

2016

# Spirituality for Late Adolescents Coping with Grief and Loss

Dana Yolanda Matthews  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Counselor Education & Supervision

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Dana Matthews

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2016

Abstract

Spirituality for Late Adolescents Coping with Grief and Loss

by

Dana Matthews

MAEd, University of Akron, 2002

BA, Clark Atlanta University, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

July 2016

## Abstract

Experiencing the death of a loved one is often life changing, and learning ways to cope is an important part of the healing process. Such a change can be particularly difficult for late adolescents (individuals between 18 and 25 years of age) who are already going through significant life changes. Spirituality and mental health has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years, and the Association for Spirituality, Ethics, and Religious Values in Counseling has developed competencies for counselors to use when working with clients who wish to incorporate spirituality in their treatment. Despite increased interest in the field, there is little scholarly literature on the use of spirituality in counseling late adolescents who are experiencing grief and loss. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the meaning and role of spirituality and spiritual practices in the grieving processes of late adolescents. Existential theory provided the framework for the study. Participants were recruited from a local grief center, college, and university as well as CESnet and ASERVIC listservs. Seven late adolescents took part in semistructured interviews regarding their grieving process. Lindseth and Norberg's phenomenological hermeneutical method was used to analyze the data consisting of naïve reading, structural analysis, and comprehensive understanding. Themes included experiences with death, surviving the loss, and changes. Findings indicated that spiritual practices were beneficial in helping grieving late adolescents cope with the death of a loved one. Results may provide counselors with additional ways to work with this population during their grieving process.

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## Dedication

I have been truly blessed to have two great parents who taught me the importance of hard work, education, and faith in God and in myself. I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my father the late Louis T. Matthews and my mother E. Margaret Matthews. Thank you both for your infinite love for me. I love you both.

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank God for allowing me to complete this huge milestone in my life! Mom, thank you for listening to me and encouraging me throughout this entire process. Thank you for being a great support and my biggest cheerleader. I truly appreciate your love, kindness, and confidence in me. To my sister, brother, nieces, nephews, and friends, thank you for your support and for being patient with me during this journey. I know I have some catching up to do. To my aunts and uncles, thank you for cheering me on and believing in me. To my late uncle Charles, I finally finished!

To my committee members, Dr. Jackson, Dr. Haddock, and Dr. Whitman, thank you for helping make my dream of being a Ph.D. a reality. Dr. Jackson, thank you for your dedication and commitment in helping me complete my degree. Your affirming words gave me the extra strength I needed to get through the challenging times in this process. Dr. Haddock, you have always been very helpful to me. I appreciate your words of wisdom, encouragement and support. You inspired me to do my best work. I am grateful to you both for being great mentors to me throughout the program and in completing my dissertation. Dr. Whitman, thank you for challenging me to do my best. I feel fortunate to have had you as a part of my committee.

To the seven brave participants who allowed me to tell your stories, thank you. I could not have completed the study without you.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	vii
List of Figures .....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	i
Background of the Study .....	2
Problem Statement .....	3
Purpose.....	4
Research Questions .....	4
Theoretical Framework.....	4
Existential theory .....	5
Death, freedom, responsibility, and isolation .....	6
Meaninglessness .....	7
Nature of the Study .....	8
Methodology.....	9
Definition of Terms.....	10
Assumptions.....	14
Scope and Delimitations .....	14
Limitations .....	15
Significance.....	15
Summary.....	18
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	19
Literature Search Strategy.....	20

Theoretical Foundation—Existential Theory .....	19
Philosophers and Theologians of Existential theory.....	22
Creating Meaning.....	25
Existential Theory .....	26
Literature on Grief and Loss, Spirituality in Adolescents .....	31
Qualitative Research Studies .....	31
Hermeneutic Phenomenology.....	33
Late Adolescence .....	34
Development and Grief.....	34
Impact of Grief of College Students .....	37
Relationship with the Deceased .....	42
Cause of Death.....	45
Coping with Grief.....	48
Spirituality.....	50
Adolescent Development and Spirituality .....	50
Mental Health.....	54
Effectiveness of Spiritual Practices .....	56
Death and Grief.....	62
Attachment to God.....	63
Summary .....	65
Chapter 3: Research Design.....	67
Research Questions and Rationale.....	67

Restatement of Research Questions.....	67
Research Method .....	68
Research Design.....	68
Implications of Hermeneutic Phenomenology.....	70
Researcher Role in the Study.....	71
Researcher’s Bias.....	71
Confidentiality .....	72
Methodology.....	73
Setting .....	73
Participants.....	73
Recruitment Procedures .....	74
Data Collection .....	77
Semistructured Interviews .....	77
Demographic Data .....	79
Follow-up Meetings .....	79
Journal Notes .....	80
Data Analysis .....	81
Data Analysis for Hermeneutical Phenomenology.....	81
Verification of Trustworthiness .....	84
Credibility .....	84
Transferability.....	84
Dependability.....	85

Confirmability.....	85
Maintaining Confidentiality.....	86
Summary.....	87
Chapter 4: Results.....	89
Research Setting.....	89
Participant Demographics.....	91
Descriptions of Participants.....	94
Data Collection.....	104
Data Analysis.....	108
Themes.....	111
Theme 1: Experiences with Death.....	117
Theme 2: Surviving the Loss.....	123
Theme 3: Changes.....	128
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	143
Results.....	147
Existential Constructs.....	153
Summary.....	154
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	157
Interpretation of Findings.....	158
Theme 1: Experiences with Loss.....	159
Theme 2: Surviving the Loss.....	162
Theme 3: Changes.....	168

Limitations of the Study.....	172
Recommendations.....	173
Positive Social Change .....	176
Ethical Considerations .....	179
Researcher’s Reflection .....	181
Conclusion .....	183
References.....	185
Appendix A: Letter of Cooperation .....	205
Appendix B: Information Letter .....	206
Appendix C: Interview Questions.....	208
Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire.....	210
Appendix E: Debriefing Handout .....	211
Appendix F: Flyer.....	212
Appendix G: ASERVIC Listserv Email .....	213
Appendix H: CESNet Listserv Email .....	214

## List of Tables

Table 1 Participants Demographic Data .....	93
Table 2 Theme 1: Experiences with Death .....	112
Table 3 Theme 2: Surviving the Loss .....	113
Table 4 Theme 3: Changes .....	115

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Hermeneutic circle .....	110
Figure 2. Experiences with death.....	123
Figure 3. Surviving the loss and associated subthemes. ....	124
Figure 4. Change and associated subthemes.....	133
Figure 5. Comprehensive understanding .....	134
Figure 6. Comprehensive understanding of changes in life purpose .....	138
Figure 7. Comprehensive understanding of spirituality as an outcome of changes .....	140
Figure 8. Comprehensive understanding of spirituality as an outcome of type of death, and change in life purpose.....	144

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Experiencing the death of someone can be life changing, especially for late adolescents (Delespaux, Ryckebosch-Dayez, Heeren, & Zech, 2013). Late adolescents are dealing with life transitions such as attending college, joining the military, beginning their first job, and leaving their parents (Liem, Cavell, & Lustig, 2010). Late adolescents are also transitioning into adulthood (Liem et al., 2010). Race, culture, and family upbringing may affect the way adolescents cope with grief and loss; however, because grief is a personal experience, it is expressed in various ways (Haason & Mehta, 2010). An increasing body of scholarly and clinical literature on grief has addressed the use of spirituality as a coping mechanism for children, adolescents, and adults. In my research, I found few studies that specifically addressed the role and meaning of spirituality and grief for the late adolescent. This lack of information presents a gap in the literature with regard to the role of spirituality in the grieving processes of late adolescents. In this study, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the meaning and role of spirituality and spiritual practices for late adolescents experiencing the death of someone they knew.

In this chapter, I discuss the background of the study, present the problem and purpose statements, and introduce the research paradigm and methodology. I also present the research questions and theoretical framework, and explain the nature of the study along with sources of data, trustworthiness of the study, and data analysis techniques. I then present definitions for important terms that could cause confusion, address assumptions about religion and spirituality, and outline the scope, delimitations, and

limitations of the study. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of participant selection and the significance of the study, and a summary of the chapter's key points.

### **Background of the Study**

Working with grieving clients requires counselors to not only be culturally competent, but also to be skilled in using diverse techniques and strategies to help clients reach counseling goals (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). Awareness and knowledge of various counseling interventions and strategies helps counselors establish rapport with clients and individualize treatment approaches. This becomes particularly important when working with a client who has experienced the death of someone he or she knows because culture, family, and personal belief systems will impact how the person grieves (Haason & Mehta, 2010). For some, spirituality may be used to help make meaning out of or cope with someone's death, and for others spirituality may play no role in the grieving process (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey (2011). What remains unknown is the role spirituality plays in the grief responses of late adolescents. This has left a gap of knowledge for counselors who seek to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate treatment for late adolescents in grief recovery.

Adolescence is a transitional time in which biological, cognitive, and social changes continue until adulthood (Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae, 2012). This period includes early, middle, and late stages with age ranges between 10 and 25 years (Baulk, 2011; Liem et al., 2010; Meschke et al., 2012). Late adolescents are individuals between the ages of 18 and 25, and are also described as young and emerging adults (Liem et al., 2010; Taylor, Barker, Heavey, & McHale, 2012). People in this age range are emerging from adolescence to adulthood but have not yet attained the independence or self-

sufficiency associated with being an adult. They are continuously trying to define themselves and are dealing with significant role changes (Liem et al., 2010).

When late adolescents are dealing with significant role changes and they experience the death of someone they know, they may experience shock, numbness, and guilt (Dougy Center, 2014). Additionally, they may experience depression, feelings of hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, anger, anxiety, difficulty eating and sleeping, and academic problems (Dougy Center, 2014). Counselors conducting grief work with the late adolescent population will need to employ counseling strategies and interventions that will help decrease grief symptoms and aid clients in finding healthier means of coping. Exploring the meaning and role of spirituality for late adolescents is important because the information can help counselor educators and supervisors (CES) incorporate spiritual practices in counseling curriculum and teach culturally sensitive, evidence-based grief recovery strategies to counselors in training. The information can also be beneficial to counselors helping clients cope with grief and loss.

### **Problem Statement**

For an adolescent living through the death of someone he or she knew, life can be permanently altered (Delespoux et al., 2013). Counselors are responsible for providing culturally sensitive, individualized treatment to these adolescents (ACA, 2014). Although much research indicates that spirituality plays an important role in grief recovery for many populations (Currier, Mallo, Martinex, Sandy, & Neimeyer, 2013), my review of the literature spanning the past 5 years revealed few research studies that addressed the role of spirituality in helping late adolescents cope with grief and loss. Researchers have suggested a need for additional research, and filling this gap may help counselors provide

culturally sensitive, evidence-based grief counseling for late adolescents (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012; Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the meaning and role of spirituality in the grieving process of late adolescents. The goals of this study were to examine the lived experiences of late adolescents coping with the death of someone they knew, to explore the role spirituality played in their coping process, and to determine whether spiritual practices had helped them find life meaning following the death of someone they knew.

### **Research Questions**

One central question and three subquestions guided this study. My primary question was the following: What are the lived experiences of late adolescents between the ages of 18 and 25 who are coping with the death of someone they know? To develop this question further, I designed the following subquestions: What lived experiences do late adolescents have in using spiritual practices in coping with the death of someone they know? What meanings do late adolescents associate with the role of spirituality when experiencing the death of someone they know? And what role does spirituality play in the grieving process for late adolescents after someone they knew has died?

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Existential Theory**

I used existential theory as the theoretical lens for this study because it focuses on finding life meaning. Existentialism comes from the term *existence*, which comes from the root *ex-sistere*, meaning to stand out or to emerge (May, 1958). Eliason Samide,

Williams, and Lepore (2010) reported that existential theory reunifies the original meaning of psychology with an examination of what is spiritual. Eliason et al. further suggested that existential theory causes individuals to examine their humanity; it means embarking on the journey toward finding meaning in a person's existence, place in the world, and spiritual connection to something higher than him or herself.

Existential theory is grounded in philosophy and theology with the goals of awareness and self-actualization (May & Yalom, 2000). In this study, I sought to consider grief through the existential lens first developed by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Once Kierkegaard and Nietzsche introduced existential thought, additional philosophers and theologians included their beliefs into existential theory such as Heidegger, May, and Yalom (Yalom, 1980). May and Yalom were instrumental in developing existential therapy. Yalom (1980) reported that existential therapists use four major constructs that pertain to creating life meaning and discovering purpose: death, freedom/responsibility, isolation, and meaning. I address each of these constructs in the following sections.

**Death.** May and Yalom (2000) posited that death is the ultimate concern, inasmuch as everyone will die, and death is inescapable. Yalom (1980) held that death plays a major role in a person's internal experience, and this begins in childhood. Yalom also posited that for people to cope with death, defenses emerge causing people to have psychopathology such as anxiety toward death and dying. Death was an important existential construct in my study because I explored participants' experiences regarding coping with the death of someone they knew.

**Freedom and responsibility.** Yalom (1980) suggested that responsibility accounts for a person's existence. Taking a negative attitude toward one's life circumstances can contribute to one's suffering, and with our attitude we take part in our own suffering (Bryant-Frank, 2011; Frankl, 2006). Yalom reported that responsibility involves authorship: that is, a person's awareness of responsibility means that the person takes responsibility to create his or her own self, life predicaments, destiny, feelings, and suffering. Freedom and responsibility helped inform the current study because I was interested in how participants chose to cope with their loss and whether spiritual practices played a role in their experiences. Frankl developed the theory of logotherapy, suggesting that freedom is experienced when people are faced with a tragedy and they choose how to react to it (Bryant-Frank, 2011; Frankl, 2006).

**Isolation.** May and Yalom (2000) reported a difference between interpersonal isolation, intrapersonal isolation, and existential isolation. May and Yalom contended that interpersonal isolation refers to the gulf between oneself and others, intrapersonal isolation refers to being isolated from parts of oneself, and existential isolation is the person's separation between the world and themselves. Yalom (1980) suggested that existential isolation occurs despite enjoyable engagements with others and despite the person's integration of self-knowledge. May and Yalom also posited that every person enters into existence alone and will depart from existence alone.

**Meaninglessness.** Bryant-Frank (2011) reported that meaning occurs when people are able to gain a deeper awareness of themselves and others. Yalom (1980) posited that a person without meaning, goals, values, or ideals can become distressed and not live fully. Yalom reported that existential meaning involves coherence and sense. Yalom further suggested that there are two types of meaning: terrestrial meaning and cosmic meaning. Yalom described terrestrial meaning as a person embracing his or her purpose. Such a person possesses a sense of meaning and experiences life as fulfilling a purpose or goals that he or she accomplishes.

Cosmic meaning, on the other hand, implies some design existing outside of and superior to the person, referring to some magical or spiritual ordering of the universe (Yalom, 1980). Frankl (2006) argued that there are three sources for meaning: work, or doing something significant; love, or caring for another person; and courage, or bravery during difficult times. Frankl also reported that people give meaning to suffering by the way they cope with it. Meaninglessness was an important construct that helped inform the study because I was interested in determining whether participants were able to identify life meaning as terrestrial or cosmic as suggested by Yalom (1980).

Existential theory offered a lens for this qualitative phenomenological study because I was interested in information from the participants that revealed the role of spirituality and spiritual practices not only in their grieving process, but also in their life meaning. The research questions pertained to life meaning and the role of spirituality and spiritual practices during the grieving process following the death of someone the participant knew. The major components of the theory and the reasons why I chose this theoretical approach of this study will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a qualitative phenomenological design for this study. According to Stake (2010), qualitative research is interpretive, experiential, situational, and personal. Researchers employing this design describe the lived experiences of several individuals relating to a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). There are different types of phenomenological research including existential, transcendental, and hermeneutic (Jones, Rodger, Boyd, & Ziviani, 2012). I chose hermeneutic phenomenology as the research design (Jones et al., 2012).

Hermeneutic phenomenology has evolved in many directions from Heidegger's initial philosophy (Jones et al., 2012). Moustakas (1994) offered that hermeneutics involves the art of reading scripts so that the meaning and intention are comprehended fully. Van Manen (1990) and Gee, Loewenthal, and Cayne (2013) suggested that phenomenology can be used to obtain information from people based on the meaning and subjectivity of their experiences.

