

**The Influence of Maternal Loss on Young Women's Experience
of Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood**

by

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**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies

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University of Victoria

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the influence of maternal loss during adolescence on identity development in young women. Six women, aged 18-25, who had experienced the death of their mothers, between the ages of 15-20, participated in interviews. Transcripts of interviews were analyzed and summarized under the following two aspects of the experience: Experience of Maternal Loss, and Influence of Maternal Loss on Identity Development. There were a total of fourteen emergent theme clusters. The following three over-arching metathemes were found across the participants' interviews, which describe the participants' perceptions of how the death of their mothers has influenced their experience of identity development: Loss Impacts All Aspects of Identity, Finding Guidance and Relatedness on the Path of Identity Development, and Redefinition of Self and Integration of Loss into Emergent Identity. Overall, this study provides a deeper understanding of the influence of maternal loss on the process of identity development in emerging adulthood for these young women. The major finding was that the death of their mothers during adolescence did influence the participants' lives and identities in significant ways. The study concludes by describing the practical implications of these findings for counsellors and for future directions in research.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research study could not have been achieved without the honest, open, and courageous sharing of the six young women who invited me to learn from their personal experiences of maternal loss and identity development. I would like to express my appreciation for their time and their stories. It was a privilege to meet each of you and I have been touched by you all.

I would like to thank Dr. Norah Trace for her guidance, wisdom, and support on this new journey. I would like to thank Dr. Max Uhlemann for his patience, feedback, and commitment to my study. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Roy Ferguson for his time, energy, and his gentle encouragement.

Thank you to my family and dear friends who have generously given me unending love, understanding, and support throughout this process. I am so grateful to all of you.

DEDICATION

For my mum with immeasurable love.

For my dad and sister; my family.

For anyone who has been touched by death.

PREFACE

Mothers are very important to children.
 They provide the lifeblood,
 the mind energy and the “soul food”
 that every child needs in order to flourish.
 Fathers *show* us how to survive.
 Mothers *teach* us how to blossom and flourish.
 The mother must teach, nurture, guide,
 and provide the spiritual support system
 that the soul requires to unfold.
 When a child does not have a mother,
 some portion of the mind,
 the soul, and the life of the child
 remains in a constant state of yearning and want.
 What the child wants is to be fed
 and loved in a way that only a mother can love.
 Only a mother can bring forth
 the grace, mercy, beauty, and gentleness of the spirit.

Iyanla Vanzant, in *Yesterday I Cried*

When a tree is struck by lightning,
 If it survives, its growth is altered.
 A knot may form where the lightning hit.
 The growth on one side of the tree
 may be more vigorous than on another side.
 The shape of the tree may change.
 An interesting twist or a curious split
 has replaced what might have otherwise
 been a straight line.
 The tree flourishes; it bears fruit, provides shade,
 becomes a home to birds and squirrels.
 It is not the same tree it would have been
 If there had not been a lightning storm.

Maxine Harris, in *The Loss that is Forever*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Impetus for the Study

In the typical human life cycle most people will experience the loss of one or both of their parents and this event will have dramatically different implications for individuals depending on their stage of development and subsequent connection to the parent. Coping with the death of a parent in adolescence is not a normative life event and the vast and enduring effects of parental death during this critical period of life can present significant obstacles to an otherwise normal transition to young adulthood. In considering adolescents' adjustment to such a significant loss, the developmental issues that adolescents face must also be considered (Balk, 1991).

Erik Erikson (1968) has conceptualized the formation of a personal and coherent sense of identity as the major psychosocial task of late adolescence. Identity formation is thought to occur through the course of normal maturational processes within appropriate, supportive social contexts, however, the loss of a significant relationship during adolescence may interfere with the natural progression of developmental tasks that mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Markstrom-Adams, 1992). Since forming a personal identity requires adolescents to construct a unique sense of self distinct from their parents, the death of a parent during this phase of life not only alters the family system as a whole but also influences this normal adolescent developmental process (Raphael, 1983).

According to Balk (2000), adolescent bereavement has gained increasing attention since the early 1980s, however continued research needs to focus on the distinct issues in

adolescent experiences of death in relation to adolescent levels of development and the unique ways that early, middle, and late adolescents' grief affects and is affected by developmental issues. Similarly, Fleming and Adolph (1986) reported that clinicians, theorists, and adolescent survivors would all benefit from a model for grieving adolescents that provides insight into how the collision of grieving with differing phases of adolescent maturation influences adolescent development. This study will endeavor to contribute to the growing body of literature on adolescent adjustment to bereavement with a specific focus on female identity formation following maternal loss in adolescence.

The loss of a mother has been described as a “woman’s most profoundly life-altering passage” (Edelman, 1994). The death of a mother during a daughter’s adolescence comes at a significant time of growth and is deeply felt as young women begin to emerge into adulthood and become women in their own right. The absence of this most primary female attachment thus leaves young women feeling as though their train has derailed in unfamiliar territory and left them without a map or a ticket home (Edelman, p. xx).

This study is designed to determine how young motherless daughters navigate the self-defining transition from being a girl to becoming a woman and the perceived impact that the experience of maternal loss has upon this identity development. As a researcher, a counsellor, and a motherless daughter, I have both a personal and a professional investment in this important topic. I believe that the death of my mother when I was 15 years old is my most defining life experience. My experience of maternal loss continues to influence my evolving sense of identity as I work towards integrating my sense of self

as a female, an adult, and a unique individual without the guidance of my most important role model. My decision to explore this topic is also strongly motivated by professional pursuits. I have a professional interest in working with bereaved children and adolescents and I believe that by gaining a greater understanding of the long term impacts of loss on development, counsellors can be more effective in their immediate interventions with bereaved youth by targeting the issues that may emerge later. In addition, counsellors may be able to serve a vital role in the development of identity by being sensitive to the issue and by acting as a potential role model for the youth with whom they work. Furthermore, as Palladino-Schultheiss and Blustein (1994) suggest, counsellors can provide a secure and supportive therapeutic relationship which may enable parentally bereaved young persons to engage in the wide-reaching personal exploration needed to promote the development of a coherent and stable identity.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the present research study, which will focus on young women's experience of maternal loss and identity formation. It will begin by presenting the statement of the problem to be explored in this study. It will then describe the purpose of the study and the reasons for engaging in this research will be presented. In addition, this chapter will define the terms utilized in the study and will provide an explanation of these terms in the context of this particular research. It will also outline the delimitations of the study by describing what the present study is intending and not intending to do.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of the study is expressed by the following question: What are the perceptions of young women (18 – 26 years of age) on how maternal loss during their

adolescence (11 – 20 years of age) influences their experience of identity development in emerging adulthood ?

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the experience of identity formation in young women who experienced the death of their mother during adolescence. A specific purpose of this study is to gain further insight into the relationship between maternal loss and subsequent identity development in young women in order to increase counsellor sensitivity and effectively target counselling interventions toward maternally bereaved adolescents during those pivotal developmental years of transitioning into young adulthood.

This study identifies maternally bereaved adolescents and young adults as a population that warrants and deserves attention and it provides the participants with a vehicle to tell their stories and express their individual experiences. It aims to benefit future populations of young adult motherless daughters by providing a narrative context for their experiences with these personal stories from maternally bereaved young women. It also aims to provide counsellors and other helping professionals with a deeper understanding and awareness of the process of identity formation in women who experienced the death of their mother during adolescence and their potential role in helping to facilitate completion or navigation of this developmental task with women across the life-span.

Definitions

The following definitions are offered to ensure proper interpretation of the terminology used in this study and to clearly delineate the purpose and objectives of the

research. The terms are defined as they are used for the purpose of this study only and the definitions are drawn from various sources.

Adolescence: In post-industrial countries, the developmental stage of life known as adolescence encompasses the years from ages ten through twenty-two. It has been theoretically divided into sub-stages, which are marked by inexact age ranges, and are commonly referred to as early, middle and late adolescence (Balk, 2000).

Early adolescence: the developmental stage of adolescence that ranges from ages ten to fourteen years, however it can vary depending on the onset of puberty, which is considered to mark the beginning of this developmental stage (Balk, 2000).

Middle adolescence: the developmental stage of adolescence that extends from ages fifteen through seventeen (Balk, 2000).

Late adolescence: the developmental stage of adolescence that extends from ages eighteen through twenty-two (Balk, 2000).

Emerging adulthood: a transitional developmental period that ranges from eighteen through twenty-six years, which is intended to encompass late adolescence and the beginning years of young adulthood. It represents a developmental status that is moving towards adulthood but not yet fully adult (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Balk, 2000).

Identity: a personal realization of being a coherent, integrated, and self-defined person who feels “at home” with himself or herself and has a sense of meaningful relatedness with the world; a purposeful, stable and reliable sense of self that consists of who one is and what one stands for in the world (Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1987). For the purpose of this study “identity” and “sense of self” will be used interchangeably.

Identity development: the gradual and progressive process of defining a stable sense of self, which includes continuity of self over time, the integration of one's personal meaning and one's meaning to significant others, commitment to personal values, and the formulation of a purpose or meaning system in life (Erikson, 1968, 1997; Josselson, 1987). For the purpose of this study "identity development" and "identity formation" will be used interchangeably.

Maternal loss: the loss of a mother through unintentional death from illness or accident (Mireault, Bearor, & Thomas, 2002).

Motherless daughter: a woman who has lost her mother through death and is living with the experience of the loss (Edelman, 1994).

Loss: the on-going sense of absence experienced following the early death of a mother (Edelman, 1994).

Grief: the process of psychological, physiological, somatic, and social reactions to the perception of loss. Grief is a natural reaction to loss and it involves continuing developments and changes over time as one learns to live in an unfamiliar world without the loved one (Rando, 1984, 1991).

Mourning: for the purpose of this study, "mourning" will be used interchangeably with "grief".

Bereavement: the state of loss experienced after having suffered a death (Rando, 1984, 1991).

Delimitations of Study

The following delimitations will be imposed by the researcher. Firstly, the study will be limited to young women between the ages of 18 – 26 who lost a mother through

death during their adolescence, between 11 – 20 years of age. Secondly, the study will be limited to those participants who have completed a semi-structured interview, developed by the researcher, in regards to the perceived influence of this early maternal loss upon their experience of identity formation in emerging adulthood. Thirdly, the study will be limited to the element of identity formation, or developing a sense of self-definition, in emerging adulthood and will not include an exploration of other developmental tasks that originate and continue throughout young adulthood. Fourthly, this study will be limited to data collected from the participants between November 2003 and March 2004. Lastly, all elements, conditions, or populations not so specified in this study will be considered beyond the scope of this investigation.

Summary

Psychological research on adolescent adjustment to bereavement and loss is growing, however, continued research needs to focus on the interaction between specific developmental tasks and the experience of loss (Balk, 2000; Fleming & Adolph, 1986). This study is important in its endeavor to contribute to this body of literature by examining the influence of maternal loss on the process of identity formation in young women. A study of daughters who have lost their mothers during the pivotal years of adolescence as they move towards defining themselves as young adult women might provide counsellors and psychologists with insight into this unique experience of parental bereavement and thus help to inform professional sensitivity and treatment interventions.

The purpose of the present chapter was to introduce the topic of this research study and the purpose for conducting a study on how the death of a mother during a daughter's adolescence impacts the normative developmental task of identity formation

in emerging adulthood. The terms that will be utilized throughout the study were identified in order to provide the reader with a clear understanding of their usage within the context of the present study, and the delimitations of the research study were stated.

In an effort to provide a theoretical background and a critical review of the current research relating to the experience of adolescence bereavement and identity development, the following chapter will present literature on five topic areas. These will consist of the developmental stages of adolescence and early adulthood, Erikson's theory of identity formation, research on women's identity, the role of parents on adolescents' identity development, and adolescent bereavement in response to parental death.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Related Literature

Introduction

The purpose of the present chapter is to review and synthesize the relevant literature addressing adolescent and young adult development, the process of identity formation and the role of parents in adolescent identity development, and the nature of adolescent parental bereavement. It will begin by providing an outline of the developmental stages of adolescence and young adulthood and will describe the transitional phase of emerging adulthood. It will then describe the process of identity formation from the perspective of Eriksonian theory and review recent research on women's identity development. This discussion will be followed by a review of current theory and research on the role of parents on adolescent identity development. Lastly, this chapter will present a description of the stages of grief and a synthesis of the literature on adolescent bereavement in response to parental death.

Developmental Stages of Adolescence and Early Adulthood

Adolescence, in post-industrial countries, is considered to be a period of transition. Theorists and researchers of adolescent development widely recognize this phase of life as a time during which young people typically try out different identities, establish their own morals and values, mature in both their physicality and cognitive development and explore novel and complex relationships (Adams, 1992; Adams & Deveau, 1995; Balk 2000; Erikson, 1968; Harter, 1990; Josselson, 1987; Makros & McCabe, 2001; Marcia, 1966; Santrock, 1998; Waterman, 1982). Although adolescence

is commonly viewed as a single phase of life, in fact it can be theoretically divided into three distinct phases (Adams & Deveau, 1995; Balk 2000).

Balk (2000) suggests that the first phase of adolescent development, early adolescence, spans the period from age ten through to fourteen. During this phase of development, parents are often still considered friends and companions. The young adolescent tends to be dependent on his or her parents, and is easily influenced by family, friends, culture, and the media. These teenagers are generally more compliant to societal demands and are more willing to work within the boundaries of parental structure. Hormonal shifts, which occur with the onset of puberty, result in both emotional and physiological changes. Consequently, these adolescents typically become self-conscious regarding their physical and sexual development and anxious about their peer relationships (Adams & Deveau, 1995; Balk, 2000).

According to Balk (2000), middle adolescence roughly corresponds with ages fifteen through seventeen. It is typically the peak stage of turmoil and rebellion. These teenagers are prone to emotional fluctuations and extreme expressive reactions. Middle adolescents often become judgmental, begin to question authority and feel that they are invincible. Relationships with parents may become strained, as peers typically become a priority and teenagers often experiment or break rules as they try to establish their own place in the world outside of their family. As these adolescents begin to seek increased independence, they often struggle with dependency needs, questions of sexuality, and their own self-presentation (Adams & Deveau, 1995; Balk, 2000).

Balk (2000) suggests that middle adolescents are expected to demonstrate increased maturity in decision making and they begin to exhibit more reliance on peers as

they start to experiment with their growing independence. In accordance with Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development, he further contends that for many youth, questions about personal identity become prominent during middle adolescence and continue to be pronounced in later adolescence and young adulthood (Balk, 2000; Erikson, 1968).

Balk (2000) proposes that late adolescence extends from ages eighteen through twenty-two and is characterized by the adolescent's increasing rationality and maturity. Late adolescents are involved in the negotiation of new, more adult relationships with their families of origin, especially with their parents, as well as addressing issues related to the formation of intimate relationships that may be the basis for their future families. They complete their physical and sexual maturation, begin to clarify their moral principles and values, and continue to develop adult social skills. They are in the process of creating and committing to distinct and coherent identities as they move into new social spheres and seek out peers and perhaps a partner with similar values. As they continue to establish their own independence, they typically begin to make long-term commitments, including career decisions (Adams & Deveau, 1995; Balk, 2000).

Consistent with Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory, Balk (2000) postulates that the late adolescent will have difficulty successfully completing these tasks if the developmental expectations of early and middle adolescence have not been met. In addition, he proposes that adolescents who are conflicted about their identity often have a difficult time navigating the transition into young adulthood (Balk, 2000).

In the contemporary West, the transition from adolescence to young adulthood marks a critical developmental phase of life (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1987). Arnett and Taber (1994) refer to this transitional period as emerging

adulthood and conceptualize it as an intangible status of development that is beyond adolescence and not yet fully adult. It is characterized by gradual cognitive, emotional, and behavioural changes. Research in this area emphasizes the importance of culture in defining this phase of life and Arnett and Taber (1994) clearly state that the idea of emerging adulthood is intended to apply to individualistic cultures, such as contemporary western culture, where adult status is individually achieved.

Arnett and Taber (1994) suggest that the completion of the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is based on an individual's internal belief and perception that he or she has attained adult status (Arnett, 1997; Arnett & Taber, 1994). In a study conducted by Arnett (1997), late adolescents and young adults identified the psychological processes that they must move through in order to perceive themselves as adults. The two most commonly reported criteria for adult status were firstly, deciding on one's personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences and secondly, establishing a relationship with one's parents as an equal adult (Arnett, 1997).

Significant role transitions, mainly shifting from the role of dependent child to the role of independent member of society, are considered to be critical markers as are psychological and behavioural shifts (Arnett, 1997). According to research conducted by Arnett and Taber (1994), young adults have a sense of having reached a state of cognitive self-sufficiency, emotional self-reliance, and behavioral self-control (p. 533). Young adults perceive themselves as able to anticipate the consequences of their actions and make plans for a preferred future. Similarly, they take responsibility for their actions and deal with the consequences of their behaviour independently rather than relying on their parents or other significant older adults. Young adults express an ability to regulate their

emotions and perceive themselves as being largely in control of their own happiness (Arnett & Taber, 1994).

This review of the literature on adolescent and young adult development highlights the various psychosocial changes that individuals are expected to achieve during these various phases of life within the overarching biological and social context of human existence. One theme that emerges from this body of literature is that people do not develop in isolation, rather their growth is influenced by other significant people and important experiences in their lives as they move from adolescence into adulthood.

Erikson's Theory of Identity Formation

The transformational stage of life known as adolescence is widely recognized in Western societies as a period that is associated with substantial change in the self (Adams, 1992; Erikson, 1950, 1968; Grotevant, 1992; Josselson, 1987; Makros & McCabe, 2001; Noller, 1994; Waterman, 1982). One of the pioneering theories that emerged for conceptualizing the development of the self during adolescence and the transition to adulthood is Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Identity Formation (Erikson, 1968).

According to Erikson (1968, 1997), human beings develop through encountering and overcoming phase-specific psychosocial crises. Erikson postulates that adolescence marks a significant developmental phase during which time young people must become whole persons in their own right by constructing a strong notion of who they are and what they will become. He refers to the wholeness that is achieved in this phase as "a sense of inner identity" (Erikson, 1968, p. 87). The psychosocial task of this phase is referred to as identity formation versus identity confusion. According to Erikson, youth

must master this task and achieve a sense of inner identity in order to move towards establishing interpersonal intimacy, which he contends is the next task in the psychosocial stages (Erikson, 1968, 1997).

In Erikson's (1997) definition, identity formation is a "process that emerges as an evolving configuration" (p. 74). Young persons must experience "inner sameness", as they move towards integrating childhood self-images together with individual potentials and the opportunities afforded by society into their emerging sense of self (Erikson, 1963, 1968, 1997). This sense of "inner sameness" must be experienced as having continuity between the past and the anticipated future and young persons must perceive prior experiences and future plans as being related to their present self (Erikson, 1963, p. 261). Erikson (1963, 1968, 1997) proposes that individuals must achieve a sense of mutuality between their conceptualization of themselves, the beliefs that significant others hold about them, and their occupational, sexual, spiritual, and political choices. He argues that failure to achieve a stable sense of identity results in a sense of confusion about who one is and an inability to make committed decisions when faced with alternative options in occupations, intimate relationships, and a worldview. Thus, the overarching task of identity formation for adolescents in Western societies involves integrating and consolidating the various identities that one selects into a uniquely defined and coherent sense of self.

According to Erikson (1950, 1968), adolescence is characterized by exploration as young persons move towards a progressive strengthening in their sense of identity (Kidwell, Dunham, Bacho, Pastorino, & Portes, 1995; Waterman, 1982). "The search for a new and yet reliable identity can perhaps best be seen in the persistent adolescent

endeavor to define, overdefine, and redefine themselves and each other in often ruthless comparison, while a search for reliable alignments can be recognized in the restless testing of the newest in possibilities and the oldest in values” (Erikson, 1968, p. 87).

Erikson (1963, 1975) asserts that during adolescence, one’s beliefs about oneself and the beliefs of others become important contributors to defining a sense of coherent identity. He emphasizes the significant influence of sociocultural factors on the process of identity formation. Erikson (1968) further contends that identity formation successfully emerges within a social network of significant people who ideally facilitate the development of relationships and roles that serve to support and validate the young person’s integrated, coherent identity.

Erikson’s (1968, 1997) theory of identity formation is consistent with other developmental theorists and researchers who propose that identity exploration continues throughout the college and early adult years (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Blustein & Palladino, 1991; Harter, 1990; Protinsky, 1975; Waterman, 1982). Erikson (1997) identifies the college years as a period of ... “sanctioned postponement of definitive commitment” and further suggests that it “provides a relative leeway for role experimentation” (p. 75). He further contends that the identity crisis is a normative transitional task for both adolescents and young adults (Erikson, 1968).

Waterman (1982) provided a comprehensive review and expansion of the literature on identity development to date. Like Erikson, Waterman conceptualizes the transition from adolescence to adulthood as being characterized by a growing sense of inner identity. He cites research evidence which clearly indicates that the greatest gains in identity formation appear to occur during the college years and that a personal sense of

inner identity is progressively strengthened throughout those early years of young adulthood. Waterman also provides support for Erikson's (1968, 1997) notion that adulthood involves a continued consolidation of the sense of identity rather than an exploration of new identities (Waterman, 1982).

Further support for the continued development of identity exploration throughout late adolescence and young adulthood is provided by Adams and Jones' (1983) study on identity development in middle adolescent females. They conducted cross-sectional analyses on age differences in relation to identity formation with a sample of 82 female adolescents from the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Their findings indicated that middle adolescence is a period of gradual change in identity formation, however the process of committing to an identity is not completed at this early stage.

Similarly, Protinsky (1975) investigated Erikson's notion of the progression of identity strength from early adolescence to late adolescence with a sample of young adolescents (aged 13-14) and old adolescents (aged 19-24). His findings indicate that older adolescents are more likely to have a greater degree of identity consolidation than younger adolescents and therefore, provide support for Erikson's concept that identity is strengthened as adolescents age and move through the developmental phase (Erikson, 1968, 1997).

A number of researchers have empirically examined Erikson's theory of adolescent identity development (Blustein & Palladino, 1991; Kidwell, et al., 1995; Makros & McCabe, 2001). Much of the empirical research in this area has emerged from Marcia's (1966) conceptualization of an operationalized measure of identity status (Harter, 1990; Makros & McCabe, 2001; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002;

Waterman, 1982). For instance, Makros and McCabe (2001) investigated Erikson's notion that identity involves integrating various self-beliefs into an integrated sense of self by comparing the relationship between identity status and self-representations during adolescence. Their sample consisted of 336 male and female adolescents with a mean age of approximately 16 years. Their findings indicated that the adolescents who had achieved a clear sense of identity also displayed high levels of commitment to a chosen set of values, beliefs, and goals. These findings provide general support to Erikson's concept that identity involves a coherent and purposeful integration of the various components of oneself and a stable commitment to one's values as a member of society.

In another empirical investigation of Erikson's theory, Kidwell, Dunham, Bacho, Pastorino, and Portes, (1995) examined the association between Erikson's conceptualization of identity formation and the self in transitional crisis. Their sample consisted of 82 male and female adolescents between 14 and 17 years of age. They hypothesized that adolescents who are engaged in the process of exploring alternative identities will also exhibit symptoms of transitional crisis, such as fluctuations in energy and response style to other people, and excessive conformity to peer pressures. Their findings support Erikson's emphasis on exploration as the fundamental component of identity development and further indicate that the exploration occurs at both an intrapsychic and interpersonal level (Kidwell et al., 1995). These findings are consistent with Erikson's notion that the formation of a coherent identity requires consolidation of both internal perceptions of oneself and one's beliefs of how other people perceive that self (Erikson, 1963, 1975).

In summary, identity involves a purposeful integration of one's beliefs about oneself, one's beliefs of how others view that self, and a commitment to personal values and a direction in life. It is a progressive process that continues to be strengthened as adolescents move into adulthood. It is both an intrapersonal and an interpersonal emergence of self and much like the other developmental changes that are achieved in these phases of life, research has shown that a coherent sense of identity is not constructed in isolation (Erikson, 1968; Kidwell et al., 1995; Waterman, 1982). However, to date, little research has investigated how an experience of significant loss interacts with this process of identity exploration and commitment to a stable sense of self.

Research on Women's Identity Development

Erikson is widely considered to be one of the most important theorists on identity. His writing on this complex aspect of personality has drawn much attention to the notion of the identity crisis and has encouraged further research in the area of identity formation (Horst, 1995; Josselson, 1987; Waterman, 1982). Although Erikson has made significant contributions to a theoretical understanding of the identity formation process, his work has been criticized for its failure to include women (Gilligan, 1982, 1988). Erikson's theory was based upon the progression of adolescent males through the psychosocial stage of identity formation and several writers have argued that successful resolution of this developmental task is based on the acquisition of traits, such as a sense of separateness, that do not adequately represent the distinct experience of women (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Josselson, 1987; Patterson, Sochting, & Marcia, 1992; Zerbe Enns, 1991).

In considering the identity formation process of girls and young women, it is imperative to include research which expands Erikson's theory of identity formation by examining the unique aspects of women's identity development (Josselson, 1987; Zerbe Enns, 1991). Two of the most prominent writers in this area are Carol Gilligan and Ruth Josselson (Horst, 1995; Zerbe Enns, 1991).

Gilligan (1982) presents a relational model of women's identity development. Her research on female development and morality suggests that the process of identity formation for women may differ in some aspects from traditional theories of identity development that were based on males. She argues that women typically define themselves in relation to others and develop through intimate connections to other people, whereas men typically define themselves by individual achievements, independent of relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Zerbe Enns, 1991). She postulates that for males, identity development is achieved through separating from others and establishing autonomy, whereas for females, identity development is achieved through interpersonal relationships, specifically their sense of connectedness with others (Gilligan, 1982, 1988).

Gilligan's (1982) influential book, *In a Different Voice*, criticizes Erikson's stage theory for its emphasis on separateness and individuation as components of identity formation that precede the development of intimate relationships. She asserts that this specific sequencing of events is based on the experience of men and is not accurate for women who learn about themselves through relationships and merge identity work with the development and maintenance of close interpersonal relationships, including connection to attachment figures (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Horst, 1995). Gilligan (1982, 1988) further criticizes Erikson's work for disregarding the central issue of interpersonal

relatedness in female identity development. She proposes that the importance of relatedness for women is partly due to socialization and different maternal experiences, which implicitly encourage female adolescents to maintain an emotional attachment to their mothers throughout adolescence as they grow into womanhood (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001).

Like Gilligan (1982), Josselson (1987) argues that the process of women's identity development involves a greater focus on relatedness and connection than Erikson's traditional theory of identity formation implies. Her (1987) longitudinal research study of the development of identity in women sought to extend current theoretical understanding of the process of identity formation to include and account for the unique differences that exist among "ordinary" women. Josselson (1987) used the identity statuses developed by Marcia (1966) to examine how women proceed through Erikson's identity stage. She conducted intensive phenomenological interviews with a representative sample of sixty college-age young women about their self-definition and then interviewed half of them twelve years later to inquire as to how their adolescent identity formation influenced their lives (Josselson, 1987).

Josselson's (1987) findings from this longitudinal study demonstrate how Erikson's theoretical model of identity development can be expanded to encompass the unique experience of women (Horst, 1995). She emphasizes that a woman's sense of self is experienced in relation to others and includes this relational aspect as a critical component in a model of identity formation for women. She reconceptualized the theme of separation-individuation as a process that requires revision of relationships with parents, which preserves connection, rather than the establishment of complete autonomy

from the family. She postulates that for women the processes of separation-individuation and interrelatedness occur simultaneously since women's identity development is "always bound to their sense of connection to others" (Josselson, 1987, p. 21). Josselson suggests that the challenge facing adolescent girls and young women is to develop a sense of individuality in the context of a continual relationship with parents. In summarizing her findings, Josselson (1987) concludes that:

The aspects most salient to identity formation in women have been overlooked by psychological research and theory, which stresses the growth of independence and autonomy as hallmarks of adulthood. Communion, connection, relational embeddedness, spirituality, and affiliation are the basis on which females construct an identity (p. 191).

The theories of female identity development reviewed in this section emphasize the crucial importance of extending Erikson's traditional theory of identity formation to include the experience of women. This is especially critical when considering the identity formation process of women as this present research study will do. In summary, these theories emphasize that women typically move through the stage of identity formation with a greater focus on interpersonal competence rather than on autonomy and they tend to construct their identities within relationships and in connection with their families (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Josselson, 1987).

Role of Parents in Adolescent's Identity Development

Theorists and researchers tend to agree that the family context has an important influence on the process of identity development for adolescents in Western societies (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Noller, 1994; Palladino-Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994). There

is an apparent lack of consensus in the research literature as to how differing parental socialization styles influence adolescents' process of identity formation, however some consistent themes have emerged and certain familial intervening factors in identity formation have been identified (Kamptner, 1988; Markstrom-Adams, 1992; Noller, 1994; Palladino-Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994). In addition, much of the research that has been conducted in this area has been correlational and therefore, many researchers have been unable to draw causal inferences (Markstrom-Adams, 1992).

In recent years, research in this area has most often focused on the interaction between the separation-individuation process within the family and successful identity formation in adolescents (Palladino-Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994; Perosa, Perosa, & Tam, 1996, 2002). In line with Erikson's (1963, 1968) pioneering theory of identity formation, many developmental theorists and researchers suggest that the process of identity formation requires adolescents to begin to differentiate from their parents and redefine the parent-child relationship as they experiment with role exploration and stronger identification with their peer group (Balk, 2000; Blos, 1979; Harter, 1990; Hoffman, 1984; Noller, 1994; Santrock, 1998).

