuck around were a great source of strength and support to me in those days. The people who meant the most to me were the ones who said straight out "I don't know what to say to you to make you feel better about your brother, but I'm here for you whenever you need me".

When I moved back home after having decided to take a year off after completing my undergraduate degree, I noticed how much my family had changed. Up to that point, my parents hadn't been overprotective or smothering, probably because I wasn't living with them. Now, however, they were terrified every time I left the house, and needed to

know where I was going, who I was going to be with, when I would be home, etc. Although they pretended to be strong for my sake, I knew how much pain they were in. I wanted very badly to keep them from hurting even more, so I answered all of their questions without complaining and tried to organize my life in a way that would cause them the least anxiety. Despite the new pressure this placed on me, my family has always been my priority, and I didn't want to add to their stress. This situation resolved itself, somewhat, when I moved out again to attend school.

In addition to the changes I had experienced with my friends and my family, I was really uncomfortable about my plans for the future. I had every intention of pursuing graduate studies, but wasn't happy with my original goals. I wanted to do something that I thought was meaningful and useful, and I didn't feel that I could achieve this in my area of training, the field of experimental psychology. Thankfully, I discovered the M.A. program in Community Psychology here at Wilfrid Laurier University, and was able to work towards a future that I know will be both professionally and personally satisfying.

Any serious life crisis has the potential to alter its structure in critical ways. When an individual suffers the loss of a sister or brother, especially during the young adult years when important decisions around identity and future goals are being made, the impact of such a tragedy is significant. Social ties, family relations, and career plans are all assessed to see if these elements "fit", as they are, into the life of the bereaved sibling, given her/his new circumstances. The sincerity and supportive potential of friends, the new family structure, and her/his expectations about the future are all evaluated, and necessary lifestyle changes (regardless of how painful) are often made.

Shifts in Personal Reality

I used to believe in a "just world". Parents are supposed to die before their children, and bad things aren't supposed to happen to good people. I realize I may sound cynical, but I no longer accept these blind truths. I hated the world for a long time after my brother died. I didn't think it was fair that his life was snuffed out when he was so young, and I was disgusted by the fact that family members who treated each other so badly were still "allowed" to have each other while my family was in such pain because my brother was no longer with us. My list of grievances could go on and on, but in general, I was angry that the world was unfair and didn't make sense.

*My naivete died with my brother and I realized that bad things **do** happen to good people, and that life **is** sometimes unfair. One day, I heard someone say "...everybody*

has a story that will make you want to cry", and it was then that I understood that the world isn't always fair, but it's not attacking ***just*** *me. Everyone's life is full of pain, comfort, sadness, and happiness, and rather than giving myself an ulcer by dwelling on the negative, I found that I was better able to come to terms with my brother's death by focusing on whatever positive aspects I could find.*

Perhaps the most difficult adjustment to make following the death of a sibling is to have to reinterpret the ways in which the world works. For a bereaved young adult, years have been spent experiencing the various aspects of her/his universe and creating logical and sensible explanations for its operations. An unexpected and chronologically out of turn loss overturns all of these beliefs, forcing the surviving sibling to reinvent her/his belief system in light of these recent changes.

An important component of an individual's outlook on the world involves the notion of faith or spirituality. These ideas both shape her/his beliefs and inform her/his actions, and therefore are likely to undergo changes in light of serious personal crises. While the topic of spiritual transformation was not directly studied in this research, by speaking with the participants, it appeared to me that they were in the process of questioning and reexamining these ideals. My own experience confirms the position that such considerations are both complex and lengthy.

The bereaved sibling, therefore, must struggle to make sense of the world and her/his place in it. Not only is this a difficult and psychologically draining process, but it can take several years following the loss to actually develop an acceptable worldview that provides the individual with some sort of meaning or purpose around which her/his life can be organized.

<u>Getting Used to a "New Kind of Normal"</u>

For the first year or so after my brother died, my life felt like an itchy sweater that I just couldn't take off. It's hard to explain, but essentially, I felt out of my element, as if I was living someone else's life. I wondered how long it was going to take for me to "get over" my brother's death.