Researchers employing Heideggerian phenomenology view people's lives as contextual, and that meaningful relationships, activities, and experiences within a family, culture, and time in history must be considered (Jones et al., 2012). Because my study was hermeneutic, I focused on the lived experiences of participants coping with grief and loss symptoms associated with the death of someone they knew. Participants described their lived experiences of coping with grief, their use of spirituality in the grieving process, and the meaning and role spiritual practices played during the grieving process through their personal experiences.

## **Methodology**

I used a homogeneous nonprobability purposive sampling method for this study (Lund Research, 2012). I recruited participants from The Grief Center (TGC), a local university (LU), and a local college (LC). In addition, I recruited participants by advertising via email on Association Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) and CESNet listservs. TGC is a nonprofit organization in a metropolitan area in the Midwest that provides individual grief counseling and structured grief and loss support groups for children, teens, and adults experiencing the death of someone they know. LU and LC are local liberal arts colleges located in a metropolitan area of the Midwest that provide bachelor's and master's level degrees. Participants in this study had to meet the following criteria: having experienced the death of someone they knew, and being 18-25 years old. I met with the directors to discuss the study, including its potential benefits and risks. Part of making entry included asking for a letter of cooperation (Appendix A) to turn in to Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB), granting me permission to select participants at their site and assisting me with recruiting potential participants.

Once Walden's IRB granted approval, I asked the director at the grief center to either mail or email previous clients a recruitment letter that included my informational letter (Appendix B) introducing the study. I also spoke by phone to the director of the counseling center at the local university and the department chair of the counseling department at the local college. In my phone conversations, I asked for permission to post the recruitment flyer in their departments once I received Walden's IRB approval. In

addition, I posted my informational letter and flyer via email on ASERVIC and CESNet listservs.

I discussed the importance of confidentiality with each director and department chair. To protect the identity of potential participants, I included my contact number on the informational letter and flyer. I informed the directors and department chair that potential participants were to contact me directly if they were interested in being in the study and the directors and department chair reported that they understood the confidentiality measures. Once individuals expressed an interest in participating in the study, I contacted them personally, answered any questions they may have had, and scheduled the interviews. Prior to meeting the participants, I informed them that I needed them to sign a written consent form prior to the interview.

I used existential theory to design the interview questions (Appendix C). I asked my dissertation chair and committee member to evaluate each question. Prior to the interviews, I shared informed consent procedures with each participant. After informed consent was granted, I engaged participants in semistructured interviews. Because participants lived locally and out of town, interviews were conducted in person and via phone. For face-to-face interviews, participants completed a demographic questionnaire following the interview (Appendix D). For phone interviews, I emailed the demographic questionnaire and asked participants to complete it and email it back to me on the day of the interview. After obtaining receipt of the demographic questionnaire, I debriefed the participants regarding their thoughts and feelings about the interview. I provided a debriefing handout (Appendix E) for participants to review after they left TGC or after the phone call ended. Prior to ending the face-to-face and phone interviews, I scheduled a

follow-up meeting to check for accuracy of the transcripts. During the face-to-face and via phone follow up meetings, I gave participants their \$10.00 gift card as a token of appreciation for completing the interview. Participation was voluntary, and participants were given the choice to withdraw at any time. There were no consequences if participants chose not to participate or withdraw early from the study; if participants chose not to continue with the study, they still received the \$10.00 gift card. I took notes of observations following the interview process and included observations when analyzing findings.

During data analysis, I assessed the trustworthiness of the study. I enhanced credibility by clarifying my biases, audio recording the interviews using Parrot Voice Recorder (PVR), transcribing audio tapes, conducting member checks, and reviewing data with my chair. I assessed dependability by keeping a journal with observation notes and keeping an audit trail that consisted of the purpose of the study, criteria for participants, data collection procedures and how long it took to collect the data, an explanation of the data analysis, interpretation and presentation of the results, and specific procedures used to determine credibility (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

I assessed confirmability by keeping accurate and comprehensive notes during the study including my biases, shortcomings, and results (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Due to the sampling limitations, the results may not transfer to other populations or other settings. I provided a thorough and concise write-up regarding the nature of the study, theoretical framework, and the assumption, delimitations, and limitations of the study. I included information regarding data collection in the final write-up. If other researchers are interested in the study, they will be able to see the research procedures and methods

so that they can make informed decisions about replicating the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

### **Definition of Terms**

#### *Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling*

*(ASERVIC)*: A division of the American Counseling Association (ACA). ASERVIC is an organization comprising counselors and human development professionals dedicated to integrating spiritual, ethical, and religious values into counseling because these values are believed to be essential to a person's overall development (ASERVIC, 2009).

*Grief*: A reaction to bereavement (Shear, 2012). According to Pomeroy (2011), grief is a "multidimensional experience that results from a significant loss of a person or object" (p. 101). Pomeroy also reported that grief involves the emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioral, spiritual, and social aspects of a person's life. Shear (2012) contended that grief encompasses thoughts, feelings, physiological changes, and behavioral changes that vary over a period of time.

*Grieving process*: Jordan and Litz (2012) contended that the grieving process involves developing a new emotional equilibrium following the death of someone known. Hart (2012) reported that grief is a biological process that has physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual effects. Hart further posited that the grief process varies for everyone.

*Late adolescence*: The transitional period in which people are between 18 and 25 years of age (Balk, 2011; Liem et al., 2010; Meschke et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2012).

*Religion*: The word religion comes from the Latin root *religio*, which means "conscientiousness, sense of right, and scruples" (Eliason et al., 2010, p. 87). Religio can

also refer to a sect, mode of worship, or cult (Eliason et al., 2010). *Religare* is a related word for religion that means to bind or tie up; religion also means to bind people together who share common beliefs (Eliason et al., 2010). Religion involves a set of beliefs that the person takes as his or her own beliefs, including a way for a person to act when coming together with others as a group and when alone (Doka, 2011). Doka (2011) noted that although spirituality may be shaped by a person's religious beliefs, a person's religious affiliation is not the only determining factor for spiritual beliefs.

*Religious practices:* Behaviors that coincide with a person's specific religion. Religious practices include participating in rituals such as attending a formal worship service, praying, and devotional reading, singing spiritual songs, and behaving according to the principles of the religion (Doka, 2010; Koerner, Shirai, & Pedroza, 2013).

*Spirituality:* This word originates from spirit, which comes from the Latin *spiritus* (Eliason et al., 2010). Spiritus means "breath, soul, inspiration, or character" (Eliason et al., 2010, p. 87). For the Hebrew, Roman, and Greek cultures, *spirit* means the breath of life; Western society, the spirit is other than the physical body, that which allows a person to live and be self-aware (Eliason et al., 2010). Spirituality is the essence of a person and is the act of looking for meaning in not only the deepest sense, but also the most authentic (Doka, 2011).

*Spiritual practices:* Behaviors that bring people closer to God or a higher being (Muselman & Wiggins, 2013). Spiritual practices include prayer, meditation, art, journaling, structured writing, and gardening (Lander & Graham-Pole, 2009; Muselman & Wiggins, 2013; Unrhu & Hutchinson, 2011; Wiggins, 2011).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are important in a study because without them the study would be irrelevant and could not exist (Simon, 2011). The terms *religion* and *spirituality*, though often used interchangeably, were not treated the same for the purposes of this study; spirituality referred to a person's essence and existence integrating and transcending the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual dimensions (Chidarikire, 2012). I assumed that the participants would view spirituality and religion as the same. I informed participants of the intended use of the term spirituality. In conducting the interviews, I also assumed that participants would answer the questions honestly based on their personal experiences with grief and loss.

Existential theorists contend that people are on a journey to find life meaning through awareness (May & Yalom, 2000). I assumed existential theory was an appropriate framework for this study because participants discussed the death of someone they knew and the spiritual practices they used to find meaning. Existential theory can be used to explain how a person creates life meaning and discovers life purpose (Eliason et al., 2010). In conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study, I assumed that participants had lived experiences coping with the death of someone they knew.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

For this study, I focused on the late adolescent population who were between 18 and 25 years old. I did not explore younger and older populations because the goals of this study were to examine the lived experiences of late adolescents in coping with the death of someone they know, to explore the role spirituality played in their coping

process, and to determine whether spiritual practices helped them find life meaning following the death of someone they knew.

Sampling and sample size were additional delimitations in this study. I used homogeneous sampling from TGC, LU, and LC in the Midwest as well as ASERVIC and CESNet listservs because I was interested in interviewing participants between the ages of 18 and 25 who had experienced the death of someone they knew. I selected seven participants for the study. Six were Caucasian and one was Hispanic. One participant was male and six were female. Transferability may be limited by the sample size (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were limitations to the trustworthiness of the study. A limitation in transferability included the results not being transferable to other settings. To mitigate this limitation, I produced a clear and concise write-up of the procedures; if another researcher wants to replicate the study, adequate information will be given (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Another limitation included the audio recorder and computer program not working on the day of the interviews. I addressed this limitation by checking the audio recorder and software to ensure that they were working properly prior to the start of interviewing and coding.

### **Significance**

The current study is significant to the counseling profession in that the outcomes will add to the existing body of knowledge regarding spirituality and adolescents. I sought to identify the role spirituality and spiritual practices played in the grieving process of late adolescents. Because spirituality is considered a factor in mental health,

the outcomes from this study may be important to counselors addressing the spiritual needs of their clients (Koenig, 2010). Furthermore, the results may promote social change through helping counselors working in grief counseling learn new approaches to addressing grief and loss issues (Muselman & Wiggins, 2012). The findings may provide additional insight for treatment providers, may inform grief interventions, and may lead to changes that could assist late adolescents who are coping with grief and loss.

Additionally, the Association of Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC, 2009), a division of the ACA, noted that counselors are able to address the spiritual and religious needs of clients within ethical boundaries. ASERVIC recommends competencies counselors should demonstrate when working with clients who wish to incorporate their religious and spiritual beliefs during counseling. Findings from this study may help counselors meet competency standards established by ASERVIC.

In addition, social change may be facilitated with counselors working in various settings including mental health agencies, schools, colleges, and universities. Counselors working in these settings may help grieving clients and students learn effective ways of reducing their grief symptoms. Results from this study may also provide information for counselor educators to include in classes on spirituality and counseling in counseling program curricula (Shaw, Bayne, & Lorelle, 2012).

The outcomes of this study have the potential to strengthen advocacy efforts to inform counselors and CES of the importance of incorporating spiritual practices when training counselors and when working with clients. Advocacy efforts, according to Lee and Rodgers (2009), include professional and moral responsibilities in bringing awareness to the public, social, cultural, and economic difficulties that have a negative

effect on psychosocial development. Findings from this study may be used to advocate for the inclusion of spirituality and spiritual practices within existing counselor curricula and to inform counselors of additional treatment interventions in working with grieving counseling clients.

Many researchers in recent years, including Ando et al. (2010) and Koszycki, Raab, Aldosary, and Bradwejn (2010), have studied spirituality as an effective means of coping with psychological disorders in general, including major depression, anxiety, and overall psychological well-being. Kelley and Chan (2012), Malcom (2011), and Muselman and Wiggins (2012) wrote about the usefulness of spiritual practices to help children, adolescents, and adults deal with grief and loss. Likewise, Hibberd Elwood, and Galovski (2010) wrote about the effectiveness of spiritual practices to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Timmons (2012) posited that spiritual practices are helpful in promoting sobriety, as people may turn to alcohol in times of grief and loss.

With regard to adolescents in particular, Muselman and Wiggins (2012) explored the use rituals, art therapy, and journaling as ways for adolescents to cope with grief and loss. Sylter (2012) also reported the success of spiritual practices in helping adolescent clients cope with grief and loss. In addition, scholars have researched the use of spirituality in helping adolescents build resiliency and recover from trauma. Researchers concluded that spirituality is useful in helping clients make meaning of their lives and find additional ways to cope with their symptoms, and additional research should be conducted pertaining to adolescents, spirituality, spiritual practices, and grief and loss (Ando et al., 2010; Bryant-Davis et al., 2012; Koszycki et al., 2010; Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011).

Some counselors working with the late adolescent population are unaware of the importance of developing treatment goals aligned with clients' spiritual beliefs (Bryant et al., 2012; Muselman & Wiggins, 2012). I conducted this study to expand the existing literature regarding spirituality and spiritual practice and inform counselors and counselor educators regarding current culturally sensitive, evidence-based practice.

### **Summary**

Counselors working with the late adolescent population may experience clients dealing with grief and loss and may wish to use spiritual practices in helping clients cope with the loss. Counselors need to address clients' spiritual beliefs in their treatment planning process (ASERVIC, 2009). Although there is a growing interest regarding mental health and spirituality, and researchers are conducting more studies regarding mental health issues and the usefulness of spiritual practices in coping, little is known about the role of spirituality in late adolescent grief recovery. Results from this study have the potential to inform counselors and other mental health professionals of the role spirituality plays in the grieving processes for late adolescents.

Using a hermeneutic phenomenological design, I explored the lived experiences of late adolescents relating to the death of someone they know. I used existential theory as the framework for the study and selected seven participants to take part in semistructured interviews discussing their experiences of grief and loss. In Chapter 2, I present an exhaustive review of literature pertaining to existential theory and current research on late adolescents, grief and loss, and spirituality.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

For adolescents living through the death of someone they know, life can be permanently altered (Delespoux et al., 2013). Counselors are responsible for providing culturally sensitive, individualized treatment to these adolescents (ACA, 2014). Although much research indicates that spirituality plays an important role in grief recovery for many populations (Currier et al., 2013), my review of scholarly literature published in the past 5 years revealed few studies that specifically explored the role spirituality plays in helping late adolescents cope with grief and loss. In the literature on spirituality, grief and loss, and the late adolescent population, scholars have suggested that additional research is needed (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012; Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011) because this gap presents a problem for counselors seeking to provide culturally sensitive, evidence-based grief counseling.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the meaning and role of spirituality in the grieving process of late adolescents. My goals for this study were to examine the lived experiences of late adolescents coping with the death of someone they knew, to explore the role spirituality played in their coping process, and to determine whether spiritual practices helped them find life meaning following the death of someone they knew.

In Chapter 2, I offer an exhaustive review of scholarly literature that I found using the EBSCO databases including Academic Search Complete, Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUES, and SocINDEX with full text. I also used Sage Journals and the Thoreau Database advanced search engine, as well as books and the Internet. In this chapter, I also review existential

theory, including a discussion of how this theory served as the lens for the study and how it pertains to working with grief and loss. Further, I provide an exploration of the counselor competencies established by ASERVIC for using clients' spiritual and religious beliefs when working with clients experiencing grief and loss symptoms.

In addition, I review the current literature regarding mental health and spirituality, including how spirituality is used as a way of coping with life's difficulties. I evaluate literature pertaining to late adolescents, grief and loss, and spirituality, including how grief symptoms affect the developmental stages in the cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I employed the EBSCOhost system to find relevant articles, and used it to generate lists of current scholarly articles regarding late adolescence, grief, loss, spirituality, and existential theory. The EBSCOhost system is an online reference system that offers a variety of full-text databases from leading information providers (EBSCO, 2014). I structured the searches to include information from peer-reviewed journals, textbooks, and appropriate Internet websites. I limited the results to include peer-reviewed journal articles and books published within the last 5 years, with the exception of primary texts relevant to the study. In cases where there was not a large amount of literature, I searched topically and theoretically similar studies.

Key words and phrases that I used in the search included the following:

*adolescents, late adolescents, young adult, college students, grief and loss, sorrow, religion, religious practices, spirituality, spiritual practices, psycho social development, late adolescent development and grief, existential, existential theory, phenomenology,*

*and hermeneutic phenomenology, purposive sampling, homogenous population, phenomenological interviewing, saturation, grief and adolescent, grief and loss and late adolescent, grief and loss and spirituality, grief and loss and spirituality not religion, grief and loss and college students, grief and spirituality and college students, grief and loss and young adults, grief, spirituality, young adults and grief and loss and sorrow, and young adults and grief and loss and spirituality.* Additional key words and phrases included *Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, May, Yalom, Frankl, Heidegger, spirituality and existential theory, grief and loss and existential theory, existential theory and adolescents, existential grief and teens, existential theory and phenomenological, hermeneutic phenomenology, and existential and grief.* After conducting the EBSCO searchers, I used the same phrases and key words with the other search engines listed above.