Previous research has highlighted the need for adolescents to psychologically separate from their parents and leave home in order to complete the individuation-differentiation process (Blos, 1979). For instance, Blos (1979) proposed that adolescence is a period of increasing individuation as adolescents psychologically separate from their parents and begin to take more responsibility in defining themselves rather than relying on their parent's identifications of what they are. More recent research has consistently shown that this process of individuation does not require the adolescent to disconnect

from the parents. On the contrary, it involves a simultaneous process of establishing autonomy from parents while maintaining a stable sense of familial connectedness through the continuation and elaboration of existing emotional bonds (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Josselson, 1987; Kamptner, 1988; Perosa et al., 1996, 2002).

Numerous studies have shown that a balance of individuality and connectedness within the family system provides adolescents with opportunities to explore identity alternatives and promotes the development of a sense of self that is distinctive and unique from parents. It is suggested that both of these processes are necessary prerequisites for identity consolidation (Adams & Jones, 1983; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Kamptner, 1988; Perosa et al. 1996, 2002; Sartor & Youniss, 2002).

For instance, Grotevant and Cooper (1985) investigated family interaction patterns and identity exploration among adolescents with a sample of 84 two-parent families. Although some differences emerged depending on the gender of the parent and the adolescent, they present a general finding that families who encourage individuality and connectedness, by allowing interpersonal differences to be openly expressed and accepted, foster high levels of stable identity exploration and commitment in their adolescents. These findings are supported by Kamptner (1988) who also found that a sense of family security characterized by a level of autonomy directly enhanced identity development in adolescents.

Similarly, Sartor and Youniss (2002) suggest that healthy parent-adolescent relationships are characterized by a qualitative shift in the dyad in which the parents provide structure with enough flexibility that adolescents can experiment with alternative identities and the adolescents establish their autonomy without compromising familial

connectedness. They further propose that parental encouragement and support are crucial to this process since the adolescents maintain an emotional bond with their parents as they engage in the process of identity formation.

In their investigation of the relationship between positive parental involvement and identity achievement during adolescence, Sartor and Youniss (2002) present findings that support the notion that the individuation process and subsequent identity exploration is nourished by parental support. They argue that parental distancing during this phase of development would be detrimental to adolescent identity formation since parental availability and emotional closeness are a source of security as adolescents progressively establish their unique identities. Such an argument is consistent with van Wel, Linssen, and Abma's (2000) finding that parents continue to play a significant role in the psychological well-being and adjustment of their adolescents as they transition into adulthood.

Papini, Sebby, and Clark (1989) offer an important contribution to the research on adolescent identity formation and familial contexts. They argue that the affective quality of the family environment does influence identity exploration, however an absence of conflict or disagreements is not necessary in order for families to promote identity exploring behaviour. Their findings show that adolescent exploration of identity alternatives was highest in families in which there was reported dissatisfaction in the affective quality of the parent-adolescent relationship and a level of conflict existed within the mother-adolescent dyad. In addition, their findings are consistent with research that identifies the need for the parent-adolescent relationship to shift to a level of greater equality. It has been suggested that such a shift may cause temporary

dissatisfaction in the affective quality of the relationship (Papini, Seby, & Clark, 1989; Sartor & Youniss, 2002)

As previously discussed, research has suggested that the process of identity formation may differ significantly for males and females with relatedness and connection being more important than autonomy for females in the development of their identity (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Josselson, 1987). Similarly, gender differences are also evident in the research literature on the relationship between family factors and identity development (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Kamptner, 1988; Palladino-Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994; Samuolis et al., 2001; van Wel et al., 2000).

For instance, Palladino-Schultheiss and Blustein (1994) explored how family relationship factors contribute to the identity formation process with a sample of 174 male and female college-age young adults. They found evidence to indicate that strong parental attachment throughout adolescence plays a significantly more important role in the identity formation process for women than it does for men. Additional support was provided by Samuolis, Layburn, and Schiaffino (2001), who found that females' identity development was positively related to attachment and connectedness to parents, particularly connection with the mother, whereas males' identity development was unrelated to attachment relationships with either parent. Van Wel et al. (2000) also suggested that a stable parental bond is more important to the psychological well being and development of females than it is for males.

Several researchers have specifically highlighted the importance of the mother and daughter bond in the process of female identity formation (Josselson, 1987; Smith, Mullis, & Hill, 1995). According to Josselson (1987), women develop their identity in

the context of their mother's identity and define their unique selves in contrast and similarity to her. She further suggests that mothers play an important internal and external role in the lives of women at least through their early adulthood. The results of her longitudinal study on identity development in women suggest that young women experience an internal presence of their mother as they weigh their mother's central life priorities and values against those which they are deciding upon for themselves (Josselson, 1987).

The literature thus far clearly identifies the fundamental role that parents can play on the identity formation process of adolescents and young adults in the transition to adulthood. It is evident from this review of numerous research studies that an emotional bond between adolescent and parent is maintained as adolescents progress towards defining a unique and individuated sense of personal identity. This may be especially true for adolescent females. Little research attention, however, has focused on the identity formation process in young women who have experienced the death of their mother and therefore may be missing that crucial familial emotional bond that may provide the security and support for them to engage in identity exploration, make stable commitments, and learn to renegotiate the parent-daughter relationship.

Adolescent Bereavement in Response to Parental Death

One of the most painful and debilitating losses adolescents may have to face is the death of a parent (Meshot & Leitner, 1993; Thompson, Kaslow, Kingree, King, Bryant, & Rey, 1998). It has been noted in the bereavement literature that the grief of adolescents who have lost a parent through death involves some problems specific to this age group (Archer, 1998; Balk, 1991, 2000; Corr, 1995; Fleming & Adolph, 1986;

Garber, 1983; LaGrand 1986; Raphael, 1983). The particular problems encountered at this time of life mainly pertain to the untimely and unexpected nature of the death. Such deaths are always more difficult to cope with because they make the adolescent's world an unsafe, personally threatening and unpredictable place. In addition, the finality of death crashes against the backdrop of the adolescent's social world, which is primarily concerned with the present and the living. It is also a time when young people are exploring their place in the world, are looking forward to the future and are preparing to make decisions that will affect them for years to come (Archer, 1998; Erikson, 1968; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Josselson, 1987).

Corr (1995) suggests that normally developing adolescents can think about death in an abstract, conceptual, formal, or adult way. However, for both developmental and situational or experiential reasons, many adolescents find it difficult to think of death as something that will eventually happen to them. Developmental theorists and researchers tend to agree that adolescents want to deny death, and typically try to shield themselves from it because they ultimately do not want to face their own vulnerability and mortality. Consequently, it is also difficult for adolescents to completely comprehend both the personal and familial implications of death (Balk, 2000; Corr, 1995; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996).

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many different theories and models have been proposed to explain the process of grief and successful resolution of bereavement. According to Stroebe and Schut (2001), these various theoretical conceptualizations of grief and bereavement can be grouped into the following three

general categories: (a) general stress and trauma theories (b) general theories of grief and (c) models of coping specific to bereavement (p. 375).

One of the areas of lingering debate in the grief literature centers around the notion of the bereaved maintaining a relationship with the deceased. Two streams of thought are evident that propose different ideas of whether or not it is adaptive for bereaved persons to develop a new connection with the deceased in which their attachment to that person is not entirely severed (Tyson-Rawson, 1996). The belief that the completion of successful grieving can be seen in the bereaved's ability to "effect an emotional withdrawal from the deceased person so that this emotional energy can be reinvested in another relationship" (Worden, 1982, p. 15) has primarily emerged from the psychoanalytic school of thought and remains common in many contemporary writings on grief. The research of Klass (1987), Marwit & Klass (1995), Hogan and DeSantis (1992), and Silverman, Nickman, and Worden (1992) on bereavement and grief has clearly indicated the adaptive and beneficial role that a continued relationship with the deceased can play in the lives of bereaved persons and has thus raised the need to reexamine traditional theory on the grieving process, which posits that such an attachment is typically representative of maladaptive grief (Tyson-Rawson, 1996).

It is often beneficial for clinical practitioners and grief researchers to adopt a suitable model of grief to help guide them in their work with bereaved individuals (Balk, 1991). Sanders (1999) has developed a functional and comprehensive theory of bereavement, which is based on an integration of psychoanalytic and psychosocial theories of loss and grief. She contends that an individual moves through five distinct phases of bereavement, which can be seen as a series of adaptations on a path toward

resolution and a state of equilibrium (Sanders, 1999). Sanders acknowledges that these stages are to be viewed only as guidelines, rather than in rigid terms and that these phases may overlap and there may be regressions (Archer, 1998). As with any stage model, it is important to consider the individual and to use his or her behaviour as the primary source of data for understanding the grief experience. Stage models are helpful and beneficial only when they are viewed as flexible and variable from situation to situation. The stages presented below may occur in any order and some may not be experienced at all, since grief is rarely experienced in a strictly linear fashion (Reeves, 2001).

The first phase of bereavement presented in Sander's (1999) theory is shock. She suggests that this initial state is characterized by confusion, disbelief and restlessness, as the bereaved is overcome by an intense state of alarm. Adrenaline rushes throughout the body, providing the bereaved with both the physical stamina needed to carry out the ritual requirements and a numbness that acts as a temporary buffer against the intense pain that will ensue (Sanders, 1999).

The second phase of bereavement, according to Sanders (1999), is awareness of the loss. As the numbness and shock begin to wear off, the bereaved must acknowledge the reality of his or her loss. Intense emotional fluctuations and spontaneous outbursts create a large drain on the individual's energy supply and the immune system is badly compromised. Yearning, crying, anger, guilt, shame, and sleep disturbance all contribute to the stress and anxiety characteristic of this phase (Sanders, 1999).

The third phase of bereavement, conservation-withdrawal, describes the bereaved's need to withdraw and save what little energy remains after the tremendous outpouring of the previous phase. A fatigue overwhelms grievers, and they have

difficulty carrying out even the simplest of tasks. This fatigue is hard for the bereaved to understand, since in the previous phases, he or she seemed to have energy enough to take care of all the necessary duties. Sanders (1999) proposes that this phase is filled with a pervasive sense of despair, helplessness and hopelessness, as all of the crying, yearning, and searching of the previous period have failed to bring back the loved one. By temporarily shutting down, the bereaved can begin to regain strength and comprehend that new approaches must be made, new relationships established and a new life built. This phase marks the turning point of bereavement, the decision to persevere, move forward, survive and change. Through rest, strength is regained, and the bereaved discovers the motivation to move on to the next phase (Sanders, 1999).

The fourth phase of bereavement proposed by Sanders (1999) is healing. The strength gathered in the conservation-withdrawal period gives the bereaved the incentive to go forward with a new life. This phase is marked by a progressive change in attitude, as confidence in decision-making skills gradually returns. An identity that had been based on a life with the deceased must now be replaced with a new identity (Sanders, 1999).

The final phase of grief according to Sanders (1999) is a process of renewal. For the most part, the pain has subsided although anniversaries and traditional family holidays may still be difficult. Sanders contends that this phase is as long and strenuous as the ones before and often more difficult, as the bereaved comes to accept new responsibilities and a new identity. The despair that was felt in the third phase has lifted, providing a renewed feeling of functional stability (Sanders, 1999).

Similarly to other age groups, adolescents work through these five phases of grief following the death of a parent or another significant loss. However, adolescent bereavement can be construed as a separate process from child and adult bereavement since adolescents are faced with a number of unique developmental experiences and tasks (Adams & Deveau, 1995; Balk, 2000; Meshot & Leitner, 1993).

The death of a parent is a non-normative life transition for an adolescent. Adolescents are not able to put the developmental tasks and issues of this life stage on hold while they cope with their grief and bereavement (Balk, 1996; Balk & Vesta, 1998). Adolescents exist within a relational world in which they come to define themselves through separation and connection to other people. The primary tasks of adolescence are the formation of a stable identity and the development of mature, intimate relationships with significant others. When adolescents lose a parent to death, they also lose the crucial parental relationship that can be a critical source of security from which adolescents come to define themselves by contrast and continuity (Balk & Vesta, 1998; Tyson-Rawson, 1996).

Bereaved adolescents are a special population, unique to their child and adult counterparts, in that they are in the midst of renegotiating their relationship with their parents and forging a place for themselves in their increasingly important peer world (Balk, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Harris, 1991; Josselson, 1987; Raphael, 1983). Raphael (1983) proposes that the need to belong to a close peer group fuels the adolescent's desire to conform to their friends' expectations and to obscure any details that may make them appear different. She argues that bereaved adolescents' overt grief may be less intense or it may be suppressed, because they are uncertain of how their

responses will be perceived by others. The fears of loss of emotional control may be a further inhibiting factor, for they may already be struggling with the increased emotionality of their adolescent years (Raphael, 1983).

In a longitudinal qualitative study with eleven 13 to 18 year-old male and females, Harris (1991) found that the bereaved adolescents were isolated and stoic in their grief even when they had large social networks. The adolescents in this sample reported that they rarely shared their immediate grief reactions with family or friends and expressed concern that emotional expression or discussions of death would be unacceptable or potentially overwhelming for their friends.

In addition, Servaty and Hayslip (2001) conducted an empirical study of adjustment among parentally bereaved adolescents, parentally divorced adolescents, and adolescents from intact homes. Their findings support previous research that suggests that significant losses such as parental death often lead to adjustment difficulties in adolescents, particularly with girls. More specifically, their findings revealed that parentally bereaved adolescents experienced a heightened sensitivity about being perceived as different from their peers and reported feeling significant levels of discomfort, inferiority, and inadequacy with regard to their interpersonal interactions.

Similarly, LaGrand (1986) suggests that unlike other age groups, adolescents often harbour strong feelings of shame, as their bereavement places them in a category separate from the majority of their peers. They may feel different and wish to avoid others who remind them of this difference. This often leads to a sense of isolation, as bereaved adolescents feel that they cannot discuss their grief and anguish with their peers because these “normal” teenagers cannot possibly understand the depth of their hurt

(LaGrand, 1986). Some adolescents exhibit profound social withdrawal when they have lost a parent through death. They may eschew closeness in relationships and actively avoid it, as they feel acutely vulnerable and fear being hurt again (Raphael, 1983).

These findings highlight the difficulties adolescents face when parental loss collides with the normative developmental tasks of adolescence (Balk, 1991; LaGrand, 1986; Raphael, 1983). Adolescents may be isolated from interpersonal interactions at a time when relationships are crucial to identity development, especially with girls (Josselson, 1987; Servaty & Hayslip, 2001). In addition, numerous research studies have consistently revealed that parentally bereaved adolescents experience significantly higher levels of depressive symptomatology, anxiety, and cognitive and behavioural disturbances than their nonbereaved peers (Gray, 1987; Harris, 1991; Raphael, 1983; Servaty & Hayslip, 2001; Thompson et al., 1998).

For example, Gray (1987) investigated adolescent responses to parental loss with a sample of 50 male and female adolescents who had experienced the death of a parent while they were between the ages of 12 – 19 years. His findings suggest that adolescents experience greater levels of depressive symptomatology following the death of a parent and that younger adolescents also often experience academic difficulties following the death of a parent. These findings are supported by a study by Thompson, Kaslow, Kingree, King, Bryant, and Rey (1998) which found that bereaved adolescents exhibited greater psychological symptomatology and behaviour disturbances than nonbereaved adolescents.

In addition, in an empirical study of adolescent bereavement following parental death, Meshot and Leitner (1993) concluded that adolescents exhibit similar grief

reactions to adults including disbelief, feelings of loss and emptiness, disturbed sleep, irritability, and anger at the person who died. They further suggest that adolescents experience this process of bereavement with greater intensity than adults and adolescents' intense grief reactions at the time of the loss carry through into young adulthood.

Sanders (1999) further suggests that adolescents typically experience a great sense of abandonment when a parent dies. They are dismayed by the paradox that the one person who should have been there to comfort and protect them in this time of anguish has gone. The adolescents' orientation toward the future, compared with that of younger children, is such that they have some awareness of the deprivation that will be involved in the times to come (Sanders, 1999). They are often frightened by this insight and resent the fact that their world will undoubtedly change, not as they want it to but in ways that are entirely outside of their control (Raphael, 1983).

Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) highlight the potential growth that can emerge from adolescent bereavement. They report that adolescents, who have successfully resolved their loss to some degree, typically describe resolution as coming to terms with the death in the sense of its having meaning, a feeling of increased individual ability to function effectively, and a sense of acceptance of the loss as a part of their life histories. Although bereavement may create problematic outcomes, it may also serve as the catalyst for the development of richer meanings, more satisfying relationships, and greater individual maturity (Klass et al., 1996).

Although the body of literature on parental bereavement is quite extensive, very little empirical research was found that pertained specifically to late adolescent and young adult women who lost their mothers in adolescence. Zall (1994) explored the

impact of early maternal loss on future maternal functioning by comparing the experiences of mothers whose own mother died during their childhood with nonbereaved mothers from intact families. His findings revealed that during adolescence and early adulthood, the maternally bereaved women described more symptoms of anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicidality than the nonbereaved women from intact families. In addition, the bereaved women reported having greater difficulty regaining their “developmental balance” throughout early adulthood as compared to the nonbereaved group. Although Zall’s (1994) study did address the long-term effects of early maternal loss on women it does not entirely capture the experience of adolescent maternal loss, since all of the participants in his study had lost their mother before the age of 13 and most of the participant’s had lost their mother in childhood.

Harris (1995) wrote a book on the lifelong impact of early parental loss, which was based on extensive interviews with sixty-six men and women who had experienced the death of a mother or a father during their childhood and adolescence. Through personal stories and vignettes, Harris (1995) provides moving personal descriptions of the life-changing event of early parental death and clearly reveals how this loss and the reality of death continues to colour the lives of men and women across the life-span. The book focuses on the experiences of adult men and women who have lost a parent of either sex, however it does not directly address the unique experiences of young women who lost a mother during their adolescence.

Perhaps, the most extensive literature on the subject of women who have experienced maternal loss may be found in the book *Motherless Daughters* written by Hope Edelman (1994). In this book, Edelman explores the profound experience of

mother-loss for girls and women. It is based on the author's personal maternal loss experience as well as professional research and interviews with 154 maternally bereaved women who lost their mothers between infancy and their early thirties. The women who were interviewed for this book range from 17 to 80 years of age and come from a diversity of ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. She later followed this book up with a published compilation of letters that she had received from motherless daughters articulating their own experiences of mother-loss, which she entitled *Letters from Motherless Daughters* (Edelman, 1995).

Edelman (1994) addresses the impact of maternal loss on women throughout the life span and explores some of the developmental struggles that motherless women have to face at various stages in their life and bereavement process. She notes the potential difficulties that maternal loss during adolescence can have on developmental tasks of that life stage, specifically the formation of a unique identity:

Unlike the adult, who experiences parent loss with a relatively intact personality, a girl who loses her mother during childhood or adolescence co-opts the loss into her emerging personality, where it then becomes a defining characteristic of her identity. From learning at an early age that close relationships can be impermanent, security ephemeral, and family capable of being redefined, the motherless daughter develops an adult insight while still a child but has only juvenile resources to help her cope (Edelman, 1994, p. xxv).

Particularly relevant to the present study, Edelman (1994) also emphasizes the role that a mother plays in a daughter's life as she moves into young adulthood. She suggests that the mother serves as a source of reference for daughters as they continue to

define their sense of self as young women. She states that “all daughters – and motherless ones are no exception – expect mothers to pass down the generational knowledge that transforms a girl into a woman (p. 179). She argues that motherless daughters emerge into adulthood without the “revalidation of self” and the encouragement that they need and that they lose the emotional connection to a home ground, which is yearned for in young adulthood. In summary, Edelman’s (1994, 1995) books acknowledge the “transformational quality” of early maternal loss and validate this experience as “a clear point of demarcation in a woman’s life” in which the self that existed before the loss is not quite the same as the self that emerges after (Edelman, 1995, p. XIX).

This review of adolescent bereavement in response to parental death outlines the difficulties and long-term effects that significant loss can create at this critical developmental stage of life. Parental death can be especially challenging for adolescents considering the untimely nature of this loss and the important role that parents still play in the lives of their children at this time, particularly for young women who lose their mothers.

Summary

The purpose of the present chapter was to present an overview of the current literature on adolescent and young adult development, the process of identity formation and the role of parents in adolescent identity development, and the nature of adolescent parental bereavement. The literature reviewed on adolescent development and bereavement illustrates the profound and vast impact that this life crisis can have on young people during a phase of life that is already marked by significant physical,

cognitive, moral, interpersonal, and psychosocial transitions (Balk, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1987). Developmental theorists and researchers widely agree that one of the critical developmental tasks of adolescence is forging a unique and purposeful identity and although considerable research has been conducted on the relationship between parenting socialization styles and identity achievement in adolescence, my review of the literature indicates that considerably less research has directly addressed the influence of maternal loss on this normal maturational task of identity formation.

The literature presented in this chapter on adolescent and young adult development, identity formation and the family system, and adolescent bereavement provides a framework for beginning to conceptualize the influence of loss on identity development. This study attempts to contribute to the body of literature by providing an in-depth and specific investigation of the experience of young women who are defining their identity as they emerge into adulthood following the experience of their mother's death during their adolescence. A study of the process of identity development among maternally bereaved women will benefit future generations of maternally bereaved adolescent girls who see themselves in the lived experiences of these women and recognize their own unique process of self-definition. It will also offer counsellors a unique source of knowledge for how to work the most effectively with maternally bereaved young women.

The following chapter will provide an outline of the methodology employed for the present study. It will present a description of the research approach and design, the researcher's stance and assumptions, the process for selection of participants, the

instrumentation used in the study, and the procedures for data collection and data analysis.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will present a comprehensive description of the methodology utilized in the present study. It will begin by providing a definition of the general qualitative approach, with a particular focus on phenomenology as the chosen research design employed in this study. It will then discuss the researcher's stance and entering assumptions in conducting the study. This chapter will also outline the process for selecting and recruiting participants, and present general demographic information on the participants included in the study. Furthermore, it will describe the instrumentation used and the rationale for choosing the selected instrumentation. Lastly, this chapter will provide a detailed account of the process used to collect data and the procedures utilized for data analysis.

Rationale for a Qualitative Research Approach

The present study will utilize a qualitative research approach in attempting to understand how the death of a mother during a daughter's adolescent years is perceived to influence the normative developmental task of identity formation in emerging adulthood (Anderson & Arsenault, 2000).

A qualitative approach to research involves a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of individual subjective experiences and creation of a rich understanding of the meaning ascribed to personal and internal phenomena in people's lives. Qualitative research is descriptive in nature and uses multi-methods to make holistic and detailed observations and to study small populations in their natural settings (Anderson & Arsenault, 2000).

The aim of qualitative research is to obtain rich descriptions of the perceptions, understandings, and imaginings of the research participants and to accurately elucidate and represent the meaning of their life experiences through the research (Anderson & Arsenault, 2000; Mason, 2002). As a research methodology, qualitative research is flexible and it supports variability in approach as opposed to strict standardization. Therefore, credible qualitative research often involves adaptation and redesign as the research proceeds (Horsburgh, 2003).

Qualitative research is not conducted to confirm or disconfirm previous research findings, but rather to “contribute to a process of continuous revision and enrichment of understanding” of the experience under study (Lincoln, 1995, p. 278). Qualitative research is designed to explore personal and subjective experiences at an in-depth level and therefore is typically not intended to be generalizable to populations at large (Anderson & Arsenault, 2000). In addition, qualitative research is generally difficult to replicate due to the fact that social reality is dynamic and is continually being constructed (Anderson & Arsenault, 2000).

The rationale for using a qualitative research paradigm for the present study is based on the strengths of this approach in exploring and describing the personal and subjective meanings that individuals infer to interpret phenomena. The topic of the present research study has not been researched extensively and therefore presents an opportunity for a deeper understanding of this particular experience. Qualitative research focuses on depth of understanding as opposed to breadth and seeks to fully describe the meaning and rich dimensions of a particular experience. The death of a parent and the impact on one’s identity is a personal and individual experience and therefore the

qualitative approach is suitable, since it embraces the personal and subjective nature of individual experience. In addition, qualitative research typically holds a reciprocal benefit for both the researcher and the participants, since they typically agree to participate in the study because of a personal interest and engagement with the topic. Qualitative research is open to possibilities and enables researchers to provide a voice to the in-depth, internal, and meaningful narratives of a small and significant group of people. It also allows readers to form their own subjective constructions of the phenomenon based on what is reported in the research (Anderson & Arsenault, 2000).

Phenomenological Research Design

The purpose of the present research study was to explore the meaning of maternal loss for young women and what it means to their experience of identity development in emerging adulthood. The phenomenological method of research was well suited in meeting this purpose, since it provides researchers with descriptive or interpretive techniques to explore the nature and meaning of human experience as it is lived from the inside (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1994). The goal of phenomenological research in psychology is to understand and discern the meaning and essence of a particular human experience that is common among groups of people (Hein & Austin, 2001; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). As Churchill and Wertz (2001) explain, “phenomenological questions are those that ask about the meaning or essence of something people live through, that is, about its basic constituents and types, how it unfolds or evolves over time” (p. 251).

According to Morse and Richards (2002), two central assumptions, stemming from the philosophical basis of phenomenology, are fundamental to phenomenological

research. The first basic assumption of phenomenology is that all knowledge is ultimately rooted in conscious human experience since lived phenomena provide evidence of the “life world”, or the everyday world as it is experienced by individuals prior to the influence of any explanations or theoretical interpretations (Giorgio, 1975; Polkinghorne, 1989; Morse & Richards, 2002). The second major philosophical assumption of phenomenology is that no separation exists between person and world. In other words, individuals and the environment in which they live cannot be considered in isolation because people are only understandable in the context of their worlds (Morse & Richards, 2002; Osborne, 1994).

Phenomenological research begins with the decision to research a phenomenon that is central to the lived experience of human beings and holds both social meaning and personal significance to the researcher (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological method focuses on the analysis of in-depth descriptions of experience obtained from research participants who have lived a particular phenomenon. The essential criteria for selection of participants are that the participants have personally experienced the phenomenon under investigation and that they are willing and able to articulate the nature and meaning of their lived experience (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994).

The unstructured or semi-structured interview is the most common means of gathering data for phenomenological research (Kvale, 1996). The researcher conducts and records purposeful, conversational interviews with the participants in order to develop an intimate understanding of their subjective experience. Rather than seeking broad and impersonal reports of the phenomenon, the interview focuses on specific

individual experiences and meanings that constitute the lived experience under investigation and enable the essence or structure of the phenomenon to emerge (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Osborne, 1994).

It is during the data analysis stage that phenomenological researchers aim to discover and elucidate the essential features and implicit meanings of the experience that are embedded within the participants' descriptive narratives (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). Following several readings of the transcribed data, the researcher shifts the focus to identifying and explicating the meaning inherent in the participant's descriptions of their lived experience through the process of synthesizing and clustering the descriptions into general themes. The findings of phenomenological research present a description of the essential meaning and the core structure of the phenomenon as it is experienced (Churchill & Wertz; 2001; Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994).

The choice of a phenomenological research approach for the present study was based on the suitability of the method to this particular research inquiry and, as a researcher coming from the counselling perspective, I felt a sense of congruence between the phenomenological method and my nature of relating to human beings and human experience. Phenomenology is a humanitarian approach to research that celebrates the uniqueness of individuals and validates the experiences of participants as significant and meaningful by seeking to gain an understanding of their life world (Moustakas, 1994). I felt it was important to utilize a research methodology that would focus on each young woman's subjective expression of her experiences and the meaning of her experiences as the essence of the study. Through the intimate sharing of these young women who have experienced maternal loss, a deeper understanding of the influence of maternal loss on

young women's identity development in emerging adulthood can begin to be realized. Throughout this study, I have attempted to capture and honour the personal nature of the women's experiences by allowing each of their voices to illuminate the meaning and the essential structure of the lived phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher Stance

In phenomenology, it is widely recognized that aspects of the researcher will be unavoidably present in all aspects of the research investigation. In an effort to minimize the influence of their subjective bias, phenomenological researchers endeavor to articulate and suspend personal assumptions and prior knowledge about the nature of the phenomenon being investigated through a process of rigorous self-reflection known as bracketing or Epoche (Hein & Austin, 2001; Moustakas, 1994; Osborne, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989). The purpose of bracketing is to enable researchers to remain open and receptive to the data, thus allowing their understanding to be informed and broadened by the participants' descriptions of the lived experience without the interference of theoretical explanations or subjective preconceptions (Hein & Austin, 2001; Moustakas, 1994).

Although bracketing is recognized as an important practice in phenomenological research, there is debate around the logic of researchers suspending their assumptions and subjective biases, particularly within the hermeneutic approach to phenomenological research. Hermeneutic phenomenological research emphasizes the importance of recognizing the temporality of bracketing and also focuses more upon the efforts of researchers to acknowledge and explicate their subjective assumptions and perspectives

rather than attempting to suspend them (Hein & Austin, 2001; LeVasseur, 2003; van Manen, 1990).

As a researcher working within the phenomenological approach, I am aware that my worldview and subjective bias have had an influence on all aspects of the research study. In reflecting on my epistemological perspective, I believe that knowledge is produced through experience and active engagement with the world and that each individual person holds knowledge unique to them based on their life experiences and interactions with other beings in the world. I do not believe that it is logically possible to completely suspend one's knowledge and understanding of the world, therefore in this study I practiced a form of bracketing that is similar to the conceptualization of bracketing in hermeneutic phenomenology.

Throughout the research investigation, I have engaged in a process of reflexivity and bracketing in an effort to maintain an awareness of my preconceptions, personal feelings, and reactions to the research (LeVasseur, 2003). This process was particularly important for me as a researcher, given that I have experienced the phenomenon under study. According to Cutliffe (2003), reflexivity can be conceptualized as an ongoing two-part process. This two-part process involves self-reflection leading to an awareness and identification of the researcher's personal feelings and biases and the ability to bracket, or put aside these feelings and biases.