*I eventually realized that I was **never** going to "get over" it. You can "get over" the loss of a job by getting a new one, and you can "get over" an illness by resting, but you don't ever "get over" the loss of a loved one. What happens instead is that you "get used" to your new situation, and start to rebuild its elements in the absence of that individual. I had to come to terms with the fact that the life I was familiar with and used to was lost and I basically had to learn how to adjust to a "new kind of normal".*

Surviving siblings often feel "out of sorts" and uncomfortable in their surroundings for a long period of time following the loss, a feeling which is common in all forms of bereavement. Although, with time, the good days seem to occur more frequently and closer together than the bad ones, living without the sibling leaves them feeling incomplete and "not quite right".

The bereaved individual reaches a turning point when s/he realizes that rather than trying (in vain) to *overcome* her/his feelings of grief, s/he should *accept* them as part of her/his personality and being. Adjusting to the current situation, in which the sibling is absent, eventually becomes far more reasonable to the surviving sibling than trying to return to the past by holding on to the way things used to be.

Action Goals

Regardless of which "phase" of the grief journey the bereaved sibling is currently in, an important aspect of any healthy healing situation is the presence of support. The form of support that the surviving sibling benefits most from is to a large degree dependent upon the amount of assistance and encouragement s/he receives from friends, family members, and/or other informal settings. In some cases, these types of informal

supports are both appropriate and helpful, and therefore, the individual need not seek out further, more formalized services. There are, however, some bereaved siblings who are unable to find sufficient comfort in these informal sources, and are motivated to obtain help from formal organizations specializing in grief and loss.

Four of the seven young women who participated in this study attended support groups at BFO, and one participant sought private counseling. Each of these participants reported having had positive experiences in either circumstance. As previously related, I also attended an 8-week support group as part of this research, and found it to be both a comforting and worthwhile encounter. While I gained a lot, personally, from hearing other people's stories and sharing my own experience with the rest of the group, there was a wide range of different types of losses within this particular support group. This diversity was positive in that I gained an appreciation for what those who have lost a parent or a child undergo. However, I learned more about *my* specific type of loss and felt less alone not as a result of my involvement within the support group, but rather while I was speaking with the participants in this research.

In speaking with several surviving siblings, as well as support providers in the area of bereavement, I discovered that although participating in groups that are composed primarily of individuals who are grieving similar losses is optimal, it is not always possible for people who have lost a sister or brother to come together in this type of setting. This is especially true of surviving siblings who are young adults at the time of the loss.

The first reason for this is that young adults are usually very busy. Being in

school or starting a career seriously constrains a young person's schedule, so much so that committing to attending an 8-week, evening program is often impossible. A second explanation for this lack of support group participation is that young adults, and young men in particular, value their privacy. Taking the time to share intimate feelings with unfamiliar people is sometimes not a priority for these individuals, and therefore, whether or not they receive assistance elsewhere, they avoid utilizing this form of support. Assistance for these individuals should, however, be made available and accessible should they need to look outside their immediate environment for support.

In order to deal with the fact that many young persons simply do not have the time to attend regular support group meetings, a potential solution (which is currently being planned by BFO, Waterloo Region) may be to hold a "One-day Sibling Support Group/Workshop", which would meet only once on a Saturday, for an entire day. Bereaved siblings could meet others sharing similar experiences, receive helpful information, and make meaningful contacts without having to commit to attending seven more sessions.

Another second possible action goal is to create a website which is geared specifically towards young adult bereaved siblings. In their investigation comparing on-line and face-to-face mutual-help groups for depressed individuals, Salem, Bogar, and Reid (1997) found that those participating in on-line support groups communicated with each other in ways similar to those taking part in face-to-face support groups, but engaged in higher levels of self-disclosure and experienced more emotional assistance. It was also revealed that on-line support was utilized by more men than women, prompting

the authors to conclude that this form of support may present a unique opportunity for those who are not likely to seek help through traditional means to gain the assistance they require (Salem, Bogar, & Reid, 1997).

Developing a website designed to fulfill the needs of young adults who have lost a sister or brother not only overcomes the time pressures that an "in-person" support group places on these persons, but also deals with their issues around privacy. Those who have lost a sibling can log onto this website anonymously and at their own convenience, and receive helpful information, read about the experiences of others, or share their own stories in a chat room. This type of website exists for adolescents grieving the loss of a sibling (www.juliesplace.com) and has been well received.

