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The Impact of Parental Bereavement on Young People: A Thematic Analysis of Using Online Web Forums as a Method of Coping

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Abstract

A qualitative approach was used to explore how online web forums might facilitate recovery and the process of coping. Ten online web forums written by young people who have personally experienced the death of a parent formed the data of this study. Previous research suggests forum users do not receive the supportive reactions from face-to-face interactions that they desire. Thematic analysis found that forums created an environment where young people can process the bereavement of a parent. Forums allowed young people to use their experience of bereavement to positively support others with similar experiences. The findings imply that the process of using forums can positively impact individuals who have experienced the loss of a parent. This supports recommendations by professionals, to consider online forums as a coping strategy. This study presents one of the few analyses of web forums written by young people who have experienced parental bereavement.

Keywords

bereavement, grief, online web forums, coping

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The term ‘bereavement’ refers to a period of grief and mourning following the death of someone significant (Stroebe et al., 2007). It is considered to be part of a normal reaction process to loss through death (McLaughlin et al., 2019). The process of bereavement and adolescence comprise two major transitions that an individual can experience (Bergman et al., 2017). Research highlights that a young person’s course of bereavement is likely to be susceptible to various complex reactions including shame, helplessness, social isolation and self-blame (Moors & Webber, 2013). More than half of the bereaved develop depression, approximately 20% alcoholism (Pitman et al., 2016) and they have the highest risk of suicide (Yu et al., 2017). Children who had a parent who died prior to them turning 6 years old were at higher risk of committing suicide themselves; this remained high for at least 25 years (Guldin et al., 2015). The death of a parent is one of the most complex adverse childhood experiences (ACE’s). In the UK, it is estimated that 41,000 young people encounter parental death, each year, this equates to 112 newly bereaved young people each day (Child bereavement UK, 2018), however according to Chatter et al. (2020) this data may be underinflated. Previous research looking at the long-term impact of bereavement has found major variations in coping strategies across individuals (Littleton et al., 2012). Walsh et al. (2010) noted that the coping strategies adopted by a young person may depend upon the severity and interpersonal distress which that individual faces. Despite the growing number of young people experiencing parental bereavement, research has neglected to focus on the impact and coping strategies of underrepresented populations such as adolescents (Wagner et al., 2020).

Literature Review

Coping Styles

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as “the cognitive and behavioural efforts made to master, tolerate or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them” (p. 223). There is a variety of existing theories that concern the concept of coping; however this paper focuses on the Approach Versus Avoidance coping model. This model is useful for gaining an understanding of how coping strategies can assist with recovery following a distressing event. This model suggests that approach coping involves attempts to directly address and integrate painful material (Quah et al., 2020); allowing a young person to regulate negative emotions and stress adaptively. For example, seeking emotional support or planning to resolve and reduce stressors (Fluharty & Fancourt, 2020). Naturally, avoidance coping involves protecting oneself from the negative feelings linked to the distressing event by distancing oneself from the stressor (Roth & Cohen, 1986; Quah et al., 2020). For example, withdrawing from others, substance use and denying the reality of the stressor (Fluharty &

Fancourt, 2020). Positive responses to coping can have a greater long-term impact compared to avoiding a situation, because the source of stress is being dealt with (Weber et al., 2019). This explains why Fluharty and Fancourt (2020) found avoidance coping is the least beneficial, as it blocks attempts to address the stressor/problem.

Avoidance coping may be an effective short term strategy for distracting and resting from the stressor, however in the long-term coping tends to require the individual to integrate painful experiences into existing schemas (Compas et al., 2017). Long term coping involves directly addressing and attaching meaning to the traumatic incident, therefore supporting why young people who have experienced parental death may be reluctant to adopt this approach (Walsh et al., 2010). It is this literature which explains why an individual does not consistently implement one single approach and often repeatedly alternates between approach and avoidance coping styles (Cantón-Cortés & Cantón, 2010).