In the present study, I have attempted to practice reflexivity through acknowledging and explicating my assumptions and by using a journal throughout the research investigation to record and process my personal reflections and reactions to the data. As Beck (1994) suggests, a journal in which a researcher can reflect on personal

feelings and self-questioning, such as “What am I taking for granted?” can help to promote and maintain an increased level of conscious awareness throughout a research project (Beck, 1994). Throughout the research study, I have also critically examined my work by challenging my assumptions and recording a log of the research process and the actions and decisions I have made in regards to this study (Mason, 2002). In addition, I have made an effort to demonstrate reflexivity through using the first person voice when appropriate in order to elucidate my influence and personal involvement in all aspects of the research (Horsburgh, 2003).

Throughout the research interviews and data analysis process, I made an effort to temporarily bracket my preexisting knowledge and assumptions about the phenomenon through recognizing the uniqueness of each individual’s experience and by remaining open and curious to learn from each of the participants. As a counsellor, I believe my ability to be fully and empathetically present with the participants and their stories enabled me to temporarily set aside my own preconceptions and beliefs and respond to the participants’ lived experience as they perceived it. Through the process of reflexivity and bracketing, I have attempted to become more aware of my influence on the research process so that I was able to be receptive to the participants’ descriptions of their lived experience and allow the personal meaning of their experiences to emerge and speak for themselves (Hein and Austin, 2001).

Entering Assumptions

In keeping with the hermeneutic phenomenological notion of bracketing, I engaged in a process of self-reflection prior to conducting interviews with any of the research participants and identified my personal assumptions and beliefs about the

experience of maternal loss for young women in adolescence, the process of identity development, and the impact of loss on young women's identity as they move into adulthood. I identified the following assumptions about the influence of maternal loss during adolescence on subsequent identity development in young women;

1. Losing a mother at a young age does have an impact on a daughter's development.
2. The experience of losing a mother during adolescence is forever a part of the daughter's life and is woven into her identity.
3. Mothers do play a significant role in aiding and guiding adolescent girls through the transition from adolescence into young adulthood.
4. There are recognizable effects, both positive and negative, to experiencing maternal loss during adolescence and the participants will be able to identify and articulate their experiences.
5. Identity development is a life-long evolving process and although people continue to reconstruct aspects of their identities throughout their lives, the core sense of self that is developed in late adolescence and early adulthood remains the same over the course of normative development.
6. Although each of the participant's experiences of maternal loss and identity development will be unique, commonalities will also exist across the participants.
7. The participants will be honest with their responses and will accurately carry out the instructions as provided by the researcher to the best of their abilities.

Overview of Research Procedure

Prior to beginning the research for this study ethical approval was received from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Committee (see pp. 209-210).

Selection of Participants

The number of participants needed for a phenomenological research study is varied but typically smaller numbers of participants are used in comparison to quantitative studies. The researcher needs as many participants as it takes to illuminate the phenomenon and this determination is based on the researcher's intuition and judgment (Churchill & Wertz, 2001; Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990). Participants are purposively selected on the basis of their ability to provide relevant data on the phenomenon under investigation (Horsburgh, 2003).

The participants in the present study were 6 young women, ages 18 to 25, who experienced the death of their mother during their adolescence years, between the ages of 15 and 20. Participants were recruited through advertisements that were distributed around university and college campuses within Western Canada (see Appendix A) and through the snowball sampling technique, in which they came to know of the research through people known to the researcher. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants voluntarily contacted the researcher regarding participation.

The six participants in this study were selected using a criterion sampling process (Anderson & Arsenault, 2000). Eligibility for inclusion was based on four criteria. The first criterion was that the participants were females between the ages of 18 and 26. The age period from 18 to 26, which is referred to as emerging adulthood in the present study, was selected given that it encompasses the period of late adolescence and the beginning

years of early adulthood during which time identity formation remains a critical developmental task (Balk, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Santrock, 1998). Second, the participants in this study were to have experienced the death of their mother, due to illness or accident, when they were between the ages of 11 and 20. This age span was determined based on developmental literature, which roughly defines adolescence as the years ranging from between 10 and 12 to the early twenties and identifies this age period as a phase when questions about personal identity become prominent. The rationale for not including women who lost their mothers to suicide is based on the research that suicide is a special type of loss, which raises distinct grieving issues in addition to the common multitude of grief reactions. Suicide grief is often complicated by heightened feelings of guilt and an overwhelming sense of abandonment (Worden, 1982).

The initial selection criteria regarding the participants' current age and the age at which they experienced the death of their mothers was originally limited to a smaller range (current age was between 20 and 26; age at time of loss was between 11 and 18), however it was difficult to find participants who met this criteria. As a result, both of these age ranges were widened in order to accommodate women who were interested in participating in the study. I believe that the wider age ranges added another layer of depth to the study, since the ages more fully encompass the years of adolescence and emerging adulthood and likely made the study more broadly representative of young women who have experienced the phenomenon. This modification was submitted to the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Committee and approval for the changes was obtained (see p. 210).

The third criterion was that the event of maternal death had to have occurred at least two or more years prior to participating in the research study. This two-year criterion was implemented since the first couple of years following the death of a loved one is considered an acute phase of bereavement and it is a distinct grieving process in and of itself (Edelman, 1995; Worden, 1996). Furthermore, it was important to allow reasonable time for integration of the loss. Fourth, the participants needed to have come from intact families. The rationale for this criterion was based on the assumption that women living in two-parent families would have a different loss experience than women living in single-mother families, since the loss of the mother for the latter group would signify the loss of their only parent. This fourth criterion was flexible in that as long as the women had been raised in an intact family during their childhood and had continued to have a relationship with both parents once the family had separated, they qualified for participation in the study.

This study was restricted to women because prior research has shown that there are significant gender differences in the process of identity formation (Adams & Jones, 1983; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987; Palladino-Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994; Patterson et al., 1992; Perosa, et al., 2002) and comparisons across genders is beyond the scope of the present research study. In addition, there is evidence in the research literature that mothers and daughters share a unique relationship (Smith et al., 1995; Thaler-Satlow, 2002) and a daughter's loss experience following the death of a mother has also been shown to be unique (Edelman, 1994; Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000; Mireault et al., 2002; Zall, 1994).

Participants who were interested in taking part in the study voluntarily contacted me by telephone. At this time, the potential participants were asked questions based upon the inclusion and exclusion criteria previously mentioned in order to determine eligibility for participation. In addition, the participants were directly informed of the nature of the research interview and the risks that were involved, such as experiencing strong emotions, and their comfort with the research topic and their available resources were explored (See Appendix B). Six women contacted me to take part in this research. I gratefully accepted participation from all six participants who met the criteria and voluntarily expressed interest and ability to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

A semistructured interview was utilized for the present study in order to obtain rich and in-depth narratives that capture the meaning of maternal loss for young women as they navigate the developmental process of identity formation in emerging adulthood. As Kvale (1996) states, “Interviews are particularly suited for studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their perspective on their lived world” (p. 105). In phenomenological research, the nature of the interview is an interactive, minimally structured conversation, which uses purposeful open-ended communication and questions to access the meaning and essence of a person’s lived experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). Researchers may formulate an interview protocol, or series of questions or topic areas intended to evoke a comprehensive portrayal of the phenomenon, however, these will be varied, modified, or discarded in response to the completeness of

the participant's descriptions and their ability to freely articulate their experience (Moustakas, 1994; Osborne, 1990).

The rationale for using a semi-structured interview for this phenomenological study is based on the strengths of this method in generating an understanding of the participant's experience of the lived phenomenon through purposeful and focused interpersonal conversation (Kvale, 1996). It is particularly efficacious at obtaining detailed information on all aspects of a particular experience from small numbers of individuals, since it allows researchers to modify the structure of the interview in relation to the needs of each individual participant. Additionally, this method supports the importance and value placed on the lived experience of human beings, since the researcher seeks to obtain rich descriptions of the participants' 'life world' as the primary source of data (Kvale, 1996).

In accordance with this method, an interview guide with provisional open-ended questions was developed for use with each individual participant in order to promote further exploration of their lived experiences (Kvale, 1996; Moustakas, 1994; Osborne, 1990). The interview questions were developed by following a similar procedure to the one outlined by Colaizzi for generating research questions (1978, p. 58). I initially conducted a review of the relevant literature on maternal loss and young women's identity development and engaged in a self-exploration of my personal experience with this phenomenon, noting my beliefs, thoughts, and questions about this lived experience. This process resulted in the generation of a preliminary interview guide. Secondly, as suggested by Colaizzi (1978), I conducted a pilot study in order to gain an understanding of other people's experiences regarding the phenomenon under investigation, which I

may not have fully considered. The pilot study will be discussed further in the subsequent section. For a complete outline of the interview guide please refer to Appendix D.

To elicit a full and rich description of each participant's experience of maternal loss and identity development, I began the interview with two main open ended questions, which enabled the participants to respond freely with their most salient experiences without restriction by the interviewer. In order to establish a context for understanding the nature and impact of their loss, the participants were first asked the following question: "Can you tell me about your experience of losing your mother during your adolescence". The second question addressed the research inquiry more specifically by narrowing the focus to the participant's perceptions of how the loss of their mother may have influenced their experience of identity development in emerging adulthood: "Can you tell me about your experience of developing your identity as you move into adulthood given your experience of losing your mother at a young age". I allowed each participant as much time as they needed to answer the first question before moving on to the second question and I checked for completeness of their answers by summarizing and reflecting the main aspects of their stories.

Each participant was then asked questions from the interview guide that related to aspects of the phenomenon under investigation that she had not already addressed fully. The wording and order in which the questions were asked was modified in response to the direction of the interview (Weiss, 1994). Gentle prompts and additional open-ended clarifying questions were also used in order to verify my understanding, however the participants were encouraged to choose the words with which to tell their stories and an

effort was made to ask for elaboration without altering or interrupting the flow of the participant's narratives. As suggested by Weiss (1994), demographic information was obtained at the end of the interview rather than the beginning in order to avoid establishing a pattern of brief question and answer interchanges. At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were invited to share any additional thoughts or feelings that they believed would contribute to my understanding of their unique experience of identity formation and maternal loss. This interview format enabled the participants to freely express aspects of their subjective experience that they felt were particularly significant or impactful and offered them a large degree of control over the process, depth, and content of the interview (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

As Corbin and Morse (2003) explain, "An interview is an exchange. The participants sometime share intimate information, but the researcher gives something in return: a sense of presence or being with the participant in the story" (p. 342). Phenomenological researchers must recognize that the depth, essence, and full richness of the participant's subjective experience are only accessible when the researcher listens and attends "with the totality of his being and with the entirety of his personality" (Colaizzi, 1978, p.64). Throughout this study, I have strived to establish an intuitive relationship of trust and comfort with the participants by taking sufficient time to establish rapport, by using active listening to demonstrate my genuine, non-judgmental interest and curiosity in each participant's individual experiences, and by being empathetically present throughout the duration of the interviews.

Kvale (1996) suggests that qualitative researchers, "interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (p.101). He further states that saturation

tends to occur around “15 ± 10” (p. 102), or in other words 5 – 25 participants. I felt that I had achieved a level of saturation following the six interviews that I conducted with the participants of this study. Each participant provided a full and rich description of her experience and the emergence of similar themes across the participants’ interviews led me to believe that the essence of the phenomenon had been revealed as completely as possible.

Pilot Study

Prior to the process of data collection, a pilot study was conducted with two personal acquaintances of the researcher. These individuals are considered experts in the topic area since they are both young adult women who experienced the death of their mothers in adolescence (Anderson & Arsenaault, 2000). The pilot study provided an opportunity to test the preliminary interview guide in order to ensure that the interview questions were clear and appropriate in accessing rich descriptions of the lived experience and that the length and flow of the interview was reasonable (Anderson & Arsenaault, 2000; Colaizzi, 1978).

The pilot study interviews resulted in an additional question being added to the interview guide based on the feedback from the participants and my own judgment regarding an aspect of the phenomenon which had not been fully addressed. In order to more closely examine the coping mechanisms that the participants have used following the loss of their mothers a question regarding personal resources was included (See Appendix D). Following the pilot study, I returned to the literature on maternal loss and this additional question was based on the interview protocol used by Edelman (1994) in her study of motherless daughters. In addition to validating and finalizing the interview

guide, the pilot test provided an opportunity to practice conducting the interview and to increase familiarity with the process and content of the interview guide before proceeding to data collection (Anderson & Arsenault, 2000).

Process of Data Collection

An initial meeting was conducted with the participants who volunteered to participate in the study at a private location that was mutually agreed upon. During this meeting, the purpose and procedure of the study was reviewed in detail and any questions that the participants had were addressed. Participants were provided with a copy of the two main interview questions to take home (see Appendix C) in order to provide them with a further understanding of what the interview process entailed and to allow them time to prepare for the interview in advance as needed. At this time, I went over the Letter of Informed Consent (see Appendix E) with the participants and after ensuring that they understood all aspects of the consent form, I had them sign it and provided them with a copy to keep. As part of the informed consent, participants were offered the option of requesting a referral to a licensed psychologist for debriefing at no cost to them. A convenient time and place for the first interview was then arranged with each participant, generally within one to two weeks of this first meeting. For three of the participants, geographical distance made the initial meeting not possible so the two main interview questions were provided by telephone or email in advance to the first interview and the process as described above was carried out at the first interview prior to beginning the interview.

The first interviews were approximately one to one-and-a-half hours long, depending upon the length of the individual participant's responses, and were held at a

location of each participant's choice. The interview began with a review of the participant's rights as outlined in the letter of informed consent form, highlighting their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, their right to not answer any question, and their right to share at their own pace and take breaks as needed. Additionally, the purpose of the interview was stated (see Appendix D) and the participants were given an opportunity to ask any questions before beginning. The interviews were audio-taped with the participants consent and each participant was shown how to turn off the tape recorder if they felt the need for a break.

Each participant was asked the two main questions that they had been given previously and then the interview guide was used as previously discussed to elicit specific aspects of the experience or greater elaboration of the experience not expressed in the initial response. Demographic information was requested following completion of the interview guide (see Appendix D). Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, at the conclusion of the interviews I spent time debriefing the interview experience with the participants to provide a sense of closure to the interview and to ensure that they felt comfortable and ready to return to their day. The participants were each reminded that I could refer them to a licensed psychologist for debriefing at no cost to them. In addition, each of the participants was offered a resource list for affordable counselling services in their respective city and a book list of relevant material on maternal loss and grief (See Appendix F).

The individual interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself and the data were analyzed for preliminary emergent themes following a procedure to be described in the subsequent section. Following transcription, a second interview was arranged with each

participant at a convenient time and location for her. The second interviews were approximately 30 minutes long. At the beginning of the interview, the participant's rights as outlined in the consent form were once again highlighted, including the option of meeting with a licensed psychologist, and consent to audio tape the interview was obtained from each of the participants. At this time, participants received a copy of the transcripts and a summary of preliminary themes from their interview and were given an opportunity to review them and make any corrections or omissions. In addition, participants were invited to share any further thoughts in regards to their experience of maternal loss and identity development. In certain cases, I asked the participants brief questions in regards to an aspect of their initial interview that may have been unclear. At the close of the interview, each participant was given a letter of thanks expressing appreciation for her participation and was asked if she would be interested in receiving a copy of the findings after completion of the study. Any additional information or modifications that were suggested by the participants in this second interview were transcribed verbatim by myself and included as data for the respective participant.

For one participant, geographical distance made a second meeting not possible. In this particular case, I emailed the participant her transcript and a summary of the preliminary themes from her interview. Once she had an opportunity to review the transcripts and themes, I contacted her by telephone and invited her to share any feedback regarding accuracy and omissions or additions.

The data were collected over a five-month period between November 2003 and March 2004. Data were stored on computer diskettes and accessed only at my home computer. The computer diskettes, interview tapes, and transcripts were securely stored

in a locked filing cabinet, which is only accessible by myself. The data were filed under an assigned code number and the participants' names were coded on all data sources. Any identifying information, such as the key to the coded names, signed consent forms, and participant contact information was securely stored separate from any data.

Procedure for Data Analysis

There is no single, exclusive method for conducting phenomenological research (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990). As stated by Moustakas (1994), "each research project holds its own integrity and establishes its own methods and procedures to facilitate the flow of the investigation and the collection of data" (p. 104).

Methods based on phenomenological principles have been established and can serve as general guidelines or outlines to provide the researcher with direction and systematic steps to be followed in order to complete a study with order and rigor (Moustakas, 1994). The present study will employ a methodology which draws from the procedures and techniques outlined by Colaizzi (1978) and Moustakas (1994) and is further informed by the suggestions of Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1999). Moustakas (1994) summarizes the data analysis procedure as follows:

The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience (p. 13).

The first step of the analysis in the present study involved reviewing the taped interviews and transcribing them verbatim. Once the interviews were transcribed I read over each transcript entirely in order to get a feel for the participant's experience and

acquire a sense of the experience as a whole (Colaizzi, 1978). As I read through the transcribed interviews I noted any ideas and hunches that came to me from the participant's descriptions of their experience (Ely et al., 1999). Several copies of each participant's transcripts were made.

The second step involved "extracting significant statements" from the interview transcripts and "formulating meanings" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). This process was carried out for each participant individually. I returned to each participant's transcript a second time and underlined significant statements that directly pertained to the phenomenon of maternal loss and its influence on the participant's experience of identity development. I then reread the significant statements in each participant's interview for the inherent meaning and noted topic names in the margins to represent these chunks of meaningful data, or meaning units. These topic names were used across the participant interviews to represent similar meaning units as appropriate. Next, I reviewed these meaning units and formulated a preliminary theme statement or phrase that seemed to capture the essence of the participant's description (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994).

As this process was completed for each participant, the participant received a copy of her transcript and a summary of the preliminary themes that I had compiled from her interview. Each participant was given the opportunity to review her transcripts for accuracy and omissions and was asked to verify the accuracy and completeness of the preliminary themes in representing her experience. Minor additions and clarifying comments were made by some participants, which were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and included in the data. This step provided an initial check for validity in the data analysis.

The fourth step of the analysis involved integrating and comparing the preliminary themes for all of the participants. Each preliminary theme was written on the front of a single index card with the corresponding participant code numbers written on the back (Ely et al., 1999). Once the preliminary themes had been listed on the index cards, they were clustered into tentative groups that seemed to be related. Connections between the groupings of themes were noted. I allowed myself time to play around with the data and immerse myself in the process and I wrote down any new brainstorming in my journal. Next, each pile of index cards was reviewed and a category heading or phrase that linked each of the preliminary themes together was created (Colaizzi, 1978; Ely et al., 1999; Moustakas, 1994). Once these categories were formulated, I returned to the transcripts for each participant to check if there were any meaningful aspects of their experience contained in the transcripts that had not been included in the categories and whether the categories proposed anything that did not emerge from the transcripts (Colaizzi, 1978).

The fifth step of analysis involved color coding the transcripts by category. I returned to each participant's transcripts and highlighted the verbatim narratives in the colour that corresponded to each category. Next, the transcripts were cut up by category and placed in a corresponding labeled folder in order to link the raw data units to the categories (Ely et al., 1999). I read through the contents of each folder several times in order to allow the essence of what the participants were saying to emerge. As I read through these data units, I noted common themes that emerged for the majority of the participants and themes that emerged as particularly significant for individual participants. Fourteen main theme clusters evolved. I wrote theme statements for each of

these main theme clusters from my best attempt to capture the essence of the participants' experience. I then organized all of the emergent themes into a diagram format, which helped me to discern and organize the main theme clusters at the top and the themes that related to these theme clusters below (Ely et al., 1999). The initial category headings or phrases were merged into the fourteen main theme clusters since they were very similar.

Once the themes were extracted I looked for overarching patterns amongst the main theme clusters that would serve to capture the experience at a broader level and organize it in a reasonable order. I wrote each of the fourteen theme clusters on an individual index card and explored how the theme clusters related to one another by grouping them on the basis of meaning and ordering the groupings. From this process, the fourteen theme clusters were divided into two main sections. The first section, which contains two theme clusters, relates to the experience of maternal loss and the second section, which contains twelve theme clusters, relates to the influence of maternal loss on the experience of identity development. For the second section, I organized the twelve theme clusters under three over-arching metathemes that emerged across all of the participants' transcripts. I returned to the participants' narratives several times to ensure that I had not missed a significant aspect of their experiences and to check that the themes did not present any meaning that was not implied in their narratives (Colaizzi, 1978).

Once the theme clusters and themes were formulated, the final step of analysis involved writing a description of each of the fourteen theme clusters, including a listing of the themes contained within the clusters (Colaizzi, 1978). Each participant received an emailed copy of the theme descriptions and was given the opportunity to review these final themes and was encouraged to provide feedback on the accuracy and the

completeness of the themes in representing their personal experience. I heard back from five of the six participants and all of them stated that the themes accurately described their experience and no modifications were suggested. This final step added a second validity check to the research project, as it gave the participants an opportunity to verify the final themes (Colaizzi, 1978).

Validity and Generalizability in Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological research construes validity and generalizability differently from natural science research approaches and this distinction is important to consider when addressing issues of validity and generalizability in phenomenological research. “Natural science research aims at objectivity through explanation, control and prediction, while phenomenological research aims at the elucidation of meaning and understanding from an individual’s point of view” (Osborne, 1990, p. 86).

Osborne (1990) suggests that there are four major ways in which the validity of a phenomenological researcher’s interpretations and findings can be determined. The first way in which researchers can achieve validity is through bracketing and making explicit their orientation to the phenomenon being studied. An accurate description of the researcher’s procedure of data analysis provides readers with an opportunity to understand how the data was interpreted and the findings were reached, whether they agree with them or not (Giorgio, 1975). Throughout the process of this study, I have engaged in a process of bracketing and reflexivity (as discussed in the section on Researcher Stance). Through acknowledging and bracketing my presuppositions, I have attempted to become more aware of my influence on the research process so that I was able to be receptive to the participants’ descriptions of their lived experience and allow

the personal meaning of their experiences to emerge and speak for themselves (Hein & Austin, 2001). I have maintained a reflexive stance throughout the research process and have made an effort to clearly explicate the process of data collection and data analysis in this study and have acknowledged my influence and responsibility in all decisions relating to the research, through using the “first person” voice.

Secondly, validation of data can be achieved by checking preliminary interpretations of the meaning of the data for “goodness of fit” with the participants (Osborne, 1990, p. 87). Validity for phenomenological research depends on the extent to which it accurately explicates the meaning of the participant’s original description of the phenomenon without imposing any meaning that cannot be grounded in that original description (Barrell, Aanstoos, Richards, & Arons, 1987; Churchill & Wertz, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1989). I utilized a form of “participant validation” (Horsburgh, 2003, p. 310) at two points in this research study (as discussed in the section on Data Analysis). The first time was following transcription when each participant was given the opportunity to review her transcripts and the corresponding preliminary themes that had been formulated. The second “participant validation” was conducted following data analysis at which time the final themes were sent to the participants for verification. Any modifications that were suggested at either participant check were included in the data.

The third means of achieving validity in phenomenological research involves the process of presenting coherent, consistent, and convincing arguments of how the interpretations emerged and a sound rationale for the findings. Lastly, the fourth measure of validity depends on the extent to which the essential meaning, or structure, of the

phenomenon resonates to some degree with the experiences of other people, outside of the study, who have experienced that phenomenon (Osborne, 1990).

Horsburgh (2003) proposes that generalizability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which results from one study may be “exported” to provide a basis for understanding the “experiences of other individuals who are in comparable situations” (p. 311). In other words, qualitative research aims to provide information about a distinct phenomenon which can be generalized to offer a basic theoretical understanding of a similar phenomenon. Generalizability for phenomenological research is based upon “empathic understanding rather than statistical explanatory procedures” (Osborne, 1990, p. 80). Phenomenological research strives to illuminate the structure of an experience through research findings, which may help others to gain insight into aspects of their own experience, which they may have been “living unreflectively” (Churchill & Wertz, 2001, p. 259).

Summary

The purpose of the present chapter was to outline the methodology utilized in the present study and to provide the reader with a comprehensive description of the processes that will be utilized for recruiting participants, collecting data, and analyzing the data. These previous three chapters have presented a detailed overview of the phenomenon under study, a review of the relevant literature, and the procedures that were followed in conducting the study. The following chapters will introduce and present the themes that emerged from the participants’ interviews and will provide a comprehensive discussion of the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

Presentation of Research Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the meaning and influence of maternal loss on young women's experience of identity development in emerging adulthood. As revealed through the interviews, the death of their mothers during adolescence was a profound experience of loss for the participants that has altered their lives and transformed their sense of self in significant ways. All of the participants engaged in the interview in an open and interested manner and provided encouraging feedback regarding the importance of exploring this topic. For many of the participants, the meaning of losing their mothers during adolescence and what this experience has meant to their identity development unfolded more deeply as they continued to share their stories. The experience and meaning of maternal loss was unique to each participant as was its influence on her identity development. Despite the individual and personal nature of these experiences, fourteen theme clusters emerged across the participants' interviews. These theme clusters did not emerge in a linear fashion or in discrete categories but, rather, as a process and many of the themes are inter-connected. There was variation in how the themes related to each of the participants, however, each theme cluster corresponds to at least four participants.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the findings obtained from the interviews conducted with each of the six participants who took part in this research study. It will begin by providing a brief description of each of the participants and then proceed to present the findings from this study. The findings are divided into the

following two sections: Experience of Maternal Loss and Influence of Maternal Loss on Identity Development. The themes relating to experience of maternal loss provide a rich context for understanding the nature and meaning of the loss for these young women. The themes relating to influence of maternal loss on identity development provide a more specific understanding of how the loss has impacted these young women's personal experiences of developing their identities in emerging adulthood. These theme clusters are presented under the following three common, overarching metathemes that capture the overall essence and main aspects of the lived experience: Loss of Mother Impacts All Aspects of Identity, Seeking Guidance and Relatedness on the Path of Identity Development, and Redefinition of Self and Integration of Loss into Emergent Identity. Summarized tables of all the themes in each section are presented on pp. 145-146.

For each of the fourteen theme clusters, selected quotations from the participant interviews are included to enable the young women's voices to describe and illuminate the meaning of their lived experiences. In an effort to remain true to the data and honour these young women's personal stories, I have included larger quotes when necessary to provide the reader with an understanding of the narrative context from which those quotes came. When a particular theme was more significant for certain participants, their experience was typically depicted more prominently. The theme clusters emerged from the participants' narratives and I collaborated with the participants to decide upon the accuracy and completeness of the final themes, however, I was ultimately responsible for formulating the presentation of the findings and, as a researcher working within the phenomenological approach, I must acknowledge this subjective aspect of the data presentation.

Participant Profiles

The following names have all been changed to protect the identity of the participants. The participants were each given pseudonyms of their choice or ones assigned to them as requested.

Joleen was 20-years-old at the time of our interview. She has two younger sisters and was raised with both of her parents. Joleen's mother died after a long battle with cancer. Joleen was 15 years old.

Kit was 23-years-old at the time of our interview. She has three sisters, two older and one younger. She was raised with both of her parents. Kit's mother died suddenly in a fatal car accident. Kit was 16 years old.

Eve was 21-years-old at the time of our interview. She is an only child. She was raised with both of her parents up until the age of 15 when she moved from her hometown in China to the United States for continuation of her high school. Eve's mother died suddenly in a fatal car accident. Eve was 18 years old.

Meghan was 24-years-old at the time of our interview. She has one older sister and was raised with both of her parents. Meghan's mother died after a short battle with cancer. Meghan was 20 years old.

Paige was 25-years-old at the time of our interview. She has one older brother and one older half sister. She was raised with both of her parents up until the age of 12 when her parents divorced. Paige's mother died after a long battle with cancer. Paige was 16 years old.

Rebecca was 18-years-old at the time of our interview. She has one younger brother and was raised with both of her parents. Rebecca's mother died after a long battle with cancer. Rebecca was 15 years old.

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

Experience of Maternal Loss

Theme Cluster 1: Loss that is Impossible to Prepare For

The death of a mother during adolescence comes against the backdrop of an evolving life filled with peers, new experiences, and a sense of invincibility. The participants in this study stated their mother's death seemed unreal and they described how a lack of knowledge and information made this loss quite unforeseen. The participants discussed how they perceived their mother as an ever-present figure in their lives, which made her death all that much more difficult to comprehend. As the participants spoke of their experiences it became clear that regardless of the circumstances of their mother's death, the loss of their mother during their adolescence was a loss that they could not possibly have prepared for. Within this theme cluster, the following two themes emerged from the participants' descriptions: *Lack of Awareness That Mother was Dying*, and *Unreal Nature of the Loss*.

Lack of Awareness That Mother Was Dying

For the two participants who lost their mothers suddenly there was no opportunity to prepare for her death since it was entirely unexpected. All of the participants who lost their mothers due to illness spoke of receiving little information that their mother was dying and described being unaware of the seriousness of their mother's condition. These young women expressed a common understanding that there was an attempt to protect them from the reality that their mother was nearing death. For all of these participants, the lack of information combined with the unpredictable course of their mothers' illness added to their unawareness. As Rebecca explained:

My mom had cancer 2 years before she died and she had a tumor removed and then we all thought she was better but I guess she and my dad knew that it came back. And then about a year before she died they told her that she had 6 months or something. But me and my brother had absolutely no idea... But then something happened and my dad he was able to treat her a little bit and we thought that she was going to be ok. But I still didn't know that she was actually going to die, like even if she had a year or two years, it was terminal but I didn't know that.

Joleen specifically identified her young age as being the primary reason for why her parents chose to shield her from the details of her mother's illness:

Leading up to it I didn't really know what was going on because my mom had cancer when I was in grade 6. And then she was ok for three years and then she got sick again. So, it's kind of a blur but I didn't really know what was going on other than that she stayed in bed more. And because I have two younger sisters so I was on more of the side of not knowing. They didn't talk to us a lot because we were younger, whereas if I was older I may know more just because of being older.