There are several ways to publicize the existence of these alternative forms of support for young adults who have lost a sibling. Descriptive pamphlets could be kept in funeral homes or made available to bereaved parents utilizing BFO's services, who could then pass these along to any surviving young adult children they have. Posters and circulars might be placed with guidance counselors or teachers in high schools, RA's or Dons in university residences, family doctors' offices, churches, and public libraries.

For bereaved siblings who feel that they are not receiving any or enough assistance through informal means, it is important to create support settings which are both useful and accessible. Keeping in mind that the two chief limits to young adults viewing peer support as a viable option for themselves are issues around time and trying to safeguard their anonymity, a "One-day Sibling Support Group/Workshop" or a website geared specifically towards this group can function to provide this necessary support in

either a public or anonymous way.

Limitations of this Study and Directions for Future Research

While many efforts have been made to ensure that this study represents a true depiction of the experience of sibling bereavement in young adulthood and that the findings produced are both interesting and useful, there are several limitations inherent in its design. Future research, therefore, should strive to address these issues.

Firstly, all of the participants in this study had experienced the *unexpected* death of their sibling. It is probable that an encounter with a sudden, unanticipated loss would differ qualitatively from instances in which the deceased sibling was ill prior to the death event. Therefore, it may be instructive for future studies to look at the experience of *anticipated* sibling bereavement during young adulthood.

Secondly, in this project, the death of the sibling left four out of seven participants as the only surviving child within the family. While I attended somewhat to this issue in this research, the experience of being the only surviving child versus living as one of two or more surviving children would be an interesting aspect of sibling bereavement for future research to explore in more detail.

A final limitation discussed here is the lack of direct knowledge available regarding the experience of young adult *males* who have lost a sister or brother. Due to the time constraints of this project, I was only able to access second-hand information regarding the experience of young adult, bereaved brothers. While this was a useful complement to the data gathered from young adult, bereaved sisters, not being able to *directly* obtain the thoughts and experiences of young men limits its descriptive power.

Future studies, therefore, should strive to obtain a firsthand account of the experiences of young men in fuller detail by perhaps contacting a greater number of counselling agencies/services within several different communities, who deal with these individuals on a regular basis, and who could draw from a larger pool of potential participants.

Reflections on this Thesis Process

When I began this project, my sister-in-law told me that I was either very courageous or absolutely crazy for choosing to pursue such a personal and painful topic area. Those who have been through this process with me would agree with her in both regards. At times, researching and writing this thesis was challenging, frustrating, and emotionally draining. However, I have also experienced the extreme satisfaction and pride that comes with dealing with a serious life crisis in a meaningful and productive manner.

I don't think that any event will ever compare to the devastation or growth I have encountered, and continue to experience, as a result of my brother's death. This singular incident has shaped my future in such a way that words cannot explain adequately. Although I wish the loss which led to the development of this thesis had never happened, I am pleased that through this project, my brother's life will always be remembered in a significant and positive way. All in all, while bittersweet, completing this study is perhaps my most important personal and academic achievement to date. For that, I am grateful.

Appendix A

Checklist For Participant Recruitment

The following is a checklist to be used when approaching potential participants to take part in the study entitled **"Coping with loss: A qualitative study of the experience of sibling bereavement in young adulthood"**, conducted by Purnima Sundar, a Masters student in the Community Psychology Program at Wilfrid Laurier University. The purpose of such a checklist is ensure that participants are fully informed of both their rights and roles in this research.

Name and signature of Participant Recruiter:

_____

❑ The purpose of the study has been outlined.

- To develop an in-depth understanding of the experience of bereaved siblings (who were young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 at the time of the loss) with a special focus on coping strategies and the effect of external factors on coping.

❑ The roles/duties of each participant has been explained.

- This individual will participate in an in-depth interview, the primary focus of which is to discuss her/his experience as a bereaved sibling (to last approximately one to one and a half hours).
- This individual will provide feedback to the investigator at two points in the research: 1) after the interview, the participant will be provided with a transcript of the interview and will be asked to comment on the accuracy and validity of that document; and 2) once the data has been analysed, the participant will be provided with a summary of findings, and will be asked to comment on the emergent themes, as well as to ensure that all information has been reported accurately.

❑ The risks involved in participating in this study have been explained.