Using Social Media as a Method of Coping

Technological advances have formed new avenues for young people to portray their experiences through the online world, for example; social media groups (e.g. Facebook), blogs and web forums. Falconer et al. (2011) suggest that people use the internet to cope with the stress of grief as it is accessible 24 hours a day. In their 2010 study, Massimi and Baecker found that 65% of their bereaved participants reported the internet as positively helping them through the bereavement process. However research has not fully investigated the functions and effect of these technologies on the impact upon bereaving young people (Yeager, 2012). The online world holds a vast amount of independence for adolescents, a “private space even while they’re still at home” as noted by Pascoe (2007, p.3). Furthermore, the immediacy of the process of uploading a post and receiving a response from the online world is attractive to teenagers (Moore et al., 2017), as well as feeling in control (Hillis, 2018). However Moore et al. (2017) found that they lose this control when the content has been posted. Particularly as privacy settings are believed to be difficult to manage on such sites (Naslund & Aschbrenner, 2019).

It is said that throughout the period of adolescence, exploring one’s own identity and values is common. Schmitt et al. (2008) found that many young adults are using online resources such as web forums to express and delve into their forming identities. As many adolescents find difficulty in issues that may be complicated to explore with parents or peers, Hellenga (2002) highlights that the world of internet communication can serve as a ‘safe haven’. As well as a place where anonymity is considered regarding the information they share and the support received. Young people who have experienced marginalisation as part of their everyday life can find a sense of community online. Research exploring the role of online support groups has found there to be benefits including

the provision of emotional support (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008), instilling hope (Vilhauer, 2009) and reducing feelings of isolation (Shoebotham & Coulson, 2016).

Yeager (2012) found that it is becoming increasingly common that traditionally voiceless groups of individuals, such as those with learning difficulties and social anxieties, are turning to the online world to speak out. This is supported by Malik and Coulson (2008) who found that teenagers, who usually find difficulty in face-to-face conversations, feel more connected with others through the internet and have gained a sense of empowerment that may not be achievable elsewhere.

Loss and bereavement among adolescents is said to alter their perception of interpersonal relationships. This has led to feelings of isolation and that they receive little social support at a point in their life when supportive relationships are crucial, particularly for identity development and well-being (Servaty & Hayslip, 2001). Ribbens-Mccarthy (2007) found that bereaved teens can experience a heightened sense of vulnerability or difference. A logical explanation is that for a young person to identify themselves as a bereaved adolescent in an online environment where being a grieving teenager is the norm, could potentially create a sense of sameness.

Potential Risks and Challenges of Online Forms of Support

Despite the potential benefits of the online world, it is crucial to understand the risks that come to light when young people use the internet. Hellenga (2002) noted that communicating online can provide young people who have a particularly shy or uncomfortable nature, with peers from an alternative socialisation ground. On the opposing hand, Standfield (cited in Natekar, 2007) highlighted that the online world may provide young people with the excuse to avoid face-to-face interactions, which is not always healthy. This suggests that there is a possibility that individuals, who spend a vast amount of time online, would be deprived of the skills that would otherwise be developed through face-to-face social interactions.

Researchers have generated concerns about online safety, particularly around cyberbullying (Sofka, 2012). Cybersbullying is a form of bullying or harassment that takes place online using electronic devices like mobile phones and social media (Popoola et al., 2020). In cyberbullying, the perpetrator harasses the victim by posting negative, harmful or false posts/comments about the victim (Stop Bullying, 2020). Cyberbullying has led to suicidal behaviours among adolescents. Victims of cyberbullying are at a higher risk of experiencing self-harm and suicidal behaviours (John et al., 2018). It is estimated that seven in ten young people have experienced cyberbullying (Viner et al., 2019). There are eminent examples of cyberbullying across the internet. One example is Tyler Clementi who committed suicide after a fellow student posted a private sexual

encounter with a male student on social media (Ortiz, 2017). Popoola et al. (2020) found that teenagers who experience any form of bullying including cyberbullying are at greater risk of anxiety, sleep deprivation, poor academic performance, dropping out of school and depression.