Similarly, Meghan felt that her mother may have withheld the fact that she had cancer from Meghan and her sister because her mother did not want them to compromise the plans they had made for moving away from home and proceeding with the typical tasks of late adolescence:

My mom hadn't been feeling well up before me and my sister left, she left a little bit before me, and she'd taken some time off work and she passed it off as being

kidney stones or that. And I think me and my sister both think that she knew then but didn't tell us. She told us it was kidney stones and like it wasn't a big deal, whatever, and for us to just go. And we think now because she didn't want us to stay because if she was sick she'd have wanted us to go anyway.

Unreal Nature of the Loss

In addition to the lack of information each participant was given in relation to her mother's illness, these women also described being unable to cognitively comprehend the fact that their mother was dying. All of the participants described the reality of their mothers' death as unimaginable and ultimately unexpected. Joleen did not anticipate her mother's death even though she had been considerably ill with cancer for several months. She stated, "even then I still didn't expect it. She was in Hospice when she died but I don't think I was shocked but I wasn't ready for it either."

Many of the women spoke about their experience as having of an overwhelming sense of unrealness; an incomprehensible event that in actuality could not be happening to them. For Rebecca, the intermittent positive changes in her mother's health reaffirmed her belief that her mother would not actually die.

I was freaking out, crying, bawling my eyes out 24/7 when I thought she was going to die and then once she wasn't anymore I was like, whew I didn't think that would happen. It was just sort of like, this is happening to me, I can't believe it and then she was better and I was like, yeah I knew it would never happen. One thing I compare it to... is if you are walking in the dark and you've seen those movies about being raped and murdered and you're like, oh my God this could actually happen to me, and you start really considering it in your head and then

you get to your car and you're like, why would I ever think that. That's what it was like for me because I was really considering it and I was like, what is happening, and then it just didn't happen and I was like, of course that would never happen.

Each time Rebecca would begin to seriously consider the possibility of her mother's death she would question herself for having had such a ludicrous thought. She was unable to wrap her head around that reality, since it would have threatened her core beliefs and understandings about the world and more specifically about mothers:

It was just hard to imagine because I never thought that, you never think your mother is going to die right? She's there for you.... I was considering it and it was obviously horrible, it was like a TV movie of the week, but I never really, really thought that it could happen to me.

Similarly for Paige, the idea that her mother might die was so unreal and inconceivable that she never considered it. Since she didn't think about the possibility of her mother dying she also didn't consider the severity of her mother's illness. There was an atmosphere of unreality surrounding her mother's condition, which made it difficult for Paige to cognitively "grasp what was going on in the present tense" when she was informed that her mother might die that night: "It was like a ton of bricks hit me, totally caught me off guard. I totally never in my wildest dreams thought my mom would ever die so I was not prepared. I hadn't thought of it and then all of a sudden here I get told within an hour she's going to be dead."

As Meghan described, the sense of unrealness that her mother was dying remained with her until the final moments of her mother's life:

It was very unreal for a long time. The night that she died she was at home and I remember being in what used to be my room and you could hear her really struggling to breathe and it had been going on for a little bit.... So I remember I heard my dad get up and I knew that that was it and so he came in and said that he had called the ambulance and they were coming and to go and tell my sister because she was sleeping in the basement... And so I went down and I got her and I remember the ambulance... I remember seeing the ambulance and it was just like, this is not happening.... It was just like, oh my goodness. It was very just, it was not real, like my head wasn't there. Like I was physically there but it was just kind of motions and no feelings at all.

While the degree of unrealness and the ability to consider the reality of their mother's death varied between participants, the surreal nature of the loss was consistent across all of these women.

Theme Cluster 2: Grief Responses / Reactions

The untimely death of a mother during adolescence leaves a profound absence in the life of a young woman. The participants described specific grief responses and reactions that they experienced following the loss of their mother. The women also described how they used various coping strategies to manage the pain of the loss. Within this theme cluster, the following two themes emerged from the participants' descriptions: Emotional Responses, and Coping with the Pain of Loss.

Emotional Responses

The participants spoke of specific grief responses and reactions that they experienced following the loss of their mother. The three main emotional responses that

the women identified were shock, guilt, and depression. The thread of sadness was woven throughout the participants' descriptions as a feeling of loss that is always present. It will not be discussed as a specific grief response due to the fact that it is a pervasive aspect of the women's experience of maternal loss and will emerge in various contexts throughout this chapter.

Shock.

Most of the participants expressed feeling a sense of shock following their mothers' death. For women who have watched their mothers live with the battle against cancer for a long period of time it can seem as though the battle will never be lost. The moment at which the cancer overtakes life can seem to come at a most unexpected time. Paige and Rebecca both experienced the death of their mothers after an extended fight with cancer that included periods of remission and sudden health declines. They both stated that their mothers' death came as a complete shock. Rebecca recalled, "It just happened overnight. I guess the cancer had just taken over completely. It was just so, so fast. I still don't even really understand what happened but she died that night. It was such a shock. I didn't expect it at all." Paige noted that the blow of the loss impacted her both emotionally and physiologically: "So I mean it affected me where I went into shock and hyperventilated."

The sense of shock is often magnified for women who lose their mothers suddenly in an accident. For these women, there is absolutely no warning. Two research participants, Kit and Eve, experienced the sudden death of their mothers following a fatal car accident. They both described the numbing shock that overcame them. Eve stated, "My first reaction when I was informed about what happened, I burst into tears

immediately. Like right away. And I cried for about 5 minutes or so and then I didn't cry a lot afterwards at all. I guess I felt very numb for a long time."

Kit, who was present at the accident in which her mother was killed, described her experience in this way: "It was pretty horrible. It was more just really shocking. I was just really shocked at the whole thing, not knowing what to do". She later recalled, "At the scene I think I was pretty calm, like I was upset but I don't know. I remember just standing there asking God, what the heck, so what do we do next?"

As evidenced in the participants' descriptions, the sensation of shock enabled these women to survive the jarring impact of the loss. Research suggests that the shock reaction provides the body with a natural anesthesia that enables people to withstand pain, such as the intense grief of losing a loved one (Rando, 1988). As Meghan describes, the shock that she experienced immediately after her mother's death created a temporary feeling of being on automatic pilot:

It was like 5:00 or 5:30 in the morning and I went and called my best friend and I was like, ok well it's done, this is what happened, and we've been here [at the hospital]. And we all drove home in the car together, like I don't remember how much time. And then it was just like funeral arrangements, sit there and smile, meet all these strange people who I don't know, and it was very mechanical.

Guilt.

A number of participants, such as Paige, described feelings of guilt in response to their mothers' death. They experienced a deep sense of regret for not having done more for their mother, for not having spent more time with her, or for not having taken the time to learn all there was about her. As Paige described, one of the hardest parts of her grief

journey was “dealing with the fact that I wish I had the chance to change a few things”.

She further explained the challenge of overcoming that sense of guilt:

I think guilt is the worst feeling in the world and most of the time, especially me, I think coming to grips now with the fact that I actually shouldn't be guilty of anything. Like, I was only a little girl. That was a very huge learning experience for me because I carried on guilt for so many years up until a couple of years ago. And finally I kind of realized, wow I don't have anything to be guilty for. I was just a little girl and what do you expect from a little girl. And for what I've been through, Christ I've done pretty good for a little girl. That was a big thing losing that guilt.

Depression.

The untimely death of a mother during adolescence may exacerbate the typical challenges that exist for young women during their teenage years. Some participants described how the overwhelming experience of loss combined with the previously existent stresses and changes of adolescent life triggered a period of depression.

For two of the participants in particular, Kit and Paige, the depression was so significant that it led them to consider suicide. As Kit recalled,

I was pretty strong for the first while but I ended up getting really depressed because I was 16, in a hard stage. I had an eating disorder and that continued on and got worse over the time. Not just because of that but just because of where I was in my life.... I felt lost. I couldn't concentrate on school so I took a break and changed schools.

After Kit's mother died, "everything got heightened". Kit felt that she should have died in her mother's place because she recognized the profound impact that her mother had on people. She stated that she felt very insignificant and guilty and she believes these feelings fueled her depression and led her to attempt suicide: "Lots of things were going on in my head and I felt that I did not deserve to live. I wanted to die and I tried to end my life".

Similarly, Paige believes that her experience of losing her mother during adolescence intensified the struggles that she was having in other aspects of her life:

I mean you go through enough things with just dealing with your friends and your clothes not being as cool as others and what school you went to and what side of the city it was on, like just stupid things like that. And then all of a sudden you have cancer and death and then you're having to graduate and do everything alone. And things that you know that everyone's moms are there.

As with Kit, Paige felt the void that her mother's death created for so many people. She reasoned that her own death would cause others less pain and she began to seriously contemplate suicide. Paige recalled,

It was very tough. I wanted to die. And I remember thinking that for years I would have given my life in a breath to have brought her back. If that really could have been; if someone could actually say your mom will come back right now but we must take you, then I would have gone in a second. Because I guess I saw the sadness that it brought everybody and I thought, that as depressing as it may be, that I wouldn't be as missed.

Coping with the Pain of Loss

The participants' descriptions revealed the following three main overlapping coping mechanisms used to cope with their grief: carrying on as normal, keeping busy, and using drugs and alcohol. Some of the participants also described how these coping strategies provided a way to suppress or avoid the pain of the loss and how this suppression often led to the emergence of grief in different ways and in different aspects of their lives.

Some of the participants noted that the loss of their mother was never discussed within their family and a sense of normalcy was quickly restored as much as possible. As Rebecca recalled,

I still don't think that I've ever completely mourned her because my dad is a man and he's very private about that sort of thing so we never really just sat at home and cried about it.... We planned the funeral really quickly and then we went to Disneyland. It sounds really dysfunctional but it worked to get our minds off it. But even to this day I feel like I never completely mourned her because we never really just sat there and thought about it. It was just sort of like we thought, okay let's just pretend it never happened. I just remember it being really, really weird because we were at Disneyland and we didn't really talk about it.

For Rebecca, the model of how to deal with loss was to "pretend it never happened" and essentially carry on with life, although she believes that her grief for her mother still surfaces in other ways:

I just sort of suppressed it and went on with my life without really having a stage of depression or anything like that. But I guess it has sort of affected me

underneath. If I've had a rough day then it just comes out and I'm just sitting there bawling my eyes out and I know it's not really about what's happened that day. So it affects me everyday.

Similarly, Joleen reported that "my family never really talked about [the loss] and my dad didn't really talk about it. We kind of isolated ourselves from each other I think... We didn't really want to talk about it because it would make us upset." Following the loss, Joleen coped by keeping busy with her normal activities and avoided processing her experience:

Right away I just kind of went on like normal and I busied myself.... Basketball was a big part of my life and that was regularly on weekends and I was busy with that and stuff.... I basically busied myself and never let myself slow down enough to think about what had happened.

As with Rebecca, Joleen recognized that her grief for her mother would emerge in an exaggerated response to minor emotional triggers. She explained,

I never was really upset about my mom but often I'd get depressed or just my world would be shaken pretty easily through little things.... I think it's just symbolic of the fact that I hadn't dealt with my mom's death. It just compiled over onto other things. I remember feeling like I just didn't want to get out of bed for lots of things.... I never went to the doctor or needed medicine or anything but I remember just being so upset over... other things that I did not put together with my mom. But I'm pretty sure that's what it was.

Like the other participants, Meghan initially coped with the loss of her mother by carrying on as normal, however she was forced to deal with her grief once it began to manifest as episodes of panic and anxiety:

I just went back to what I was doing and...I didn't really let it affect me too much. And then...I guess 3 months after, I started to get really panicky and filled with anxiety attacks and I didn't know why. And then I was like, I think I really need to deal with this; this is kind of a big thing that just happened. And I kind of realized what had just happened.

After the loss of her mother, Paige coped by turning to drugs and alcohol to escape the pain of her grief and to try and regain a sense of control in her life. She recalled,

I did drugs...and it was a form of escape, nothing to do with peer pressure whatsoever. And it was also a form of control because I felt like I had no control in my life and everything was just happening and I was expected to handle it. And so then I did the drugs and it always made me feel happy.... It's very comforting to have something take away your thoughts and that's what drugs and alcohol do. They just make you somewhere else.

Paige was able to further identify how her experience of losing her mother initiated an intense search for control that led her to use drugs and alcohol and also restrict her food intake:

It never affected my weight in any way but I used to always control eating so I guess it did in an anorexic form. It's got nothing to do with really wanting to do it, it's almost a cry of help.... You know they expect you to move on and maybe

you're not ready to so it's a sense of a cry out, where I can't control what happened but I am damn well going to control me. And I am going to tell myself what I'll eat and I am going to tell myself what I'll drink and put in my body, you can't stop me. So it's really sad.

The participants' descriptions of their experiences of maternal loss clearly indicate the profound grief that they experienced following the death of their mothers. These themes will provide the context for understanding how these young women's experience of their mother's death has subsequently influenced their identity development in emerging adulthood.

Influence of Maternal Loss on Identity Development

Metatheme 1- Loss of Mother Impacts All Aspects of Identity

Theme Cluster 1: Self Before and After

The participants described the loss as marking a separation between two different lives or two different selves. They discussed their lives in terms of "before" and "after" the death and described the different person they became after the loss of their mother. Some of the participants discussed having to take on new and different responsibilities within the family, such as caring for younger siblings or fulfilling the mother role. Some of the participants described a feeling of raising themselves following the loss, and having to depend on themselves to meet their needs. Within this theme cluster, the following two themes emerged from the participants' descriptions: Two Lives, and Change in Familial Role and Responsibilities.

Two Lives

All of the participants reported that the death of their mother during adolescence changed their lives as they had known them. As Kit described, “I kind of feel like I don’t even remember what it’s like to have a mom anymore. I don’t remember that aspect of mother-daughter anymore.”

For some of the women the loss of their mother became a specific marker between the cessation of one life and the start of a completely different life and a new understanding of self. Joleen explained, “It does feel like two lives really. There was my life before when I went to Disneyland and was a kid and then there’s this other life that’s completely different. There’s no comparison.” Meghan recognized the loss of her mother as creating a vague division between two lives that is marked by the influence of the loss on her life and her self:

I think there’s kind of life before and there’s life after. And not that everything is directed towards before and after but there’s definitely a shift in my thinking. It was very conscious at first and now I’m sure that it still affects my decisions and everything that I do in some way and maybe not even in all ways but it’s kind of always there.... I guess it changed my outlook and changed why I make decisions maybe.

Similarly, Rebecca described how different her life has become since her mother died: “Everything changes. It’s just your life is not the same.... After a while you get so used to it that now it’s just normal. I’m just used to not having her in my life. But things would definitely be a lot different if she was still around.” Rebecca further articulated how the profound loss of her mother has impacted a redefinition of her self:

Her death is the defining moment in my life. That is what defines me.... I am the girl whose mom died, that is me. I'd have to say that was the defining moment in all aspects. That's what changed my life, that's what I am now... It just splits your life in half from before and then after.... I always think of it as before death and after death because things are just so different. So I think of things like, ok was that before my mom died, yeah because that was me before, a normal person, and then there's me after. I would definitely say that I am, as my identity, the girl who lost her mother. That is the most important thing about me; that's the main thing about me.

For Paige, the loss of her mother as a marker between two lives was less specific although she believes that her experience of her mother's death has altered her life and her sense of self in significant ways. Paige articulated that the loss of her mother was not the absolute defining moment of her life but one of a number of life-altering experiences in her developing identity that caused her to feel "isolated from her old self to a new person". She stated, "I always felt like all my life when something traumatizing has happened, that the person who was there wasn't the next person who then wasn't the next person. So standing here right now I feel like this person was not the person who dealt with my mom's death."

Change in Familial Role and Responsibilities

A family is a system and when an important person is removed from that system the family experiences profound change. As revealed through the participants' descriptions, their mothers were a central figure in the lives of these adolescent daughters

and in the life of their families and in her absence these young women were forced to adapt to new roles and new responsibilities.

Some of the participants described how the loss of their mother impacted their identity within the family as they moved from being a child towards fulfilling the role of mother. This shift in roles was particularly notable for participants who have younger siblings. Rebecca, who has one younger brother, describes her experience in this way:

[My mom] was the centre of the family, kept everything going, drove everyone everywhere so I sort of had to take on half of her role. Me and my dad have sort of split her role in half... It just feels like it's the two of us running the family. I feel like I'm a bigger part of the family now, whereas before I was just the kid but now I'm helping to run it because things go wrong if you don't buy the groceries or don't make dinner and stuff.

For Rebecca, this new role in her family has become a "normal way of life" that she has had to accept and integrate into her sense of self: "It's just become my life, I'm not upset about it, there's nothing we can do because there is only three of us. I understand that I have to help out but it's still hard. I couldn't see anything any other way, like that's the way my life is, my mom's not going to come back and do everything that she used to do."

Similarly, Kit had to redefine her role in her family when she began caring for her father and younger sister whom she described as having been "dependent" on her mother. As with Rebecca, Kit has come to accept this as "the way of life" since the loss of her mother. She stated, "I felt like I needed to be the mother with cooking, cleaning, and supporting the family... And I stayed around a little longer to help out. I think over time it's just become the way of life I guess."

Joleen sensed significant responsibility for “bringing up” her younger sisters after her mother died. Joleen recognized that her sisters “looked towards [her] for leadership” and she recalled, “I’d always be driving them around or just making sure that they were alright.” She stated that she was a “natural caretaker” but believes that the loss of her mother and the subsequent changes within her family pushed her more forcefully into that role:

My sisters were a huge, huge part of my life. If you talk to anybody else... they’d say the thing that they were most worried about is the pressure I took of bringing up my sisters.... I felt like I needed to be at home for them and... food was kind of a big deal at our house because my dad didn’t know how to make any food and my mom, she was a substitute teacher so she was at home most of the time, and so we never really had any food and just like basic things that had always been there that weren’t there anymore.

In addition to acquiring increased responsibilities within the family, some of the participants described feeling more responsible for raising themselves and meeting their own needs following the loss. Rebecca stated that her mother was the primary caretaker of the family and that after she died Rebecca felt that she was left to “raise herself” in many ways:

I can’t even imagine what it feels like anymore to have someone who is taking care of you all the time because my dad doesn’t really give me that much emotional support that my mom would.... It’s become where I just do everything for myself... It’s like all I have is me. There’s not really anyone who’s completely concerned with what I am doing.

For Rebecca, the loss of her mother at a young age forced her to become increasingly responsible for herself: “It was the me who was taken care of and then it’s the me that takes care of myself.... I am responsible for myself. No one is responsible for me anymore”.

Similarly, Joleen recognized that the freedom she had after her mom died required her to be more self-reliant and responsible for her own personal development, since she was lacking the parental guidance that a mother often provides for a daughter:

I think my personality because I’ve had to search for my personality; it wasn’t laid out, there wasn’t rules like, oh I can’t go hang out with this person late at night and I can’t do that, that I have made who I am more so than my parents molding me into the person they want me to be.

Theme Cluster 2: Change in Relationship with Father

All of the participants described a change in their relationship with their father following the loss of their mother. The loss of their mother profoundly impacted the family system and their relationship with their father was inevitably altered. Of the six participants, three women described a disconnection in their relationship with their father and three of the participants described a strengthening in their relationship with their father following the loss. All of the women described the change in their relationships with their father as being a significant aspect of their experience of maternal loss and as being meaningful to their experience of identity development. Within this theme cluster, the following two themes emerged from the participants’ descriptions: Distancing in Relationship with Father, and Becoming Closer to Father.

Distancing in Relationship with Father

Some of the participants described a distancing in their relationships with their father shortly after the loss of their mother. For some of these women the relationship with their father became stronger again after several years.

Eve stated that the change in her relationship with her father is one of the most “essential” effects of her mother’s death. She explained that her perception of her father changed after the loss of her mother and she believes that her mother’s absence caused her to see the relationship that had existed between her parents more clearly:

I think after my mom passed away the relationship between me and my father, it’s getting... maybe a bit more distant. You know I used to look up to him as this like God figure almost. I think I see their relationship more clear.... And I know how he’s dominant; he’s always been dominant and I wasn’t aware of that. I thought that was a good thing but it’s not a good thing and I’m still struggling with it.

Eve further expressed the conflicting strong emotions that she feels towards her father and how she is hopeful that their relationship will improve over time. She stated, “I’m pretty optimistic. I think it will change as I grow older, so we are not going to have this hate-love relationship all through our lives. I think it’s just part of growing up and understanding him better and he’ll understand me better hopefully.”

Joleen also described a distancing from her father after the loss of her mother. Similar to Eve, Joleen initially felt that her father did not meet her needs or expectations as her only parent: “I was definitely distant from him. When I think back to when it first happened I was really close to him and then I just started to pull away more and more and then eventually I tried to isolate myself from him.... I didn’t think he was good enough

so I just didn't want to accept anything from him." She stated that she felt frustrated with her father for not being available to her and her sisters after her mother's death, since he had a girlfriend and "he was dealing with his own things". Although Joleen initially tried to separate herself from her father their relationship has continued to evolve and the two of them have grown closer again. Joleen explained that over time she has come to understand her father's perspective and she is now more accepting of her father's influence in her life:

And now I'm beginning to accept him again and recognize we all have faults or whatever and they might not even be faults, just different views.... I think when I was in it I forgot about how he would have felt. So I mean it's hard because he lost his 25-year partner for life and I just thought me and my sisters lost our mom... But now we're really growing back together again and more so respecting each other as adults but he still has a bit of a fatherly role. But if it was last year I don't know if I could have told you that. It's the time and I'm learning to respect him too because he's my dad. He doesn't have to take care of me anymore but he still supports me. And I appreciate that support.

Similar to the other participants, Paige initially experienced a distance in her previously strong relationship with her father. After her mother died, Paige's father and step-mother assumed a much more powerful influence over her life:

Before my mom died I was very close to him... but I must say when she died I just resented him and I don't think I resented him for being alive or for my mom not but I think it's like he and my step-mom changed. They all of a sudden got this power trip on them and started putting all these expectations on me. And I

was just very angry and bitter and I definitely started extremely considering running away, which had never been an idea in my head before. And I did find myself, I just never talked to them anymore. I totally felt like he was the enemy.... I just used to pray to my mom that she'd take me away so I could be with her. I almost found that I needed her more than I had ever needed her and now she was gone.

As with Joleen, Paige's relationship with her father eventually evolved into a renewed and strengthened closeness. She stated, "And then finally one day I was just sick of being so angry and it was such an effort to be so mean to him that I finally just stopped being mean to him.... I went from being a very angry and bitter teenager to talking again and communicating and loving him and caring about him. And then from that day is when we have had such a good relationship."

Becoming Closer to Father

Of the six participants, three women, Kit, Rebecca, and Meghan, described an increased closeness in their relationship with their father following the loss of their mother. As two of the participants in particular described, the loss of their mothers during adolescence forced the development of a new relationship with their fathers in which they both came to know each other better as human beings. Kit explained how she developed a genuine and familiar relationship with her father for the first time after her mother died:

We had no relationship until she died. He was always on the road for work and I only saw him in the morning and briefly at night. But since my mother died we have become really good friends and our relationship has become amazing and I

am really happy about that. My dad has had the hardest life of any human being I know and he has fought hard to survive and he is doing it. I respect him with all that I am.

Similar to Kit, Rebecca's father took on a more involved parenting role with her and her brother since he was now the primary and only parent. Rebecca described how she and her father grew closer after her mother died:

You sort of have to when it's just him and us. He always says that he didn't even know us before because he was sort of concerned with doing his own thing. I wouldn't say he was a workaholic but he basically went to work and then he liked to relax and watch TV and he was doing Tae Kwon Doe. He just sort of had his own thing and obviously he loved us a lot but my mom was definitely the caregiver and he was sort of the provider. But he has become both. So that's definitely different.

Rebecca also recognized how the change in her relationship with her father has impacted her identity development. She stated, "And just with shaping identity again, I think my dad had a really big role in that. I really see that in the way that he has changed me. I was always sort of like him, like you pick up characteristics, but I definitely think I listen to him more."

As Meghan described, she always had a relationship with her father but their relationship became considerably stronger after the loss of her mother. Similar to Rebecca, Meghan also recognized the influence that her father has come to have on her development. She explained,

I had a very typical relationship with both my mom and dad and we were close...and, I don't know, whatever a regular relationship is for a teenager to have with her parents. And then it definitely changed our relationship, me and my dad, but not too dramatically. And it's just definitely more open and I mean he's just amazing. He's definitely a huge influence on a lot of what I do.

Theme Cluster 3: Perception of Self as Different

The loss of a mother in adolescence is a non-normative life event and, as these participants described, it felt as though their loss placed them in a category separate from their peers. The participants described how the loss of their mother made them feel different from others. They discussed not knowing many or any other people who had experienced the loss of their mother and how it made them feel inadequate or disconnected from their peers to not have their mother. Within this theme cluster, the following three themes emerged from the participants' descriptions: Feeling Different, Nobody Can Understand, and Desire to be "Normal".

Feeling Different

A number of participants, such as Joleen, described a sense of differentness following the loss of their mother: "I knew that I was different.... I knew my family was different from everyone else's." Rebecca explained, "I would just have to say that the most important thing I can say about my experience is I felt different... from everybody else."

Some of the participants experienced their loss and the subsequent feelings of differentness as shameful or secretive. One woman in particular, Rebecca, described how

her sense of being different following the loss of her mother caused her to feel ashamed and inadequate in comparison to others:

I used to feel ashamed, like it was embarrassing and I felt different than everybody else, like not as good. Yeah, that's a big thing, you feel different from everyone else because you just don't have that big mentor in your life anymore.... It's just a feeling of inadequacy because you don't have something that everyone else has. And it sounds kind of weird to be ashamed of that because it's obviously not your fault but you feel like it is because you're different.

For Rebecca, the loss of her mother became a personal and painful secret that she tried to withhold from others. She recalled, "It was just like a pain, it was like a secret I was hiding. A year after I couldn't talk about it without crying because it was just like this secret inside that I was hiding... Because I didn't know anyone that had had that happen to them." Furthermore, being an adolescent, Rebecca was at an age where a sense of belonging in your peer group is critical to self development. She stated: "Like teenagers you just want to fit in, right. And I was like I don't know anyone else whose mother has died; who has this weird family. I don't want to talk about it. I know probably everyone knew but nobody talked about it."

Similarly, Paige described how she tried to hide the loss and her pain from the people around her, particularly at school. She recalled,

I went to school and I'd only had one other friend that had ever lost a parent and it was a dad and I'm so close to my dad now that I couldn't imagine what that would have been like but at the time when you're a young kid you're close to your mom kind of that way. So, I felt like nobody understood so I didn't tell

anybody. I told maybe like two friends that my mom had died. And I went to school day in and day out, continually went to school as if my mom hadn't died...I just didn't want anybody to know anything. I just didn't want anyone to look at me. I wanted everyone to pretend that everything was the exact same.

Many of the participants expressed that the topic of their mother and the loss also created awkwardness for other people and this would cause an uncomfortable situation for both individuals that the participants tried to avoid. This experience contributed to the women's feelings of differentness, since they felt as though people didn't know how to respond to them. Rebecca explained,

So it was always just so, so horrible if anyone ever said anything about her because then I would have to talk about her in the past tense. I would either have to talk about her in the past tense and then they would ask about it and then I would have to say it and they'd feel guilty and say "oh I'm so sorry" and it would be really awkward or I'd have to lie about it which made me even more uncomfortable. So, it still makes me uncomfortable. It's just so awkward.... If you're with a stranger and you have to tell them that right off the bat, because even though it's a way of life for me it's still very personal, so I feel very awkward talking about it with strangers. Now it's not as bad but before it was like if I knew it was coming or if they did ask me I would get this hot feeling and I felt dizzy. It was horrible; I didn't want to talk about it

Similarly, Meghan described the awkwardness that she would experience when she spoke about her loss to other people. She recalled, "I remember definitely feeling very awkward about it, like I didn't want people to be feeling sorry or kind of dancing

around the topic. I didn't want them to be feeling that way and when they did it just felt like a big thing hanging over me.”

Nobody Can Understand

For many of the participants, the death of their mother was their first close, personal experience with death and grief. They were now facing a significant loss, which was both new and unknown to them and to the majority of their peers. These participants reported feeling that nobody could understand their loss or their pain and for many of these women this left them feeling isolated and alone. Eve explained:

I don't think people can get into my brain and understand what I have been through. It doesn't make my experience more significant than theirs, it's just they can't experience mine, my experience. It's very individual when I think about it. It's not a shared experience and we can just talk about it... They think they can connect with me or they can understand me but they can't.

Eve further described how her loss and her feeling of differentness have caused her to feel disconnected from other people in her life and the world:

All the experience I've had just makes me feel very different. Until it gets to the point you almost feel like you're this one person on earth, everybody else is I don't know. It builds up to the point you just give up searching for connections almost.... Even though when I'm with people, it doesn't matter how good the relationship is, even friendship, I always feel this barrier. Always. Like there is this aura around me, it just covers me. It doesn't matter how intimate I feel with the person, I'm just this totally separate individual from everybody and the rest of the world. That's what I feel.... I feel almost like I am in a womb.

Paige also experienced a sense of being alone and felt like nobody could understand her experience of losing her mother. She expressed that she felt like “nobody in the world had any idea [of my loss] and then they’d pretend to and say things and I’m really sorry to hear that your mom died”. She stated, “One of the reasons I felt so alone is no one ever cared of the fact that I’d lost my mom so I felt like I didn’t really have anybody that cared.” Paige reasoned that she may have felt less alone if she had known other people who shared her experience and could understand what she was going through: “You know how they have those camps for kids with cancer, well maybe if they had camps for kids who lost a parent to cancer you think you’d have felt like you weren’t alone and there were people out there who were going through the same thing and that it’s just part of life and you’ll get through it and it’s ok.”