- The death of a loved one is a painful and distressing experience, and discussing such issues may cause some psychological discomfort. In order to minimize this risk, interviews will take place at the BFO office, with a trained counsellor (who will be available for immediate intervention if necessary, and debriefing at the end of the interview). In cases where participants feel that they would be more comfortable having the interview elsewhere (i.e., their home or a neutral location) will be appropriately accommodated. In addition, each participant will be

notified both verbally and in writing that s/he reserves the right to refuse to speak to any issue s/he wishes not to discuss.

❑ The benefits of participating in this study have been explained.

- The benefit of participating in this study is that by sharing their experiences, each participant will be contributing to the limited knowledge base that exists for sibling bereavement. By sharing their stories, these participants can provide us, both on personal and academic levels, with an increased understanding of the experience of sibling loss and the ways in which they sought to cope with this devastating event.

❑ The procedures used to ensure the privacy and identity of participants and their responses throughout this study have been outlined.

- Participants reserve the right to refuse to answer any question or address any topic s/he wishes not to discuss.
- Participants are guaranteed, both verbally and in writing, that *all information arising from this study will be held in the strictest of confidence.*
- Participants are informed that no names or identifying statements will be used in the written report, and all quotations will be verified by the participant before appearing in the final report.
- All audio-tapes, transcriptions, and notes will not be heard/seen by anyone other than the principal investigator, and will be stored in a locked drawer in the office of the principal investigator at Wilfrid Laurier University. Upon completion of the study, all of this information will be destroyed.

Appendix B

Study Information Sheet

"Coping With Loss: A Qualitative Study of the Experience of Sibling Bereavement in Young Adulthood"
Principal Investigator: Purnima Sundar
Department of Psychology, (519) 884-0710 ext. 2987
Wilfrid Laurier University
Waterloo, ON

You have been invited to participate in a research study entitled "Coping With Loss: A Qualitative Study of the Experience of Sibling Bereavement in Young Adulthood." The overall purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of the experience of bereaved siblings (who were young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 at the time of the loss), with a special focus on factors that both helped and hindered effective coping. The rationale for this study is based on a review of current literature which indicates a shortage of information in this particular area. A written report of the findings of this study will be produced in order to fulfill the requirements of a Masters thesis project in the Community Psychology Programme at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Your participation has been requested because you possess valuable experiential knowledge in this area. As one of approximately 10 participants, you will be involved in an interview conducted by the principal investigator. With your consent, the interview will be audio-taped so that it can be transcribed and analysed. The interview will take place for approximately one and a half hours, and will not exceed two hours.

You may experience some degree of psychological discomfort due to the distressing and often painful nature of this information. To minimize this risk, your interview will take place at the Bereaved Families of Ontario centre with a trained counselor on the premises throughout the session. This counselor will be available for immediate intervention if necessary, and debriefing at the end of your interview. Prior to consenting to the interview, you will be provided with a copy of the Interview Guide so that you may judge your level of comfort with regard to the issues to be discussed throughout the interview. You reserve the right to refuse to answer any question or address any topic you wish not to discuss. You are guaranteed, both verbally and in writing, that *all information arising from this study will be held in the strictest of confidence.* No names or identifying statements will be used in the written report, and all quotations will be verified by you before appearing in this final report. All audio-tapes, transcriptions and notes will not be heard/seen by anyone other than the principal investigator, and will be stored in a locked drawer in the office of the principal investigator. Upon completion of the study, all of this information will be destroyed. You will receive a transcript of your interview in order to gain your feedback and to clear up any issues requiring clarification. In

addition, you will be provided with a summary of findings in order to once again gain your feedback and any final thoughts you may wish to add at that point.

Great consideration and effort have taken place in order to minimize any risks you may suffer as a participant in this research. This is because sharing your personal experiences within the context of this study facilitates a greater understanding of this topic. Participation in this study, however, is entirely voluntary. If you should choose *not* to participate or wish to discontinue your participation *at any time*, you will suffer no penalty. In addition, all data pertaining to your experiences will promptly destroyed.

You are invited to ask any questions at any time before, during or after completion of the study. These questions should be directed to the principal investigator of this research (see above), or the supervisor of this study, Dr. Geoffrey Nelson at Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-0710, ext. 3134.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee, Dr. Linda Parker, in the Office of Research and Graduate Studies ((519) 884-0710, ext. 3126).