It should also be considered that emotional well-being can be affected by unsettling phenomena that occurs online, such as: “trolling”, abusive remarks and insensitive images. Phillips (2011) conducted a study that found individuals who shared content from raw emotions, unintentionally caused offence and had negative impacts on other web forum users. Considering such pitfalls to online sources of support, why are young individuals frequently choosing this method of support?

Kauer et al. (2014) found that improving help-seeking and access to care/support is integral to improving mental health for young people. Growing research repeatedly shows that young people favour online sources of support over alternative methods. However little research has attempted to understand and evaluate the reasons for these choices. Considering the increase in children experiencing parental bereavement each day, it is critical that we develop an in-depth understanding, to determine whether the potentially supportive benefits of forums, outweigh the negative consequences. Previous empirical findings have found a range of benefits to using web forums to assist the process of parental bereavement. However, no prior studies have directly explored the phenomena by solely focusing on young people. Despite the limited research in this area, it is crucial to attempt to better understand the wide ranging issues that could be experienced following the loss of a parent. Using a thematic analysis could give understanding as to why individuals use web forums to cope with the adverse experiences of parental death.

The aim of this study was to explore the impact of using online web forums for young people in the bereavement stages, following the death of a parent. The following research questions were addressed:

- What makes using online web forums an attractive form of support for young individuals?
- What are the positive and negative impacts upon users’ well-being?
- What are the barriers to receiving offline support for bereavement?
- How can the use of online web forums facilitate recovery following the bereavement of a parent and improve the process of coping?

Methodology

Design and Approach

A qualitative approach was utilised to achieve rich and meaningful data regarding young people who are bereaved by the loss of a parent and the influences

that engaging in web forums has on helping them to cope. The thematic analysis carried out was data-driven (Attard & Coulson, 2012) and resulted in a distinctive coding framework being devised in relation to the impact of parental loss and web forum engagement.

Sample

Throughout this study the researcher adhered to the WHO definition of young people as aged between 10 and 19 years (World Health Organization, 2021). For the purpose of this study, the specific interest focused on the impact of the loss of a parent and how engaging in forums can assist with the recovery process of bereavement. Therefore every attempt was made to exclusively include quotations presented within the results from young people. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain the exact age of each web forum user (Lavis & Winter, 2020) an important element of the data analysis was to determine whether the posts were uploaded by young people. This was identified through the content of the conversations and specifically searching for key phrases or terms such as; descriptions of school, college, homework and living with parents. As well as the language and linguistics used by the forum user, such as slang terminology or abbreviations (For example, 'LOL' was an abbreviation for the term 'laugh out loud'). Schwartz et al. (2013) defined the term 'language of age' in a study that presented differences in linguistics used between age groups across social media platforms. This term was considered throughout the entirety of the study.

A total of ten online web forum posts formed the data for this study. The members within each forum were both male and female, with the responses of 2 male posters and 8 female posters forming the analysed data of this study. The members ranged from those looking for advice and guidance to those trying to share their stories to help others. All content in this study were from UK based members; however other members within the forum did come from other countries.

Data Collection

Grieving forums were identified by typing the term "Grieving child forums UK" into the Google search engine on the 21st December 2017. Google was selected as the preferred search engine because it was rated the number one search engine, used by 98% of web users (SEO Consultants Directory, 2010). Sixteen UK based forums for grieving children and young people were identified and systematically searched for appropriate content. Due to the age group of the study, considerations were given to working sensitively throughout the design (Shaw et al., 2011).

Two forums contained content on the guidance, in 11 threads. It is these threads which became the source of data for this study, with 58 forum members

contributing to over 200 posts. The posts within the forum ranged from a few sentences, to a large and in depth account of their personal experiences of grieving over the loss of a parent. All threads were varied in length, from five posts to over 200. In some threads, members posted only once, however in others some members were regularly active (tended to be the original poster).