Similar to Paige, Rebecca believes that she would have felt less alone and different from her peers if she had found someone to talk to who understood her and her experience. She stated,

I wish that I had gone to counselling or something so I could talk to other people or talk to someone who understood how I was feeling and tell me that I was normal. So time has helped me get over that but I might have gotten over it faster... if I had someone to talk to or someone who understood me or just knew that there wasn’t something wrong with me because that’s the main feeling you get.

Desire to be “Normal”

As life continues and the loss becomes farther away, many of the participants expressed a continued sense of not wanting others to perceive them as different due to the

loss of their mothers. In adolescence, they perceived themselves as different from their peers and many of the women tried to hide these differences. In emerging adulthood, some of the participants described how they do not want other people to perceive them as different or pity them due to their experience of losing their mother at a young age.

Rebecca described how she is still hesitant to share her experience of losing her mother with people because she believes it influences how they perceive her as a person:

It just changes their perception of me. Maybe that's just me but I'm pretty sure that once someone knows that they think of you differently. I don't know if they feel sorry for you but you're just like a different person; you're just different. So I just feel like they feel pitiful and I just want to be a normal person. I guess I still feel like that because I am still young, I'm still a teenager and it has only been four years and I do still feel like oh I'm different now. And they feel sorry for me. And I'm this independent person and I have this different weird life.

Similarly, Meghan explained that she often avoids sharing her experience of losing her mother with new people that she meets:

I know that I don't mention her death or that experience, which I always kind of wonder if I should.... And there are definitely opportunities when people are talking to be like, oh no my mom died... and all I'll do is, yeah my dad, and, at home with my dad, and nobody questions me as of yet and I haven't brought it up as of yet. And sometimes I feel like that's privileged information, like it's personal in a big part and other times I guess it depends on the people.

Meghan recognizes the impact that her mother's death has had on her self and her life but she also realizes that it does not comprise her whole identity and she does not want to be perceived as different from other young women her age based on her loss. She stated,

I don't think I'm any different from anyone else who hasn't lost their mom. It's just kind of a thing that happened I guess. Just as in my best friend has both of her parents but other stuff has happened in her life too that hasn't happened to me. I just think just like she's had stuff I've had stuff. And though it's changed me in certain ways it's not everything.... It has had a lot of effect on who I am and everything that I do. But it's a balance between the two. I really do feel that life happens and that just kind of happened. And it was sad and it was tragic and I'm still dealing with it but at the same time these things happen.

Theme Cluster 4: Loss of Mother throughout Life

The participants described feeling the loss of their mother in their lives as they move into adulthood. They also spoke of missing the special mother-daughter bond that women establish with their mothers throughout their lifetime and the female guidance and emotional support that was taken away from them with the death of their mothers. As revealed through the participants' descriptions, learning to live without their mothers is an evolving process. Within this theme cluster, the following three themes emerged from the participants' descriptions: A Missing Piece, Did Not Have Chance to Develop Adult Relationship with Mother, and Sense of Being Cheated.

A Missing Piece

All of the participants described feeling the absence of their mother throughout their lives, especially at significant developmental milestones and special events. They

spoke of anticipating the feelings of sadness and loss and the void they will face as they continue on their life path and grow as women throughout adulthood without the guidance of their mothers. As Eve stated, "It's sad because I won't be able to experience her presence at whatever in my lifetime. Whatever's going to happen to me, she's not going to be there."

For Paige, the sense of missing her mother's presence is related to specific moments and events in life where a daughter relies on her mother. She explained, "If you said to any girl what do you think the most important times in your life have been to have your mom there it's always when you're older. It's always when you're graduating or when you're having your baby or when you're getting married. It's always those things and it's really sad that I'll never have that." Paige recalled her experience of her brother's wedding, which was the first marriage in the family, and described how she felt "overwhelmed" by the feeling of her mother not being there. She expressed her apprehension and sadness about the absence of her mother in her own life and contemplated how this profound loss will affect her throughout her development as a woman:

I deal with it all the time what I'm going to do at my wedding because talking about my brother's brings me to bloody tears let alone thinking about mine. I don't know how well I'll be able to deal with that. I'm 25 and she's missed a lot of my experiences and stuff but nothing yet of what I was saying most women refer to their moms for. I still have all those things to deal with.... I have all that to still go through so it's not something I really look forward to that way.... So I consider myself a woman but I kind of consider myself still very young. Like I'm

only in my twenties and they say the twenties are the best years of your life so I'm trying to make them that. But I mean that's why I keep hoping I have a very good mother-in-law or very good people and family members around me because I think I'll need them a lot. I think emotionally I'll really depend on those people to play that role. And I think that it's going to be harder on me as I get older to kind of come to grips that she's not there.

Similarly, Meghan described how her current age and stage of life development emphasizes her mother's absence and her feelings of missing out. She stated,

It's really hard. It's hard when you see, I guess maybe I'm at the age where people are getting married and having babies and you think I don't want to go through those things without her. And not that I don't want to go through them at all but it just seems like how do you do that without that person in your life.

Because you always see it, maybe it's kind of a Hollywood thing but on TV and movies the mom is always there and it's really annoying.

As with the other women, Kit also described times to come in her life when she believes that she will feel the loss of her mother more strongly: "Like when I have a baby... I think that and when I get married probably, if I get married.... I'm sure that there will be times when it will be harder but just take it as it comes. That's all you can do."

One woman in particular, Paige, also described the impact of Mother's Day on her feelings of loss and missing out. She expressed the sadness that she feels each year on that day, since it is a day of celebration for mothers and their children:

And like Mother's day, mother's day sucks for me. I hate Mother's day, I just hate it. I think it's sad. I mean I think it's great that mothers have their day but everything that day is Mother's day, Mother's day, Mother's day and it must be tormenting to all women who have lost their mothers. So, I think it's probably the hardest day of the entire year. And with Christmas being so busy, you're just so excited and everything's pretty that you get through that and Thanksgiving you're surrounded by loving family members who are thankful of whatever in their lives so that's good too, and Easter big deal. But it's like you come to Mother's day and for every second of that day it's thrown in your face.

The participants identified specific times and events in their lives when they believe that they will experience the effects of missing their mothers with greater intensity. All of the participants also described a more general sense of missing out as a woman without a mother. The women described the significance of their mothers in their lives as daughters and as women and expressed a sense of missing the emotional bond and female guidance of their mothers. Paige explained,

I think it's just a different love from a mom. It's just more of that maternal thing and your gut and obviously there are things about women, women have higher pain thresholds and women live longer. There's something about women that is powerful and I think you do definitely feel that loss as opposed to maybe a boy would feel that loss in losing a father, where I think that a little girl losing a father wouldn't feel that loss as much. I think it would definitely be easier. Where oh my God, I'm glad that my dad's never passed on and I think that would have devastated my brother as a kid too but I think with a mom you always expect her

to be there. You always think she's going to be there. So it's a bit of a kick in the ass when all of a sudden they're just taken from you.

Rebecca described how the loss of her mother has left her with a sense of missing out as a woman and she further reflected on how the absence of her mother will continue to impact her as a woman as she develops throughout adulthood:

Definitely as a woman I would say that I am missing something. Something huge because there is definitely that mother-daughter bond and that was so strong with us. It was always like the two of us, like I had her and she had me, like the daughter she always wanted.... I would definitely say that I do feel like I'm missing that nurture, nurturing person in my life. My dad, he does give me a lot of advice but I do feel like I'm lacking that female guidance, sort of that person who is always with you throughout your entire life. I always think about how she's not going to be at my wedding and all that sort of thing. Yeah, you're missing something, you're missing that mentor, that best friend who is also your mentor who is also your mother, like the nurturing, loving person.... It's always different that female connection because my dad is a really good mentor but I'm still missing that love, that motherly love that you can't compare.

As with Rebecca, many of the participants emphasized a feeling of missing out on the bond between mothers and daughters that is characterized by mutual emotional closeness and deep personal sharing. Kit stated, "I think it's for sure been hard just because I haven't had that emotional support that you normally would." Meghan expressed sadness over the fact that she is unable to share her new life developments with her mother: "It is feeling missing out. I think about when she died, it was January, and

then I made a decision to go back to school in February and I ended up doing something that is, like she never knew and I feel like she doesn't even know what I love to do and who I am and who my friends are and it's like I can't share that with her. Similarly, Joleen stated, "I think I felt like I was missing out on lots of things sometimes. Yeah, missing out. Like, I didn't have that close bond that lots of my other friends had with their moms." She further described how she felt like she had missed out on some of the learning that a mother passes on to her daughter: "I missed out on some of the things to do with being a girl. I never learned how to do my make-up right or going through your period by yourself and you're too embarrassed to ask your friends."

Did Not Have Chance to Develop Adult Relationship with Mother

As adolescents emerge and grow into adulthood, there is an opportunity for their parent-child relationship to transform into a relationship between two adults, where the daughter comes to know her mother as more than a mother and begins to learn about her as a person and potentially as a friend. Many of the participants described a sense of loss and sadness knowing that they will never have the opportunity to develop an adult relationship with their mothers and wondered what it would have meant to their lives to have known her as a person.

Joleen stated, "I was only fifteen so I hadn't gotten to a stage where I was friends with my mom yet. You know how when you get older then she's not the disciplinary person anymore but I knew that would have come so I think that sometimes I'm sad that I never really got to know her as a person. I only knew her as my mom." Similarly, Rebecca said, "I definitely feel really, really sad that I won't know her as an adult. That

is definitely something that I've thought about, that just hit me one day and that was really sad."

Similar to the other participants, Paige felt sad that she lost the opportunity to become more to her mother "than just her little girl." She imagined what an adult relationship with her mother would have been like and how it might have impacted her life:

When you're a little girl you just see your mom and dad as mom and dad, you don't really see them as buddies. And my dad and I are very close. We hang out and we laugh and I wouldn't even think for a second, oh this is my dad why am I hanging out with him. I enjoy his company. And I wish that I could have been able to have that with my mom because I think she would have been very supportive, she would have loved the fact that I traveled and she probably would have come with me on a few [trips] and I think she would have been very supportive through relationships and with graduation. And supporting me at those moments when big things happen to you and your mom's the one who gets you that present because she always did when I was a little kid.

Meghan also described missing out on developing an adult relationship with her mother, however the void that she felt for not having known her as a person was partially filled when she learned about her mother through other people who had known her:

I didn't really get that chance to develop that relationship past those horrible teenage years. And I still viewed her as a mom in all the typical kind of senses and she was a horrible person sometimes and so great the other days. And so it was after her death I got all these stories and her friends and people who knew her

in different ways and I was told this and I was like, I did not know that. Things that I had no idea and so I guess my view of her changed even though she wasn't here and I kind of felt that I could have gotten a piece of that if we had developed [a friendship]. Like maybe I would have found out those things, instead I got them anyway in a different way.

For Kit, the sadness she feels at having missed the opportunity to know her mother as an adult extends beyond her self to a feeling of loss for the generations to come. She stated, "It will be sad that my children and then my grandchildren won't be able to ever know my mom. But I don't know. I'm going to make her life real to them and tell stories."

For these women the loss of their mothers during adolescence meant that they will never have the opportunity to experience a relationship with their mothers as adults. The effects of this loss was felt by each woman as sadness for not having known her mother as a person, as an absence for the children she may have, or as a sense of wondering of what could have been.

Sense of Being Cheated

A number of the participants described feeling cheated for having lost their mothers so young. They expressed feelings, such as anger and jealousy, at the unfairness of life and questioned why this experience happened to them. Eve described how her experience of losing her mother at a young age has caused her to feel cheated in comparison to other people: "I don't have to experience all these when I am so young. You know why can't I just be happy, right, like everybody else." Similarly, Rebecca expressed how her loss has led to her to experience jealousy towards others:

I would say that I take out a lot of angry emotions on people when I'm just jealous. And that probably has a lot to do with the whole mother thing, like I feel like I'm not as good. Just jealous that life is unfair.... That's something that really affected me because I wasn't like that before. I had no reason to be jealous of other people because I had everything. I had the perfect family and all the friends and everything was good. So that's definitely something that has changed within me when I feel threatened by other people because they have something more than me.... I definitely feel cheated, definitely cheated out of life because I might be a less jealous cynical person; I wouldn't be like that if she was still around.

Meghan described how she sometimes feels cheated when she hears about the relationships that other women have with their mothers, knowing that she can not experience that mother-daughter relationship again. She stated that it angers her to listen to women complaining about their mothers, since she feels they can not understand what it is like not to have a mother:

There's other days where I get really mad and really pissed off and feel really cheated that... I guess mostly it happens when just either sitting with random people or overhearing other conversations or talking with people you do know or being a part of a bigger group and things always come up and it's, my mom blah, blah, blah; my mom did this and she; oh I hate my mom and she makes me so mad, and I'm just like don't say that, you don't know how lucky you are. Or I get really sad because I don't get to call up my mom and tell her whatever or she can't come over and cook me dinner or buy me new clothes, like you know, I

don't have that. So that has a big effect and usually... I don't think I've ever done it but I kind of want to scream at everybody and be like, don't you understand!

Similar to Meghan, Paige described how she feels cheated in comparison to other women who still have their mothers or who lost their mothers at an older age. She described the anger she felt at books that only address the experiences of women who lost their mothers later in life, since she perceived these women as lucky for having had their mothers for as long as they did:

I definitely did feel shafted... and that's where I said to you I'm really glad you're doing this because all those books were about losing your mom when you're 30 or 40 or 50, well they got to have that friendship with their mom, they got to have their mom be there for their child and watch them go through labour and be supportive, where pffft that angered me because I was like well what a shaft I didn't get that. I didn't get 30 years with my mom. I didn't get her to be at my wedding, I didn't get her to be at my children's birth. So I just felt like where's our story, where's our form of therapy to get us through the fact that we'll never have that. So you do feel shafted. You do feel sad.

For Paige, this experience of losing her mother so young also led her to wonder if she was being punished or if she had done something wrong. She stated, "It was really, really tough and I felt shafted, I felt punished, that maybe from me not being as supportive as I could have been through her cancer that maybe this was my way of not being able to have her any longer.... I thought I had done something wrong and that it just wasn't fair."

*Metatheme 2 - Seeking Guidance and Relatedness
on the Path of Identity Development*

Theme Cluster 5: Seeking Maternal Influence of Older Women

The participants highlighted the significant role that older women have in their experience of self-development. They described the older women as providing a female influence in their lives in a way that they would not if their mothers were still alive. The participants described seeking out women to fulfill their needs for maternal caring and also seeking out women as role models. Within this theme cluster, the following two themes emerged from the participants' descriptions: Maternal Figures, and Older Women as Role Models for Identity Development.

Maternal Figures

Three women in particular, Joleen, Paige, and Kit, described the significance of older women in their lives as maternal figures. Joleen stated that she "longed for older women's caring" and protection after her mother died. She described how a few older ladies in her life have provided her with the maternal care she was seeking and she expressed what this care has meant to her:

I feel like I'm very fortunate because I've had other women come into my life and take that role but not like a motherly role but more...just like a protective, like you know did you get your hair cut. You know kind of the self care.... It's definitely a relief...just to know that they're there and just kind of watching out for me.

Paige described how her friends' mothers have helped to fill the void she has felt from losing her own mother:

I've always, and I think it's helped me, I've always gravitated towards my friends' moms. I call my friends' moms "mom". I just love people's moms... That's one thing that I kind of think in the present way makes me think of moms and by having so many moms it makes me feel good because I do.... I've got lots of friend's parents, especially moms, that love me and I love that and I know that I could call many of them and they would be there for me and help me and love me anytime I need them. So it's very comforting, it's very nice. But I kind of initiated it all. It was me having enough oomph and enthusiasm to run up and give them a big hug and kiss where most people don't do that to their friend's parents.

Paige stated that everyone deserves the kind of caring that a mother gives to a daughter and although her step-mother has become a significant woman in her life, she believes that she is still searching for that motherly love from a mother-in-law:

So I must say that I've always dreamed that I would find a really nice boyfriend that had a lovely mom and then it would be a nice mother-in-law for me and I could love her the way that my mom would have played that role. Because I love my step-mom and...she's definitely come into that place where I will confide and rely on her with those things I would have relied on my mom, like when I have a baby and shopping for my wedding dress. I'm lucky to have a step-mom who has developed to be a wonderful figure in my life. But it still hasn't made me stop wanting to have a lovely mother-in law.... You know like how a daughter's mom is always so involved in the grandchild's life and I've always wanted that from my mother in-law.

For some of these young women, a family member, such as a step-mother or an aunt, has offered the type of support and care that women typically seek from their mothers. As Kit described, a special aunt has taken on more of a maternal role in her life following the loss of her mother: She's someone who's important to me. She's kind of like a mom in a way. She probably feels like I'm a bit like her daughter. She always tells me to come home." The participants recognize how these women have filled a need that came about after the loss of their mothers. As Joleen stated, "If I did have my mom, I know I wouldn't have them as friends."

Older Women as Role Models for Identity Development

Many of the participants described seeking out women as role models for how they want to develop as women or as mothers themselves. All of the participants were asked if there have been any significant people in their experience of developing their identity as they move into adulthood. In response to this question, most of the participants identified older adult women as being significant to them in this process. Eve identified her search for women role models as one of the "essential" changes she has experienced within herself following the loss of her mother.

For a number of the participants, such as Eve and Joleen, older women took on a more significant role in their experience of developing their identity following the loss of their mothers. As Joleen described, she "fed off" the presence and influence of the adult women in her life. She stated that she values these women for the wisdom they can offer to her as she continues to develop as a person: "I just appreciated them because they saw me as a whole person and as a maturing person, as a developing person whereas my friends who are my age just were living day to day. Whereas the ladies are more kind of

wise I guess and I can ask them about bigger things and direction. Like more about bigger questions.”

Similar to Joleen, Kit feels fortunate to have her aunt, among other women, who has become such a significant and influential person in her life:

My aunt is a big part of my life whether she really knows it or not. She’s just more of a mentor to me, someone who I really respect. She’s gone through the worst kind of shit you can ever imagine and she’s the strongest woman you’ll ever meet.... She’s a really passionate person, everything that she feels, everything that she is is open. And that’s what I look up to and that’s what I try to be.

For Paige, the presence of other mothers in her life provides her with a model and a continual source of inspiration for how she would like to be as a mother. She stated,

Like the mom who’s going to bake cupcakes and have little birthday parties where they get goodie bags and volunteer as a parent helper and go to the ice rink and drive the kids to swimming and I just always imagine stuff to inspire me to do that kind of thing. And I think that that stuff comes from a mom.... I mean I’m going to make damn sure that I’m a good mom and a good grandma. And I think I love the female influence in my life.

Theme Cluster 6: Need for Connection

The participants described a longing to have someone care for them and offer them the emotional support that they feel has been missing from their lives since their mothers have died. They discussed the close bonds that they formed with their friends and how they searched for strong emotional connections within their friendships and relationships to fill in the void. Within this theme cluster, the following two themes

emerged from the participants' descriptions: Longing to be Cared For, and Intense Friendships.

Longing to Be Cared For

Some of the participants expressed a yearning to feel cared for, supported and loved. One woman in particular, Joleen, described how she recognized her strong desire to be cared for following her mother's death: "I think I was pretty easily persuaded. If somebody puts effort into hanging out with me or something I care for them quickly and I think it's because I was searching to be cared for." She further detailed how she found sources of caring in other areas of her life, such as team sports, and described her appreciation of this support:

And teams... it was a whole other support system. My coaches cared... that I was healthy so that I could play but they also cared about me as a person. When I was upset they would know because you go everyday so they sense any differences in you. And coaches are older, like I definitely longed for older people... And then there's all the girls on my team, all their parents cause they come to the games and they know how I'm doing. I think that adults and parents of full families... they care, just because you're not their child doesn't mean they don't care about you. There were definitely a lot of people who didn't necessarily say anything to me but I know that they were concerned or I guess wanted to make sure I was ok. If there was anything that they could do I know they would want to.

While some of the participants were fortunate to find positive relationships and groups that offered them the care they were yearning for, others had a more difficult time

finding healthy sources of support. Paige described how her need for love and caring following the loss of her mother resulted in unhealthy relationships that caused her to feel even more alone: “I was very drawn to dysfunctional relationships. I was very drawn to just all I wanted was someone’s love almost and very, very insecure because I guess I’d felt like I’d done something wrong so then I needed to have people show me their love and I didn’t really feel like I was getting that so it made me push everybody away.”

Intense Friendships

Some of the participants reported that they developed intense friendships characterized by an extraordinarily close emotional bond to try and fill in the void from losing their mothers. As Rebecca described, she has looked to her close friends and their families for the strong emotional connection and caring she feels she lost when her mother died: “One thing I would have to say is that because of her death I attach myself to other people and have tried to sort of replace the void she left with other people. So, I guess it’s like me and my friend, we were really good friends before but I’ve definitely spent all my time at her house.” As she spoke she realized how much the loss of her mother has impacted her need for caring and what the connection that she found through her “two best friends” and their families has meant to her:

Maybe I feel a need to be closer to their families or be part of their lives because I don’t have as much in my life after she died. Yeah, I definitely think that at the time it just seemed normal that I would be close to these people but now that I look back at it I was probably quite needy. I really, really needed that emotional support so it was like a magnet, like I had to have people really, really close to me... So I think I definitely had the need to cling on to people and just have that

emotional connection right away.... Whereas if I had her around I wouldn't need that as much; I'd have my own family. So I've sort of clung to both their families as some sort of therapy to fill in what she took away from me.

For Joleen, her close friendships provided her with a support structure that she felt was lacking at home since her mother had died. She described her friendships as "deeper" than most high school friendships and she articulated the significance of these friendships on her identity development. She explained,

I think because I didn't have a support structure at home I think I fed off friendships more than what normal people would because... I'd say most people develop their identity in their home, whereas since I didn't have that support structure at home I took it off of the intense friendships that I had, which most people don't have.... I think I spent more time with friends than normal people would. Just trying to draw out of them more, like draw their care and their ideas, and their beliefs, and stuff like that because I didn't really have that at home.

Theme Cluster 7: Mother as Part of Myself

The participants described how their mothers continue to be an influence, either consciously or unconsciously, in their lives and in their identity development. Some of the participants discussed how the memories of their mothers influence their decisions and the person that they are becoming. Many of the participants also described how they were developing in similar ways to their mother. Some of the participants discussed how they have been influenced by their mother's family, either through finding connection and belonging with them or by feeling that their sense of identity with their mother's family has been disconnected. Within this theme cluster, the following three themes

emerged from the participants' descriptions: Mother Continues to Influence Identity Development, Becoming Like my Mother, and Connection with Mother's Family.

Mother Continues to Influence Identity Development

Many of the participants described how their mother continues to be an influence in their lives and in their identity development. Some of the participants highlighted the influence that their mother still carries since much of their development, up to the time she had died was dependent, on their mother, their primary caregiver. As Rebecca stated, "When you're a kid it's like this is the way that life is and those things don't leave you just because that person is not there anymore." Rebecca reported that her mother was the centre of the family and she described how her mother directed her development toward the person that she is today:

I just feel lucky that I had her up to the point that I did because I was still 15 so I was obviously really young but I feel like I did shape a lot of my identity by the time she had died. So I'm thankful for that because she definitely made me the person that I am because we were really, really close.... When you're a kid that's all you know, she was the only person who was there so I learned everything I know about life from her, everything about personality, everything about behaviour that's normal, like that's where I learned it from. So that would affect me everyday. That's who I am.

As did Rebecca, Meghan also described how her development continues to be influenced by the person that her mother was in her life:

She has the same influence now as if she was still alive. That hasn't changed.

And maybe it's the event of her death that's carrying the influence but partly it's

just her as a person. Like, I knew her way longer as my mom than as my sick mom and her death. So I guess her as the person before she was sick is the person that has a big influence on me.

Similarly, some of the participants specifically explained how their ongoing memories of their mothers influence how they intend to develop as mothers themselves.

As Paige stated,

I think I'll be okay and I'll use the memories of my mom and how she lives on in me to help me be a helpful person to people and wise and loving and nourishing and a good mom and a good grandma. I hope for all of that.... I guess in some ways... I look at the good things that she did and I want to take it with me and then I think of the things that maybe she wasn't strong enough to deal with and then I think how could I deal with them in the future.... Maybe it will help me be a better mother, where she might not be here but she is.

Paige further described how her memories of her mother inspire her to think about the type of mother she would like to become:

She was a really cool mom in many ways.... Even stuff like taking me out of school to go to the beach, I hope to do that with my kids too. I loved that. And I had the biggest sleepovers with, you know, 15 girls stay over and she'd make us goodie bags and be yelling at us all night to go to bed but it was just really cool. I hope that I can do a lot of those fun little things that you kind of neglect and forget about and obviously being young and losing her those are the things I remembered.

Similar to Paige, Joleen described how she remembers the things her mother did for her and how she hopes to be a similar mother to her own children:

I think back to things that she did for me when I was a kid or just who she was in the family, like consistent, and you know who I want to become; what kind of mom I'd want to be. Things like she came to our elementary school and picked us up for lunch to come home for lunch and I want to be able to do things like that and just be around.

Becoming Like My Mother

Many of the participants described how they were becoming similar to their mothers in many ways and although they have an independent identity, they could recognize their mothers as a piece of themselves. Kit stated, "I think I'm a lot like my mom. Just high energy and that's what she was. I know I have a lot of that. I just sometimes say things that remind myself of her or feel like I'm her at times." Similarly, Rebecca emphasized the strong similarities between her mother and herself: "She was very shy and sensitive...and very moody and I feel like I'm very, very similar to her. Probably almost the same person...I've definitely inherited a lot of her mannerisms and just the way she is. So that definitely affects me still."

Of the six participants, Paige most strongly reported that she feels as if her mother lives on in her. She explained how she identifies closely with her mother and how she is unconsciously becoming like her mother in many ways:

I always feel like she's in me, she's living through me.... I can't really even put it to words but I have people that don't even know that I exist and have seen me in my pub job and have asked me did you have a mom named ... and they've never

met me and it's just because I look that much like her and act that much like her. And she was a waitress too and a bartender and so am I.... So it's nice, it's like how does it influence me, it's almost like I have unconsciously become her without even knowing who she was at that time cause I was so young that... I never would have known what my mom was like. So it's kind of funny that without even having her here to influence me I am like her.... All of a sudden things fly out of my mouth that I wonder how did I even know that, when did I get taught that, or why would I think like that where there's no reference that I could relate to. Even stuff to do with morals or things that you believe in...and you think nobody ever taught me that so where is that coming from and then I think I guess maybe from somewhere else. I always think maybe she's talking, I'm just sitting there relaxing on a couch or something.

Connection with Mother's Family

Some of the women described the influence that their mother's family has had on their identity development in their mother's absence. Two of the participants in particular, Joleen and Paige, identified a feeling of connection and belonging that they discovered in their mother's side of the family. Joleen described how her experience of meeting her mother's family validated her sense of self:

I am like my dad in some ways but I'm not in many others and because I never really got to know my mom I don't know if I was like her or not. And I remember going to a wedding one time on my mom's side... and I remember sitting there and thinking I fit in with these people. So it was still when I was in high school I think and I just [remember] feeling this huge relief, like <sighs> I

do belong. And it was such an extraordinary feeling.... So I think I've had to find that. I've found myself because it wasn't laid out for me and because of my mom's death, like I found it because of the death and that's made me that much more sure that that's who I am.

Paige also described the positive impact of meeting her mother's family. Two years after her mother died, she had an exceptionally unique experience meeting a half sister on her mother's side who had she didn't know existed since she had been given up for adoption as a baby. Here Paige describes her experience of meeting her sister and what that maternal familial connection means to her:

So through a lot of trippy coincidences [my sister] tracked us down and ever since that day in '98, my mom passed away in '96, I have a sister and a brother-in-law and a little niece and she's had a baby since then so I have a little nephew. So it's really lucky for me because through my traumatic experience of something that could have been many different outcomes I have four blessings... and I know that [my sister] is everything that my mom would have wanted her to have been. And we always feel because too many crazy coincidences happened for us to have come together the way that it happened and we always think my mom, she's looking down and she had that control where she thought I'm going to make this happen. And it did so it's kind of helped me ever since that day where I don't think sad about my mom's death.... And with my sister, she is just my everyday therapy. I look at... her and she looks like my mom, she sounds like my mom, she acts like my mom and you just think, wow, what cool trail of events has happened that here I have my sister who didn't exist as I was growing up.

In contrast to the other two participants, Rebecca has been unable to experience a sense of connection or belonging with her mother's side of the family. She described how in losing her mother she has also lost her mother's extended family and she explained how this has impacted her identity and left her with a feeling of incompleteness:

After she died the ties were sort of cut [with my mom's family]. So another thing that I realized is that I really don't have a feeling of a bigger family. And I really feel envious when I see my friends who have this amazing extended family, like they have their grandparents and aunts and stuff. I don't have that feeling at all.... I do have my dad's family but I wouldn't say that I am personally close to them.... That's another thing that has sort of affected me, another thing that makes me feel hollow in comparison with other people is that I don't really have my mom's side of the family. So I feel like my identity has been cut in half because I only have my dad and I only have his family now. And it's also sort of a cultural thing because my mom was Danish so all of her relatives are Danish and then so that's sort of the white side of me and then my dad is Chinese so his whole family is Chinese, Chinese speaking. And it's weird because I definitely embrace the white side of me more than the Chinese side but family wise it's sort of like a mystery to me now because I don't know as much about my background. So I definitely feel like I am missing something. Missing the history of my mom's family, I don't know anything about it really and also since I'm not close to them I do feel like I am missing half of myself because that's all my relatives, right. And she had a really, really large family with step-brothers and half-

brothers and stuff and it's sort of a blur to me now, like who's my real family because I just don't know them and that makes me really sad.