### **Theoretical Framework: Existential Theory**

Existential theory was the theoretical framework for the study. An understanding of existential theory is important to this study because it facilitates a theoretical focus on helping clients create meaning and find purpose—one of the main struggles that people face when a loved one dies. Existential theory is grounded in philosophy, suggesting that meaning and purpose are the focus of life’s journey; existential theory helps refocus attention on the present moment of life and on living rather than on the end of life (Eliason et al., 2010). The goals of existential theory consist of awareness and self-actualization (Eliason et al., 2010; May & Yalom, 2000). In the following section, I address existential theory including its key theorists and use in previous studies.

## **Philosophers and Theologians of Existential Theory**

Post World War II, existentialism emerged in Europe as citizens were looking at their current hardships (Bryant-Frank, 2011). Philosophers during this time were developing and sharing their perspectives regarding these hardships after the war. There were various approaches to existentialism and numerous philosophers and theologians who made their contributions to existential theory (Eliason et al., 2010; May & Yalom, 2000). Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were two key figures who began existentialism and theorized existence without presuming essence (Bryant-Frank, 2011). Below I discuss these two key figures that helped shape existentialism.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were earlier philosophers who contributed to existential theory. Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher who believed existence means being ethical and being human is a task because humans can fail and do the wrong thing; however, humans can embrace the task because it leads them to live in an ethical manner according to their existence (Odde, 2011). Kierkegaard was also a theologian who argued that to live a life of faith means that the person exists in a constant state of change and development in which he or she is striving to become a Christian (Nowachek, 2014).

Nietzsche's views on existential theory differed from Kierkegaard's. Nietzsche was a German philosopher focused human subjectivity. Subjectivity for Nietzsche referred to the soul, ego, or will (Cox, 1999). Nietzsche looked at how morals and values impact human experiences. Nietzsche believed that values provide symbolic meaning to each person, and people have their own set of values that inspire and provide meaning (Sullivan, 2013). Kierkegaard believed in God; however, Nietzsche believed that people

must develop their identity through self-realization and not relying on God or a soul (Wilkerson, n.d.).

Because many theologians and philosophers have contributed to existentialism, I focus on Heidegger, May, Yalom, and Frankl in the next sections.

**Heidegger.** Heidegger, another German existential philosopher, believed that people understand existence in two ways: (a) taking situations that have happened to them and (b) understanding their ability to identify, define, and categorize these situations (Pontuso, 2014). Heidegger (1962) was interested in the ontology of being. He posited that all human beings experience being and time, which he called *dasein*, or being in the world. Heidegger had different philosophical ideas than Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Heidegger believed conscienceness is a part of essence. Consciousness leads people to have individuality and causes the person to face what is authentic and not feel guilty (Watson, 2014). Watson (2014) further contended that Heidegger believed people are in charge of themselves in being in the world. Heidegger (1962) argued that being is the person's essence until he or she is no longer alive. What people choose to do between life and death is up to them.

**May.** May was a North American psychologist instrumental in existential therapy. May brought existentialism to the United States (Bryant, 2011). May was a theologian who attended seminary school and admired the work of Tillich, another theologian and German existentialist (Rabinowitz, Good, & Cozad, 1989). May believed in God and believed that God is the basis of meaning and being. May further contended that people have to learn how to live in an antagonistic world in which they are alone and will die (Rabinowitz et al., 1989). In relating to death and dying, May (1960) experienced

tuberculosis and spent a year and a half in a sanatorium. While in the sanatorium, he experienced anxiety pertaining to his own mortality. May, like Kierkegaard, believed that anxiety is the struggle of life against death.

**Yalom.** Yalom is a North American psychiatrist instrumental in existentialism in the United States. Unlike May, Yalom does not believe in God. Yalom (1997) described himself as a practicing atheist. Yalom (2002) suggested that existential psychotherapy and religion are different yet have some “common mission to minister to the intrinsic despair of the human condition” (p. 301).

Yalom (1980) believed that existential theory focuses on concerns in human existence consisting of death, freedom and responsibility, isolation, and meaninglessness. Death, according to Yalom, is the ultimate concern, and it plays a major role in a person’s internal experience. Yalom (1980) further contended freedom means that individuals are responsible as the authors of their own world, life design, choices, and actions. May and Yalom (2000) reported that individuals possess the freedom to be authentic, but it requires that they confront the limitations of their destiny. Isolation is another ultimate concern according to the existential school of thought. Yalom (1980) suggested that existential isolation differs from other concepts of isolation in that no matter how closely individuals relate to one another, there is a final unbridgeable gap; everyone enters existence alone and must depart from it alone. With regard to meaninglessness as the fourth ultimate concern for the existentialist, May and Yalom (2000) reported that life meaning becomes a concern for individuals when they begin to question their existence. Thought processes include questioning life meaning and purpose and how a person should live. May and Yalom reported that to obtain a sense of life meaning, people begin

to develop schemas that generate the importance of values. May and Yalom also posited that values are the blueprint for how people conduct their lives because values tell people not only why they should live, but also how they should live.

**Frankl.** Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist instrumental in existentialism. Frankl developed an existential analysis, logotherapy, or logos (meaning) and therapie (healing). Logotherapy means healing through meaning (Frankl, 2006; Ponsaran, 2007). Frankl (2006) believed that the primary motivational force in humanity is finding life meaning. Frankl also believed that to find meaning, it is important to understand the spiritual person. Frankl believed that humans have three existential characteristics consisting of being indivisible, complete, and unique (Reitinger, 2015). Reitinger (2015) further contended that because Frankl believed in the existential characteristics, parents cannot create the spiritual person. Because the essence or a spiritual person is already present, sexual reproduction does not create the essence of a person. Meaning occurs in the connection between existence and essence. Frankl believed that people can arrive at meaning by creating work, experiencing something new, and experiencing something or encountering something.

### **Creating Meaning**

Creating meaning is a fundamental construct in existential theory. Creating meaning is a personal choice. People create personal meaning for their lives, and individuals must take responsibility for their actions in discovering meaning (Eliason et al., 2010). Stelter (2014) reported that people attribute particular values to acts, experiences, and interactions with others personally and professionally. Stelter further suggested that making meaning is based on previous experiences and hope for the future;

therefore, the experience of the death of someone they knew during late adolescence would provide a prime opportunity for an individual to make meaning for life. Searching for meaning can be challenging during adolescence. Researchers such as Brassai, Piko, and Stegar (2012) reported that the search for meaning at pivotal times during adolescence can support psychological well-being. Brassai et al. found that when difficult situations arose, adolescents began to evaluate and search for authenticity, which caused them to explore life meaning. Brassai et al. further contended that searching for life meaning owing to difficult existential circumstances led to psychological growth. According to Brassai et al. (2012), managing life and engaging in a journey to find meaning may be an important part of daily life for adolescents. During the journey, life meaning becomes a concern for individuals when they begin to question their own existence (May & Yalom, 2000).

### **Existential Theory**

Researchers have used existential theory in studies addressing meaning, purpose, and spirituality. Existential theory was the theoretical lens for this study in which I examined the role spirituality played in helping grieving late adolescents find meaning following the death of someone they knew. In exploring studies pertaining to existential theory and spirituality, I found researchers providing rich details about existential theory and its use in identifying the role spirituality plays in their lives (Eliason et al., 2010). Eliason et al. (2010) and Gatewood (2010) reported that the use of existential theory in counseling settings has been instrumental in client care. Gatewood added that existential theory can be used as a model for spiritual care for patients experiencing anticipatory grief. Gatewood specifically used Frankl's logotherapy in teaching pastors about creating

meaning in spiritual care in his study on anticipatory grief. Gatewood suggested that the purpose of study was to propose a model for spiritual care based on existential philosophy, theology, and psychology. Gatewood further contended that the spiritual care model may provide parishioners a way work through their anxieties with a sense of life meaning that will give them courage for living. The author reported that he used the Purpose in Life Test as a measurement during pre-test and post-test because this measurement complimented the work of Frankl. The assessment consisted of 20 questions in three parts. The author reported that the measurement was given individually and in a small group to seven participants. Gatewood reported that there was a positive effect when pastors could relate to a sense of meaning regarding anticipatory grief. A strength of the study included useful background information regarding existential theory, more specifically the work of Frankl and logotherapy. Weaknesses included the author not giving details about the procedures of the study including research method and design. Too, the author did not discuss participant selection, age of participants, and the results in a clear and concise manner thus making it difficult to understand how he came up with the results.

Some late adolescents are parents. In reviewing the literature, I found researching existential theory as it pertained to parents who lost a child due to death important to explore and whether or not spirituality played a role in grief and loss. Lichtenthal, Currier, Neimeyer, and Keese (2010) used existential theory in studies pertaining to grief, loss, and spirituality in working with parents whose children had died. Lichtenthal et al. conducted a mixed methods study. The authors reported that the purpose of their study was to identify themes of meaning making among bereaved parents and examine

associations of these themes to the severity of grief symptomatology. The authors sampled 156 bereaved parents who responded in writing to open-ended questions pertaining to sense making and finding benefit. The participants' age range was 23-77 years old. 81% of participants were mothers and ethnically, 93% were Caucasian, 4% African American, and 3% were Hispanic/Latino and biracial. Children's deaths were caused by either miscarriage or stillbirth (6%); natural anticipation such as cancer (12%); natural sudden such as heart attack (20%); accident (45%); suicide (11%); and homicide (6%).

The authors reported that they assessed normal grief symptoms with the measurement Core Bereavement Items, and maladaptive grief symptoms with the Inventory of Complicated Grief measure. Additional measurements included qualitative questions pertaining to benefit finding. The authors asked participants, "Despite the loss, have you been able to find any benefit from your experience of the loss? If so, please, in a brief paragraph, describe the benefits you have found" (p. 797). In addition, participants wrote answers to open-ended questions pertaining to Sense Making measure. The researchers reported that the aim of the study was a follow-up and expansion to an earlier study that contributed to the process of grief severity in bereaved parents conducted by Keesee, Currier, and Neimeyer in 2008. The authors reported that during qualitative analysis the data revealed 45% of the sample could not make sense of their loss and 21% could not identify any benefits related to their experiences with loss. According to the authors, the parents that could not identify any benefits with their loss had more severe normative and maladaptive grief symptoms. Lichtenthal et al. found that the parents discussed 32 distinct approaches in finding meaning in their child's death in which 14 of

these approaches involved sense making and 18 involved themes of benefit finding. Lichenthal et al. further suggested that the most common sense-making themes included spirituality and religious beliefs, and the most common benefit-finding themes included an increase in the desire to help others and show compassion for others' suffering. Data analysis included content coding from open-ended sense-making and benefit-finding responses. The authors organized words and phrases into meaning units, which were segments of participants' responses that captured a distinct aspect of the meaning-making process. Quantitative data analysis included using hierarchical multivariate regressions to determine the themes associated with Complicated Grief Inventory scores and the ICG scores, along with the Prolonged Grief Disorder. Strengths of the study included the authors providing information about spirituality and religion being conduits for participants in making sense out of their losses and an increase in the desire to help others who are suffering. A weakness of the study included lack of diverse population. The majority of participants were Caucasian and female.

In an effort to assess which aspects of spirituality adolescents' value, Bussing, Foller-Mancini, Gidley, and Heusser (2010) used existential and cognitive theories as the lens for their study regarding the interconnection between life satisfaction and self-centeredness. The authors conducted a quantitative study where they surveyed 900 participants between the ages of 17 and 18 years old. Participants came from 11 Christian academic high schools in Germany and 73% were female and 27% males. In addition, 61% of participants identified themselves as Catholic and 31% Protestant. The authors used measures to aid in data collecting that consisted of Aspects of Spirituality, Life Satisfaction, General Self-Efficacy, and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale. The authors

conducted a statistical analysis using cross-tabulation, descriptive ANOVA, and stepwise regression analysis (Bussing et al., 2010). The authors found the existential theme of meaning became prevalent in the study. The authors also found differential patterns of the altruistic/helping attitudes with respect to distinct aspects of spirituality. In addition, authors reported that the best predictors of the ideal to help consisted of compassion/generosity, conscious interactions, and religious orientation. Male gender was a negative predictor. Also, authors reported that participants revealed a longing to be guided, sheltered, and beloved by a transcendental being that provided meaning and direction for their complicated lives. A strength included the authors making a distinction between participants' use of spirituality and altruistic helping and finding meaning. Weaknesses included the authors did not examine from secular universities. The results may differ with participants who participate in a religion other than Christianity. There are Christian adolescents who attend secular schools. The results may differ with a more diverse population.

As demonstrated by the literature above, existential theory has contributed to our understanding of how people make meaning of their lives and how to cope with difficult life circumstances. Likewise, existential theory and spirituality have also been utilized to help others make sense of and find meaning to difficult life circumstances, build resiliency, and develop effective coping skills. What is known is that existential theory has been explored by previous researchers who conducted studies exploring and examining peoples' perceptions about their spirituality and difficult life circumstances. In this study, I used existential theory as a framework to explore the specific role spirituality played in grief and loss and in finding meaning. The current study benefitted from

previous research on existentialism because these studies helped inform research questions, interview questions and chosen methodology. In the next section, I address the research method and design for the current study and current literature as it pertained to grief and loss, spirituality, and adolescents.

### **Literature on Grief and Loss, Spirituality, and Adolescents**

The present study was a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study. I was concerned with participants' lived experiences with grief and loss; how spirituality played a role in their coping process, and to find out if spiritual practices helped them find life meaning following the death of someone they knew. In reviewing the literature, I began by looking for research methodology and design for qualitative studies previously conducted pertaining to grief and loss, spirituality, and adolescents. In the next section, I addressed the current literature as it pertains to previous qualitative research. The information obtained from the next section helped inform this study.

### **Qualitative Research Studies**

Researchers employing qualitative research take an inductive approach to exploring and understanding the meaning associated with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). In the process of exploring and understanding meaning, qualitative researchers may choose from five different research designs consisting of phenomenology, case study, grounded theory, ethnography, and narrative (Creswell, 2014). In reviewing the literature, there were few studies that focused specifically on adolescents, spirituality, grief and loss from the different research designs.

**Case study and grounded theory.** Muselman and Wiggins (2012) conducted a qualitative study using a case study research design in exploring an adolescent's

experience with grief and loss and spirituality. What the authors learned was that spiritual practices may be beneficial to clients in making meaning of their loss. Raftopoulous and Bates (2011) also used qualitative research methodology; however these authors used grounded theory as their research design in exploring spirituality, grief and loss, and adolescents. Raftopoulous and Bates found that spirituality can be used in helping adolescents cope with grief and build resiliency. In addition, Raftopoulous and Bates further contended that spirituality fosters resilience by,

providing a sense of protection, comfort and security through relationship with higher power, the opportunity for increased self-awareness and self-efficacy through connection with the inner self and a sense of coherence, purpose and optimism from the belief that everything happens for a reason (p. 163).

I will in greater detail later in the chapter discuss studies conducted by Muselman and Wiggins (2012) and Raftopoulous and Bates (2011) along with the findings, strengths, and weakness of their studies.

**Phenomenology.** Benavidas (2012) conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study in which the researcher asked 14 adolescents about their lived experiences pertaining to the use of spirituality in the context of domestic violence. Eleven participants were female and three were males. Seven participants were Hispanic, six African American and one Caucasian. The ages of the participants were from 13-16 years old. In this study, Benavidas queried participants about how they used spirituality to help them through difficult times in order to obtain an answer to the following research question: “In what ways does spirituality serve as a protective factor for adolescents exposed to domestic violence?” (Benavidas, 2012, p. 167). The authors asked participants

about spirituality and if it has made them stronger as they go through difficult times and whether it has given them hope for the future. There were four themes that emerged from the data that consisted of learning from experiences, self-expression, beliefs, and feelings. Findings included that spirituality emerged as a strength and a protectant factor for at-risk adolescents. Strengths of the article included background information about domestic violence and information regarding themes and spirituality emerging as a result.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

In taking a look at the current literature, there have been different approaches to how previous researchers explored late adolescents, grief and loss, and spirituality; however, few researchers have utilized hermeneutic phenomenology in conducting studies pertaining to late adolescents, grief and loss, and spirituality. A hermeneutic phenomenological research method and design were meaningful to the study because existing scholarly articles do not include a study where researchers have specifically asked participants about the meaning and role spiritual practices play in their grieving process. I found few studies that focused on participants' lived experiences and the use of spirituality or spiritual practices to help with other life stressors (Lyness, 2013; Muselman & Wiggins, 2012; Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011).

Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce (2011) suggested that a hermeneutic phenomenological design is concerned with capturing people's subjective lived experiences and interpretations. Reiter et al. characterized phenomenological research as a collaborative effort between the researcher and participants that answers how-and-what questions in order to arrive at the core of the phenomenon being studied. Researchers should then be able to identify meaning or themes based on the responses to questions from the

phenomenological interview data (Reiter et al., 2011). In the next section, I discuss studies pertaining to late adolescence, grief and loss and spirituality.

### **Late Adolescence**

Late adolescence is a developmental stage people go through when they are transitioning into adulthood. Because late adolescents are emerging from adolescence to adulthood, and typically between the ages of 18-25 they are continuously trying to define themselves and to deal with significant role changes (Balk, 2011; Liem et al., 2010). Grief and loss may have an impact on late adolescents. Previous researchers have explored the impact grief has on the development phase of late adolescence and the usefulness of spirituality in helping adolescents cope with difficult life events and find meaning (Balk, 2011; Briggs, Akos, Czyszczo, & Eldridge, 2011; Herberman, Mash, Fullerton, & Ursano, 2013; Johnson, 2010). Previous researchers have also explored the impact of grief and loss on college students and the types of loss college students may experience as well as foster resiliency (Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Hedman, 2012; Walker et al., 2011). In the next section, I address these studies along with the findings, strengths and weaknesses.

### **Development and Grief**

Grief can impact the developmental stage of late adolescence. Researchers have explored the impact on grief as late adolescents emerge into adulthood. Herberman et al. (2013) contended that during this transitional stage of late adolescence or emerging adult people in this developmental stage manage different developmental challenges as adolescents and adults. Heberman et al. suggested that experiencing a loss during this developmental time period may impact identity formation. As a means to better

understand grief and loss and young adults, Herberman et al. conducted a quantitative study that examined the association between loss and relationship quality with complicated grief, depression, somatic symptoms, and world assumptions for young adults. The purpose of the study was to have a better understanding of loss and young adults. The authors selected 107 participants between the ages of 17-29 years old who either bereaved or have not experienced a loss. The authors reported that out of the 107 participants who had experienced bereavement, 66 reported that they had lost a close friend and seven lost a sibling within the past three years. The authors of the study found that 19% of young adults met the criteria for complicated grief and 31% had depression from mild to severe. Participants who lost a sibling were more likely to have complicated grief, depression, and somatic symptoms than those who had lost a friend. In addition, the authors found that participants who had lost a sibling reported having a lower sense of meaningfulness and benevolence of the world and self-worth in comparison to those who lost a close friend and or who have not experienced loss. The authors of the study reported that complicated grief and depression are common among grieving young adults. In addition, the authors reported that sibling loss is distressing due to their relationship with their sibling and is associated with increased psychological and physical symptoms after the loss of sibling. Strengths of the study included important information about complicated grief and the effects of prolonged grief. Another strength entailed the authors providing information regarding attachment styles and how attachment also impacts the grieving process. Although the authors discussed treating complicated grief, the authors did not discuss viable treatment options or modalities. Even though the data supported complicated grief being more prevalent with bereaved siblings, a weakness included a

lack of information regarding the effects of grief and loss on young adults who lost a friend.

Like Herberman et al. (2013), Balk (2011) also suggested that bereavement affects adolescent development. Balk wrote an article presenting information linking adolescence and bereavement through the work of Fleming and Adolph (1986). The purpose of this article was to examine central concepts that are useful to understanding issues in adolescent bereavement. The author further contended, in using Fleming and Adolph's model, one can examine the effects of bereavement as early, middle, and late adolescents cope with tasks, conflicts, and core issues that are common to adolescent maturation. Balk suggested that the effects of grief and loss on adolescents can impact their lives physically, cognitively, emotionally, interpersonally, behaviorally, and spiritually. Physically, adolescents may have body aches, reduced energy, trouble eating and sleeping, and a weakened immune system. Balk also observed that cognitively, images of the person who died may intrude on their consciousness, thus causing them to have difficulty focusing. Emotionally, late adolescents may experience anger, fear, and guilt. Interpersonally, adolescents experiencing grief and loss may experience changes in their interpersonal relationships with peers and may find it difficult to maintain routines. Finally, Balk found that spiritually, adolescents may face questions about meaning, and questions regarding their belief in God.

Strengths of the article included comprehensive background of bereavement for early, middle, and late adolescence and its effect of maturation. The author linked each stage of adolescent development along with core issues in bereavement and provided possible cognitive, behavioral, and affective responses to bereavement based on the core

issues, tasks, and conflicts. The author discussed spirituality and the effects of bereavement from early, middle, and late adolescents. Balk presented information from literature reviews and not from conducting the study therefore he did not present information on procedures from research and if the findings are transferable to different populations. Death can impact the development stage for late adolescents left behind to grief and the loss. As late adolescents emerge into adulthood, some attend college. When adolescents experience the death of someone while in college, the grieving process may affect matriculation and overall psychological well-being. Next, I will discuss literature pertaining to the grief and college students.

### **The Impact of Grief on College Students**

Undergraduate college students are typically between the ages of 18 and 25; therefore, addressing the implications of grief and loss to college students is important in this study because some participants may be attending college or had to drop out of college due to grief symptoms. College students are within the age group of late adolescents and emerging adults (Walker et al., 2011). Balk et al. (2010) reported that approximately 39% of college students who are between the ages of 18 and 23 have experienced the death of someone they know within the last 2 years.

Though some colleges offer support networks for grieving students, students may choose to participate in these services or not (Balk, 2011). According to Walker et al., (2011) current literature is providing more insight into the implications of loss owing to death in the realms of education, peer relationships, and the construction of meaning among college students. When a college student experience the death of someone they

know, they risk not reaching their full potential because they may do poorly academically, drop out, or be expelled (Balk et al., 2010).

Grief and loss may not only affect a college student academically as previously presented by Balk (2011), Balk et al., (2010), Walker et al., (2011), but also physically and mentally as presented by Hedman (2012). Hedman reported that if college students experience the death of someone they know within the first year of college, the grief and loss process can affect the student's physical and mental health, with such symptoms as sleep disturbances, lack of energy, problems remembering and focusing, and preoccupation with thoughts of the person that died. Students may also experience depression, anxiety, and guilt. As Hedman noted, these symptoms can affect students' overall academic success and, thus, their eventual academic aspirations. College counselors providing mental health services on college campuses need to be aware of the negative consequences of not addressing the symptoms associated with grief and loss. Finally, Hedman advised that college faculty, advisors, and student support services should be available for students experiencing grief and loss. Next, I detail studies pertaining to college students, grief and loss including findings, strengths and weakness.

Balk et al., (2010) replicated Balk's quantitative study regarding the prevalence and severity of bereavement in college undergraduates. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and the PG-13 measurement that is the shortened form of the Inventory for Traumatic Grief. The authors used stratified random sampling to assess the prevalence and severity of bereavement in college undergraduates, providing an advance over findings that emerge from convenience sampling methods or from anecdotal observations. In previous research, Balk utilized convenience sampling as his method of

obtaining participants. He indicated that 22% to 30% of college students were within 12 months of having experienced the death of a family member or friend. The authors reported using an ethnically diverse sample of 118 participants. Participants had to indicate if they either experienced a death 12 or 24 months prior to the study. The authors found that two of the students who bereaved 12 months prior to the study had prolonged grief disorder. The authors found that there are a significant amount of bereaved college students at any time and these results confirmed the previous estimates of the prevalence rate and the need for university assistance in helping bereaved students. The authors included diverse types of losses participants experienced including pets, physical function, jobs, material goods, cherished ideals, self-respect, ability, and interpersonal relationships. A weakness of the study was the focus on one specific geographic location.

Walker et al. (2011) conducted a quantitative study that examined college student bereavement specifically at a Christian university. The authors measured the sex of the participants, year in school, and closeness to the deceased in terms of academic and mental health outcomes and resources utilized. The authors reported that the rationale for the study was to broaden the empirical base of college student bereavement by exploring the basic factors associated with bereavement experiences among students attending a Christian university and place findings in bereavement literature. Authors reported that 442 students participated in their study and 197 were bereaved if they reported experiencing the death of a family member or friend within the past 2 years. The authors reported that the age range of participants were between 18-23 years old in which 77% were females out of the 195 bereaved. The authors reported that 27% of the participants were freshman, 28% sophomores, 24% juniors, and 21% seniors. Approximately 65% of

the students reported that they were white and 21% were African American. No other racial category exceeded 5% of the sample. The authors further contended that 72% indicated that the death of their family member or friend resulted from an illness; meanwhile, approximately 18% indicated that the death resulted from an accident, 4% reported being unsure of the cause of death, 3% indicated homicidal death, 1% indicated suicidal death, and 2% marked other. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, the Bereaved College Student Experience Survey (BCSES) and the Survivor Needs Assessment Survey. The authors found that the females in the study reported more mental health problems when they experienced the death of someone close to them. In addition, the authors found that seniors were less likely than first year students to use family and religion as a personal support. Also, the authors found that when the death occurred of someone close to the participant, he or she experienced additional mental health problems and negative social outcomes without using more resources. Strengths of the study included information regarding participants' ability to connect the relationship with the deceased and the grieving process. Additional strengths included implication for Christian colleges and future studies. Although this study pertained to Christian students, the authors did not discuss whether or not participants utilized their faith to help them cope with their loss.

Hedman (2012) conducted a quantitative study involving 371 undergraduate students and assessed their comfort levels discussing death with faculty. Hedman suggested that the purpose of the study was to understand the role that faculty play as a referral source and support for students. Hedman reported that the information from the study will help higher education institutions understand that students view faculty

members as a resource to use in bereavement. The author asked students questions pertaining to their comfort levels in discussing death with faculty and faculty's likelihood to provide accommodations to grieving students and perceived empathy of faculty members. Students completed the Student Survey on Grief Issues. Participants had to complete 53 items, and there was a space at the end of the questionnaire for students to provide comments. The author found that 30% of students reported being comfortable discussing death with a professor and 37% reported feeling comfortable talking with an advisor. In addition, the author found that 40% of participants stated that faculty members were empathetic. Students perceived professors were more likely to provide accommodations closer to the date of death than later on. A strength included information about the benefit of talking to college faculty following the death of someone. The author sampled participants from one university. Results may be different for students who attend a different university.

Consequences for not dealing with grief and loss can have serious implications for college students including dropping out, failing academically, as well as experiencing mental health and physical health concerns (Balk et al., 2010; Hedman, 2012; Walker et al., 2011). College students need to be able to talk to someone about their feelings after experiencing the death of someone they know (Hedman, 2012). In the studies previously conducted, college students experienced the death of someone with whom they shared a close bond. Researchers have studied the effects of death including the cause of death, coping with loss, and the relationship the person had with the deceased loved one (Bagge, Lamis, Nadorff, & Osman 2014; Johnson, 2010; Lyness, 2013; Mauk, 2011; Muselman & Wiggins, 2012; Nemours Foundation, 2012; Paris, Carter, Day, & Armsworth, 2009;

Wolchik, Coxe, Tein, Sandler, & Ayers, 2009; Wolfelt, n.d.; Zinzow, Rheingold, Hawkins, Saunders, & Kilpatrick, 2009; ). In the next section, I discuss studies exploring the relationship with the deceased and its impact on the grieving process of the late adolescent. I will also discuss studies pertaining to the effect the cause of death has on the grieving process and ways of coping with the loss along with findings, strengths, and weaknesses.

### **Relationship with the Deceased**

When a parent, sibling, friend or relative dies, adolescents feel the overwhelming loss of someone who helped shape their self-identities (Wolfelt, n.d.). I did not limit participation based on the kind of death the person experienced or how long it has been since the person died. Instead, I explored the relationships participants had with the deceased because it may have had an impact on psychological development and social and emotional functioning (Paris et al., 2009).

Paris et al. (2009) conducted a study on sibling loss on trauma and reactions to grief of the siblings left behind. The authors conducted a study with 26 participants between the ages of 9 and 18 years old. The authors reported that the purpose of their study was to examine the impact of type of sibling loss on trauma and grief reactions using children's self-report. The authors reported that they assessed participants' grief symptoms using the child (ages 9–12) and adolescent (ages 13–18) forms of the Hogan Inventory of Bereavement (HIB, formerly called Hogan Sibling Inventory of Bereavement; Hogan, 1988; Hogan & DeSantis, 1996). Trauma symptoms were assessed with the Impact of Events-8 (IES-8) Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979; Dyregrov & Yule, 1995).

The authors hypothesized that siblings who experienced a sudden death would report a higher level of trauma in comparison to siblings who experienced an anticipated death. The authors further hypothesized that siblings who experienced an anticipated death would report higher levels of grief than children who experienced sudden death. The authors found that the grief scores on the HIB and the IES-8 were highly related and that grief and trauma were hard to distinguish among participants. The authors also found no correlation between age and grief or trauma and that the developmental differences. Strengths included the authors providing information regarding the different types of grief and how grief impacts children who have experienced sibling loss. Additional strengths included information regarding the differences between boys and girls and how they grieved the loss of their sibling. Although the authors provided rationale for selecting the number of participants in their study, participants were not ethnically diverse.

Wolchik, Coxe, Tein, Sandler, and Ayers (2009) reported that the death of a parent or legal guardian is considered one of the biggest stressors adolescents experience because the implication can affect them for the rest of their lives. Wolchik et al. (2009) reported that when a parent dies during a person's childhood or adolescence, the person may experience depression, academic problems, and social withdrawal long after the parent has died. Not only will the adolescent experience depression, academic, and social withdrawal following the death of a parent, but also his or her religious and or spiritual beliefs (Muselman & Wiggins, 2012). In addition to the death of a parent, the death of a friend and sibling may also affect the adolescent developmentally.

Wolchik et al., (2009) conducted a study on adolescents and young adults who had experienced the death of a parent during childhood or adolescence. The authors reported that this study was a six year longitudinal study and that their study extended knowledge about the positive outcomes of parental death by examining predictors of posttraumatic growth in adolescent and young adults who had experienced parental death during childhood or adolescence. The authors selected 50 adolescents and young adults who had experienced parental death in childhood or adolescence. Eighty eight percent of participants were between the ages of 14-20 and the other percentage was 21 and 22 years old. The mean age was 17 and 46% were males. The authors reported that 68% were non-Hispanic Caucasian; 14 % Hispanic; 8% African American; 4% Native American; and 6% Other. The authors further contended that 37% of parental death included illness and 63% were due to violent deaths. The authors of the study utilized several measurements including the Threat Appraisal Scale (TAS; Program for Prevention Research, 1999) which included items from the Negative Life Events Scale (NLES). The NLES included two scales, the Parent Death Event Scale (Sandler et al., 1992) and the General Life Events Schedule for Children (Sandler, Ramirez, & Reynolds, 1986); the Children's Coping Checklist Revised (Ayers, Sandler, West, & Roosa, 1996; Program for Prevention Research, 1999); the Coping Efficacy Scale, (Ayers et al. 1996); Child Depression Inventory (Kovacs, (1981); the Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale, (Reynolds & Richmond, 1978); the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1982);and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).The authors found that there were predictors for posttraumatic growth. These predictors included controlling threats to appraisals based on the Threat Appraisal Scale, active and

avoidant coping styles, and seeking support from parents or guardians and other adults. Additional predictors of posttraumatic growth included internalizing and externalizing problems. A weakness in the study included the difficulty in comprehending when participants took each measure.

The relationship with the deceased and the cause of death have implications for the person left behind. In the next section, I address cause of death.

### **Cause of Death**

When someone dies from homicide, the homicide survivors may have to contend not only with the emotional trauma, but also financial stressors, stigmatization, and the fear that homicide will happen again (Zinzow et al., 2009). Johnson (2010) reported that homicide is the leading cause of death of African American youths in the United States. Johnson conducted a qualitative grounded theory study on effects of death due to homicide on African American teenage girls. Johnson reported the sample size consisted of 21 African American teen girls between the ages of 16-19 years old who experienced the death of a friend 6 months prior to the interview. Johnson interviewed participants using a constant comparative approach to analyze the data. The author found

(a) the presence and pressure of psychosocial stress on the participants' identity development process, (b) the adaptive functions of foreclosed religious identity commitments, (c) the potential for this event to inform, in complex ways, racial identity development examined through racial group orientation, and (d) natural avenues of resistance to marginalization and race devaluation that may be experienced from societal responses to this event (p. 27).