Appendix C

Informed Consent Statement

"Coping With Loss: A Qualitative Study of the Experience of Sibling Bereavement in Young Adulthood"
Principal Investigator: Purnima Sundar
Department of Psychology, (519) 884-0710 ext. 2987
Wilfrid Laurier University
Waterloo, ON

I have been informed of the purpose, rationale, and methods of the above named study. I am aware of what will be required of me as one of approximately 10 participants in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time during this study, with the assurance that all data pertaining to my experiences will be destroyed promptly, should that occur. The principal investigator has given me a comprehensive sense of the type of questions contained in the interview, and I have been notified that I reserve the right to refuse to answer any question or address any issue I wish not to discuss.

I understand that all materials related to my role in this study (i.e., audio-tapes of the interview, transcriptions of the interview, notes, etc.) will be stored in a locked drawer in order to protect my confidentiality, and will be destroyed upon completion of the project. I have been notified that only the principal investigator will listen to any recorded material (which will be destroyed once I approve the transcription of this material), and nobody other than myself and the investigator will view any transcriptions. I understand that any names or statements that could potentially reveal my identity will not be used in this study, and that the principal investigator will consult me to clarify any quotations she wishes to use in the final report.

I understand that the benefit of my participating in this study is that by sharing my experiences, I will be contributing to the limited knowledge base that exists for sibling bereavement. By sharing my story, I can provide others, both on personal and academic levels, with an increased understanding of the experience of sibling bereavement and the ways in which I sought to cope with this devastating event.

Finally, I am aware that I will receive a copy of the transcript of my interview, and a summary of findings in order to provide the principal investigator with my comments and feedback. In addition, I understand that by contacting the above investigator at any time following this project's completion (tentatively scheduled for April 1, 2000), I may obtain a copy of the full report.

I have read and understood the Study Information Sheet. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix D

Interview Guide

Following the *general interview guide approach* (Patton, 1990) to interviewing, these are the specific topics to be addressed during each session:

Background Information About the Participant

- general information about the participant (e.g., age, family situation, etc.)
- information pertaining to lifestyle (e.g., occupational/academic situation, etc.)

Information About the Loss of Her/his Sibling

- details about the circumstances around the sibling's death
- the participant's opinions regarding the effects of the loss (i.e., on the family system, on personal goals, etc.)

Coping Strategies

- a look at what types of coping strategies the participant used to deal with the loss
- the participant's evaluation of which coping strategies were helpful, and which were unhelpful

Outside Influences

- the participant's assessment of outside influences which were either helpful or unhelpful in coping with their bereavement

The last 10-20 minutes of the interview will be used to gain information about the participant's emotions and thoughts experienced throughout the session (i.e., debriefing). In addition, any questions, comments, or unresolved issues will be addressed at this time.

Appendix E

Questions for Individuals Providing Support to Bereaved Siblings

- In your work with bereaved siblings (between the ages of 18 and 30), have you found any gender differences with regard to help-seeking behaviour? If so, what is the nature of these differences?

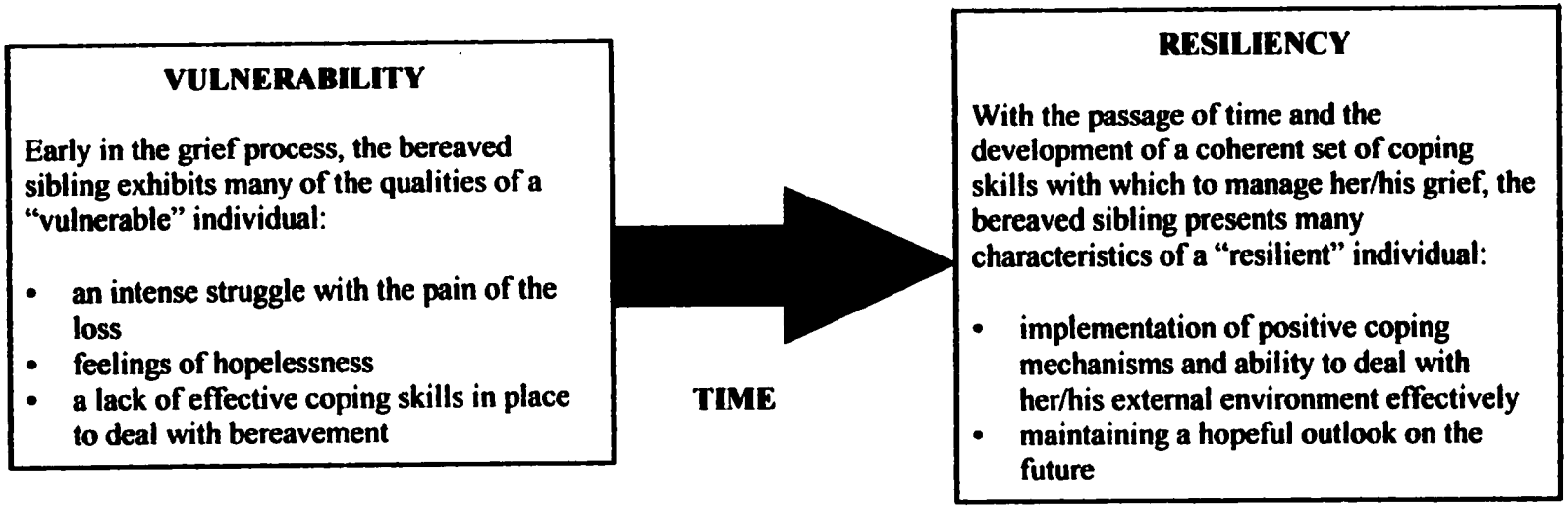
- What are some of the strategies (both helpful and unhelpful) that are typically used by young men when dealing with the loss of a sibling?