Metatheme 3 - Redefinition of Self and Integration of Loss into Emergent Identity

Theme Cluster 8: Redefinition of Personal Spirituality

Some of the participants reported that the loss of their mothers inspired a movement towards exploring their personal spirituality or religion. Some of these young women described how they embraced their faith as a source of comfort and meaning for their loss. In contrast, others described reevaluating the meaning or purpose of their faith in order to make sense of their loss and its impact on their sense of self. Within this theme cluster, the following two themes emerged from the participants' descriptions: Embracing Personal Spirituality, and Questioning or Reformulating Personal Spirituality.

Embracing Personal Spirituality

Two of the participants, Joleen and Paige, described looking to faith for comfort and to help them understand the meaning of their experience of losing their mother. Joleen recalled, "my family went to church a little bit when we were younger and then stopped going when we were getting older and playing soccer or whatever and got busy and then in the last year of my mom's life she started going again and getting really involved." Joleen stated that a couple of years following the loss of her mother, she "came to faith" as her mother had and she described the comfort and strength that her faith gives her: "I have a more solid base now through my faith... and that is like a rock. And it's like, yeah things are going to happen and things are going to be bad and stuff but I still have a solid base that I believe to be true and I have that faith that it's going to be ok."

For Paige, it was her belief “that there is something after and that maybe there are people taking care of us and watching over us” that helped her to get through the tough times. She recalled, “I always felt like when the worse things in my life happened it was like I all of a sudden had faith in God or dead relatives and next thing you know it was like I was filled with energy and answers and clarity.” Similar to Joleen, Paige has embraced her faith following the death of her mother and she described how it inspired her and has given her the strength to persevere in a positive direction:

A lot of people look to faith above, like a lot of people use God and religion to help them through tough times and that’s what I’ve done. And I’m not even really a really religious person but I am enough. I’ve never read the bible, I don’t go to church on a regular basis, I don’t go to midnight mass at Christmas time but I’m very faithful in up above. And I just think that a lot of times you need to have that faith in something or someone to get yourself through it.... It will make you not fear anything and it will make you have the strength to go on to have another day and another day as opposed to people who are so negative about life.... So it’s one of those things that I think having faith gets you through a lot of tragedy. You have to know that there is someone that is going to take care of you and that you are being helped because it does make it worth it then.

Questioning or Reformulating Personal Spirituality

Two of the participants, Eve and Kit, described how their experience of losing their mothers led them to question their faith and look beyond their religion to find the meaning of their experience. Eve reported that she made the choice to get baptized as a Christian when she was a teenager. She described herself as a person who has always

contemplated death and what happens after a person dies, however the early loss of her mother caused her to question her religious faith and the purpose of that faith with even greater scrutiny:

I've read the bible and know pretty much what's going on there and I know about other religions too. I don't know why people always turn to God. It's almost you have to find something to give you peace. And why can't people just live dangerously through their lives.... Why do you have to believe what you believe when you get older. You just have this fundamental belief system and you don't question it and you don't do anything about it. It makes you safe, it makes you secure, it makes you feel loved, you're going to stick with it, right, but that might not be the truth. Even if the truth is ugly.

Following the death of her mother, Eve realized that she was unable to find comfort or answers in her religious beliefs. She stated, "I don't even care if there's a God or not I just can not comprehend how this living human being with all, you know it's so complicated and they can just disappear like that."

Similarly, Kit reported that her mother's death led her to examine her religious beliefs. She stated that she "felt angry at God" after her mother died since her sister and father no longer had anyone to "fend for them". She further described how the loss of her mother influenced her to explore her personal spirituality and look beyond her religion in order to make sense of her experience and her self:

I was raised really religious and I'm not so much anymore, which is ok because I've really looked into stuff and obviously had to look through a lot of who I am.... I used to say that I was Christian. I don't anymore but I do know that I

have some spiritual insight in me. I've studied a lot of religion and all different ones just to try to get a broader perspective of what's going on in the world and what people are thinking and what I'm feeling.

Theme Cluster 9: Development of New Wisdom and Perspective

The participants discussed the wisdom and perspective they have gained about life and death, their selves, and how their loss experience fits within a broader context of their own lives and the world. Some of the participants described how their experience of loss led them to develop an increased appreciation and passion for life. Some of the participants also described how they feel that their experience of losing their mothers at a young age helps them to be supportive to other people who are experiencing loss and pain. Within this theme cluster, the following three themes emerged from the participants' descriptions: Gratitude and Appreciation, Worldly Perspective, and Ability to Help Others with Loss and Pain.

Gratitude and Appreciation

Some of the participants expressed that their experience of losing their mother at a young age impelled them toward a deeper sense of gratitude for what they have and a fuller appreciation for life. Similar to Meghan, these participants described feeling greater appreciation for their family and friends as well as the beauty of everyday life. As Meghan expressed,

I definitely feel more of an appreciation for the relationships I do still have and that are still here. It definitely makes me appreciate other things a lot more and kind of in the moment things.... And when good things happen, it's definitely a much more appreciation for it. Like for beautiful days and a chance to go for a

walk on the beach with a good friend and have a good conversation. Things like that are so much more appreciated and that kind of moment thing.

Meghan described how the loss of her mother helped her to “see things in a bigger light” and changed the way she “views things and sees things and feels things”. She acknowledged that this appreciation for life would likely have developed as she continued to grow as a person but she believes the death of her mother influenced her to develop it at a younger age: “I mean I would hope that if that hadn’t happened I would have gotten to that point eventually anyway but it could have been when I was 30 or 40 or whatever before I would realize that and have that appreciation and instead I got it a lot sooner and in a different way.”

Similarly, Paige expressed how the loss of her mother has made her a more appreciative person. She stated, “I just think that it has made me a very nourishing, loving person because of what I’ve been through and it just makes me value so much more than what people neglect and forget about.” Paige also specifically acknowledged how her experience of losing her mother influenced the way that she values her family:

I think that now it does make me really appreciate my dad and my grandparents.... It made me really, really value my family and some of my family members are my best friends.... So it’s really nice having these people that I’ve really made very important to me.... It really makes you realize you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone. And I think that it always does kick me in the ass; I always think about that, you never know what you’ve lost until it’s gone.

Worldly Perspective

A number of the participants described a new wisdom and perspective they have gained about life and death and how their loss experience has inspired them to fully embrace life. Some of these participants articulated how they have learned to perceive the loss of their mother in a broader context, which helps them to accept the loss and feel grateful for the time that they had with their mother. As Kit stated, "I just look at all those orphans. I just try to take myself and put myself in other people's perspectives, other people's lives. I know that I am grateful for the amount of time I had... if that's how long she was meant to be here then I'm very grateful that I got to have 16 years with her." Rebecca noted that some women have poor relationships with their mothers and she believes that seeing these types of relationships makes her feel even more appreciative for the time she had with her mother:

I feel that I was so lucky to have such a wonderful person in my life and to have her for 15 years. I don't know, my friend and her mom are always fighting and I don't think they really like each other all that much and I sort of see that and I think well I'm glad that I at least had this person who made me the person I am, this sensitive person, like really loving person. And I'm still glad I had her for the time that I did.

Two participants in particular, Kit and Paige, articulated the learning and wisdom that they have gained about death and how their experience of their mother's death has inspired them to embrace all that life has to offer. Kit stated,

But now over the years and thinking about it I know that people die every day, every minute and it's a matter of choice how you are going to respond to it....

Everyone is born and everyone dies. It's just our culture has become accustomed to life rather than death I find... Death is a huge part of my life, something that I have experienced immensely. So much loss but that's just the other side of life. People die and my perspective has enabled me to see with another set of glasses to look at the glass half full. To see challenges and difficulties as a chance to fight through.... People get so caught up in work or school and they become like robots and forget to smile, forget to enjoy simple things in life. If there is anything I learned from a lot of pain in my life is that I just like living. I like to experience everything I can.

Similarly, Paige expressed how the death of her mother taught her that people have a choice how to respond to loss and that death can be seen as a reminder to live life fully:

I just think that it's important for people to just face it and to take it as a way of living your life to the fullest and knowing that nobody's invincible.... You definitely need to take the experience and put it in a direction, anything you want.... It's a choice.... You can choose to do what you always wanted to do or you can choose to say you can't. And that's where the confidence comes in; to know that you are better than that and you deserve better than that. And this isn't your demise and you weren't the one who died. And I think that's easier said than done and I'm twenty-five and when I was sixteen I wasn't saying these things to myself.

Similar to the other participants, Eve stated that her experience of her mother's death inspired her to always have a "passion for life" despite the struggles and difficulties

she may face. She expressed how the early loss of her mother reminded her of the importance of “never wasting a day” and “living every day to the fullest.”

Ability to Help Others with Loss and Pain

Some of the participants described how the wisdom they developed from losing their own mothers enables them to be helpful and supportive to other people who are experiencing loss and pain. Joleen stated that the loss of her mother has allowed her to reach people who may otherwise not open up to her:

I feel like even talking to you about it, all these things that have happened because of [my loss], like this is who I am and this is who I was meant to be, these are the people I can reach and talk to.... In relationships I'm a little bit more aware of how other people are doing or what's going on. I think that maybe the loss has helped them. It has created an opportunity where it's almost like if one person is vulnerable the other person can be vulnerable. So if I've shared something with them then they're more open to sharing with me.

These participants also specifically described how they can identify with other people who have experienced a close death and how they can be helpful to them. As Joleen expressed, there is an “underlying understanding” between people who have experienced a significant death that is different from other losses.

Paige stated that she is able to help a lot of her friends through cancers and death of family members since she has lived through those experiences with her mother. She specifically recalled how her experience of her mother's death helped her step-mother to deal with the loss of her own mother:

I think me going through it helped my step-mom when she lost her mom because she couldn't imagine going through it at my age so it almost gave her inspiration to get through it and she was 42. And here she looked at me like, she sure knows how I feel and Christ she was 16. So I am very helpful with people.

Kit described how she became involved with an organization that provided counselling to grieving children and teens following the loss of her mother. She worked with the teen and the children groups and helped to start new groups for grieving teenagers across her province. Kit noted the mutual benefit of working with other people who have experienced the death of a loved one and she described how this process was helpful to her: "It was really good. Really healthy I think. It got me through a lot of different stuff knowing that other people were there who had similar experiences.... There are a lot of people out there who are hurting too."

Theme Cluster 10: Personal Attributes That Emerged From Loss Experience

The participants described specific personal attributes that they perceive as having developed from their experience of losing their mother at a young age. The participants discussed how the loss has changed them and described their personal qualities that have emerged or strengthened as they continue to grow into adulthood without their mother. Some of these attributes emerged more prominently than others in the participants' descriptions, but all will be discussed. Within this theme cluster, the following six themes emerged from the participants' descriptions: Independence, Maturity, Strength and Confidence, Emotional Expressiveness and Openness, Acceptance, and Empathy.

Independence

Some of the participants identified independence as a characteristic that they developed due to the loss of their mother. Like Rebecca and Kit, these women described how they learned to be independent following the loss of their mothers, since they had to depend more on themselves to meet their own needs and the needs of their families. As Rebecca expressed:

I feel like I'm very, very independent. Which is a huge difference because my dad he takes care of me but he still leaves a lot to me, whereas when my mom was around she just did everything for me. So that would make a big difference in how I view myself. I've had to be more independent than most people my age. So I think that's made a big, big difference.

Kit described how she faced new responsibilities within her family after the loss of her mother and she believes this impacted her development as an independent person: "I think I've become more independent than I maybe would have been just because I took over and started cooking and cleaning and fulfilled the mother role when I was 16 or 17 for my sister and my dad." Kit describes herself as an independent person, however she recognizes that being independent still means that she needs other people. She explained, "I used to think oh yeah, I'm independent. I am in many ways, I go off and do my own thing and I'm not afraid to do it. But there's always that aspect you know people need people and people are always helping."

Maturity

A number of the participants identified maturity as a personal attribute that emerged from their loss experience. Two of the women in particular, Rebecca and

Joleen, noted that their growth in maturity was related to the demand that they become more independent at a young age and assume increasing responsibility within their families following the loss of their mothers. As Rebecca stated, “I guess I perceive myself as being a lot more mature than other people; a lot more independent. Sometimes I feel like I am thirty years old.”

Joleen stated that other people perceive her as mature for her age: “Another thing that people have said to me a lot was that I was mature.” Similar to Rebecca, Joleen was required to take on more adult responsibilities in caring for her younger siblings following the loss of her mother and she believes that these experiences influenced her to mature into an adult at a young age:

I think when I was 15, 16, 17, I was way mature for my age and I think it concerned the other adults around me because they were like, you need to be able to go out on Friday nights and not worry about how your sisters are. And that’s not something I could do because I hung out with friends but I never really let loose because I was concerned about how they were doing. So...I’m only 20 but I feel like I moved into adulthood a little while ago.

For some of the women it was the demands of dealing with the emotional and psychological impact of the untimely death of their mother that has forced them to grow up quickly. Paige acknowledged that other people perceive her as more mature than most people her age and she believes that her maturity has come at the unfortunate price of experiencing a great deal of loss and pain in her life, most especially the loss of her mother:

Many people talking to me don't think I'm the mentality of a 25 year-old but then I think but I haven't been through what a typical 25 year-old's life should have gone through. Like I shouldn't be where I am; I wish I wasn't so Goddamn life matured. I've had more death and sadness and sickness than people that I know who are my friends' parents.

Strength and Confidence

The personal attributes of strength and confidence will be discussed together since they were closely related in the participants' descriptions. One participant in particular, Paige, specifically identified strength as a personality trait that was shaped by the experience of her mother's death: "It has obviously made me a strong person which everybody says what don't kill you makes you stronger." Some of the participants, such as Paige and Rebecca, also described a personal confidence that they developed from knowing the strength they possess to have survived and positively emerged from their profound loss. As Rebecca stated,

I definitely think of myself as being more competent because it's happened already, I've seen that I can do all this stuff. Like I made it to university and managed to get through it.... I've seen what I can do and so I'm pretty confident in myself... maybe even more so because I've had to deal with so many hard things at such a young age that I'm definitely more secure in my ability to deal with future things.

Emotional Expressiveness and Openness

Some of the participants described how the experience of losing their mother influenced them to become more emotionally expressive and open. Similar to Meghan,

these participants described how the death of their mothers helped them to become aware of the preciousness of life and moved them to express their feelings and emotions in the moment. Meghan explained,

You don't wait until special occasions to tell somebody that you love them or that you appreciate what they're doing or what they mean to you. It happens all the time. Which is good because I have a lot of friends that are like that; we're very open. And with family too, it's always talking to them all the time, phone calls constantly, visiting, always saying like, ok talk to you later, bye, I love you, take care. It's definitely made me more open; before I was not an emotional person at all.

Acceptance

Some of the participants expressed a sense of acceptance for their loss and the changes that have come in their lives following the death of their mothers. Statements, such as "I've come to accept it", or "you have to accept it", were made by several of the participants in relation to their loss.

One participant in particular, Kit, identified acceptance as a personal attribute that she believes was engendered by her experience of losing her mother. She stated,

I'd have to say I'm a bit of a free spirit. Like even just I'm not really worried about anything... Generally I just let things be. I think probably my mom's death has impacted that feeling and made me more accepting of whatever... I know there's times where you get afraid but I'm totally fine with whatever the world has to offer. If I get hurt it's ok, I just pick up and go. And if you can't pick up and go, you just learn to adapt to whatever has happened.

Empathy

Many of the participants reported that their experience of losing their mother influenced them to develop greater empathy towards other people. The participants described it as being more attuned and sensitive to other people's feelings, having more compassion for people, and being more accepting of others.

Kit reflected on how her empathy and sensitivity towards people was shaped by the loss of her mother: "I've just become very aware of a lot of things; a lot of feelings that people have whether or not they express them. I just pick up on a lot of things and I've become more sensitive to people's pain and people's losses in their lives too, whether big or small, whether it's been death related [or not]." Similarly, Joleen explained how her experience of her mother's death influenced her to become more attuned to people's feelings:

So, I'm kind of, I don't think in a condescending way at all, but you know checking out to make sure how people are doing. I have quite a few friends who it's like I want to know how they're doing before they find out how I'm doing... I definitely think that was because of my mom's death. I was just a lot more in touch with other people and how they are feeling. Because when something emotional happens to you it affects all the parts of your life. And so I was just aware of what else is going on in other people's lives.

For some of the participants, such as Eve and Paige, the experience of loss led them to feel greater compassion and acceptance towards others. As Paige stated, "I am extremely open-minded because I think from having so much sadness and loss in my life I'm very appreciative of all sorts of people and what they have to offer." Similarly, Eve

described how the pain and struggles that she experienced from her mother's death have helped her to empathize with other people:

I have more compassion. No, I have compassion. I didn't really have compassion before, really. I was really this cold person because everything came to me so easy. I just got everything like that. You know it was too easy. It was like I did not understand why other people could not comprehend things. I think now I understand.... Actually I think that made me feel more, like I can react more to people's emotions I guess... I think I have learned to have compassion for people. That's really important.

Theme Cluster 11: Death Becomes a Real Part of Life

The participants discussed how living with the loss of their mother has become a part of their daily lives and an aspect of their selves. They described how the loss is always a part of them whether they are consciously aware of it or not and how, over time, living with the loss of their mother has become their normal way of life. The participants also discussed how the loss has impacted their awareness of mortality and death and how it has made death a very real part of their lives that can happen at any time. Within this theme cluster, the following two themes emerged from the participants' descriptions:

Living with Loss of Mother is Part of Daily Life, and Increased Awareness of Mortality.

Living with Motherloss

Many of the participants reported that living with the loss of their mother has become a part of their daily life. Rebecca described how she has become accustomed to living life without her mother although her sense of loss is still present: "It was weird because when we came back from the hospital, the house just felt really empty when she

wasn't there and I guess it still does feel empty but it's just you get used to it. You can't do anything about it so you just get used to her not being there anymore."

These participants also acknowledged that the loss is an ever-present aspect of their selves that they live with everyday whether they are consciously aware of it or not. Kit stated, "It's something that I'll always feel but it's not paralyzing. It's just a sad little spot in your heart." Rebecca closely mirrored Kit's sentiment: "It's not this constant thing that I'm always thinking about. It's just this little ache in your heart but you're not really conscious of it." Similarly, Meghan said, "I think it's always in the back of my mind somewhere but it's not always conscious." Meghan further highlighted how living with the loss of her mother means experiencing "good days" when she understands and accepts the loss and "bad days" when her awareness of her mother's absence is more heightened. Here she describes a bad day: "I guess a bad day is, it's random and it just kind of happens and just days when you feel it a bit more and maybe it's a little bit more real that she isn't around and I can't pick up the phone."

As these participants described, it is an acceptance of the loss over time that has allowed them to integrate it into their sense of self. Rebecca explained,

And the more time that goes by it's just like, yeah that did happen 2 years ago, 3 years ago, and then I'm a person who is living without my mother. It's not I'm living a normal life but my mother died but I'm trying to forget it. It's like you accept it now.... It's with me all the time now. So yeah, my biggest feeling of acceptance would be moving from the stage of suppression to the stage of acknowledgment. That would be the biggest thing, just to stop pretending that it

didn't happen into accepting that it did happen but not thinking about it all the time but knowing that it did happen.

Increased Awareness of Mortality

A number of the participants reported that the loss of their mother has heightened their awareness of the transitory nature of life and the reality of death. Many of the participants, such as Paige, described how their mother's death created a heightened fear of losing loved ones:

Everyday I cross my fingers that someone else isn't going to die on me.... I always worry about being left behind.... I think the feeling of being left behind to deal with people dying on me is one of my biggest fears in life. It's not even death I'm scared of, it's living. It's weird. So I always think I'll live just fine if you all just stay here.... And I think that sometimes I think don't be dishing me anymore here, it's hard enough to deal with the crap that you already have to deal with that I think that if I was to have to deal with another death it would have a huge influence on how I deal with not having my mom and kind of going through that.

Eve described how her experience of her mother's death has caused her to feel scared about becoming close to people, since she fears losing them: "It's a fear of losing. You know once you accept someone, emotions get involved and you never know what could happen to them next."

More than any of the other participants, Eve also expressed how the loss of her mother has created an increased fear of her own death. She stated that she has a heightened awareness of the suddenness of death and she fears that she could die in an

accident “at any moment.” Eve also described how this fear has affected her sleep: “I think after my mother passed away, I don’t have trouble sleeping but I have trouble sometimes falling asleep because it’s scary to me that I might not wake up the next morning. And obviously there’s no reason when you think about it, right, it’s like why would you not wake up.” Eve recognized that her fear was illogical but it was real nonetheless.

Theme Cluster 12: Resources

The women described resources that have helped them to manage without their mother and process their experience as they grow into adulthood and continue to develop their identity. The resources that the women spoke of provided comfort and direction and strength and healing. Within this theme cluster, the following three themes emerged from the participants’ descriptions: Importance of Supportive People, Finding a Positive Outlet, and Faith in Eternal Connection to Mother.

Importance of Supportive People

All of the participants highlighted the importance of having someone in their life that they could rely on for support and care and to be there for them when needed. Each of these participants identified friends, family members, colleagues, counsellors, or other adults who have been significant in helping them process their loss experience and grow into adulthood without their mothers. Like other participants, Rebecca emphasized how much her friends have helped her and what this support has meant to her: “My dad is a great support system but you need friends. I think it’s really, really important to have friends your own age. Someone who you feel comfortable talking about everything with and who can be there for you. Even if they don’t understand , just to be there for you to

talk to and just to hug you and if they hadn't been there for me I would be a different person.”

Similarly, Paige identified the significance of having both a supportive family and friends in her life:

I have a great family now and of course when I was younger I thought it might have been tough but as everything has turned down, as everyone has grown and stuff we definitely have a very good family around us, so that's really important. And friends obviously are huge. I feel sorry for anyone that would have to go through that and not have those good friends to be able to rely on. Because I was very lucky, very, very good friends.

Kit expressed that she is fortunate to have “really good people” in her life and she believes that this will help her to manage throughout her life without her mother. She stated, “I've got enough supportive people in my life that I've grown accustomed to having around and not really around but there if I need them or just there.” Kit also specifically described how she benefited from the help and support of a counsellor whom she met with following the loss of her mother and who continues to be a friend to her today.

In discussing the significance of supportive people, and counsellors in particular, it is important to report that two participants, Meghan and Paige, expressed that they had unsatisfactory experiences with mental health practitioners following the loss of their mothers. Meghan stated,

At one point I thought that I should go and talk to somebody because that's what it seemed like you were supposed to do. And so I went but it just didn't work out.

It was really ridiculous. And I think, not that I don't think that that's very important for some people and I totally support it and I don't know, like maybe I will eventually even go and do that. I just... the therapist and me just butted heads and maybe I just wasn't ready for that.

Similarly, Paige described how she did not feel supported or listened to by the psychiatrists or psychologists whom she went to see after her mother's death:

The only thing I could thank a psychologist for is knowing that I could not depend on anyone but myself. That is the only thing I could thank them for because I left there thinking oh my god what a waste of time that was. And she gave me medication and I took it for a day and it made my brain stop. And I felt like a mental patient.... I couldn't believe it, I was like "oh don't sit here and talk to me about it, just shove me medication that stops my mind from thinking. And all it did was make me realize that you do need the strength to get through it and people need to find the strength somewhere.

Finding a Positive Outlet

All of the participants described a type of positive outlet that has helped them to cope and to manage without their mothers. They identified the value of these positive outlets, ranging from tree planting to reading, as helping them to process their loss experience and providing them with an alternative focus. The following examples describe the positive outlets that each participant identified for herself.

A number of the participants, such as Meghan, Eve, and Kit, highlighted the benefits of writing in helping them to process their loss experience. Eve stated that she has kept a "diary" for a long time, which has helped her to see how she has "grown".

Similarly, Kit described how she found writing beneficial following the loss of her mother, in particular writing songs: “It was probably about 2 years that I really wrote a lot. I wrote and wrote and wrote. I wrote songs and I just wrote whatever. I played the guitar and just went all out. I probably wrote about 200 songs.... I think that helped a lot too.”

Kit also described the importance of tree planting in her life and in her healing process following her mother’s death:

I went tree planting the next year. And if you’ve heard about tree planting you know it’s hard. Basically it’s more of a mental thing than a physical thing. It’s for sure physical but it’s really difficult at times and it was the best thing I could have done and just kind of forced myself to be out there and to work really hard and to work through whatever I was feeling.... You get everything out. You’re out there by yourself and you can scream, cry, sing. Tree planting is a big thing for me. It’s been a healing, healthy thing.

For Paige, traveling and reading books have been positive outlets in helping her cope and manage without her mother. She stated that her mother loved to travel and that she would have been proud to know that Paige was traveling. Paige believes that traveling helped her to focus on her own life and her own happiness: “Traveling helped me just think of me for a little bit...I don’t think I ever thought of my happiness.... So then when you go traveling it is all about you. Everything is about what you make of it.” Paige also explained how self-help books have helped her to feel a sense of control in her life in the face of her loss experience:

Reading also did help me.... Self-help books. Anything that makes you think that you do have control. I think that's a way for a person to try to deal with it without letting people know because I think a lot of people are ashamed of what they're going through when they go through it or they're embarrassed or they're scared.... So I think reading is huge because it gives the person that control when they want to continue reading, when they want to pick up the book. No one has to know about it. No one has to know your thoughts.

Two of the participants noted how being involved in physical or creative activities that they enjoy has helped them following the loss of their mothers. Eve highlighted the importance of music in her life and the pleasure that she finds in practicing and pursuing her goals in music. Joleen stated that she has put a great deal of her "time and thoughts and efforts into sports" and she believes that sports have been a positive outlet in helping her to manage with the loss of her mother.

Rebecca had a difficult time determining which resources she has used over the years to manage without her mother, since she believes that her main coping mechanism has been suppression. Unlike some of the other participants, she noted that she is not interested in expressing herself in a written or artistic form, however she did identify talking as being helpful in coping with the loss of her mother. She stated, "Talking I guess; just talking about it. I didn't talk about it that much though but just every time I talk about it it feels a little bit better. That's definitely a way to cope."

Faith in Eternal Connection to Mother

Many of the participants expressed that they find comfort in the belief that their mother continues to be present in their lives in some way. Paige described ways that she has found to maintain a feeling of continued closeness with her mother:

My mom always, always loved sunshine... and would suntan all the time so I would go to these warm, hot countries and it was like I felt her. And I would watch the sun and it was like I just always felt a very calming feeling when I was in that situation.... I just felt like I had to have sunshine and she was more around.

Paige also stated that she talks to her mother “all the time” and she has often felt her mother’s energy come through her at those times, which she has found very comforting.

Rebecca explained how she finds it comforting to think that her mother is always looking out for her and caring about her:

I definitely feel like she’s watching me all the time. It’s comforting.... Just to sort of justify the unfairness of it all since I lost her, at least she’s watching over me to make sure nothing bad happens. That’s the way I think about it. And I just like to think that she’s still watching me and looking after me. And I dream about her a lot still.... I like to think she’s around. And then in the dreams I like to think that that was her that put herself in there so she could talk to me.

Similarly, Meghan described how she believes that her mother knows the person that she has become: “I guess thinking that she still knows, like I said before I feel cheated that what I’m doing and all these things I love to do developed after and she never knew about them, and kind of thinking that yeah she does know and she can see. I

guess that is comforting.... It's not her being present but it is.... It's not something tangible, it's just there.”

Summary

This chapter introduced the six participants and their unique and common experiences related to maternal loss and subsequent identity development. It attempted to present the richness of their experiences as collected during the process of this study. The meaning of maternal loss and its influence on the experience of identity development for these women is examined and discussed. The fourteen theme clusters that emerged through analysis of the data were presented using the words of each of the six participants to illuminate and describe the essence of the experience. The following chapter will discuss the significance and implications of these findings within the context of relevant literature, future research, and counselling practice.

TABLE 1

Experience of Maternal Loss: Summary of Theme Clusters and Themes

<p><i>1) Loss that is Impossible to Prepare For</i></p> <p>I. Lack of Awareness that Mother was Dying</p> <p>II. Unreal Nature of the Loss</p>	<p><i>2) Grief Responses / Reactions</i></p> <p>I. Emotional Responses</p> <p> Ia. Shock</p> <p> Ib. Guilt</p> <p> Ic. Depression</p> <p>II. Coping with the Pain of Loss</p>
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TABLE 2

Influence of Maternal Loss on Identity Development:
Summary of Metathemes, Theme Clusters, and Themes

Loss of Mother Impacts All Aspects of Identity	Seeking Guidance and Relatedness on the Path of Identity Development	Redefinition of Self and Integration of Loss into Emergent Identity
<p>1) <i>Self Before and After</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Two Lives II. Change in Familial Role and Responsibilities <p>2) <i>Change in Relationship With Father</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Distancing in Relationship with Father II. Becoming Closer to Father <p>3) <i>Perception of Self as Different</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Feeling Different II. Nobody can Understand III. Desire to be "Normal" <p>4) <i>Loss of Mother Throughout Life</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. A Missing Piece II. Did Not Have Chance to Develop Adult Relationship with Mother III. Sense of Being Cheated 	<p>5) <i>Seeking Maternal Influence of Older Women</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Maternal Figures II. Older Women as Role Models for Identity Development <p>6) <i>Need for Connection</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Longing to be Cared For II. Intense Friendships <p>7) <i>Mother as Part of Myself</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Mother Continues to Influence Identity Development II. Becoming Like My Mother III. Connection with Mother's Family 	<p>8) <i>Redefinition of Personal Spirituality</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Embracing Personal Spirituality II. Questioning or Reformulating Personal Spirituality <p>9) <i>Development of New Wisdom and Perspective</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Gratitude and Appreciation II. Worldly Perspective III. Ability to Help Others with Loss and Pain <p>10) <i>Personal Attributes that Emerged From Loss Experience</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Independence II. Maturity III. Strength and Confidence IV. Emotional Expressiveness and Openness V. Acceptance VI. Empathy <p>11) <i>Death Becomes a Real Part of Life</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Living with Motherloss II. Increased Awareness of Mortality <p>12) <i>Resources</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Importance of Supportive People II. Finding a Positive Outlet III. Faith in Eternal Connection to Mother

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Implications

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of the present study within the context of relevant literature, to address the limitations of the study, and to consider the implications for future research and for counselling practice. This chapter will be divided into two main sections. It will first present a discussion of each main theme in relation to the existing research and literature on maternal loss and identity development. The second section will consider the limitations of the study and explore possible directions for future research. The significance of this study for counselling theory and practice and the impact of the study on myself as a researcher and a counsellor will also be discussed.