Strengths of the study included the author providing explanation for how participants made meaning out of their loss. In addition, the author discussed how meaning was associated with resilience and finding ways of moving on following the death of friends. The author selected African American females to participate in her study. Results may differ with other racially ethnic groups and among male participants.

Bagge, Lamis, Nadorff, and Osman (2014) reported that suicide is the third leading cause of death among college students and has negative effects on survivors. Bagge et al. (2014) conducted a cross-sectional quantitative study that examined whether the reasons for living would account for the association between risk factors such as hopelessness and depressive symptoms and suicide ideation and attempts. The authors reported that participants for the study included 1,075 undergraduate college students. In addition, participants completed online assessments. The authors reported that 69% of participants were women and 78% European American, 13% African American, 4% Asian American, 1% Hispanic, and 4% other. The authors reported that participants took the Beck Hopelessness Scale (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974), Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996), Reasons for Living (RFL) Inventory for Young Adults (RFL-YA) (Gutierrez et al., 2000), and Modified Scale for Suicide Ideation (MSSI) (Miller, Norman, Bishop, & Dow, 1986). The authors defined RFL as reasons for not committing suicide despite suicidal thoughts or considerations. The authors found a correlation between risk factors and current suicidal ideation was partially due to RFL and subscales Coping Beliefs Subscale and Self-Evaluation Subscale. In addition, the authors reported that the total RFL and the Coping Beliefs subscale mediated the relationship between hopelessness and the past year suicide

attempt and partially mediated the relation between depressive symptoms and suicide attempts. Strengths of the study included sampling late adolescents 18-23 years old and provided information regarding the impact suicide has on this population. A weakness included the authors using a Likert scale for self-rating measures such as the Beck Hopelessness Scale or Beck Depression Scale II. Participants may have scored themselves based on how they felt at the moment; therefore, the results may have been different if taken on a different day.

In working with grieving late adolescents due to suicide, Supiano (2012) conducted a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological study for participants experiencing suicide survivorship and grief support groups. The author reported that the purpose of the study was to explore the impact of participation in a suicide loss grief support group and the participants' sense-making of the loss as well as changes in self-reported symptoms associated with grief distress. The author selected nine participants from a suicide loss support group. The suicide loss support group was an eight-week closed group for community residents in a university setting. The author reported that participants in the study were one year or more post loss and they had completed the group 6 months or more prior to being in the study. The author interviewed participants using an interview guide. Each interview took 90-180 minutes. Four themes emerged from the data consisting of attribution of suicide causation, personal impact and response, wanting to die-wanting to live, and ways of coping (Supiano, 2012). The author further reported that they examined themes in context of group support, interaction with others, personal-spiritual awareness, and meaning-making. The author suggested that grief support groups are beneficial in helping clients make meaning out of death caused by

suicide. Strengths included the author providing information regarding complicated grief. The author also disclosed ways participants' coped with their loss including self-care practices. Another strength included the author providing definitions to the reader for added clarification such as survivors of suicide, attempters, and completers. The author included people who lost a spouse to suicide; therefore the findings may not be the same for those who lost friends and family members due to suicide. Although the author presented a detailed case on how data was collected and transcribe, she did not present demographic information about participants including age and sex.

In sum, death due to homicide and suicide has severe consequences on the adolescent left behind especially if grief symptoms are left untreated including the risk of developing complicated grief and or prolonged grief (Herberman et al. 2013). In order to move on healthily, adolescents have to find ways of coping with their grief symptoms. Adolescents experiencing the death of someone they knew may experience sadness and a longing to be with the person that died (Johnson, 2010). Coping is a very personal experience; therefore, part of the grieving process entails learning effective coping skills. Grief support groups can help members learn effective coping skills following the death of someone due to suicide (Supiano, 2012). Through the use of coping skills, group members may be able to make sense and meaning out the loss (Supiano, 2012). In the next section, I will provide a literature overview of additional ways adolescents cope with grief and loss based on the current literature.

### **Coping with Grief**

Grieving adolescents cope with the loss in highly different ways, which may include pretending the person has not died (Nemours Foundation, 2012). The Nemours

Foundation further posited that grieving adolescents may not talk about the deceased for fear that they may upset the rest of the family or because they are in too much emotional pain. On the other hand, some adolescents talk frequently about their memories of the person who died. Finally, some become very busy with activities, school, friends, and work to keep their minds off of the deceased loved one (Nemours Foundation, 2012).

Reacting to grief varies from person to person. Lyness (2013) reported that people react to grief differently. People react to grief emotionally, physically, and cognitively. Strong emotional reactions to grief and loss include sadness, anger, guilt, relief, love, and hope. Lyness further contended that reactions to grief may include physical reactions to and symptoms of grief such as changes within the person's appetite or sleep as well as having an upset stomach, and experiencing chest pains. Some people may experience having tense muscles and or have trouble concentrating. Another reaction to grief and loss consists of frequent thoughts that may include happy memories, worries, or regrets (Lyness). Like Lyness, Mauk (2011) also reported that adolescent reactions after the death of a person they know may also vary. Reactions can include a decline in school performance, difficulty learning academic material, and an increase in irritability, withdrawal, and anxiety. In addition, some adolescents may begin to develop low self-esteem and may begin to exhibit increased symptoms of depression. Other adolescents may begin to engage in risky behaviors, such as promiscuity, reckless driving, self-harming behaviors, and substance abuse (Mauk, 2011).

Late adolescents coping with grief and loss may use their religious and spiritual beliefs to aid in their process. Previous researchers explored the usefulness of spirituality as a coping mechanism during grief and loss (Hassan & Mehta, 2012; Lyness, 2013;

Muselman & Wiggins, 2012). Other researchers explored late adolescent psychosocial development and spirituality (Good, Willoughby, & Busseri, 2011). Researchers have explored the effectiveness of spiritual practices (Wiggins, 2011). Also, researchers have explored using spirituality in coping with difficult life events such as grief and loss as well as resilience and trauma (Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011). In the next section, I will discuss studies pertaining to the use of spirituality and spiritual practices as a form of coping along with findings, strengths and weaknesses.

### **Spirituality**

Some adolescents use spirituality as a means of coping emotionally with grief and loss (Hassan & Mehta, 2012). Likewise, Lyness (2013) suggested that some adolescents react to grief by using their faith as a source of strength for them while others may begin to question their beliefs. Other adolescents may either discover spiritual connections and meaning or may turn to God or a Higher Power to find comfort (Lyness, 2013; Muselman & Wiggins, 2012). In reviewing the literature, few research studies specifically addressed late adolescents, grief and loss, and the role spirituality played in finding meaning. There were research studies conducted on the use of spirituality and adolescent development, coping with mental health problems, effectiveness of spiritual practices when coping with difficult life events. Next, I address these studies.

### **Adolescent Development and Spirituality**

Good, Willoughby, and Busseri (2011) conducted a quantitative study consisting of longitudinal, person-centered analysis of multiple dimensions of spirituality and religion. The authors sampled Canadian adolescents by giving them a survey at the end of 11th grade and again at the end of 12th grade. The authors selected 756 participants of

which 52% were female and 48% were male between 16 and 17 years old from eight high schools in Ontario, Canada. 83% of students completed the survey in the 11th grade and 87% completed the survey again in the 12th grade. Differences in the percentage of students who took the survey were due to absenteeism. Researchers for this study did not discuss a particular name for the assessment they used assessing spirituality/religiosity (S/R). Authors reported that in order to address the religious notions of participants, each person had to answer questions, “In the past month, how often have you gone to church/temple/synagogue?” “How often in the last month have you gone to religious/spiritual meetings other than church/synagogue/temple (e.g., youth groups)?” and “I enjoy attending activities held by my religious/spiritual group” (p. 541). In assessing spiritual issues, participants had to answer one item, “I often wonder about spiritual issues such as life after death, the existence of a higher power, etc.”(p. 541). For each statement, participants either had to respond to a 5-point scale or a 4-point scale. Authors reported that seven items were adapted from the Spiritual Transcendence Index (Seidlitz et al., 2002); however, they did not indicate which seven were adapted. The authors reported that descriptive statistics and inter correlations were between period of time and stability for six spiritual/religious dimensions. The spiritual/religious dimensions consisted of religious activity involvement, enjoyment of religious activities, wonder, Spiritual Transcendence Index (STI), prayer, and meditation. The authors reported that the mean scores significantly decreased between 11th and 12th grade over four dimensions consisting of religious activity involvement, wondering, prayer, and meditation. The mean scores for enjoyment of religious activities and STI over the two years were not significant. There were five clusters that consisted of (a)

aspiritual/irreligious, (b) disconnected wonderers, (c) high institutional and personal, (d) primarily personal, and (e) mediators (Good et al., 2011). The five clusters were similar in both 11th and 12th grades. A strength in the study included the authors using multiple dimensions of S/R in their study. A weakness of the study is that a year may not have been enough time to note significant changes in spiritual and religious development. Another weakness involved the use of a specific age group. The authors did not explore spirituality as it pertained to late adolescents beyond high school. The authors examined the psychosocial development as it relates to spirituality and religion; however, they did not explore with participants their lived experiences with grief and loss following the death of someone they knew.

Kim and Esquivel (2011) provided a literature overview on the theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and educational suggestions as they relate to adolescent spirituality and resilience. Kim and Esquivel provided theoretical perspectives on adolescent spirituality and found that spirituality was unique and complex and interconnected with religion and human experiences. They reported that attention to spirituality has evolved over the years and has served to protect people from negative outcomes such as depression and substance use. The authors asserted that spirituality is also an asset in promoting positive outcomes, such as overall psychological well-being and academic success. In sum, Kim and Esquivel indicated that spirituality emerged as an important part of healthy adolescent development. The purpose of the article was to provide an empirical literature review discussing theoretical assumptions about how spirituality has been a source of resilience, as well as its influence on close relationships, social support, personal growth, moral conduct, coping, developing meaning, and life

purpose. The authors revealed in their literature review the importance of collaboration between the school, community, and homes in fostering and enhancing the positive aspects of spirituality. The authors further contended that social-emotional learning experiences for adolescents and spiritual development can foster relationships among the school, home, and community. According to Kim and Esquivel, (2011) collaboration between the community and home can be catalysts in helping adolescents develop a sense of meaning and life purpose. Also, the collaboration between community and home can also be a catalyst in helping adolescents thrive in adversity, care about the well-being of others, and become active in helping communities build resiliency (Kim & Esquivel, 2011).

The authors provided a literature review that gave important and useful information regarding the use of spirituality in developing resiliency, internalizing problems, fostering psychological well-being, and encouraging academic performance. Although the authors provided information regarding the use of spirituality in various situations, they did not establish anything concerning the role spirituality would play with older adolescents coping with grief and loss after the death of someone they knew.

In reviewing the articles pertaining to spirituality and adolescent development, spirituality has been found to be useful in helping adolescents with daily living activities (Good, Willoughby, & Busseri, 2011; Kim & Esquivel, 2011). Spirituality has also been found to be helpful to adolescents during adversity. In addition, spirituality has been found beneficial in help adolescents become resilient (Good et al. 2011; Kim & Esquivel, 2011). Good et al. (2011) reported changes in spiritual beliefs occurred for adolescents between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The authors suggested that from their findings, they

learned that participants leaned more towards their familial beliefs in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and adapted their own beliefs in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Kim and Esquivel (2012), on the other hand, reported that spirituality can be a part of healthy adolescent development especially in fostering resilience during adversity. When an adolescent experience the death of someone he or she knew, spirituality can be used as a coping mechanism that may impact his or her mental health. In the next section, I will address spirituality and mental health.

### **Mental Health**

Investigations of spirituality and mental health have increased in more recent years (Koenig, 2010). Koenig (2010) wrote an article that specifically discussed literature pertaining to the use of spirituality in working with people experiencing depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Koenig found from conducting his literature review that there has been an increase in using spirituality as a coping mechanism for clients experiencing mental health problems. Strengths included literature pertinent to spirituality and mental health disorders. Although the article provided useful information regarding spirituality and mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, a weakness included the author not discussing the implications in working with late adolescents and whether or not spirituality can be used for reducing and or managing grief symptoms.

Although Koenig (2010) presented literature of the usefulness of spirituality in coping and mental health disorder, few researchers have explored the specific role spirituality played in coping mental health disorders associated with grief and loss and late adolescents. One team of researchers, Koszycki, Raab, Aldosary, and Bradwejn (2010) conducted a quantitative study regarding the use of multi-faith spirituality as an

intervention for Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Koszycki et al. (2010) reported that they used multi-faith spirituality as an intervention and compared it to the interventions used in cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). Multi-faith spirituality comprised of spiritual practices derived from seven religious traditions: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism (Koszycki et al., 2010). While incorporating these spiritual practices, a person is to “cultivate a calm, and concentrated mind, emotional and spiritual wisdom, spiritual awakening, positive emotions, ethical living, and generosity and service” (Koszycki et al., 2010, p. 432). The authors also collected follow-up data at three and six month intervals to evaluate whether or not treatment gains were maintained (Koszycki et al., 2010). Findings from the study showed a reduction in anxiety and depressive symptoms, and suggested enhancing spiritual well-being in an effort to reduce psychological distress. A strength of the study included the use of spirituality as an effective intervention for clients experiencing anxiety. Limitations included a small sample size in which gender was not distributed evenly; these may have caused some bias. Another limitation was a lack of clarity regarding whether it was primarily the therapist or the multi-faith spirituality intervention that helped the participants to improve. Finally, the participants were either from Judeo-Christian backgrounds or did not have a religious affiliation; thus, Koszycki et al. could not generalize the findings to other clients of different faiths.

Coping with the anxiety and depression associated with grief and loss may occur following the death of someone participants’ knew in this study. I therefore explored literature pertaining to late adolescents’ coping styles including spiritual practices used to help cope with grief and loss. Although the focus was not on one particular religion,

religion played a role as a spiritual practice used as a means of coping for some in the study. In the next section, I discuss the effectiveness of spiritual practices, findings, strengths, and weaknesses.

### **Effectiveness of Spiritual Practices**

Spiritual practices can include meditation, prayer, and journaling. Meditation and has been proven to be effective in helping adolescents cope with loss (Wisner, Jones, & Gwin (2010). Wisner et al. (2010) wrote an article providing information regarding previous research on the benefits and usefulness of meditation in schools. The authors discussed the types of meditation practices conducted in schools such as mindfulness, the relaxation response, and Transcendental Meditation. The authors suggested implications for social workers and other school professionals using meditation in working with students. The article provided information about innovative ways for schools to help adolescents whom are facing serious personal and family problems. The author suggested that meditation can be a useful technique in the school setting. The authors believed that meditation can help enhance academics and psychosocial strengths as well as improve self-regulation coping. The authors defined meditation and meditative practices and reviewed the literature detailing the benefits and challenges. Strengths of the article included information about meditation and meditative practices being helpful in helping students reduce stressors. In addition, authors provided types of meditative practices that can be done in the school setting.

Haason and Mehta (2011) conducted their study using qualitative methods and presented information from participants' experiences of Malay/Muslim grieving adolescents who used spirituality as a coping mechanism. The authors administered

semistructured interviews to ten females and six males between the ages of 12 and 23 years. The authors reported that they conducted two interviews either in the participants' homes or a place the participant suggested (Haason & Mehta, 2010). The theoretical models presented in the study were the Transaction and Stress Coping Model (TSCM), Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS), Fowler and Dell's (2006) faith development model. The authors reported that based on TSCM there are two main ways of coping that consists of problem-focused and emotion-focused. The authors reported that the purpose of their study is to identify a third way of coping, which is spirituality-focused. In addition, out of the three types of coping, the spiritual focus was the most significant. The authors provided examples of the different types of coping. For example, the authors suggested that spirituality focused coping consisted of reflections of death and focus on transcendence. An example of problem-focused coping entailed seeking social support and an example of emotion-focused coping entailed worrying.

Muselman and Wiggins (2012) conducted a study regarding adolescents experience with grief and loss and spirituality. The purpose of the study was to explore counseling approaches that incorporate adolescent clients' spiritual beliefs while grieving the death of a loved one. The participant in this study included a 16 year old who was in grief counseling following the death of her mother killed by a drunken driver. The participant's counselor used spirituality as an intervention to help her cope with her grief and loss. Interventions consisted of rituals, bibliotherapy, art therapy and letter writing. During this case study, the authors found that in using spiritual practices, the adolescent was able to make meaning after her significant loss. The authors expressed hope that the results of the study might inform counselors that integrating spiritual practice can be a

powerful therapeutic intervention for counseling bereaved adolescents. Strengths of the study included the authors providing background information about the role spirituality played in adolescent grief and loss. The authors provided examples of spiritual interventions that counselors could use in working with grieving adolescents. The authors conducted a case study of one participant. The authors reported that the participant grew up in a Protestant home. The results may be different if the participant were of a different religious affiliation and grew up in a different geographical location.