- What are some of the outside influences (either helpful or unhelpful) which impact upon the way that bereaved brothers cope with loss?

- How do you think bereaved young men can be encouraged to seek assistance from support providers within the community when dealing with the loss of a sibling (i.e., are there any forms of outreach that would more effectively engage young men in bereavement support groups, counselling sessions, etc.)?

Figure 1

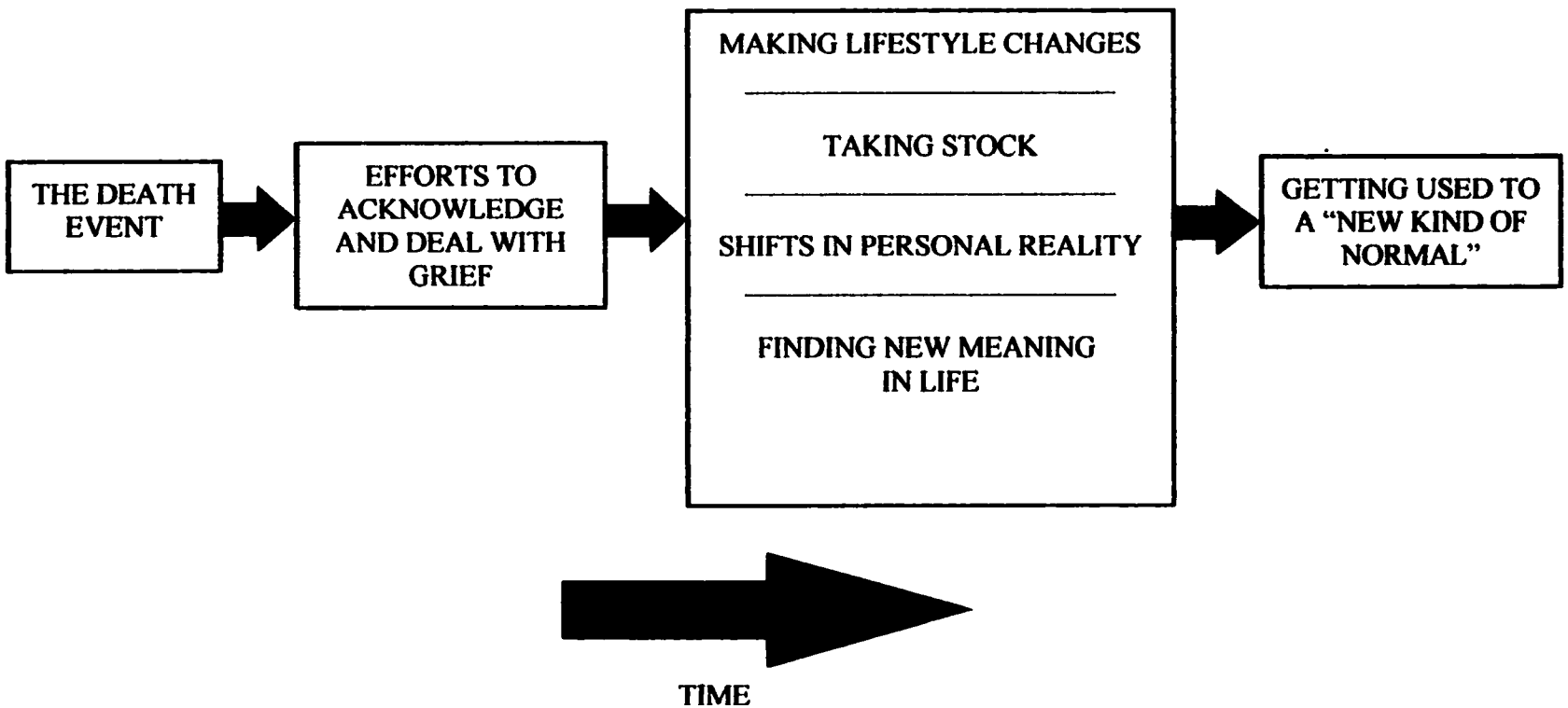
A Bereaved Sibling's Movement From Vulnerability to Resiliency



