

'They're Going to Die at Some Point, but We're all Going to Die'

A qualitative exploration of bereavement in later life

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Bath loneliness project



Explore loneliness of older people living in retirement communities in the UK and Australia

80 qualitative interviews (8000 minute) collected between 2019-2020

Experiences of loss and bereavement emerged naturally throughout the data



Variation and complexity of bereavement in old age

- “A new identity and striving for independence in the face of disrupted everyday activities and routines, loneliness, health concerns and changed relationships within the family and social network are essential features of older persons’ bereavement experience.”
- (Naef et al., 2013: 1108)

Gaps between bereavement research and gerontology



Focus on disruptive nature of bereavement and the significance of resilience in facing the loss of others



Highlight older people may be intimately connected to a gradual process of losing *defence* to cope and adapt to disruptive circumstances

Understanding bereavement in the context of ageing



How ageing may be ingrained into day-to-day life to disrupt older people's resilience to reconstruct meaning.



How these experiences may further give rise to a deeper sense of losing the wholeness of the self.



How they respond to these challenges compounded by bereavement and ageing.

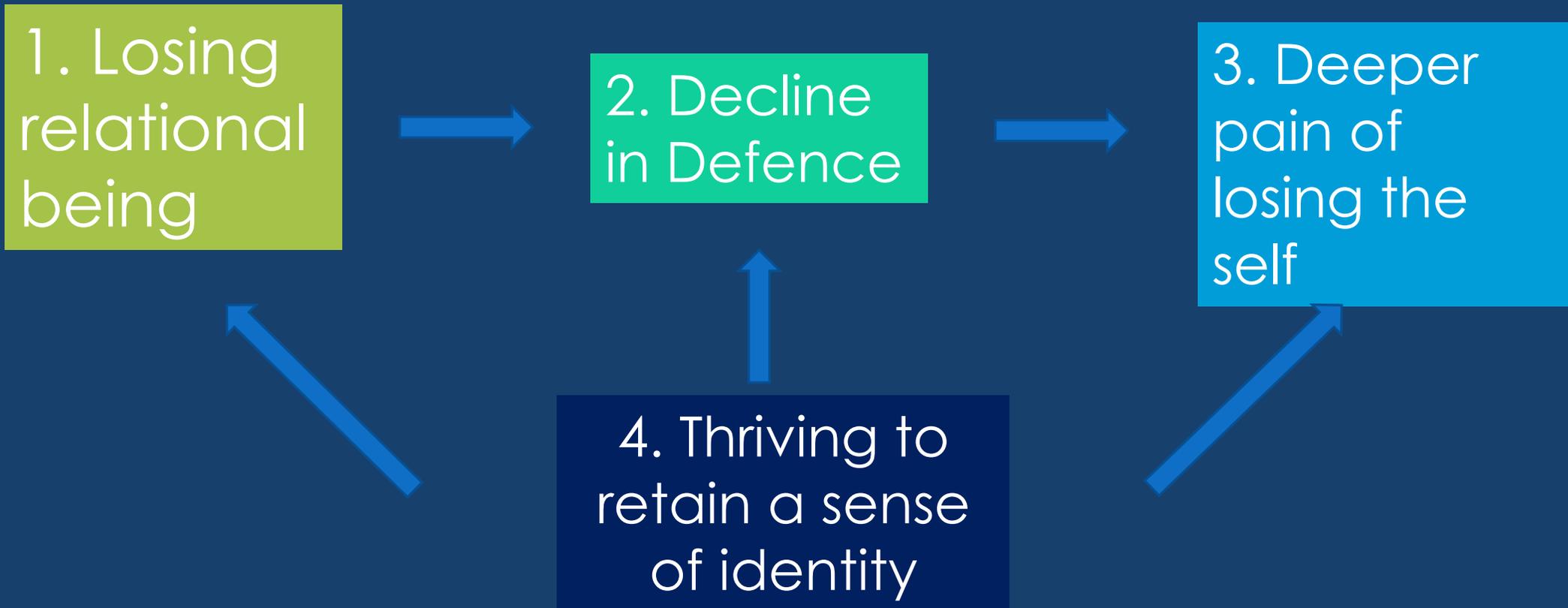
Table 1. Socio-demongraphical Characteristics of Interview Samples.