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data based on the methodology highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2006). As the analysis was grounded in the data, an inductive approach was used, to highlight patterns and similarities (Saunders et al., 2021). Any identifying characteristics were removed from the posts and usernames were replaced with pseudonyms such as F1E23, which stands for forum 1, thread E, post 23. This represents the guidelines outlined by the BPS for conducting internet-mediated research to protect the poster's identities (BPS, 2013).

The next stage of analysis involved coding the generated data into initial themes. The themes were generated from the patterns within the codes and were included when they linked to the research aims, were frequently mentioned and appeared important to the forum users. Later on, a comparison of the initial themes was conducted and finally grouped into three non-overlapping broader themes that were defined and specifically organised to address the research questions of facilitating recovery, the barriers to receiving offline support and the positive/negative impact on users' well-being.

The themes have been illustrated with paraphrased extracts from the posts. Direct quotations have not been used as these may allow the data to be matched with the original source and thereby compromise anonymity. The themes have been developed from quotations across the forum threads, illustrating that similar comments were made in each forum thread.

Ethical Considerations

This study was granted ethical approval and the guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society were adhered to (BPS, 2013). As the data collected for this study was gathered from open access websites available within the public domain, it was not necessary to obtain informed consent. However, some researchers argue that the content within publically accessible forums are still written by individuals who want to assume privacy (Hookway, 2008). Thus, careful consideration has been taken to ensure that the identity of the individuals within such forums remains anonymous and that any comments highlighted cannot be traced back to the forums or individual members. It was decided that the forum names would not be disclosed.

Analysis and Discussion

A thematic analysis of online web forums created by individuals who have experienced the loss of a parent highlighted three key themes. These were termed; finding a support system, repercussions of losing a parent and assisting others with their recovery.

Finding a support system. This theme refers to how important the participant considers the support of others to be throughout the process of bereavement. It was difficult to establish whether all the participants received long term social support. However, it was evident that the participants who did receive ongoing social support described positive outcomes from the idea of having a reliable support network. One participant described the use of forums as beneficial to the lack of social support being received from their home environment. This corroborates with the stress buffer model (Olstad et al., 2001), in that social support buffers against the negative impact of stress. The positive impact of social support networks can include increasing confidence; overcome feelings of isolation, as well as assisting an individual to express their emotions and challenge any denial or negative beliefs in a positive and safe way (Wenocur et al., 2020). Various participants revealed that although they come from large families and have good friendship groups, they did often feel hesitant to confide in such individuals to discuss their emotional difficulties. Shapiro (2001) noted that the experience of grieving can be enhanced or impaired by the openness of communication and level of cohesion among family members. A family that functions well is said to provide a mutual support system which can contribute to an adaptive adjustment to loss. It was also common that participants felt that they had to put on a 'brave face' to avoid upsetting family members and believed that they had to prove that they were strong.

Other relatives don't understand. They grieve differently. . . In need of support but family abandons me. . . I have read many articles and it has been helpful. Everyone seems so kind here. (F2G05)

I'm scared for my dad . . . they were married 28 years. I'm scared that he won't be able to go on. I'm scared to lose him too. I'm scared for my father to be alone . . . they had a bright future. This is why I need to keep plodding on. (F1A38)

This insufficient level of support noted throughout the web forums is particularly striking, as strong social support networks have been found to improve the bereavement process after stressful events (Nurullah, 2012). Furthermore, a lack of social support has been linked to the development of psychological distress following bereavement (van der Houwen et al., 2010). Despite this, research on the effectiveness of social support systems for bereaved individuals, frequently shows inconsistent results (Lavis & Winter, 2020). Most participants within this

study revealed that it was easier and more comforting to get support from other members within the forum.

I feel it is easier writing my problems on here than worrying my mum with my pain (F4B12).