In dealing with grief and loss, some people find comfort using creativity such as writing, art, and music. Writing is a spiritual practice for some (Muselman & Wiggins, 2012). Late adolescents dealing with grief and loss may naturally wish to write about their experiences. Writing is a spiritual practice for some and writing about the death of someone may assist the survivor to make sense of their loss. Like Muselman and Wiggins (2012), White and Epston (1990) reported that narratives are an interpretive method for helping the person makes sense of his or her world. Wiggins (2011) also suggested that structured writing can be instrumental in grief recovery. Structured writing entails having adolescents write about issues and problems they are experiencing (Wiggins, 2011). In working with grief and loss issues with adolescents, one could use structured writing to elicit their thoughts and feelings regarding the deceased and the impact the loss has had on their lives. Letters can also be beneficial in helping adolescents cope with loss. Writing letters to the deceased allows adolescents to express their emotions about the loss and brings issues about the person that died into their conscious awareness (Ihrmark et al., 2012; Lander & Graham-Pole, 2009). Letter writing is also considered a spiritual practice that can lead to reflection and creative expression (Lander & Graham-Pole,

2009). Another form of writing that is also considered a spiritual practice entails journaling (Janesick, 2011).

Wiggins (2011) wrote a book chapter where she details case studies she conducted using spiritual journaling. Wiggins (2011) identified spiritual journaling as another practice in which adolescents keep a written diary to express their feelings, thoughts, and struggles, as well as their reflections on the purpose, sacredness, and meaning of their lives. Wiggins suggested that spiritual journaling can also be used to help adolescents explore their personal belief systems, deepen their connection to the holy, struggle with unanswered questions about the death of the person and their own mortality, and process the grief and loss experience. In addition, spiritual journaling can help adolescents connect with their inner world and connect the spiritual aspects of themselves with the human experience (Wiggins, 2011). The author suggested that spiritual journaling can aid in helping clients explore their belief systems, deepen their sense of connection to the holy, struggle with unanswered questions, process loss and grief, examine vocational directions, and come to terms with mortality. Strengths to the chapter included discussions about case studies previously conducted and the literature review regarding writing being a spiritual practice. In reading the case studies, the participants were of diverse ethnicities, genders, and ages in that some were Chinese, African American, and Caucasian men and women. The author provided information regarding the different types of therapeutic writing consisting of journal writing, structured writing, and writing poems including prompts to help the client with writing.

Additional researchers such as Ihrmark et al. (2012) also conducted a study on writing. Ihrmark et al. conducted a study regarding grief recovery where participants

wrote letters to the loss object about their grief experiences. The authors reported that purpose of the study was not to determine whether or not methods used by the Swedish Institute of Grief Recovery's (SIGR) method was effective, but instead to determine which factors were perceived as the most helpful in grief recovery. The authors reported that the study raised the questions how do people experience grief and what factors in on have been most effective in formal grief work? The authors reported that 308 out 513 people participated in the study. The authors reported that there were 48 men and 260 women. The authors further reported that 112 of participants had attended the workshop course provided by SIGR, 82 attended 12-week course, and 114 attended the certification course. According to the authors, the findings indicated that emotions, cognitions, physical expressions, and behaviors were all characteristics of grief; however, emotions were the most central component. The grief course brought about relief for participants and writing a letter helped participants express their feelings to the loss object was the most successful practice. The authors reported that the letter might help with grief recovery by helping bring to conscious awareness aspects with which participants have not dealt. The authors were able to provide information that detailed the types of losses participants had experienced. A weakness included results were from the sample of people from SIGR and may not represent everyone's sentiments who attended SIGR for grief recovery.

Edgar-Bailey and Kress (2010) provided a review of creative interventions for traumatic grief in children and adolescents. The authors reported that traumatic grief is a condition in which a person loses a closed loved one in a traumatic way, and the symptoms disrupt the normal grieving process. The authors reported that they presented

creative interventions based on cognitive behavioral treatment model that may be used in addressing traumatic grief. Creative interventions entailed having clients create epitaphs, acrostic poems, unfinished sentences/writing prompts, life imprints, journaling, bibliotherapy, and creative writing, letter writing, drama, commemoration/rituals, planting, linking objects, and drawing/painting/collaging.

The authors suggested that writing and/or drawing a story can help late adolescents deepen the reprocessing of events once they have learned about the death of someone they know. Edgar-Bailey and Kress noted that life stories can be written or drawn in a way that shows progression from a traumatic event to one that instills hope. Writing poems can also be a spiritual practice that allows adolescents to use symbolism and metaphors for expressing their emotions (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010). Strengths of the review entailed providing interventions counselors can use in working with adolescents coping with a traumatic event such as the death of a loved one. Another strength in the review included the authors linking the interventions with the evidenced based practice of cognitive behavior therapy. Another strength included authors discussing ways to help regulate adolescents' emotions following a traumatic event. Since this article was a review of the literature, authors did not discuss possible procedures for implementing the creative interventions.

Music therapy and art therapy, although two separate forms of therapy, can be used as spiritual practices in helping adolescents cope with grief and loss (McClellan, Bunt, & Daykin, 2012; Slyter, 2012). McClellan et al. and Slyter both found that adolescents coping with grief symptoms can discover meaning through music or art

therapy. Slyter also offered listening to music, drawing, making collages, and taking pictures as spiritual practices that can benefit grieving adolescents.

Like Musleman and Wiggins (2012), Ihrmark et al. (2012), Edgar-Bailey and Kress (2010), and McClean et al. (2012) also wrote an article regarding creativity, adolescents, and grief. Slyter provided a background for adolescent development and how interventions pertaining to grief and loss need to be developmentally appropriate. The author placed an emphasis on creativity in working with grieving adolescents. The author specifically discussed creative arts such as music, visual arts, bibliotherapy, drama, and cinematherapy. In addition, the author discussed interventions that include helping adolescents maintain tangible connections with the deceased person while engaging in meaningful rituals. The author provided useful techniques counselors can use in working with grieving adolescents. Although the author did not conduct a study on the interventions presented, there were previous studies conducted that substantiated the claims that using developmentally appropriate interventions for adolescents may help in reducing grief symptoms. Weaknesses included the author not identifying whether or not the interventions would be appropriate for all adolescents experiencing grief due to death.

### **Death and Grief**

Spirituality and death can play significant roles in the human experience (Park & Halifax, 2011). Thus, Park and Halifax reported that grief can be a process that affects a person's life continuously. Grief can also be a life experience that changes a person, increasing his or her ability to be more compassionate, have increased wisdom, and have a greater sense of humanness. Park and Halifax also observed that spirituality can strongly affect the grieving process. In addition to spirituality affecting the grieving

process, spirituality has been deemed a viable coping mechanism in coping with a traumatic event (Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011). Raftopoulos and Bates (2011) conducted a study on the role of spirituality in adolescent resiliency. The authors reported on specific areas that included adolescents' understanding of spirituality and their perception of whether or not spiritual practices and beliefs are used to help adolescents overcome at the lowest points in their lives.

Three dimensions of spirituality emerged from the data including participants' having a transcendental viewpoint, having a relationship with a Higher Power or God and life meaning, as well as, a connection with the inner self. In addition, the authors found three dimensions that fostered resilience for participants that consisted of (a) a sense of security, protection, and comfort, (b) a sense of meaning, coherence and optimism, and (c) increased self-efficacy and awareness. The strengths in this study included identifying themes regarding spirituality and how spirituality helped in promoting resiliency. A limitation of the study included bias owing to the self-selected sample.

Researchers have conducted studies on grief and loss; however, few have explored attachment to God and religious coping following the death of a loved one. In the next section, I address a research study on attachment to God.

### **Attachment to God**

In 2012, Kelley and Chan attempted to identify the role of attachment to God during times of grief and loss by examining attachment to God, meaning, and religious coping in adolescents who were grieving a significant death within the previous year. There were 93 participants in the quantitative study who had experienced significant death in the prior year (Kelley & Chan, 2012). The authors found a secure style of

attachment to God as a significant predictor for depression, grief, and stress-related growth. The authors also reported that attachment to God was also a significant predictor for meaning and positive religious coping. In addition, the authors suggested that participants with a secure attachment style to God may have a worldview or faith that includes a belief in consistently available, responsive, and benevolent God. Therefore, participants who have a secure attachment to God as well as faith and worldview of a benevolent God are able to use positive religious coping when dealing with depression and grief and more stress-related growth from a significant death (Kelley & Chan, 2012). The authors further contended that meaning also emerged from the data as an important construct and process in their study. The authors suggested that meaning was defined as a sense of coherence and purpose, emerged as an important construct, and God also became an important construct for some participants.

One strength of the study's approach was that the results provided insight into adolescent grief, showing how adolescents attach themselves to God while grieving. Additional strengths included implications for clinical work in highlighting the key role of a secure style of attachment to God as a buffer in coping with symptoms of depression and grief. Weaknesses of Kelley and Chan's (2012) study included lack of diversity in participants: this was a quantitative study with 93 participants. The authors reported that 93 was a small number and that the majority of the participants were European, Christian females (Kelley & Chan, 2012). The authors suggested that future research should be done in order to address the limitations. In addition, the authors recommended using different attachment instruments and qualitative research to explore the different styles of attachments to God, as well as purpose, coherence, and growth through adverse situations

(Kelley & Chan, 2012). Although the authors reported that some adolescents grew in their attachment to God during the grieving process, there continues to be a need for additional information pertaining to attachment to God during bereavement (Kelley & Chan, 2012).

### **Summary**

In Chapter 2 I included an exhaustive literature review of the major constructs of the study including grief, loss, spirituality, and late adolescents. A search of the literature revealed that further studies need to be conducted on the subject of grief and loss, spirituality, and late adolescents (Balk, 2011; Haason & Mehta, 2010; Malcom, 2010; Muselman & Wiggins, 2012; Nemours, 2012; Raftopoulous & Bates, 2011). A comprehensive review of the literature showed that late adolescents cope with grief and loss in various ways, some positive and some negative. A number of research studies focused on the physical and spiritual developmental processes of late adolescents during grief and loss (Balk, 2011; Bugge et al., 2012; Hedman, 2010; Liem et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2011). Researchers (Paris et al., 2009; Wolchik et al., 2009; Zinzow et al., 2009) examined the grief and loss process as it pertains to the relationship between the late adolescent and the identity of the deceased person they knew and how that person died. Koszycki et al. (2010) and Raftopoulous and Bates (2011) studied spirituality is an effective means of resiliency in dealing with trauma, anxiety, and depression. In addition, spirituality was found to be effective in helping the senior population and younger children, as well as clients with chronic illnesses and diseases (Damianakis & Marziali, 2012; Malcom, 2011; Nichols & Hunt, 2011). For some, grief can feel like an illness and trying to find meaning in it all can be a long process (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011; Parkes,

2011). In my study, I explored the role spirituality played in helping late adolescents cope with grief and loss following the death of someone he or she knew. I also explored with participants the role spirituality played in helping them identify their life meaning.

In chapter 3, I will include a qualitative research design and the hermeneutic phenomenological research method. In addition, I will include in chapter 3 a discussion on how using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach will answer the central and associated sub questions of the study.

## Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the meaning and role of spirituality in the grieving process of late adolescents. The goals of this study were to examine the lived experiences of late adolescents in coping with the death of someone they knew, to explore the role spirituality played in their coping process, and to determine whether spiritual practices had helped them find life meaning following the death of someone they knew. In this chapter, I present the research design and rationale, my role as researcher, methodology, and trustworthiness.

### **Research Questions and Rationale**

#### **Restatement of Research Questions**

One central question and three subquestions guided this study. My primary question was the following: What are the lived experiences of late adolescents between the ages of 18 and 25 who are coping with the death of someone they knew? To develop this question further, I designed the following subquestions: What lived experiences do late adolescents have in using spiritual practices in coping with the death of someone they know? What meanings do late adolescents associate with the role of spirituality when experiencing the death of someone they know? And what role does spirituality play in the grieving process for late adolescents after someone they knew has died?

#### **Rationale for Research Questions**

I wanted to explore the lived experiences of grieving late adolescents who knew someone who died and the role spirituality played in these experiences. I used a hermeneutic phenomenological design in an attempt to explore the meaning and essence

of participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). In the next section I discuss the research method for this study.

### **Research Method**

I chose qualitative methodology for this study. Qualitative research is an inductive approach that involves exploring the meaning associated with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) contended that qualitative research is conducted using the social constructivist notion that “people seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 8). Creswell further contended that social constructivists believe that experiences are subjective. In addition, Creswell suggested that people have different meanings associated with their experiences, and researchers employing social constructivism are interested in the complexity of views from these experiences.

I used qualitative methods as the basis for the study because grief, loss, and spirituality are subjective constructs. I attempted to explore and understand the meanings ascribed to the lived experiences of late adolescents coping with the death of someone they knew and the role spirituality played in their experiences. There are five qualitative research designs I could have chosen for this study; however, I chose hermeneutic phenomenology as the research design. In the next section, I address the research design.

### **Research Design**

I considered other research designs for this study. One consideration was case study. Creswell (2014) suggested that if researchers want to explore and analyze a case involving one or more people, they should employ a case study design. Houghton et al. (2013) reported that case study research can be useful for comparing cases when there are multiple case studies, especially if they are done in different settings. I also considered a

narrative approach, which differs from case study research in that it involves participants telling stories about their lives (Creswell, 2014). Creswell suggested that researchers employing a phenomenological design describe the lived experiences of individuals about a particular phenomenon as described by participants. There is universality of the phenomenon being studied. Grief, for example, was a universal phenomenon; however, the lived experiences of grief differ for each individual (Pilkington, 2006).

Moustakas (1994) suggested that phenomenology involves the relationship between the description of the experience and the structures that account for the experience. The person's experience provides meaning and unity that help him or her understand the essence of the experience. Moustakas further contended that researchers using a phenomenological design are able to return to a person's experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for portrayal of the essences of the experience. According to Moustakas, the researcher identifies the underlying structures of an experience by analyzing the original descriptions of the experience.

Phenomenological research involves the analysis of the individual's personal experiences and in using a phenomenological design my goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of a person's everyday experiences (Van Manen, 1990). There are different types of phenomenological designs including transcendental, existential, and hermeneutical (J. Smith, n.d.). D. Smith (2013) suggested that transcendental phenomenology involves researchers studying how situations are constituted in consciousness as pure or transcendental, thus setting aside questions that relate to the natural world. D. Smith contended that existential phenomenology involves researchers studying concrete human existence, including the individual's experience of

free choice or action in situations that are concrete. Hermeneutical phenomenology, according to D. Smith, involves researchers studying the interpretive structures of a person's experiences. Also, D. Smith suggested that researchers using hermeneutical phenomenology study how people understand and engage in things around them as well as their world including themselves and others. Finlay (2009) suggested that hermeneutics involves interpretation of texts, and phenomenology involves exploring the lived experiences of humans in relation to a phenomenon. Kafle (2011) contended that hermeneutical phenomenologists believe that people's realities vary depending upon their experiences and that knowledge is based on a person's experiential insights. For this study, I was more interested in how participants interpreted their losses due to death and whether or not spirituality was a viable coping skill and whether spirituality played a role in their interpretation with finding life meaning. I, therefore, employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach by exploring the lived experiences of late adolescents experiencing the death of someone they knew. I decided on hermeneutic phenomenology because I wanted to explore participants' point of views of their lived experiences with grief and loss and the role spirituality played in their grieving process (D. Smith, 2013; Van Manen, 1990). Next, I discuss implications of hermeneutical phenomenology as a research method.

### **Implications of Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

In conducting this hermeneutic phenomenological research study, there were implications. Finlay (2009) reported that researchers employing phenomenological research aim to capture the meanings of lived experiences and what these lived experiences feel like for the person. According to Finlay, "phenomenologists explore the

‘lifeworld’—the world as directly and subjectively experienced in everyday life, as distinguished from the objective physical world of sciences” (p. 474). In examining the lifeworld, phenomenologists also direct more attention to a person’s lived experiences and their feelings about these experiences.