Characteristics	Sample (N = 80)
Age (years)	
55–60	2
61–70	9
71–80	35
81–90	31
91+	3
Gender	
Female	55
Male	25
Marital status	
Divorced/separated	7
Married/partnered	26
Unmarried	4
Widowed/widowered	43
Health	
Has a chronic condition(s)	28
Healthy	52
Household	
With the spouse/partner	41
Living alone	37
With friends	2

A diverse Sample



Findings



Losing a relational being in everyday lives

- Loss of a long-term relationship and/or concurrent loss in old age can significantly disrupt the consistency and meaningfulness of older people's everyday lives, challenging their sense of self in a relational sense

Paula: “[W]hile he was alive and I was his full-time carer, companion, friend, we had a ball even though he was in a wheelchair, but when he was gone I didn’t know where I fitted anymore. I didn’t know who I was anymore because I wasn’t ...”

Simon: “I knew her for 73 years she was part of my life. It’s like cutting off half of you.”



Mary: “I had a couple stayed for lunch about three weeks ago. That is the first time I’d put lunch on for somebody for a number of years, because they are all dead, they’ve gone. I’ve had loads of friends, dear, they’ve died.”

Decline in defence

- In facing bodily deterioration and the loss of other special resources (e.g. social connection, inner strength) alongside ageing, older people may confront increasing risks of losing agency and coping resources to defend from the void of others

Lucy: "Yes. Friendships are difficult when you get older. The friends that I had in Newcastle, it was a case of, "Oh yes we'll come and see you," but they are all my age. We've all got the same problem. And to be honest, a lot of them have died... Really there is no one. There's not many people left [to rely on], which is sad..."

Lucy: "No... I find now I have to channel into survival."

Deeper pain of losing the self



- Ageing related challenges may accumulate and even intensify, gradually giving rise to a deeply painful process, in which the older people's lives, memories and narratives may increasingly fade and eventually become irretrievably lost in the past.

Iris: "The only other thing is of course that most of my friends are dead. I'm 90 on Christmas day and when I go through my life, my school friends, most of them are gone, my college friends, most of them are gone. I'm the only in-law left, I'm the only great grandparent left. So that aspect of the extended family becomes less and less... Yes, then it becomes lonely as regard your future and your past life and the people that I was familiar with, people that I worked with, of course, and the people that I had social contact with and relatives. My own family, I've only got one brother left and my husband was Dutch, and the Dutch family, one sister-in-law. So I'm finding that I'm standing alone as regards my former life."

Thriving to retain a sense of identity

- Older people demonstrated their longing for meaning to restore their defence and further to retain their sense of the self moving forward.

Stephen: "The first six months after she died, I guess I was fairly lonely. The worst part was sitting down to a meal at night. Breakfast was okay, because we always scrapped for that. But to cook a meal and sit down on your own in the house, and I came here to be in a community. And I recovered, I think, because of the fact that I was in community with people here, I wasn't on my own any longer."

Pauline: "I said to my elder daughter the other day, 'I would give anything to have a chat about my mum and dad'."

What bereavement means to older people?

Bereavement in later life is not only an experience of dealing with the loss of others but may also be intimately connected to a gradual process of losing the wholeness of self.

Ageing may impact older people's defence from loss.

Older people can seek varied strategies to retain their resilience and further to ascribe meaning to their loss and bereavement at a more existential level.

Fundamental to these older bereaved people's resilience is their access to adequate social channels and their own inner strength.

Experiences of bereavement in later life should be understood and thus adequately supported in the deeper context of ageing that emphasises the loss as both relational (*others*) and existential (*the self*).

Further details...

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