The theory of catharsis suggests that “venting one’s anger will produce a positive improvement in one’s psychological state” (Bushman, 2002: 724). Therefore, writing about complex and stressful experiences through online support groups is likely to facilitate the process of catharsis (Gondwe & Some, 2020), which may allow an individual to address their innermost emotions and thoughts. Paola (2020) reported a number of barriers to an adolescent accessing support services, even when experiencing severe psychological distress (Robinson et al., 2016). Pitman et al. (2016) found that reasons for the low use of professional psychological support may include a lack of psychosocial care being available at the time of crisis or a fear of stigmatisation.

I don’t know what to do I tried talking to a counsellor and that was just a waste of time. (F5E41)

Within forums it has been found that the way offline support providers would challenge negative attitudes and self-blame, is replicated (Littleton & Radecki-Breitkopf, 2006). Similarly to how an individual would dismiss negative beliefs that their relative is labelling themselves as. The reality of this is supported by the Uses and Gratification theory which highlights how individuals tend to use readily available sources such as web forums as a way of meeting their particular needs throughout a period of bereavement (Getty et al., 2010). However, in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of this area, greater research on the role of engaging in forums as a means of grieving is essential. The theme of *finding a support system* insists that participants within this study utilised web forums as a method of delegating stress and negative emotions linked to parental death. As well as the difficulty they felt in disclosing to others in an offline world, suggesting beneficial elements to web forum engagement.

Repercussions of losing a parent. As previously discussed, the impact that losing a parent has on a young person is associated with increased risk of psychological distress in bereaved children (Geulayov et al., 2012). These signs of psychological distress were evident throughout the posts within the forums.

I got mad and depressed . . . I am still in disbelief . . . I don’t know what to do and I am always so upset. (F3R11)

There are further potentially negative effects that were mentioned by the participants which include self-blame, outbursts of anger, confusion and denial, all

as a result of losing a parent at a young age.

My problems relate to before her death, when I failed to see and/or act in her best interests...I know I failed her. Every decision I made that week she died was wrong...had I done at least 1 thing right that week, she shouldn't have died that day. (F6C35)

I felt like I couldn't catch my breath and everything didn't feel real. Like he is still here or will pop round for tea... Maybe that's why I'm confused over being upset over his passing. (F7D14)

Coping with the loss of a parent in childhood can have serious long-term implications, such as impacting their ability to adjust or recognise personal strengths (Debiasi et al., 2020). Social support, through affective regulation and reassurance, is theorised to protect people from the effects of stressful events through the mechanism of coping (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Coping is a cognitive appraisal process that allows perceivers to manage and transition negative thoughts about an event (i.e., appraisal), through conscious actions such as problem solving or relaxation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The support received from online networks provides an element of supportive communication, mutual trust and shared identity (Haslam et al., 2018). Therefore, online web forums may serve a useful purpose of providing online social support (Lu & Hampton, 2017). This reflects the experiences that are described by participants in this study within their forum posts. Findings reveal that the overall experience has affected how they are achieving in school, their ability to concentrate and further relationship breakdowns due to finding it hard to demonstrate emotions.

My girlfriend really doesn't care anymore, in a way I don't blame her... Both of us are talking about splitting up. We were so in Love. I have not seen her smile in months.... This is so difficult for her. I really wouldn't blame her if she left me. (F10G18)

My sister is not comforting like my mother. And it sucks that I will never find anyone that gives me comfort. She expects me to work on my homework... when I'm not in a clear mind. (F8R22)

The negative experiences of each participant varied, this could be a result of intervening issues such as the presence of positive and influential support systems, such as caregivers and the different methods of coping applied by each individual (Walsh et al., 2010). Almost all participants demonstrated awareness that their experience of losing a parent would have a significant impact upon their lives, both immediately and in the long-term.

For 2 weeks straight I had horrible knots in my stomach 24/7. This had never happened before and they would not go away. My throat felt tighter and still does. Then, I started having negative thoughts; it's been so long now. (F9I44)

Linley and Joseph (2004) have highlighted how psychological distress after a traumatic experience can be reduced when long-term positive changes are introduced. Evidence of positive changes following the loss of a parent was demonstrated within these web forums.