Kafle (2011) noted that the research pattern of transcendental phenomenology was to discover a lived world without including the researcher’s personal opinion. Transcendental phenomenology, therefore, means that researcher should bracket personal opinions. Hermeneutic phenomenology, on the other hand, includes the researcher’s opinions. I played an important role in this hermeneutic phenomenological study. In the next section, I discuss my role as researcher in this study.

### **Researcher’s Role in the Study**

My roles involved being the interviewer and observer. I conducted interviews with participants who volunteered and provided written consent to participate in the study. I kept a journal to document my thoughts, feelings, and interpretations as well as biases for each interview. There were associated risks in conducting this study, including researcher bias and confidentiality. In the next section, I discuss the risks associated with this study.

### **Researcher Bias**

One of the risks of this study included my personal biases. For the study, I recruited participants from a local grief center, a local college (LC), and a local university (LU), as well as ASERVIC and CESNet listservs. I have experience dealing with grief and loss, both professionally and personally. Personally, I have experienced great losses and have had to learn ways to cope with the grief; therefore, the participants and I shared

knowledge of grief and loss. Professionally, I have worked in the community mental health and private practice sectors with clients dealing with grief and loss symptoms by providing individual outpatient mental health counseling services. In the school setting, I conducted grief counseling groups for middle school students. My experiences have created personal biases that may affect the interpretation of the results, including personal experiences professionally and personally pertaining to grief and loss. I managed my biases by acknowledging them at the onset of the study, and I kept a journal to process personal feelings and document self-reflection. In addition, I consulted with my dissertation chair when triggers were brought up during data collection and interpretation of the results to verify that my concerns and biases were bracketed.

### **Confidentiality**

Another risk associated with this study was confidentiality. Mikėnė, Gaižauskaitė, and Valavičienė (2013) reported that it takes flexibility and efficiency to meet challenges related to confidentiality when conducting qualitative fieldwork. Maintaining confidentiality may have posed problems during the study because participants were recruited from TGC, LU, and LC as well as ASERVIC and CESNet listservs. Confidentiality breaches may have included directors at TGC, LU, and LC asking potential participants whether they were going to participate in the study. To protect participants' confidentiality, I asked the directors to preserve the confidentiality of potential participants by not asking anyone specifically about their interest in being in the study.

Another way these risks were mitigated was by having potential participants contact me directly to express their interest in being in the study. Although I conducted

the study in person at the grief center, I interviewed participants during days and times when fewer counselors were working in the building. I addressed confidentiality breaches with directors and the seriousness of not adhering to confidentiality during the meetings at the onset of the study. I also discussed confidentiality when I met with potential research participants. In addition, I informed potential participants that I would give them a pseudonym instead of using their actual names. In the next section, I discuss the methodology of the study.

## **Methodology**

### **Setting**

The setting consisted of me meeting in person with two of the participants and speaking over the phone with those who could not meet in person. I conducted two interviews at TGC while I conducted others over the phone from my home office.

### **Participants**

I was interested in interviewing people between the ages of 18 and 25 years who had experienced the death of someone they knew. The sample included participants from TGC, a LU, and a LC, as well as ASERVIC and CESNet listervs. I used a nonprobability purposive sampling method to select participants for the study. The criteria included participants being between the ages of 18 and 25 years and experiencing the death of someone they knew. Crossman (2014) reported that purposeful sampling is based on knowledge about the population and the study's purpose. Homogeneous sampling was the type of purposive sampling that I used in the study (Lund Research, 2012). The data was saturated once I interviewed seven volunteers in the study. I therefore selected seven participants between the ages of 18 and 25 years who had experienced the death of

someone they knew. My aim was to select a diverse sample by posting the study on CESNet and ASERVIC listservs and asking directors at two local universities and one local grief center for assistance in advertising the study.

### **Recruitment Procedures**

Although efforts were made to recruit from TGC initially, there were not enough participants to meet data saturation. I continued my recruitment efforts by advertising the study at a local university and local college. In addition, I recruited participants from ASERVIC and CESNet listservs. In the next section, I discuss the recruitment procedures.

**Making entry.** I met with the director of TGC and spoke over the phone with the director of a counseling center at the LU. I spoke the director of campus ministry at the LU. I also communicated over the phone and via email with the director of a counseling program at a different LC. In speaking with directors and department chairs, I explained the criteria for participation and the rationale for selecting this population. I also discussed the importance of adhering to the ethical guidelines regarding research, confidentiality, and informed consent. The director at TGC agreed to assist in recruiting once Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval. The director of TGC also agreed to write a letter of cooperation, which I submitted to Walden's IRB. In addition, the director of TGC agreed to write a recruitment letter to send with the informational letter to potential participants who met the study's criteria. The director of the counseling center at the LU and the department chair at the LC agreed to post approved flyers from Walden's IRB in their departments to advertise the study.

**Informational letters.** Once Walden's IRB approved the sites to recruit participants, the director at TGC sent recruitment letters and emails to individuals

between 18 and 25 years old. I included my informational letter detailing the study in the letters and emails.

**Flyers.** Once Walden's IRB approved the flyer, the director at the counseling center at the LU and the department chair of the counseling department at the LC posted flyers (Appendix F) in their offices and departments. The director of the counseling center at the LU also passed out the flyer to people who fit the criteria that came in for counseling services for grief and loss. The director of the counseling department at the LC also posted the flyer and emailed the flyer to current and former students.

**Listservs.** I am a member of counseling professional organizations that have listservs. Once approved by Walden's IRB, I sent a recruitment email and flyer (Appendices F, G, and H) to ASERVIC and CESNet listservs asking for those interested in participating in the study, to contact me directly.

**Compensation for participants.** Compensating research participants was regarded as somewhat controversial. Pandya and Desai (2013) reported that compensation may influence the integrity of clinical research, hence raising ethical concerns. Pandya and Desai proposed different models for compensating participants for research, including the market model, the wage model, the reimbursement model, and the appreciation model. For this study, I was partially employing the wage and appreciation models. The wage model indicates that although research participants need little or no skill, the participants' efforts and time are taken into consideration as well as any discomforts they may experience (Pandya & Desai, 2013). I debriefed the interviews and provided debriefing handouts to participants who may have experienced some discomfort in participating in the interview.

Pandya and Desai contended that the appreciation model suggests that participants will receive a token of appreciation for their time in participating in the study.

Participants for this study will be given a \$10.00 gift card as a token of appreciation and for their time, effort, and any discomforts they experienced in the study. Gift cards were given during the follow-up meeting after interviews are completed for interviews conducted in person. For phone interviews, participants were sent an e-gift card from Target. If participants decided that they no longer wish to participate in the interview, he or she would still receive the gift card for their participation.

**Saturation and sample size.** In order for me to ensure saturation, I had to make sure I had enough participants. Walker (2012) reported that saturation was a tool researchers used to make sure adequate data has been collected to support the study. Data saturation consisted of interviewing enough participants until information redundancy or replication occurs (Marshall, Cardoon, Plodder, & Fontenot, 2013; Patton, 2002). Saturation has been reached when the data no longer showed new information, insights, or revelations (Creswell, 2014). Creswell suggested that for phenomenological studies, the sample size can be anywhere between three and 10 participants. Seven participants were enough to provide saturation for this study.

In order to collect data for the current study, I had to follow ethical procedures from ACA and from Walden's IRB. In the next section, I discuss data collection procedures.

## **Data Collection**

Walden's IRB approved the study prior to collecting data. In addition, each participant provided written informed consent prior to each interview. I collected data by conducting interviews and writing down observations from in person interviews and journal notes for face-to-to interviews and phone interviews. In collecting data in this study, my aim was to create a deep, rich, accurate analysis of participants' lived experiences pertaining to grief and loss and spirituality. I address data collection procedures in detail in the following paragraphs.

### **Semistructured Interviews**

Researchers employing phenomenology are interested in learning about the essential meaning of the participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2015). Prior to scheduling and conducting interviews, I developed an interview guide (Patton, 2015) based on the information obtained from conducting an exhaustive literature review regarding spirituality and the grieving processes for late adolescents and the theoretical framework guiding the study.

The interview questions I utilized for this study were a series of questions I constructed that have undergone review from my committee chair and member. I used existential theory to help develop the interview questions. I asked questions about participants' lived experiences with grief and loss and the role spirituality played in their process. The interview questions helped me understand better participants' experiences with grief and loss and spirituality (Maxwell, 2013). I asked my committee members to assess content validity to the interview questions. I used data from the interviews as the main source of data collection (Appendix C).

**Face-to-face interviews.** After participants expressed an interest to participate in the study, I contacted the potential participant either via phone or by email to answer any questions they may have had about the study and to schedule the interview. Participants arrived on their scheduled day and time to participate in the interview. I reviewed the informed consent form, asked the participant to review the consent form and sign if they agreed to participate in the study. I gave copies of informed consent forms back to the participant for their records. I began the semistructured interview and the recording of the interview. The interviews and debriefing was approximately 45-60 minutes. Once the interview was over, participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). I debriefed with each participant and gave a debriefing handout (Appendix E) in the event participants needed additional resources after the interview. I informed participants that I will transcribe the interview and discuss with them any discrepancies during the follow-up meeting. I scheduled follow-up meetings and gave participants a \$10.00 gift card to either Target or Walmart during the follow-up meeting.

**Phone interviews.** For participants who participated in phone interviews, they returned the consent form back to me via email. Participants emailed the signature page of their consent forms therefore I did not send copies of their consent form. Once I received the consent forms, I contacted the participant via email or phone to schedule the interview. Prior to the interview, I emailed participants the demographic questionnaires to return on or before the day of the interview. On the day of the interview, I contacted the participant via phone and answered any additional questions prior to the interview, and to ensure that the demographic questionnaire had been return. I then began the

semistructured interview. After the interview, I debriefed with the participant and emailed them the debriefing handout. The interview and debriefing was approximately 30-45 minutes. Like the face-to-face interviews, I informed participants of the next steps including transcribing the interviews and asking them to take a look at them to ensure accuracy for the follow-up meeting. Also, I informed participants of the \$10.00 e-gift cards they would receive from Target. I purchased the e gift card prior to the follow-up meeting in the event there was an error with purchasing the e gift cards online.

### **Demographic Data**

Demographic data was part of the data collection process. Participants had to complete a demographic questionnaire to help determine the number of participants, gender, age, marital status, education, employment, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Demographic data was collected at the end of the interview for in person interviews. For phone interviews, I emailed the demographic questionnaire to participants prior to the interview to be turned back in on the day of their interview. I used the information from the demographic questionnaire to help determine whether or not the study would have a diverse pool of participants.

### **Follow-Up Meetings**

I used information from the follow-up meetings as a part of data collection. Member checking occurred during the follow-up interview scheduled a different day and time. During the post-interview meeting, I asked one face-to-face participant to review the transcribed interview and point out any discrepancies. Although I asked both face-to-face participants for a follow up appointment, only one showed. The other face-to-face participant reported that he would email me some available days and times for the follow-

up; however, he did not email me therefore, I did not schedule a follow-up appointment. I emailed the phone participants their transcripts prior to the follow-up meeting and like the face-to-face follow-up meeting, phone participants also scheduled a date and time to review the transcripts and were asked to point out any discrepancies (Jones et al., 2012). Six of the seven participants participated in a follow-up meeting. During this time, the one face-to-face participant read over the transcript and reported the information correct and there were no additional notes that needed to be changed. I gave the participant a \$10.00 gift card to Target for participating. The five participants who agreed to conduct the interview via phone also met for a follow-up meeting. Two of the five participants missed their scheduled appointment time; however, each participant called me within the same day. The other three participants were available during their scheduled time. Each participant reported that the interview transcripts looked accurate and I did not need any additional information. In all, one phone participant indicated needed changes. The participant made the changes and emailed me the corrections. I made note of the change in the participant's transcript. I sent each person that interviewed via phone a \$10.00 e-gift card sent directly from Target. They received their e-gift cards prior to the follow-up meeting and receipts of each gift card sent were sent to me. The follow-up meetings lasted approximately 15-20 minutes for face-to-face and 10-15 minutes for phone interviews.

### **Journal Notes**

I used journal notes as part of data collection. Creswell (2014) and Janesick (2011) reported that journaling was an additional way to collect data while conducting a qualitative study. During the research study, I kept a journal that included observations

and notations about participants' nonverbal communication as they answered research questions. My journal included personal reflections and biases regarding the research process. Throughout the development of the research project and during the study itself, I documented my reflections to feedback, impressions about the study and personal insights learned. For example, after each contact with my dissertation chair, I used the research journal to document my thoughts, feelings and impressions regarding the feedback and any additional insight that was gained as a result of the contact. In my journal, I wrote reflective notes regarding impressions about the participants' answers and whether or not I had to clarify any questions and answers.

Once I collected the data, I had to analyze the results. In the next section, I address data analysis procedures.

### **Data Analysis**

Analyzing data was important for making sense out of the collected data and determining the findings from the study (Creswell, 2014). Creswell also suggested that data analysis procedures will depend on the type of qualitative strategy used to collect data. I will address data analysis procedures for hermeneutic phenomenology in the following section.

#### **Data Analysis for Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

In analyzing data for hermeneutic phenomenological studies, it was important to keep in mind the hermeneutic circle in which I circulated between the purpose of the research, the theoretical frames, personal experiences and expertise and subjective responses of the participants (Miner-Romanoff, 2012). In the literature within the past five years, researchers have used data analysis procedures based on hermeneutic

phenomenological research designs. Researchers such as, Cooper, Flewascher, and Cotton (2012) utilized Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) approach to analyze their data. Cheung and Lee (2011) utilized Crist and Tanner's (2003) circular process of hermeneutic phenomenology to help guide data analysis. Crotser and Dickerson (2010), Dickerson, Alqawassi, Underhill, and Lally (2011) and Spratling (2012) utilized Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner's (1989) steps for data analysis in their hermeneutical studies. Dale, So" Derhamn and So" Derhamn (2012) utilized Lindseth and Norberg's phenomenological hermeneutical method in their hermeneutical study, For this study, data analysis will be carried out according Lindseth and Norberg's (2004) phenomenological hermeneutical method for researching lived experiences inspired by Paul Ricoeur.

**Data analysis procedures.** I conducted data analysis by using Lindseth and Norberg's (2004) phenomenological hermeneutical approach that was inspired by Paul Ricoeur (1976). Lindseth and Norberg (2004) suggested that when lived experiences are narrated and written down, the written text express its own meaning. Data analysis procedures for phenomenological hermeneutical entails including the understanding of the meaning of lived experiences as narrated by participants and afterwards a hermeneutic interpretation of the written text as a separate entity with its own meaning (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Lindseth and Norberg (2004) suggested that hermeneutic interpretation entails three steps consisting of naïve reading, structural analysis, and comprehensive understanding. My aim was to describe the meaning and role of spirituality in the grief process for grieving late adolescents. I used the following steps to analyze the data where themes emerged.

**Naïve reading.** The first step in data analysis was naïve reading. Naïve reading entails reading the text as a whole (Mentsen Ness, Hellzen, & Enmarker, 2014). During the naïve reading portion of data analysis, seven transcripts were read multiple times to grasp an initial meaning of the entire text (Pratt-Eriksson, Bergbom, & Lyckhage, 2014).

**Structural analysis.** The next step in analysis was an inductive thematic structural analysis. During this phase, I looked to identify and formulate themes that confirmed initial meanings (Dale et al., 2012). In addition, during this phase, every sentence was analyzed, and I was able to identify meaning units (Pratt-Eriksson, et al., 2014). I used different colored pens to underline text and circle words and phrases that were significant. The different colored pens also helped identify how many times the text was read based on the notes written about each text. There were times when I rewrote the participants' words to focus more on what the participant was saying. In addition, I created tables to help sort and organize the MU, CMU, subthemes, and themes.

I put together similar units into subthemes and themes after I reflected on their similarities and differences (Pratt-Eriksson et al., 2014). In the structural phase, I was able to derive and interpret subthemes and themes. The major steps in structural analysis were to outline meaning in the text and interpret the text further into subthemes and themes (Dale et al., 2012).

**Comprehensive understanding.** During this phase of analysis, I took into consideration my preunderstandings, the naïve reading, and structural analysis, as well as, the literature into account when interpreting the data (Pratt-Eriksson et al., 2014). My preunderstanding consists of personal and professional knowledge of dealing with grief

and loss, and the literature pertaining to grief and loss and the late adolescent population (Pratt-Eriksson et al., 2014).