With time, as s/he moves through her/his own grief journey, each bereaved sibling progresses from a state in which primarily vulnerable qualitites are exhibited, into a state featuring predominantly resilient characteristics. At no time is an individual entirely at one extreme or the other.

Figure 2

A Theory of Sibling Bereavement in Young Adulthood



References

Balk, D. (1996). Models for understanding adolescent coping with bereavement. Death Studies, 20, 367-387.

Balk, D. (1991). Death and adolescent bereavement: Current research and future directions. Journal of Adolescent Research, 6(1), 7-27.

Balk, D. (1983). Adolescents' grief reactions and self-concept perceptions following sibling death: A study of 33 teenagers. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 12(2), 137-159.

Bank, S., & Kahn, M. (1982). The sibling bond. New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers.

Berger, P., & Luckman, T. (1967). The social construction of reality. New York: Anchor.

Caserta, M., & Lund, D. (1993). Intrapersonal resources and the effectiveness of self-help groups for bereaved older adults. The Gerontologist, 33(5), 619-629.

Clark, D., & Goebel, A. (1996). Siblings of youth suicide victims. In C. Pfeffer (Ed.), Severe stress and mental disturbance in children (pp. 361-389). Washington D. C.: American Psychiatric Press, Inc.

Cohen, L. (Ed.). (1988). Life events and psychological functioning: Theoretical and methodological issues. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Coleman, F., & Coleman, W. (1984). Helping siblings and other peers cope with dying. In H. Wass & C. Corr (Eds.), Childhood and death (pp. 129-148). Washington: Hemisphere Publishing Co.

Corr, C., & Corr, D. (Eds.). (1996). Handbook of childhood death and bereavement. New York: Springer Publishing Co.

Davies, B. (1993). After a child dies: Helping the siblings. In A. Armstrong-Dailey & S. Goltzer (Eds.), Hospice care for children (pp. 140-153). New York: Oxford University Press.

Davies, B. (1991). Long-term outcomes of adolescent sibling bereavement. Journal of Adolescent Research, 6(1), 83-97.

DeMinco, S. (1995). Young adult reactions to death in literature and life. Adolescence, 30(117), 179-185.

DeSpelder, L., & Strickland, A. (1996). The last dance: Encountering death and dying (4th ed.). Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Egan, G., & Cowan, M. (1980). Moving into adulthood: Themes and variations in self-directed development for effective living. Monterey: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.

Folkman, S. (1997). Positive psychological states and coping with severe stress. Social Science and Medicine, 45(8), 1207-1221.

Frydenberg, E. (1997). Adolescent coping: Theoretical and research perspectives. London: Routledge.

Gartner, A., & Riessman, F. (Eds.). (1984). The self-help revolution. New York: Human Sciences Press, Inc.

Gass, K. (1989). Health of older widowers: Role of appraisal, coping, resources, and type of spouse's death. In D. Lund (Ed.), Older bereaved spouses: Research with practical applications (pp. 95-110). New York: Hemisphere Publishing Corp.

Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln, (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Hogan, N., & DeSantis, L. (1996). Basic constructs of a theory of adolescent sibling bereavement. In D. Klass, P. Silverman & S. Nickman (Eds.), Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief (pp. 235-256). Washington: Taylor & Francis.