When I put guilt to one side and think in a better way, I know I'll be with him in the future, in another life, that's what keeps me plodding on. (F4B12)

Feels good to write it out though . . . surely I won't feel like this forever? The future can only get better right? (F7D14)

However, these kind of positive attitudes were not evident in every post within this study, which could be a result of several factors, such as other present life stressors, personal motivation and determination to stay positive. Frazier et al. (2004) note that duration of participation in web forums and the period of time since the actual loss of a parent, are strong mediating factors.

Assisting others with their recovery. The online web forum users demonstrated an obvious strive to assist others who have also experienced the loss of a parent. This was demonstrated through repeatedly using encouraging words, and sharing personal stories of positive achievements within their recovery. Lavis and Winter (2020) found that this provides readers with a feeling of hope and reassurance that a positive outcome is achievable. The forum users shared and discussed their personal techniques which were used to assist with their own bereavement. This included being open about their feelings, discussing the importance of religious and spiritual coping methods and confronting difficult feelings in order to overcome them.

I'm religious, so I like to think that he's still around and can somehow hear me when I talk to him. This helps. (FB412)

I know it's good to get it out and hopefully I can help others who feel even a tiny bit like I am, that they are not alone. (F10G18)

The adoption of avoidant coping strategies such as denial and repression, have frequently been associated with later mental health problems (depression, anxiety and PTSD) (Busch et al., 2020; Satija et al., 1998). This type of coping is persistently reflected throughout the forums. It appears that avoidance coping has served as a way of distancing themselves from the bigger stressors related to the loss of a parent, therefore serving as a short-term practicality (Roth & Cohen, 1986). However, the avoidance coping strategies discussed throughout the forums have been ineffective and have led to the development of more permanent and long term negative coping strategies, such as the inability to confront difficult feelings.

I turned to using recreational drugs at one point, thinking that might release my pain, I wouldn't say I was addicted but they made me feel better even if it was for a

short time. It wasn't until people turned their back on me that I thought I need help. I wanted to help myself and ease the pain of everyone around me. (F9I44)

This suggests that the function of coping with parental death changes over time. It also supports the assumption of Walsh et al. (2010) that adopting a combination of approach and avoidant coping styles can be beneficial.

Within the forums, users also gave advice on their personal experiences of coping with parental death. Self-compassion was a primary piece of advice discussed throughout, with users suggesting that it allowed them to work through difficult feelings. The forums also provided links to other sources of information that contained help and support techniques such as books, websites and events.

Don't get me wrong - it's hard being strong and get through the everyday when you feel like you're going crazy and questioning things, but don't question yourself, you're grieving for god sake, give yourself a break, the best is yet to come. (F9I44)

The forum users also provided moral support and encouragement. This was done by sharing personal experiences of their coping process and this appeared to make others feel the need to persevere with their journey.

Keeping it short and sweet, I want to let you all know that you're amazing. Keep being strong and know this isn't an easy process but you're already on your way. (F11S26)

These entries written by individuals, who have personally experienced the loss of a parent at a young age, have the potential to empower others by providing a form of support. Several forum users state that they received validation about some of their experiences and that they felt it was normal to feel the way that they do. This supports Coulson's (2005) research that shows how individuals who have been affected by similar traumatic experiences can be viewed as a more effective support mechanism, as their needs can be matched. An example of this is the Winston's Wish (2018) charity that is specifically aimed at assisting young people with the transition following the loss of a parent. The website was founded by an individual who also experienced the death of a parent at a young age. The success of this charity suggests that more charities could be created to improve bereavement. Despite this, it should be considered that erroneous information can be supplied on such online platforms, which could have negative impacts on individuals.

Limitations

The first issue to consider is that the forums used within this study, were from open access websites, meaning that they could be accessed by anyone.

Therefore it is difficult to determine if the posts within the forums were genuine accounts from individuals who have actually experienced parental bereavement. By establishing how authentic these posts are, could improve the veracity of this study.