The primary purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the meaning of maternal loss for young women and what it means to their experience of identity development in emerging adulthood. The study provided an exploration of the influence of maternal loss on identity development in young women while offering participants the opportunity to voice their stories and explore their unique experiences with the lived phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six young women and through their intimate sharing of the meaning and essence of their individual experiences, fourteen common themes emerged that describe the impact of maternal loss in the lives and personal development of these women. The findings from this study provide insight into young women's experience of maternal loss during adolescence and its influence on identity development in emerging adulthood.

Since the experiences, opinions, and insights presented in this study are based on the lived experiences of the six women interviewed for this study, readers should not assume that the findings are representative of all women who experienced maternal loss in adolescence. Nevertheless, it is possible to obtain a phenomenological essence of how the experience of maternal loss influenced the process of identity development for these young women, which may resonate for other women who have lived this phenomenon.

Findings Related to Previous Literature

The present study explored the experience of maternal loss for young women and the influence of this experience on their identity development. The results of this study indicate that maternal loss during adolescence does have a significant influence on the experience of identity development in these young women. Through semi-structured interviews, the six participants described how their experience of losing their mother during adolescence has had an impact on their identity and their experience of developing their identity. Across the participants, experiences can be grouped into the following three major overarching metathemes that describe the influence of maternal loss on these young women's experience of identity development: *Loss of Mother Impacts All Aspects of Identity*, *Seeking Guidance and Relatedness on the Path of Identity Development*, *Redefinition of Self and Integration of Loss into Emergent Identity*. These findings will be discussed in relation to relevant literature on the nature of adolescent parental bereavement, adolescent and young adult development, identity formation, and the role of parents in identity development.

Loss of Mother Impacts All Aspects of Identity

All the women in this study were clear that the death of their mother during their adolescence had profoundly influenced their identity in significant ways. Research on adolescent loss and bereavement has found that the impact of a significant death pervades most aspects of the bereaved adolescent's life, including his or her meaning system and self-identity, and inevitably leads to personal change (Angell, Dennis, & Dumain, 1998; Balk, 1991; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). Throughout their interviews, these young women described how their experience of maternal loss has had an impact on their sense of self over time, their sense of self in relation to their peers, and their relationships with their fathers.

A consistent theme across many of the participants' interviews was that the experience of losing their mothers had created a sense of having two lives or at least a palpable division between the self before and the self after the death. The women distinguished their two lives by their original sense of self as their mother's daughter who was taken care of, and subsequently an individual who was forced to take care of herself. For some of these participants, the loss of their mother required them to take on increased adult responsibilities in order to fulfill the mother role within the family and become largely responsible for raising themselves. Harris (1995) asserts that many people who have experienced the early death of a parent experience the loss as the day in which their world was eternally changed and they became a new and different person. Bereavement researchers and practitioners have further noted that the death of a mother frequently demands responsibilities to be redistributed to children, especially daughters, and that the

grief and changes within the family may force the daughter to independently take care of her own needs (Harris, 1995; Shapiro, 1994; Tyson-Rawson, 1996).

As described in the literature review, identity formation is a process that continues to evolve over time and involves the progressive consolidation of past, present, and future selves in to a stable and coherent identity (Erikson, 1968, 1997; Josselson, 1987). As Erikson (1963) states, identity consists of a sense of “inner sameness”, which is experienced as continuity between one’s prior experiences, one’s present self, and one’s plans for the anticipated future (p. 261). The finding that these participants experienced a distinct marker between their past and present selves may indicate that their mother’s death has impacted their sense of continuity of self over time. It further suggests that the women’s experience of maternal loss may have precipitated a feeling of sudden and advanced movement into adulthood, thus accelerating the normative gradual progression of identity development. This finding may be understood within the context of literature on bereaved women which emphasizes the struggle of women to bridge a connection between their past and their future following a significant loss (Angell et al., 1998; Silverman, 1981).

In considering their identity over time, the participants expressed feeling the absence of their mother throughout their future lives, especially at significant developmental milestones and times where a daughter typically relies on her mother. As mentioned in the literature review, adolescents and young adults have an ability to conceive how the loss of their mother will affect them as they continue to grow through adulthood and they often feel resentful that their lives will be changed in ways that are entirely outside of their control (Raphael, 1983; Sanders, 1999). The findings of this

study depict that the women experienced a feeling of being cheated in comparison to other women for having lost their mothers at such a young age. As Edelman (1994) explains, daughters have an expectation that their mothers will “pass down the generational knowledge that transforms a girl into a woman” (p. 179) and women who lose their mothers before reaching adulthood are robbed of this learning from their mother.

In a similar finding the participants expressed a void and a sense of missing out as daughters and as women without their mothers. The participants described the role that mothers typically play in a daughter’s ongoing self-development as a woman, such as her transition to adulthood, getting married, developing her career, and becoming a mother, and they noted how their loss will continue to impact them since they will be missing the maternal connection and guidance that they would have relied on their mothers for. Consistent with this finding, Edelman (1994) writes that adulthood is a remarkably different experience for women who navigate this course without the presence of their mothers and are forced to find their own way of learning how to be a woman.

The participants also specifically expressed a profound sadness at having missed the opportunity to develop an adult relationship with their mothers. As stated in the literature review, Arnett (1997) found that adolescents and young adults identified establishing a relationship with their parents as equal adults as being a necessary component of one’s sense of self as an adult. The women in this study wondered what an adult relationship with their mother would have been like and how they might have been different if they had had the opportunity to develop that relationship with their mothers. Silverman, Nickman, & Worden (1992) propose that the bereaved must consider what the

lost parent's continued presence would have meant to his or her life since one cannot effectively grieve a loss unless one recognizes all that was lost.

As revealed through the participants' interviews, one of the main aspects of their experience that clearly indicated that life had been forever altered was the changes that occurred within their family systems. A consistent theme throughout the interviews was that the participants experienced a shift in their relationship with their fathers following the loss of their mothers. Two opposing and contradictory trends that emerged from this study were a distancing in the father-daughter relationship and a strengthening in the father-daughter relationship. Harris (1995) explains that when a child or adolescent loses a parent the surviving parent instantly becomes the only parent and takes on monumental importance and influence in the child's life since all of the child's needs, expectations, and fantasies are transferred on to this parent. In this respect, the father's ability to manage his own grief and remain emotionally available to his daughter will influence the relationship between father and daughter (Edelman, 1994; Harris, 1995).

The finding in this study that three of the women experienced a distancing in their relationship with their father closely following their mother's death appears consistent with research that suggests that adolescent daughters often perceive their fathers as unsupportive due to gender differences in the grief process (Balmer as cited in Fleming & Balmer, 1996; Gray, 1987; Lendhart & McCourt, 2000). These three women reflected on how their fathers changed in their parenting role and how they perceived their fathers as being emotionally unavailable to support them and guide them through their grieving. Two of these participants experienced an initial distancing in their relationship with their father that has since evolved into a renewed closeness. As Edelman (1994) explains, the

relationship that existed between father and daughter before the loss is a good indicator of where their relationship will ultimately end up, however the death of a mother can significantly alter the way that a father relates to his daughter as he learns to adjust to being a single parent. One participant in particular discussed that her relationship with her father became more distant after the loss, since her mother's absence caused her to perceive her father differently and she recognized how he was dominant in relationship with others. Although the connection between the loss of her mother and this shift in her relationship with her father was unclear for Eve, a possible explanation can be found in the work of Edelman (1994) who writes that the father's "ability-or inability- to take on the expressive parenting role is suddenly magnified, and his strengths and weaknesses in this area become more apparent and more important than they were when his wife was present" (p.114).

The findings in this study also revealed that three of the women experienced a strengthening in their relationship with their father following the loss of their mothers and for some of these women it was the first time that they came to know their fathers as a person and their fathers came to know them. Interestingly, the women who discussed an increased closeness in their relationship with their father more freely discussed how their father has influenced their identity development. These findings suggest that it may be important to more closely consider the role of the surviving father and the impact of his coping style on women's bereavement following maternal loss and how subsequent shifts in the father-daughter relationship can influence women's identity development.

As described in the literature review, a fundamental component of identity is the integration of one's beliefs about oneself and one's beliefs of how other people perceive

that self (Erikson, 1963, 1975). Additionally, Gilligan (1982, 1988) emphasizes that girls and women construct their identity through their sense of connectedness with other people, including their peers. The findings of this study suggest that the death of a mother during adolescence influenced the way that the participants viewed themselves in relation to their peers. Many of the participants described how their experience of maternal loss made them feel different and inferior and they believed that other people also perceived them as different and often expressed pity towards them. For some of the participants, this feeling of being different caused them to feel alone and disconnected from their peers since they felt like their peer group could not possibly understand the depth and intensity of their grief.

This finding is consistent with research conducted by Servaty and Hayslip (2001), which revealed that parentally bereaved adolescents are highly conscious of the differences between themselves and their peers and often report feeling inadequate and uncomfortable with interpersonal interactions. Additionally, LaGrand (1986) found that the death of a parent can lead adolescents to isolate themselves from their peers since they feel that “normal” teenagers can not comprehend their loss and pain. The finding from this study that the participants felt different and disconnected from their peers suggests that these young women may have been isolated from interpersonal interactions at a time when a sense of connectedness with others is critical to the process of identity formation (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Josselson, 1987). It may be important to consider that this feeling of disconnection and difference from other women who have their mothers could potentially make these young women vulnerable to self esteem issues, such as feeling inadequate or less worthy, as they move into adulthood.

Seeking Guidance and Relatedness on the Path of Identity Development

As discussed in the literature review contemporary theories of adolescent development propose that women develop their identities within relationships and in connection with others (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Josselson, 1987). In this sense, adolescent girls and young women learn about themselves through the development and maintenance of close, interpersonal relationships and develop a sense of individuality and autonomy in the context of a continual emotional attachment with their parents (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Harter, 1999; Josselson, 1987; Palladino-Schultheiss, 1994; Samuolis et al., 2001; Sartor & Youniss, 2002; van Wel et al., 2000). In accordance with this research on women's identity, a central trend that emerged from this study was that the participants sought guidance and relation in their process of developing their identities. The findings of this study suggest that the loss of a mother during adolescence does not sever the need for these young women to develop in close emotional connection with attachment figures but rather indicates that it shifts this process to one where these women seek out stronger connections and attachments with peers, family, and older women who can act as maternal substitutes.

Three of the participants expressed the notion that the death of their mother left an emotional void, which created a need for them to establish stronger attachments in relationships with other adults, boyfriends, and most importantly friends in order to fill in the feelings of emptiness. These women perceived themselves to be emotionally needy and they sought to draw the care they needed from their friends and relationships to replace what they had lost with the death of their mothers. This finding is understandable considering the central importance of a woman's emotional attachment to her mother in

the process of defining her identity (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan 1982, 1988; Josselson, 1987; Samuolis et al., 2001). It suggests that the experience of maternal loss during adolescence may have influenced these women to seek out an alternative base of love and support in their friendships and other significant relationships from which they could explore their developing individuality and unique identity as they move into adulthood.

The importance of these close relationships was evident in their narratives, however as one participant indicated, such close attachments can potentially leave the women vulnerable if the relationship was to end. This participant reflected on the devastation she believes she will experience if her two best friendships are disrupted since she so strongly relies on these friends for support and a sense of connectedness. A similar implication has been noted in previous research. In a study of adolescent bereavement following the death of a parent, Harris (1991) found that the older adolescents in the study frequently relied on the support and protection of a best or special friend but experienced severe distress if this relationship was broken.

The findings from this study revealed the important role that older women hold in the lives of the participants as both a source of maternal caring and as a feminine guide on the path to adulthood. Four of the women described how the void created by the loss of their mothers has influenced them to seek out and develop closer connections with other adult women who can offer them some of the emotional comfort and womanly wisdom previously provided by their mothers. In explaining the role of older women in the lives of motherless daughters, Edelman (1994) writes "A girl who loses her mother... has little readily available, concrete evidence of the adult feminine to draw from (p. 178). A mother surrogate unquestionably can help steer a girl through childhood,

adolescence, and early adulthood...A feminine mentor who's emotionally invested in a motherless girl's well-being can help her develop self-esteem and confidence as a both a female and an individual" (p.186).

The findings from this study depicted that some of the participants found a sense of connection with their mother's family. For one participant in particular, Joleen, the sense of familiarity and belonging she felt when she met family from her mother's side validated her sense of identity. Since she never had the chance to get to know her mother as a person, she did not have that female figure to compare her development against. Joleen expressed that she has had to create her personality and search for the connections between her own development and that of others in her family. As Edelman (1994) writes, "without a living mother to refer to for comparison, a daughter invents much of her identity alone." (p. 204). She further argues that motherless daughters emerge into adulthood without the "revalidation of self" and the encouragement that they need and that they lose the emotional connection to a home ground, which is yearned for in young adulthood. Joleen's experience may be understood as a searching for that home ground where she can feel a sense of belonging and feel validated for the person she is becoming.

In her writing, Edelman (1994) clearly points out that many motherless daughters permanently lose their connection to a home ground when they lose their mothers. For one participant in the present study, Rebecca, the loss of her mother meant a severing of the familial ties and the connection to her mother's family. Rebecca described that as something that felt as if her identity was being "cut in half", and she further stressed how this feeling was especially significant because of her cultural ethnicity. Rebecca's mother was Caucasian and her father is Chinese and since the loss of her mother she feels

as though that part of her self has become a mystery since she doesn't know the history of her mother's family background. In her book, Edelman (1994) refers to the feminine line of descent as the "Motherline" and she acknowledges the great void and sense of incompleteness that a woman feels when her mother's death severs the cord to the family and generations of women on her mother's side.

These findings indicate the significant sense of connection and validation that the mother's side of the family can provide to maternally bereaved young women and alternatively the secondary losses that young women may experience when this familial connection is somehow unavailable. It suggests that young women who lose their mothers and their mother's family may experience a sense of incompleteness in their own identities if they are unable to learn about the history of their mothers through other family members. It also suggests the value that young women may find in learning about who their mother's were as people in order for them to construct an image of their mothers as women whom they can compare and contrast their developing identities against (Josselson, 1987).

One of the most intriguing findings of this study is that the women tend to draw on their memories and an enduring connection with their mothers to positively guide them in their process of identity development. Throughout the interviews, the women each described how they have maintained a connection with their mothers in their own way through either memories and reflection, dreams, sensing her presence or energy, incorporating or recognizing aspects of their mother's identity within their own, and talking to their mothers. This finding appears contrary to more traditional theories of grief which emphasize the need of the bereaved to detach emotional ties from the

deceased (Dietrich & Shabad, 1989; Raphael, 1983; Worden, 1982), but may indicate support for research and a model of grief which points to the importance of the bereaved constructing a relationship with the deceased in order to integrate the loss into one's sense of self and proceed with life (Hogan & DeSantis, 1992; Klass, 1987; Klass & Walter, 2001; Marwit & Klass, 1995; Shapiro, 1994; Silverman et al., 1992; Tyson-Rawson, 1996).

Each woman's relationship with her mother was unique and thus the young women in this research used different aspects of their connection with their mothers to guide them in their identity development as needed. Some of the participants discussed how the memories of their mothers provide them with an image for how they want to become as women and as mothers or alternatively act as reference points for what they may choose to do differently as they move through adulthood. Additionally, some of the participants explained how they understand aspects of their own identity development within the context of their mothers' identity through recognizing the similarities that exist between themselves and their mothers. In accordance with Josselson's (1987) theory of women's identity development, these young women define their identities in comparison and contrast to their memories of their mothers and use their ongoing connection to their mothers as an important resource when deciding upon their own values and life decisions. Although their mothers are not physically present, these women have maintained a psychological and spiritual bond with them that evolves as they grow and their needs in relation to their mothers change over the course of their development. This finding suggests support for the model of bereavement as conceptualized by researchers and theorists such as, Klass (1987, 1995, 2001), Hogan & DeSantis (1992), Silverman et al.

(1992), and Shapiro (1994) which posits the importance of the bereaved developing a continued internal relationship with the deceased who can “function as role models or behavioural guides” in the life and development of the bereaved (Marwit & Klass, 1995, p. 293).

Many of the participants discussed how their continued connection with their mother helps them to move forward with their lives in the face of this significant loss. In this respect, the ongoing attachment to their mother serves as a resource in helping the young women to integrate their loss experience into their identity by preserving a meaningful connection to their past. Additionally, it may help them to recognize the positive effects they can take from losing their mother at a young age, such as a sense that they are being watched over and cared for as they grow into adulthood. This finding may best be explained by the family systems developmental model of grief proposed by Shapiro (1994), which postulates that bereaved children and adolescents maintain significant relationships with deceased family members and revisit these evolving relationships “as sources of comfort and havens of safety throughout life” (p. 122).

The findings of this study suggest that the ongoing relationship that these women have formed with their mothers can serve the dual purpose of providing a form of guidance on the path of identity development in emerging adulthood and offering comfort and a sense of strength from knowing that they maintain a connection to their primary attachment figure. I am reminded of a poignant example that Paige described in our interview together. One of the significant turning points for Paige, following the loss of her mother, was making the decision to emerge from her loss experience positively in order to make her mother proud. In weighing her mother’s values and life priorities

against her own, she explained that it was not about “what university [she] was going to go to or what big house [she] was going to buy” but rather “just getting through it and coming out of it positive”. Paige stated that she has “formed a form of confidence” through her ongoing connection with her mother and through her belief that her mother would want her to live her life as fully as she had done. She further emphasized that she continues to use her memories of her mother to help her live her life as an open and loving person.

Redefinition of Self and Integration of Loss into Emergent Identity

As discussed in the literature review, the grief process and successful resolution of grief have been conceptualized in many different ways (Russac, Steighner, & Canto, 2002; Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Despite these variations of theory, there appears to be a general consensus that a person cannot emerge from grieving a loss unchanged. As Shapiro (1994) writes, “relationships are the constituent elements of self” (p.12) and the loss of a parent will undoubtedly require a redefinition or reshaping of one’s identity in order to accommodate the experience of loss and transform one’s connection to that person (Angell et al., 1998; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Schaefer & Moos, 2001; Silverman, 1981; Silverman et al., 1992; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). Throughout the interviews, the women in this study discussed how, over time, their loss has become an aspect of their identity and their daily life and they each recognized how the need for them to cope and find meaning in their loss experience has resulted in new understandings of self. Some of the processes through which these participants have come to understand and integrate their experience of maternal loss included redefining their personal spirituality, reflecting on the meaning of the loss and the wisdom they have

gained from the experience, recognizing specific personal attributes that have developed due to the loss, and developing individual coping skills and resources.

Some of the participants in this study discussed how their experience of maternal loss instigated an exploration and redefinition of their personal spirituality in order to help them understand the meaning of their experience and its impact on their sense of self. The two trends that were revealed in the participants' narratives were a move towards spirituality and, on the other hand, a questioning or reformulation of their personal spirituality. As discussed in the literature review, identity development involves the exploration and commitment to spiritual beliefs and choices (Erikson, 1963, 1968, 1997; Josselson, 1987). The finding that the loss of their mother impelled some of the participants to explore and redefine their spirituality indicates that their experience of maternal loss influenced a reformulation and shift in these women's commitment to their personal beliefs. It suggests that the participants engaged in a process of self-reflection and reconstructed aspects of their identity in order to integrate and accommodate the loss of their mother into their ongoing self-development. These findings appear to align with the work of Balk (1999), who postulates that bereavement is a life crisis that has the potential to actuate spiritual change as the grieving person seeks to find meaning in the loss and reestablish a sense of psychological and emotional balance.

A very interesting and hopeful finding in this study is that despite the incredible challenges and negative consequences that the participants have experienced from losing their mothers at a young age, they each recognized some positive outcomes of their bereavement. The women in this study described having new wisdom and perspective and identified specific personal characteristics that they perceive as having developed

from their experience of maternal loss. This finding may suggest that the participants sought to integrate the loss into their emergent identity over time by reflecting on how the loss has changed them and what it means to the person they are now becoming. As Tyson-Rawson (1996) proposes, the changes that young people perceive in themselves and the world are one way in which they derive meaning from the death of a parent.

Two common traits that some of the participants discussed were independence and maturity. Most of these women attributed their increased maturity and independence to the changes that occurred in their familial responsibilities following the loss of their mothers, including caring for younger siblings and their sense of responsibility for raising themselves. One participant believed that her accelerated maturity was a consequence of having to deal with the loss of her mother at a young age. These women expressed a degree of ambivalence towards these two traits since they recognized the personal growth in their increased maturity and independence yet were also aware that it had come at a price of being unwillingly propelled towards adulthood. Other characteristics that the participants attributed to their experience of maternal bereavement were openness, emotional expressiveness, acceptance, and compassion and empathy towards others in pain or need. Some of the participants also noted that they have developed confidence in their ability to be self-reliant and their strength to handle future life challenges, since they have seen their capacity to overcome adversity and change in adapting to the loss of their mothers. These findings are consistent with research that has examined the positive effects of bereavement on adolescents and has noted the emergence of similar characteristics (Balk, 1996; Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Klass et al., 1996; Oltjenbruns, 1991; Schaefer & Moos, 2001; Tyson-Rawson, 1996)

The findings of this study depict that the experience of maternal loss also resulted in the development of new wisdom and perspective. Some of the participants described how their experience of losing their mother at a young age induced a deep sense of gratitude for their other relationships and an increased appreciation and passion for life. Some of the participants also discussed how they had developed a broader and more worldly perspective in relation to the meaning of life and death, human adversity, what is important in life, and personal responsibility.

Over time, the participants have endeavored to find meaning and a sense of purpose in their experience of maternal loss through reexamining their beliefs about the nature of the world, reconsidering their priorities, and embracing their ability to help others with pain, loss, and grief. It appears that this process has led them to understand their loss within a broader context in order to move towards accepting it as part of their lives and selves. As one participant stated, she believes that she would have eventually acquired this wisdom and worldly perspective but realized it at a much younger age due to her mother's death. This finding is consistent with the research of Tyson-Rawson (1996), which noted that parentally bereaved late adolescent women developed significant learning about the nature of the world that most people do not achieve until later adulthood. She writes that "the development of new understandings about the world and the self, and the struggle to attribute meaning to the loss" are created by the "process" of bereavement in response to the death of a parent (p. 160).

As the participants in this study have come to discover new wisdom and beliefs about themselves and the nature of the world in which they exist, they have been simultaneously transforming their identities. As Josselson (1987) writes, "identity

incorporates a woman's choices for herself, her priorities, and the guiding principles by which she makes decisions" (p. 3). The young women in this study described how their experience of maternal loss influenced them to reevaluate what is important in their lives and how it led them to make shifts in their personal life choices, priorities, and "guiding principles".

The participants in this study reported that the loss of their mothers has heightened their awareness of mortality and death. The findings depicted that these women's experience of maternal loss impacted an increased fear of losing other people in their lives and for some of the participants it also created an increased consciousness of their own mortality and a fear for their own death. This finding supports previous research that found that adults who experienced early parental death manifest a "perceived vulnerability" to the future loss of loved ones (Mireault & Bond, 1992; Mireault et al., 2002) and increased anxiety in regards to their own death (Zall, 1994).

One way of understanding this finding is within the context of previous research literature, which proposes that individuals who have personal experience with a negative life event are more likely to perceive themselves as being vulnerable to similar events in the future (Mireault & Bond, 1992). Another possible explanation is that the participants' process of integrating their experience of maternal loss into their identities involves reflecting on and comprehending the reality of death in their lives. Once again, the participants in this study appear to be reformulating their understanding about the nature of the world in relation to the unpredictability of life. It is important to consider that for some of these participants their new beliefs about the transitory nature of life have created a level of fear and anxiety in regards to losing other people in their lives or

losing their own lives that may be emotionally or psychologically distressing rather than conducive to the integration of the loss experience. This may indicate the need for counsellors to determine with the women their level of fear or anxiety and how the women believe it impacts their lives both negatively or positively. Implications for counsellors working with maternally bereaved young women will be discussed further in a later section.

In a related finding, the participants of this study reported that the loss of their mothers is an ever-present aspect of their selves that they live with everyday. Throughout the interviews, some of the participants shared that the pain and sadness from their mother's death is always with them, like a "sad spot in their hearts", but it is not a constant part of their conscious awareness. These young women discussed how they have reached a level of acceptance that living with the loss of their mothers is their way of life and that the loss will continue to exist as a part of their identities throughout the course of their lives. This finding may suggest that these women's process of integrating their loss into their emergent identity involves accepting the loss and the impact of the loss on their ongoing self-development and recognizing the loss as a part of who they are and who they are becoming. This finding is consistent with the research of Klass et al. (1996), which found that adolescents who have resolved their loss to some degree described an aspect of this resolution as acquiring an acceptance of the loss as part of their life histories.

The final finding to be discussed, which relates to all aspects of the participants' experiences of maternal loss and identity development, is the importance of resources in the lives and development of these young women. Throughout the participants'

interviews the importance of their personal resources was clearly evident. Each of the young women in this study had constructed or found her own coping mechanisms that has helped her through her grieving and has helped her to manage over the years without her mother. The benefits of resources in helping bereaved people to positively emerge from a significant death have been well documented in the research and clinical literature (Dillon & Brassard; 1999; Gray, 1987; Schreder, 1995; Shapiro, 1996; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). The finding that each of the participants discovered and created her own strategies for coping with their experience of maternal loss aligns with the findings of Dillon and Brassard (1999) who highlighted the notion that although grieving people may share certain characteristics, their responses and needs in managing their grief are unique to each individual and this needs to be considered when working with bereaved persons.

One of the most common resources that was revealed in the participants' narratives was close friends. Some of the participants described how they have one or two special friends who have been an important source of support to them. One way of understanding this finding is that adolescence and young adulthood are typically characterized by an increased reliance on friendships and stronger connections with peers, especially for women (Balk, 2000; Josselson, 1987). An additional or different way of understanding this finding is that, as previously mentioned, some of the participants experienced a distancing in their relationships with their fathers following their mother's death and they reported that they did not feel supported at home. In this respect, these young women may have looked outside of their family and to their friends for the support and care they were seeking. This finding is consistent with previous research on bereaved adolescents in which adolescents report their peers as being

especially important and valued sources of support following a loss (Gray, 1987; Harris, 1991; Marwit & Carusa, 1998; Tyson-Rawson, 1996)

Limitations of the Study

First, the young women who participated in this study elected to participate voluntarily and were selected on the basis that they were comfortable sharing their experiences of maternal loss and identity development. In this respect, the participants represent a group of women who felt comfortable talking about a subject of a personal and potentially emotional nature. This may indicate that the young women in this study had reached a degree of resolution with their loss and the findings may represent this bias.

Secondly, the findings of this phenomenological study are based on the subjective experiences of the six individual research participants. The findings of this study and the participants' experiences are not necessarily representative of all young women who have lost their mothers in adolescence. The purpose of this study was not to generalize to populations at large but rather to describe the phenomenon and gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience for this group of women.

A third limitation of this study is that there was no distinction made between the women who lost their mothers to illness, which is generally considered an anticipated death, and those who lost their mothers suddenly in an accident, which is considered an unanticipated death. Over half of the participants in this study experienced the death of their mothers after a battle with cancer and the small sample size made it difficult for comparisons to be made with the participants who experienced the sudden death of their mothers. Although common themes emerged across the lived experiences of all of the

participants, useful insights may have been discovered through clarifying and comparing the lived experiences of the women who lost their mothers suddenly with those of the women who lost their mothers following an illness.

Fourthly, another limitation of this study is that the developmental passage from adolescence to emerging adulthood and the process of identity formation are defined as they are conceptualized in Western culture and thus may not be representative of other cultures. Researchers, such as Arnett and Taber (1994), have emphasized the importance of culture in defining the normative developmental tasks of this phase of life. Although there was cultural diversity amongst the participants in this study, the influence of culture was not closely considered due to the small sample size. Future research that investigates the role of culture in the experience of maternal loss and young women's identity development may yield useful results in gaining a more representative understanding of this lived experience for young women.

A fifth limitation of this study is that detailed demographic information was not obtained from the participants nor was it considered. This study was exploratory in nature and thus the focus was limited to the influence of maternal loss on these young women's identity development. However, in investigating the experience of maternal loss and the impact on identity it may be important for future research to consider the influence of other variables, such as social economic background and education level.

Implications of the Findings

Future Research Directions

Research on adolescent bereavement following parental death has grown in recent years, however there are many aspects of the experience that still remain to be learned

and understood (Balk, 2000; Balk & Corr, 2001; Fleming & Balmer, 1996). The process of conducting the present research study and the findings obtained from this study yielded ideas about practical implications and future directions for research in this area.

The death of a mother during adolescence is a unique experience for each woman who has to face it. The influence of the loss on her experience of identity development is equally individual and subjective. I believe that qualitative research is particularly adept at describing and exploring the personal nature of maternal loss and it is a well-suited approach for research in this area since one of the research needs is to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of loss on the developmental tasks of adolescence (Balk & Corr, 2001). I recommend that future research continue to utilize the qualitative as well as quantitative approaches.