Hogan, N., & DeSantis, L. (1992). Adolescent sibling bereavement: An ongoing attachment. Qualitative Health Research, 2(2), 159-177.

Hogan, N., & DeSantis, L. (1994). Things that help and hinder adolescent sibling bereavement. Western Journal of Nursing Research, 16(2), 132-153.

Hogan, N., & Greenfield, D. (1991). Adolescent sibling bereavement symptomatology in a large community sample. Journal of Adolescent Research, 6(1), 97-112.

Humphreys, K. (1997). Individual and social benefits of mutual aid self-help groups. Social Policy, 27(3), 12-19.

Katz, A. (1993). Self-help in America: A social movement perspective. New York: Twayne Publishers.

Kessler, R., Mickelson, K., & Zhao, S. (1997). Patterns and correlates of self-help group membership in the United States. Social Policy, 27(3), 27-46.

Klass, D., Silverman, P., & Mickman, S. (Eds.). (1996). Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief. Washington: Taylor & Francis.

Kubler-Ross, E. (1973). On death and dying (10th Ed.). New York: Macmillan

Publishing Co., Inc.

Lagrand, L. (1986). Coping with separation and loss as a young adult: Theoretical and practical realities. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.

Lakin, M. (1985). The helping group: Therapeutic principles and issues. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.

Levine, M., & Perkins, D. (1997). Principles of community psychology: Perspectives and applications (2nd Ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Levy, L., Derby, J., Martinkowski, K. (1993). Effects of membership in bereavement support groups on adaptation to conjugal bereavement. American Journal of Community Psychology, 21(3), 361-381.

Lieberman, M., & Videka-Sherman, L. (1986). The impact of self-help groups on the mental health of widows and widowers. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 56(3), 435-448.

Marmar, C., Horowitz, M., Weiss, D., Wilner, N., & Kaltreider, N. (1988). A controlled trial of brief psychotherapy and mutual-help group treatment of conjugal bereavement. American Journal of Psychiatry, 145(2), 203-209.

Moos, R., & Schaefer, J. (1986). Life transitions and crises: A conceptual overview. In R. Moos (Ed.), Coping with life crises: An integrated approach (pp. 1-28). New York: Plenum Press.

Morse, J., & Carter, B. (1995). Strategies of enduring and the suffering of loss: Modes of comfort used by a resilient survivor. Holistic Nursing Practices, 9(3), 38-52.

Nelson, G., Ochocka, J., Griffin, K., & Lord, J. (1998). "Nothing about me

without me": Participatory action research with self-help/mutual aid organizations for psychiatric consumer/survivors. American Journal of Community Psychology, 26(6), 881-912.

Patton, M. (1990). Qualitative evaluation and research methods (2nd Ed.), Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Robinson, L., & Mahon, M. (1997). Sibling bereavement: A concept analysis. Death Studies, 21, 477-499.

Salem, D., Bogar, G., & Reid, C. (1997). Mutual help goes on-line. Journal of Community Psychology, 25(2), 189-207.

Sanders, C. (1992). How to survive the loss of a child: Filling the emptiness and rebuilding your life. Rocklin: Prima Publishing.

Schwandt, T. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (pp. 118-137). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Stahlman, S. (1996). Children and the death of a sibling. In C. Corr & D. Corr (Eds.), Handbook of childhood death and bereavement (pp. 140-153). New York: Springer Publishing Co.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory, procedures, and techniques. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stroebe, M., & Schut, H. (1999). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: Rationale and description. Death Studies, 23, 197-224.

Vachon, M., Lyall, W., Rogers, J., Freedman-Letofsky, K., & Freeman, S. (1980).

A controlled study of self-help intervention for widows. American Journal of Psychiatry, 137(11), 1380-1384.

Videka-Sherman, L., & Lieberman, M. (1985). The effects of self-help and psychotherapy intervention on child loss: The limits of recovery. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 55, 70-81.

Weber, G., & Cohen, L. (Eds.). Beliefs and self-help: Cross-cultural perspectives and approaches. New York: Human Sciences Press, Inc.

Wheeler, I. (1994). The role of meaning and purpose in life in bereaved parents associated with a self-help group: Compassionate Friends. Omega: Journal of Death and Dying, 28(4), 261-271.