Secondly, only a small sample was used and in some cases the entries were small and not significantly in-depth. Obtaining a larger sample with a wider population (males and females) and spending a greater time-frame selecting larger entries would give a wider scope for more validated results.

Finally, the selected forum users who publicise their entries may represent a specific group of young people, such as those further on in the bereavement process, thus feel more inclined to motivate and assist others with their journey. Oppositely, forum users may epitomise individuals who are in deeper need of support. These issues could be clarified by carrying out in-depth qualitative interviews.

Future Recommendations

The findings of this study imply that young people who have experienced parental bereavement are faced with negative encounters regarding the support they receive. Future work on the area should attempt to discuss with these individuals, why they feel that engaging in forums has had a positive impact on their bereavement. This in turn could create a wider scope for understanding their social support systems, as well as providing techniques for professionals and close relatives/peers, to give the best support.

However, the area of research concerning the support available to bereaving adolescents requires further development. Although sources of support for bereaving adolescents such as; mental health interventions, self-help and support groups are available, Krysinska and Andriessen (2010) note that there is little evidence for the effectiveness of these interventions. Burrows (2011), supports this by recommending that counsellors engage in training to gain an understanding of online support platforms, before suggesting that bereaved individuals engage in them. This corresponds with the findings in this study, suggesting that bereaved individuals can benefit from professionals recommending the use of forums written by other bereaved individuals. Conversely, the accuracy of the information within these forums should be considered, as this cannot be determined at face value.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

The impact of technology is an important element in psychological development for all generations. The frequent changes in online technology provides an avenue for future exploration. As professionals within the mental health field

continue to assist grieving individuals, it is important to consider the ever evolving needs of such individuals within the digital age.

Encouraging users' online safety is a common recommendation from researchers (Shillair et al., 2015; Tomczyk & Eger, 2020). Considering some of the harms that young people may face when using such platforms, this is something that should merit awareness. Pascoe (2007) labelled this as the term "digital literacy", which refers to ways that a young person can keep safe whilst exploring and engaging in the online world (e.g., <https://staysafe.org/teens/>). Organisations such as Stay Safe teach young people, ways to think about the information they share, and the need to discuss certain issues with a professional, if needed. Teenagers could be given information on such safety sites prior to engaging in them.

Furthermore, Hillis (2018) found that consideration should also be given to having open discussions with teenagers about online resources and their experiences of using such platforms. Edgington (2011) recommended multiple resources that are accessible to professionals. These include: <https://www.wiredsafety.com/>; Hillis (2018) further describes how inviting an adolescent to share stories of their experiences, without judgment, is useful for them to process experiences and alleviates the impact on their social and emotional well-being.

This study provides further insight into why a growing number of young people use online web forums to cope with parental bereavement and how communicating online can serve a positive purpose. However, the study also highlights that young people identify multiple barriers to receiving offline support from professionals. This information could be used to develop a targeted strategy that encourages professionals to break the barriers that young people identify regarding, receiving support. For example, forums could be developed that apply a pre-user questionnaire which asks why accessing online sources of support is more attractive to them, compared to speaking to a professional in person, or using alternative offline support. These results could be compared to a control group of young people who instead choose to seek professional support, only. Future theoretical models could draw on this evidence to help clinicians to develop skills that normalise and validate patient experiences associated with bereavement. It may be that a clinician is able to start a dialogue that encourages a young person to focus on positive memories that they feel comfortable sharing and gradually working towards the challenging and difficult memories that they may be avoiding/masking.

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Susanne Langer, joined the Department of Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University in January 2014, bringing with her a wealth of research expertise in applied qualitative health research and experience of working across disciplinary boundaries. Susanne has been involved with studies that used inquest files to understand lives ending in suicide; identified treatment preferences for diabetes using deliberative methods; critically assessed the role of gender in northwest England's shared service industry; evaluated the Short Breaks for Disabled Children Pathfinder Programme; and investigated the links between chronic illness, depression and anxiety, and healthcare use.