Based on my experience with using a phenomenological research methodology to explore the influence of maternal loss on young women's identity development, I have two practical suggestions for future researchers who conduct similar qualitative studies. Firstly, I recommend that focus groups be used in order to enable the participants to discuss their experiences with other people who have shared a similar experience. I believe that a focus group could lead to deeper insights and valuable findings since it would generate a conversation around parental death and adolescent bereavement, which is typically a shrouded topic in western society. Due to geographical distance between participants I was unable to conduct a focus group, however I believe that it likely would have added another layer of depth to the present study.

The second recommendation is to interview participants three or more years following the death of their parent in order to allow time for integration of the loss and

reflection of how the loss has impacted their lives both positively and negatively. In the present study, I interviewed participants two or more years following the death of their mothers and although each participant provided a rich and thoughtful description of her experiences, the young women who had lost their mothers over three years ago appeared to find it easier to freely express how their loss has impacted their experience of identity development.

In addition to these practical implications, the findings from the present study revealed questions that could be examined more closely in future research. One of the questions from the present study that warrants further investigation is the role of the surviving father and the impact of his coping style on young women's bereavement following maternal loss. In conducting a comprehensive review of the literature, I found a surprising lack of empirical literature that directly relates to the role of the surviving father in young women's adaptation to maternal loss. Considering the important role of parents in adolescent girls' identity development (Josselson, 1987; Palladino-Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994; Samuolis et al. 2001; van Wel et al., 2000), it would also be worth exploring how shifts in the father-daughter relationship following maternal loss can influence young women's experiences of developing their identities.

Another interesting finding from the present study, which requires further research to be substantiated due to discrepant findings in the research literature, is the role of continued connection to mothers in young women's coping and ongoing development following maternal loss. It would be beneficial for such research to investigate how this ongoing attachment facilitates or hinders integration and acceptance of the loss in to young women's life histories and identities.

The final recommendation for future research in the area of maternal loss and young women's identity development is to explore the impact of maternal loss on women's identities over time. The participants in the present study expressed feeling the absence of their mothers throughout their lives, especially at significant developmental events. A longitudinal research study that investigates how the experience of losing a mother during adolescence affects women's ongoing identity development across the life-span may provide valuable insights into these women's experiences of developmental milestones, such as their experiences of becoming mothers and their experiences of reaching the age at which their mothers died.

Implications for Counsellors

The findings of this study and the participants' poignant and honest descriptions of their lived experiences can help enhance counsellors' awareness of the profound effects of maternal loss on the self-identity of young women. The insights that the participants provided into this phenomenon suggest some general and some specific implications for counsellors, which they may find helpful in working with maternally bereaved young women.

Death is not a topic that is freely discussed in society. As the participants in this study expressed, most people are uncomfortable with talking about loss or hearing about another person's grief. The findings from this study and from previous research (Balk, 1991; Harris, 1991; LaGrand, 1986; Raphael, 1983) have noted the difficulty for adolescents to share their grief with their peers and those around them, since adolescents typically have a strong desire to feel accepted and appear like any other "normal" teenager. As discussed in this study, the participants suppressed and hid their grief and

avoided talking about their loss. The implication of these findings clearly points to the limited opportunities that young people may have to process their loss experience through talking with others.

One of the indirect findings that emerged from this study was the benefits that the participants experienced from having the opportunity to discuss their loss experience and what it has meant to their lives and their sense of self. During informal conversations throughout the research process, many of the participants reflected positively on their involvement in the research and stated that they found it personally beneficial to examine their experiences of maternal loss. Some of the participants also expressed that the opportunity to talk about their experiences helped them to form new insights into their own process of grief and identity development.

These findings suggest two main implications for counsellors who may work with maternally bereaved young women. The first implication is the importance of empathic listening and allowing the women the needed time and space to share their stories. Many of the young women in this study had not fully shared their experience of loss and grief with many people but they did express a desire to be understood and supported. As mentioned throughout the study, the experience of maternal loss was unique to each of the women and therefore it is important for counsellors to allow each young woman to educate them about her personal experience of loss and the impact that it has on her life and her identity. It is important for counsellors to acknowledge the pain and grief of loss but to avoid making assumptions about the women's feelings or personal experiences. One of the participants in this study, Paige, specifically expressed how her experience of having her story and pain listened to and completely heard was the "best thing that had

ever happened”. She stated, “It was the one thing in my life that literally lifted that [weight] off me”. Another participant, Rebecca, expressed that she feels a little bit better every time she talks about the loss of her mother. In addition to listening and being empathically present, it may be important for counsellors to provide the client with information about normal grieving and different styles of grieving. Some of the participants in this study expressed that they did not know if what they were feeling and thinking was normal.

The second implication from these findings is the possible benefits of creating or facilitating a peer support group for maternally bereaved women. Given that adolescents are typically hesitant to discuss their loss and appear different from their peers by openly grieving, I would suggest that these groups be open to women across the life span who have experienced adolescent maternal loss. As indicated in the present study, few of the participants knew of anyone else who had lost their mother and many of them expressed that they might have felt less alone and more supported if they had known that other people have gone through a similar experience. Many of the young women in this study chose to participate because they were eager to learn more about themselves but, just as importantly, they also wanted to offer a story and wisdom that could potentially help other young women who have to face the death of their mothers. This desire to reach out to other women also supports the notion of making a peer support group available to maternally bereaved young women in order to help them make sense and find meaning in their own loss experience through both receiving and offering support to other women.

In addition to a peer support group, it may be beneficial for school-based counsellors to provide education on grief and loss in the schools in which they are

working. The opportunity for teachers and students to learn about normal grief and how to help someone who is grieving may facilitate dialogue around death and promote a deeper level of understanding and sensitivity.

The finding that the experience of maternal loss created a heightened awareness of death and personal mortality for the participants of this study suggests a more specific implication for counsellors working with bereaved young women. As was seen in this study, the increased knowledge of the transitory nature of life raised a level of fear and anxiety for some of the participants that was emotionally distressing to them. This implication points to the importance of counsellors exploring the women's beliefs about mortality and death and how their beliefs impact their lives either positively or negatively. For those clients who experience a level of fear or anxiety in regard to their increased consciousness of death, it may be beneficial for counsellors to determine the nature of that anxiety, such as whether it is a reaction to the trauma of the loss, and how they can potentially work through it together in counselling.

The findings of this study indicate the important role that a mother's family can have in helping a bereaved young woman feel a sense of connection and belonging to a maternal or feminine familial base as she develops her identity. The findings also reveal that some young women may experience a literal disconnection from their mother's family after their mother's death. These findings suggest that counsellors may have a vital role to play in helping women regain a sense of connection to their mother's side of the family by encouraging and supporting the young women in talking to family members or long time family friends to find out information about their mother's history and the history of her family. In cases where there is a severance of ties with the

mother's family, counsellors may find it beneficial to work with the bereaved woman to piece together a history of her family through memories and stories that she may recall, photo albums, or visiting places that her mother lived throughout her life.

The present study revealed that, in the absence of their mothers, these young women often turn to other older women as sources of maternal caring and as role models in their process of identity development. In her book *Yesterday I Cried*, Iyanla Vanzant (1998) clearly articulates the importance of older women in the lives and self-development of young women:

Older women are like midwives who assist in the birth of a young woman's consciousness. It's not just what they do, it's who they are that provides young women with "womanhood training." Young women and girls learn about themselves and what it means to be a woman by watching the older women in their lives.... Only a woman can teach another woman what it really means to be a woman (p. 88).

Like some of the participants, young women who have lost their mothers may have an even greater need to develop such connected relationships with older women. Women counsellors may play a significant role in the lives of maternally bereaved young women in both their professional work and their personal lives by being sensitively aware of their potential role as a source of information and knowledge to young women in emerging adulthood.

The present study offers support for previous research that highlights the benefits of resources in helping bereaved individuals to positively cope with a loss (Dillon & Brassard; 1999; Gray, 1987; Schreder, 1995; Shapiro, 1994; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). Each

of the young women in this study had developed personalized resources and coping mechanisms to help them grieve and manage over the years without their mothers. This implication suggests that it may be helpful for counsellors to facilitate an exploration with each of the women regarding what her individual needs are in processing and managing her grief and what possible resources the women have available that they could rely on to work towards meeting some of these needs. Although the needs and resources for each client will be unique, I would suggest that counsellors also offer some general ideas of potential resources for clients based on their counselling experience. One common resource that was noted by several of the participants in this study was writing. Thus, journaling or writing exercises may be a consideration.

The findings of this study also indicated that the participants used their memories and a continuing connection to their mothers as an important resource in their lives. Disagreement over the adaptiveness of bereaved individuals maintaining an ongoing relationship with the deceased is still evident in the literature (Russac, et al., 2002; Stroebe & Schut, 2001) however based on the findings of this study and previous research (Silverman & Worden, 1992; Silverman et al., 1992), a sense of continued connection with the lost parent can be beneficial. In light of these findings, I would suggest that counsellors working with bereaved young women explore their beliefs about their mothers and their sense of connection with her. The participants in this study expressed how their memories and connection to their mothers has helped them accept the loss and find comfort in their grief and also provide them with an image of how to be a woman, against which they can compare and contrast their own developing identities. Although, the findings from this study are not generalizable to other populations they do

indicate the significant resource that bereaved young women may have in their memories of their mothers or their faith in an enduring and redefined relationship with their mothers.

Concluding Thoughts and Reflections as the Researcher

This research study has been exceptionally meaningful to me as a researcher, a counsellor, and as a woman living with the loss of my own mother. I have been touched and have learned from each and every one of the six women that I had the genuine privilege of meeting and interviewing and I believe that their voices will reach and speak to many more people.

The impetus for this research study came from my personal experience of losing my mother as a young adolescent girl and from the stark realization I gained that there was a significant lack of societal understanding and resources available to me as a young girl faced with the loss of my mother. Prior to conducting this research study, I had never met or known any other young women who had lost their mothers at a young age apart from my sister. After I graduated from high school I learned that there were two girls in my grade who had also lost their mothers young and yet it was never acknowledged or spoken between us. The six women I met for this research study are the first young women I have come to know who share my experience and it was the first time I learned of another young woman's personal experience of maternal loss. Likewise for most of the participants, it was the first time they had met another woman who had experienced the death of her mother at a young age and they each mirrored my sentiment that there was a distinct lack of societal sensitivity and resources for them as maternally bereaved young women.

As I listened to each of the participants' stories I felt as though they were inviting me to take a first look inside their private loss experience. I feel grateful to have been introduced to each of these young women's mothers through their sharing and memories. I felt a kindredness between myself and each of the participants as if we both held an understanding and information that we had unwillingly been forced to learn and now carry throughout our lives. I have since heard the loss of a mother described as the club that nobody wants to belong to and I recognize the truth in this statement as motherless women are seemingly bound together by an invisible thread of shared experience. A shared feeling that without our mothers, we are somehow different and less than other women; a shared understanding of the unpredictable and fleeting nature of life; a shared need to develop a new way of being in the world whether we are forced to become more responsible for ourselves and others, forced to seek out new women role models, or forced to use the memories of our mothers as our guide.

The reality of death is not open for discussion in Western society, which has encouraged people to shroud their experience of loss in secrecy. When a girl loses her mother during adolescence it is a grave and startling reminder of human mortality and in my experience most people would rather not be reminded. The death of a mother during a girl's transitional and often tumultuous teenage years shatters our basic assumptions that mothers are always there when you need them and that girls will not need to forge ahead into adulthood alone. I believe that as a society we have made it awkward and difficult for young women to discuss their loss with others by sending the underlying message that death is an uncomfortable subject. This type of message promotes the

isolation of grief and the shame that these women have experienced for having to keep their pain a secret.

As described by the young women in this study, adolescents can be particularly vulnerable to feelings of shame since their loss can cause them to feel starkly different from their peers. Adolescents typically do not know how to respond to such a significant loss since it may bring up their own fears around death and the mortality of their parents. The inability or the unwillingness of adolescents to respond to their bereaved peers further promotes the silencing and the isolation of grief and fuels the feelings of shame. I was deeply moved and struck by this finding because it represents a huge gap in how the needs of maternally bereaved adolescent girls and young women are being addressed. I find it sad that these women felt ashamed and inadequate since they are all such incredible, courageous, and uniquely wonderful women. It seems perverse that these women who have survived and have managed to emerge from such a profound loss would ever have felt unworthy in comparison to other women simply because they still have their mothers. Somehow the message is seemingly not being communicated to girls and young women who have lost their mothers that they are not alone and that they should be celebrated for their struggles and triumphs in finding their way through.

One of the most poignant and rewarding aspects of conducting this research study was to realize the reciprocal benefit that it held for both myself and the women who chose to participate. Throughout the course of this study, it became clear to me that it is rare for these women to encounter people who genuinely want to understand their experience of loss and the influence on their development. I recognized how meaningful and powerful it is for them to have the opportunity to share with a genuinely curious and

interested listener. All of the participants expressed that they were glad to have participated in the research study and many of them noted that the experience of sharing their story and having their experience heard was therapeutic and beneficial to their healing process. At the end of one of my interviews, a participant stated that she believes this experience was helpful for both of us. After reading the themes that emerged from this study, another participant commented that it helped to normalize her experience knowing that certain aspects were shared with other women as reflected in the themes. I received very touching positive feedback from all of the participants about the research and their experience of being interviewed, which was extremely validating since it directly spoke to the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of young women's experience of maternal loss and the influence of maternal loss on young women's identity development.

As a researcher, I wish to credit the work of Hope Edelman (1994, 1995), which has been cited throughout this research study. She was one of the first authors to deeply wade into the intimate subject of mother loss for women of all ages and to bring the experience forward for discussion. I hope that these six young women's voices will continue to open the dialogue around maternal loss and death. There is a critical need for women to have opportunities to share their stories and to have their stories heard in order to increase our understanding of maternal loss in the lives of young women and break through the isolation and shame that surrounds the early death of a mother. I wonder what it would mean to adolescent girls and young women if they were encouraged by society to share their memories of their mothers and openly discuss their loss. I am sure that it would help them to feel less alone, less shamed in comparison to other women, and

less pitied by others. I would hope that it would help them and other people recognize the courage and strength they possess for having struggled and found a way to flourish in the company of death.

I am committed both personally and professionally to continue the dialogue around death and loss and develop resources for young people to process and grow from their loss experience. One of the participants in this study, Paige, stated how different her experience may have been if a camp had existed for children and adolescents who lost a parent through death. Like many of the other participants, such as Eve and Rebecca, the overwhelming sense of being alone and not understood was one of the most difficult aspects of her loss experience. The idea of a camp for children and young people who have experienced the death of a mother or the death of a parent would provide a place for connection, learning, and healing where children and adolescents could meet other people who have lost a parent and could share their experiences. As a counsellor, I was inspired by this idea of a camp and the possibilities it may hold in addressing some of the needs of children and adolescents who have experienced the death of a parent.

I feel truly honoured for having had the opportunity to conduct research in an area that holds personal significance to both myself and the research participants. I believe that the honest and deeply personal stories that these young women shared will offer insights to counsellors and other helping professionals and will provide a context of experience for young women who have been faced with the death of their own mothers. I want to acknowledge my gratitude to the six courageous young women who volunteered to share their intimate experiences of maternal loss and identity development in order to benefit future generations of maternally bereaved young women. Although these stories

are of loss, they are also powerful stories of courage, hope, and inspiration. They are spoken by six young women who continue to try, persevere, and rise through the experience of their mother's death and have developed into strong, capable, and wise women worthy of admiration.

I have been both personally and professionally transformed from this research experience. Throughout the research process I have been touched and felt myself moved close to tears many times by the strength and courage the participants embodied in sharing their painful stories of maternal loss and their inspiring stories of hope and personal growth in the face of profound loss. As a result of this research, I am more informed about the influence of maternal loss on young women's identity development and I know that this knowledge will help me in my personal life and in my professional work as a counsellor.

In closing, I would like to offer the following words of Hope Edelman, from her book *Motherless Daughters*, to all women who have lost their mothers and to anyone who knows a woman who has lived through this most profound loss:

To be a motherless daughter is to be riddled with contradictions and uncertainties, but it is also to know the grit of survival, to hold an insight and maturity others did not obtain so young, and to understand the power of renewal and rebirth.

EPILOGUE

When I started this research study on the influence of maternal loss on young women's identity development, I knew that I would be meeting courageous women who were willing to share their personal stories of loss and self-development. Throughout the interviews with each of the participants, I was both inspired and moved by their wish to reach out to other women in a supportive and helpful way. For most of the participants their decision to participate in this research study was as strongly motivated by their desire to have their own story heard and gain insight into their own personal experience as it was to share their story in order to help others.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the meaning and influence of maternal loss on young women's experience of identity development in emerging adulthood. The objectives of this study were to provide counsellors and other helping professionals with a deeper understanding and awareness of the impact of maternal loss on the self-development of young women and to provide a narrative context for other maternally bereaved young women who may see aspects of themselves in these stories, find a sense of validation for their experience, or otherwise benefit from the moving stories of these six young women.

Although the participants were not formally asked what they had learned from their experience or what words of wisdom or advice they would share with other young women who have lost their mothers, all of the participants described in their own way the learning that they had gained from their loss experience and I believe that this has been revealed throughout the research findings. Two of the participants in particular, Rebecca and Paige, ended their interviews by voluntarily sharing with me the wisdom and learning

that they would like to offer to other young women and girls faced with the death of their own mothers. To honour their wish to communicate this learning to others and to acknowledge the profound knowledge and understanding gained from all of the participants I have chosen to end this study with their words; the words of wisdom, learning, and hope as told to me by Rebecca and Paige.

Rebecca

And I would have to say that I know the purpose of this study is to help other people...and to help other people, I would have to say that they have to stay open about it. Because the one thing I regret and maybe prolonged my pain was that I didn't talk about it. And I did suppress it a lot. So my advice to anyone else who ever has to go through this would be to talk about it and to try and find other people who have gone through it. And just to know that I don't think anyone else who hasn't gone through it would understand that there's a feeling of being wrong, something you did wrong, something wrong with you, because you're different.... I would just probably say for anyone who's lost anyone, not just your mother, you feel this huge feeling of regret and guilt, why didn't I spend more time with this person. So that's another thing that it would really help if those people could understand that there was nothing they could do.

Paige

I think reading is huge because it gives the person that control when they want to continue reading, when they want to pick up the book [and] I think writing things down always helps as well. So I think those are the best ways for people who can't talk like I can because a lot of people can't so I would definitely recommend

those forms of therapy for them. And then for those who can talk to definitely not be ashamed of it; to share it, to talk about it like it's not a big deal because if you make it not a big deal people aren't going to... So I would definitely think facing it is huge. And I think valuing the other people around you, your family and friends instead of shutting them out. That shutting them out just makes you more alone and you're already going to feel alone so why feel more than you have to. I just think confidence and strength. Find it somewhere. If it be you take up a new hobby or you take up a new interest or if you travel or if you start going to church or if you start believing in God or praying or if you start volunteer work or help people of less fortunate things. It does make you value life more and it does make you appreciate what you have. I would say that people definitely need to put their energy somewhere because it's so easy to dwell in it but if you can put your energy in a positive direction, well that itself will get you through it. Your energy will get you through it as opposed to letting it suffocate you cause I've been through all the stages. I've been through where I shut my blinds and don't answer my phone and like to sit in the dark and watch TV. You know you go through so many different stages and I think I've been through them all, the mental ones and the more positive ones. But yeah I would just think that it's important for people to just face it and to take it as a way of living your life to the fullest and knowing that nobody's invincible. I think everybody handles it differently. I just think you need to put it somewhere. You definitely need to take the experience and put it in a direction, anything you want. And that's where the confidence comes in, you can be anything you want to be really. It's a choice. Just like you can choose to

let it affect your life, you can choose not to. You can choose to do what you always wanted to do or you can choose to say you can't. And that's where the confidence comes in; to know that you are better than that and you deserve better than that. And this isn't your demise and you weren't the one who died.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Notice

Join a Research Study

On

**YOUNG WOMEN'S
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

For

**WOMEN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED
MATERNAL LOSS**

Women volunteers are needed to participate in a research study to explore the experience of identity development in young women who experienced the death of their mother. This research is being conducted as part of the researcher's master's thesis at the University of Victoria.

As a participant you will be requested to complete two interviews about your experience of maternal loss and self- discovery. Participation will require approximately 1.5 – 2 hours of your time. Your confidentiality will be strictly protected.

Women are needed for this study who:

- ◆ Would like to share their story in a study that may facilitate greater understanding of women who have lost their mothers
- ◆ Are between 18 and 26 years of age
- ◆ Were raised in intact families
- ◆ Experienced the death of their mother due to accident or illness (not suicide) between the ages of 11 to 20; the loss occurred two or more years ago

If you have questions, would like more information, or would like to arrange an interview appointment, please call:

Lara at (250) 385 – 5676

Your participation will be greatly appreciated

APPENDIX B

Telephone Screening Questionnaire

Potential participants will voluntarily contact the researcher regarding participation. Participants will be selected using a criterion sampling technique, in which participants meet specified criteria set forth by the researcher. Potential participants will be asked if they meet the criteria for participation in the study.

Upon contacting the researcher, the participants will be asked questions such as the following:

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. The purpose of this research study is to understand the experience of identity formation in young women who experienced the death of their mother during adolescence.

- (1) Are you between the ages of 18 and 26 ?
- (2) Were you raised in an intact family (with both your mother and father present) ?
- (3) Did you experience the death of your mother when you were between the ages of 11 and 20, at least two or more years ago ? Was her death related to an accident or illness (not due to suicide) ?

In order to gain a comprehensive picture of the experience of identity development for maternally bereaved women I will be interviewing volunteers who feel comfortable discussing their experience of maternal loss and identity formation. Participation will involve completing two audio-taped interviews.

- (4) Do you feel comfortable discussing your experience of maternal loss and identity formation in a research interview ?
- (5) If you found that participation in this study stirred up some emotions for you, do you have some people you can talk to and who will support you ?
- (6) Do you have any questions ?

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

Ensure that the consent form is signed and understood before beginning the interview. Remind interviewee that she can withdraw at anytime without penalty and that she can stop the tape recorder and take breaks as needed. Check out available resources with interviewee: “It is possible that this interview may stir some things up a bit for you and I just want to double check with you that you have some people in your life that you feel comfortable talking with.”

Convey this information to the interviewee: “The purpose of this interview is for me to gain a description of how the loss of your mom during your adolescence influences your experience of defining an identity as you move into adulthood. I invite you to take your time, to focus on the experience, recollect moments that are particularly vivid and impactful, and describe the experience as completely as possible. Do you have any questions ?”

- (a) Can you tell me about what it was like to lose your mother during your adolescence.
- (b) What has been your experience of developing your identity as you move into adulthood given your experience of losing your mother at a young age ? For instance, what has it been like to discover who you are while living with the loss of your mother ?

Since this is a qualitative interview, additional prompting questions related to the individual participant’s experience of maternal loss and identity may be added as the interview proceeds in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the interviewee’s experience of maternal loss and identity formation. Participants may be asked questions such as the following:

- Have there been any significant people in your experience of forming an identity as you move into adulthood ?
- What is it like to live without your mother and how does that experience affect who you are as a person ?
- How do you describe yourself to another person who wants to know who you are ? Are there any aspects of yourself that you feel were shaped by your experience of your mother’s death ?
- How secure do you feel with who you are and how secure do you feel in the world ?
- What does it mean to you to be a woman living with the loss of your mother ?
- How do you see yourself moving into adulthood without your mother ?
- How much influence do you feel your mother still has on the person that you are today ?

At the conclusion of the interview, ask the interviewee the following questions:

- (c) What are some of the resources that you have used over the years to manage without a mother ?
- (d) Would you like to share any additional thoughts or feelings that you believe would contribute to my understanding of your experience of maternal loss and identity formation ?

Ask the interviewee the following demographic questions:

- (e) How old were you when your mother died ?
- (f) How old are you now ?
- (g) Do you have any siblings ? Older of younger ?

Debrief the interview. “How did you experience being interviewed about your experiences ? ”
Provide the interviewee with the resource referral list and book list. Make a plan for a second interview.

APPENDIX E

Participant Consent Form

**The Influence of Maternal Loss on Young Women's Experience
Of Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood**

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled *The Influence of Maternal Loss on Young Women's Experience of Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood* that is being conducted by Lara Schultz. Lara Schultz is a graduate student in the department of Counselling Psychology at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by telephone at 250-385-5676 or by email at lschultz@uvic.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct this research as part of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in Counselling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Norah Trace and Dr. Max Uhlemann. You may contact Dr. Norah Trace at 250-721-7840 and Dr. Max Uhlemann at 250-721-7827.

The purpose of this research project is to examine the experience of defining a sense of self in young women who experienced the death of their mother during adolescence. Research of this type is important because it aims to benefit future populations of young adult motherless daughters by providing a context for their experiences of self-discovery through these personal accounts of maternally bereaved young women. It also aims to provide counsellors and other helping professionals with a deeper understanding of the process of identity formation in women who experienced the death of their mother and their potential role in helping women to develop their selfhood throughout their lives.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a young woman who lost your mother during your adolescence and you have indicated that you are comfortable and willing to discuss how your experience of maternal loss influences your experience of self-discovery in emerging adulthood. You have voluntarily contacted the researcher by telephone and have been briefed on the purpose and the procedures of the research study. It has also been established via the telephone that you meet the criteria for participation in the study (young woman between the ages of 18 and 26; raised in an intact family; experienced the death of your mother due to accident or illness, not suicide, between the ages of 11 to 20; the loss occurred at least two or more years ago). You are participating voluntarily.

This is not counselling, but a research project to explore the influence of maternal loss on the experience of self-discovery in young women. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include reflecting on your experience of maternal loss and your experience of self-discovery and participating in two interviews with the above-mentioned researcher. With your permission the interviews will be audiotaped. The interviews will be held at the University of Victoria or a quiet and semi-private location to be mutually determined. Requests to reschedule an interview due to illness or other personal circumstances will be met if possible and your convenience will be considered at all times.

The first interview will focus on your perception of how your experience of maternal loss influences your experience of self-discovery and what these experiences mean to you. It will take about one hour.

The second interview will involve sharing your interview transcripts and a list of summarized themes with you and having you review them for accuracy and omissions. In addition, you will be asked if you have any further thoughts to add in regards to your experience of maternal loss and self-discovery. This interview will take about 30 minutes. Any questions that you have about the research study will be addressed at the time.

Potential inconvenience related to participation in this study involves meeting with the researcher on two separate occasions, totaling about 1.5 to 2 hours of your time.

One potential risk of participating in this research is the possibility of experiencing strong emotions due to the sensitive subject matter. We can stop the interview whenever you wish and you can choose not to answer any individual question. Also, you can stop the tape recorder at any point in the interview and we

can take breaks as needed. At the end of the interview, we can take time to briefly debrief your thoughts and reactions related to the interview experience. If you wish to process your experience further, I will provide you with a referral to a licensed professional psychologist for a consultation and debriefing at no cost to you.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include gaining insight into your personal process of self-discovery and how this interacts with your experience of maternal loss. Your participation may provide new information on the process of identity development in maternally bereaved young women and help to inform and guide counselling practices for parentally bereaved youth. In addition, your participation may benefit future populations of maternally bereaved young women by providing a context for their unique experiences of forming an identity.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw or refuse to answer certain questions at any time without any consequences or any explanation. In the event that you withdraw from this study, your data to that point will be used in the analysis only if you agree to this, indicated by signing a data release form at the time you withdraw. If you do not agree to this, your data will not be used in the analysis and all data relating to you will be immediately destroyed. Your tape and computer diskette will be erased and your transcript will be shredded.

In order to ensure that you wish to continue consent to participate in this research, I will remind you about the terms of participation (e.g. voluntary, ability to withdraw at any time etc.) at the beginning of each interview.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, your name will not be recorded on the transcribed data, on the interview tapes, or in the reports of the research results. The data will be filed under an assigned code number and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name in the report of the research results. The key to the coded names and the signed consent forms will be securely stored separate from any data and will only be accessible by the researcher.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by storing the computer diskettes, the interview tapes, and the transcripts in a locked filing cabinet. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

Data from this study will be kept secure for seven years following the final analysis of the results. The computer diskettes and audiotapes will be erased and the transcripts will be shredded within seven years.

In addition to using the data to complete my MA thesis, this data may be used by the researcher for publication in peer-reviewed journals and for presentation at scholarly and/or professional conferences.

A copy of the research results will be given to all participants upon request following the final analyses. Research findings will be communicated to university faculty and interested students and professionals through the MA thesis. The results of this study may also be shared in articles for publication and through presentations at professional and/or scholarly conferences, seminars, meetings, and workshops.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisors at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria at 250-472-4632.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

APPENDIX F
Participant Reading List

Bereavement Books

A Selected List

- Edelman, Hope. (1994). *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Edelman, Hope. (1995). *Letters From Motherless Daughters: Words of Courage, Grief, and Healing*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Harris, Maxine. (1995). *The Loss That is Forever: The Lifelong Impact of the Early Death of a Mother or Father*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Levine, Stephen. (1982). *Who Dies*. New York: Anchor Press.
- Myers, E. (1986). *When Parents Die: A Guide for Adults*. Markham, ON: Penguin Books.
- Staudacher, Carol. (1987). *Beyond Grief*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. (1999). *The Tunnel and the Light: Essential Insights on Living and Dying*. New York: Marlowe & Company.
- Boulanger, Gail. (2002). *Life Goes On: Losing, Letting Go and Living Again*. Nanoose Bay, BC: Notch Hill Books.
- Rando, Therese. (1988). *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Reeves, Nancy. (1999). *A Path Through Loss: A Guide to Writing Your Healing & Growth*. Kelowna, BC: Northstone Publishing.
- Kennedy, Alexandra. (1991). *Losing a Parent*. New York: HarperCollins.