Trustworthiness is important to address in this study. I put procedures in place in order to assess the trustworthiness of the study. In the following section, I verify the trustworthiness of the study.

### **Verification of Trustworthiness**

In conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study, openness was the key to verifying the trustworthiness of the study (Fleck, Smythe, & Hitchen, 2011). Therefore, once I completed and transcribed the interviews, I established the trustworthiness of the study through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility entails the internal validity of a qualitative study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Each of the participant's interviews was audio recorded. In transcribing interviews, participants' responses were not only recorded honestly, but also accurately and clearly (White, Oelke, & Friesen, 2012). In assessing credibility I employed member checking to ensure that the transcripts were correct at the follow-up meeting (Creswell, 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I also employed triangulation in which I asked my dissertation committee to review data in order to obtain another perspective.

#### **Transferability**

Based on the delimitations of this study, results may not be transferable to all populations. I provided a thorough description of the research background, nature of the study, and theoretical framework. I also identified vital information about the study including assumptions, delimitations, and limitations. If another researcher is interested

in a new study, he or she will be responsible for deciding whether or not this study's results would make sense to transfer to another study (Thomas, & Magilvy, 2011).

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the reliability of a qualitative study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011), as well as to the stability of the data (Houghton et al., 2013). In qualitative research, the participants' experiences must be described as accurately as possible (Walker et al., 2012). I completed an audit trail to help establish reliability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Thomas and Magilvy reported that an audit trail should consist of (a) the purpose of the study, (b) criteria for participants, (c) data collection procedures and how long it took to collect the data, (d) an explanation of the data analysis, (e) interpretation and presentation of the results, and (f) specific procedures used to determine dependability. In addition to the audit trail, field notes from my journal and observations also enhanced dependability.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability relates to the objectivity of a qualitative study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I utilized an audit trail, triangulation, and reflexivity to help establish the confirmability. The information in the audit trail examined the evidence from the data that support my findings, interpretations, and recommendations (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Triangulation entailed asking my dissertation chair to review transcripts, themes, and subthemes. My journal added to confirmability through reflexivity in that I was able to use my journal to discuss my own biases and thoughts about the interviewing process while maintaining objectivity to participants' narratives.

In the next section, I address measures to protect and keep participants' information confidential.

### **Maintaining Confidentiality**

In conducting the study, it was important to safeguard participants' personal and identifying information. I established practices for protecting participants' personal information. In the following section, I discuss confidentiality.

#### **Directors**

In meetings with the directors, I addressed ethical practices, including confidentiality, and procedures for emotional distress. There were discussions regarding when and how emails and or letters will be sent to potential participant and if applicable a space to conduct the interviews for the face-to-face interviews. I also discussed posting and emailing flyers to potential participants.

#### **Developing Participant Identifiers**

A common way to safeguard participants' personal information was to assign them identifiers. I replaced participants' names with pseudo names for identification purposes to protect their identities and contact information. I saved participants' information under their pseudo names in a word document on a password protected flash drive in a folder titled "The Study".

#### **Data Storage**

Storing data was important in protecting participants' identity. I saved the audio recordings of each interview on Google Drive under the computer file name, "The Study". In "The Study" file, I also saved participant responses and observation notes in Microsoft Word documents. In addition, I put in the same computer file, consent forms

and demographic questionnaires for phone interviewees. The computer and flash drive were password protected and stored in a locked cabinet where I am the only person able to access the information. For data that was on paper, such as informed consent forms and demographic questionnaires for face-to-face interviews, the data was put in folders and stored along with the password protected flash drive.

### **Data Maintenance**

Maintaining data was another important part of keeping information confidential. Walden's IRB (2014) guideline of saving information for a minimum of five years will be followed. After five years, all research data will be deleted from flash drive. Journal entries and notes will also be deleted. Demographic information and informed consent paper forms will be shredded.

### **Institutional Review Board**

Walden's IRB ensured that the study adheres to ethical practices to protect the confidentiality of participants and their well-being by reviewing the first three chapters of the study along with a completed application for approval. Once the IRB reviewed all submitted material and approved the proposed study, recruitment procedures began.

Walden's approval code for this study was 03-02-15-0307818.

### **Summary**

I presented in chapter 3 a detailed discussion of the methods that I used for this study, including identification of research participants and the many ethical considerations. I also discussed measures that I used to safeguard participants from harm. The methodology of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study followed the

ethical guidelines of the ACA and Walden University's IRB. In chapter 4, I will discuss the data analysis and results of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the meaning and role of spirituality in the grieving process of late adolescents. The goals of this study were to examine the lived experiences of late adolescents coping with the death of someone they knew, to explore the role spirituality played in their coping process, and to determine whether spiritual practices had helped them find life meaning following their loss. In this chapter, I discuss the research design and rationale, methodology, my role as researcher, and the trustworthiness of my findings. I address the research setting, participant demographics, and data collection process. I also describe my data analysis procedures, present the results, answer the research questions, and provide a summary.

### **Research Setting**

I conducted interviews either in person at TGC or via phone from my home office. Participants who chose to participate via phone lived in either the Midwestern or Eastern regions of the United States. At TGC, I conducted the face-to-face interviews in an assigned counseling room. I explained the interview process, making clear that the interview would be recorded. I reviewed the informed consent form with participants, and each participant signed the signature page consenting to participation in the study. Prior to the interview date, I sent participants an informational letter detailing the study and confidentiality procedures. The informational letter also informed participants that their participation was voluntary and that they would receive a \$10.00 Walmart or Target gift card for their participation. The informed consent form reiterated the same information as the informational letter, and each participant had the opportunity to ask questions before

beginning the interview. Upon receiving the signed informed consent, I began the interview.

Following the interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire and participated in a debriefing. Subsequent to the debriefing, I provided participants a debriefing handout that explained the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, compensation, and the emotional distress that could occur during and following the interview. The handout outlined self-care practices that participants could use if they were feeling distressed and included website addresses for information on additional self-care practices. The debriefing handout also listed a mobile crisis number and my contact information. I scheduled follow-up meetings with one participant following the interview. Although the other participant had explained that he would email me about available times to meet for a follow-up meeting, I never heard back from him, and therefore did not conduct a follow-up meeting with that participant.

I emailed informational letters and informed consent forms to the five telephone participants. In this email, I instructed participants to send back a signed signature page of the informed consent form if they were still interested in participating. Once I received the electronic copies of the signature page, I printed them and saved them in a folder titled "Informed Consent," which I put in a locked filing cabinet. The electronic copies were also saved to an external hard drive that I kept in the locked filing cabinet. I scheduled interviews for those participants who returned the signature page of the informed consent form. After scheduling the interviews, I sent participants a demographic questionnaire to complete, and I asked them to return the questionnaire to me on the day of or before the interview.

Before the phone interview started, I explained the interview and the recording process. After the interview, participants participated in a debriefing. I emailed the debriefing handouts to participants following the debriefing. This was the same debriefing handout that I gave to face-to-face participants; it included the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, compensation, and the emotional distress that can occur during and following the interview. It outlined self-care practices that participants could use if they were feeling distressed and included websites addresses for information on additional self-care practices. The debriefing handout also listed a mobile crisis number and my contact information. Before ending each call, I scheduled a follow-up meeting to allow each participant to review the interview transcript. I thanked each participant and then disconnected the call.

I tried to conduct follow-up meetings both for face-to-face and phone participants. Although two participants met me for face-to-face interviews, only one followed through with scheduling the follow-up meeting to review the transcript. This participant read the transcript to ensure accuracy and informed me that the transcript was correct. I gave the participant a \$10.00 gift card to Target. Although I made several attempts to schedule a follow-up meeting with the other face-to-face participant, that participant chose not to return for the follow-up meeting.

I emailed phone participants their transcribed interview prior to the follow-up meeting so that they had an opportunity to review the transcript prior to the follow-up interview. Two out of the five phone participants completed the follow-up interview at the scheduled time. The other three participants contacted me later in the day because of scheduling conflicts. One participant had to read the transcript again and made

corrections after her missed appointment. She later emailed me corrections to her transcript. Once I received this participant's corrections, I noted the changes. Each phone participant requested an e-gift card from Target. I arranged for e-gift cards to be sent to participants, and I sent follow-up emails to make sure they had received their e-gift cards. I thanked each participant again for participating in the study. Because participant demographics were particularly important to this study, I discuss them in detail in the following section.

### **Participant Demographics**

All participants were in their early 20s except one who reported being 18 years old. Six participants were Caucasian, and one was Hispanic. One had recently graduated from high school and was unemployed. The other six worked either part- or full-time. One was working as a mental health counselor, and two were students in counseling master's degree programs. The other four were in college working on an associate's or bachelor's degree. Participants were from various parts of the Eastern and Midwestern United States. Some participants disclosed their religious preferences, and some did not. Although I explored spirituality with participants, I did not include religious and or spiritual practices on the demographic form. I was more interested in learning whether participants' used spiritual practices rather than exploring their religious preferences. Table 1 illustrates participant demographics.

Table 1

*Participants' Demographic Data*

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education	Employed	Race/Ethnicity	SES
Tasha	F	18	S	HS Graduate	No	Caucasian	Middle
John	M	21	S	College Student	Yes	Caucasian	Lower Middle
Kelly	F	24	S	Graduate Student	Yes	Caucasian	Middle
Diane	F	24	S	Graduate Student	Yes	Caucasian	Middle
Gabrielle	F	23	S	BA	Yes	Caucasian	Middle
Lula	F	23	S	MA	Yes	Caucasian	Middle
Carmen	F	24	S	MA	Yes	Hispanic	Middle

*Note.* SES = socioeconomic status, HS = high school, BA = bachelor's degree, MA = master's degree.

## Descriptions of Participants

To clarify participants' backgrounds, I provide a detailed description of each participant, including pseudonyms, beginning with participants from the face-to-face interviews.

### Face-to-Face Interviews

**Tasha.** Tasha is a single, 18-year-old high school senior who identified herself as Caucasian and middle class. On the day of the interview, Tasha had just received approval to graduate from high school. Tasha stated that there was a time when she did not know if she was going to graduate because her grades had suffered after her mother died. Tasha came to the interview dressed appropriately for the weather and her age, and was happy and upbeat. She was friendly throughout the interview and eager to answer questions. She smiled at times and laughed as she talked about her graduation and post-graduation plans with her friends. She reported being unemployed at the time of the interview.

Tasha grew up with her siblings and birth parents. Tasha described her family as "An all-American family who lived in a neighborhood where everyone knew everyone." She experienced the death of her mother from a drug overdose 3 years ago. As she talked about her mother and spirituality, she continued to smile and present with a happy disposition. Tasha reported that she and her family went to the cemetery on important dates such as her mother's birthday and the anniversary of her death. The Sunday following the interview was Mother's Day, and Tasha reported that she planned on going to the cemetery. She showed me pictures of her mother, her mother's gravesite, and tattoos she had gotten in memory of her mother. She also showed me prom pictures that

included her sister and brother. Tasha reported feeling a particular closeness to her mom and family.

Tasha stated that she almost died twice at birth, and that she had always believed in God. Tasha attended the grief center for individual counseling, and she participated in two grief support groups. Tasha's family bond and her belief system continued after her mother died. She continued to attend church on Sundays, and spent daily time with her family. Tasha reported that because of her mother's death, she had changed for the better and had aspirations of working with children with disabilities.

Tasha reported that her faith in God and family support were instrumental in coping with her mother's death, stating, "I feel if I didn't believe in God, I honestly feel like I wouldn't be here now." She continued, "My brothers and sisters were everything to me." As Tasha talked about her relationship with her mother and the things she and her mother used to do together, she would often smile.

**John.** John was a single Caucasian 21-year-old college student who worked part time. John identified himself as a lower-middle-class male. John was cooperative, dressed appropriately for the weather and his age, and appeared happy. He was pleasant and very cooperative throughout the interview; however, initially he responded carefully and slowly. As the interview continued, John spoke openly about his experiences.

John experienced the death of his best friend in December, 2014 and his grandfather in 2007. John reported that his best friend committed suicide. John described his relationship with his best friend as being more like brothers than friends. John reported that he continued to struggle with his best friend's death. John described his grieving process for his best friend differently from when his grandfather died in that

John had more time to grieve his grandfather's death. John's best friend died 6 months before the interview.

As a means of coping with his best friend's death, John found doing physical activity in nature beneficial. In addition to doing physical activity to cope with his loss, John also participated in individual counseling at TGC and found it helpful in processing his grief. In addition, John found that meditating helped him connect to "his higher self" and helped with his spiritual "growth and healing." Relating to his higher self, involved asking himself questions and finding the answer through running and listening to music. If he was unable to find an answer, running and listening to music helped him "find solace."

John described his family and friends as being a support system for him. He also reported that he went to chapel a few times for support. He did not talk as much about his faith in God. Instead, he equated his spirituality with running in a park, listening to music, praying, and meditating. As John talked about his best friend, he talked about how much this death affected him. John's affect changed as he talked about his grandfather and best friend. When John talked about his grandfather, he reported that his grandfather was like a second father. However, when he talked about his best friend, he would look down at the table, slow down his speech, and speak in a softer tone.

John reported that his best friend's death changed him and that he believed he found his new life purpose. He stated, "I'm living my life for (friend's name) now, my friend and ...it's just kinda... it's kinda... hard to explain." John described feeling as though he had a new purpose since his friend's death that consisted of helping others and being more empathic toward others.

### Phone Interviews

**Kelley.** Kelley was a 24-year-old, single, Caucasian, middle-class college student who worked part time. Kelley was pleasant and friendly over the phone. She experienced the death of her grandmother 4 years ago. Kelley reported that she was especially close to her grandmother. Kelley's grandfather also died; however, she did not report when he died precisely. Kelley reported that the symptoms from a stroke caused her relationship with her grandfather to be different from his relationship with her grandmother. For example, as she talked about her grandfather's presence growing up, she related, "He was there too. He had a stroke when I was about eight or nine I think, possibly younger, which definitely affected his speech a lot so I wasn't as close to him as my grandmother just because he had trouble." She added, "I had earlier memories of him. He had trouble speaking a lot like formulating thoughts and emotions so he wasn't as active with us as my grandmother was." In addition to her grandparents' death, Kelley spoke of how her mother almost died from a brain aneurysm. When her mother had the brain aneurysm, Kelley said her family was preparing for her mother's death. She related,

Two years ago my mom actually had a brain aneurysm and stroke, and she nearly passed away, um..., so we kind of got ready to prepare ourselves for her to pass.

But she ended up making... um... a miraculous recovery, so that wasn't the case.

In addition, she related, "We had to take her through the whole process of taking her off of life support when we didn't think that she would recover, we started the process, but thankfully she survived." Kelley shared that her faith has grown over the years and that she has come to terms with her grandparents' deaths. Kelley shares a bond with her

family, and she believes that through her religious beliefs she will see those who have died one day.

**Diane.** Diane was a single, 24-year-old graduate student in counseling and worked full time. Diane identified herself as Caucasian and middle class. Diane was friendly and pleasant throughout the interview. Diane experienced the sudden death of her mother when she was ten years old. Diane's mother worked often before her death and as she described her relationship with her mother, she reported, "My mother was the registered nurse for the ICU, or she was charge nurse... um...so she was working all of the time, and I honestly don't remember like doing a whole lot of things with her." Before her mother's death, Diane described herself as "self-centered and focused" on her needs versus others' needs. She was in and out of trouble in school. Since her mother's death, Diane has been in both individual counseling and group counseling.

Diane also began to behave better in school after her mother died. Diane stated, "I was that 10-year-old little girl that caused trouble in school and [went to] the principal[s office] often." Because of her mother's death, Diane reported, "I certainly am less self-centered, and I can be more compassionate with people." Diane disclosed that she was getting married soon and she felt sad that her mother would not witness her wedding. Diane stated, "There is that cycle when something comes up. I am getting married next month, so having that big event is..., it hasn't been just today, but you realize how much you want her there you know? (Voice quivers)." Diane reported having a strong faith in God and Christ and credited her Christian faith as a means of coping with her mother's death. Diane stated, "I am Christian, I read the Bible, and I think that helped."

**Gabrielle.** Gabrielle was an employed; single 23-year-old, Caucasian, working class female. Gabrielle was friendly throughout the interview. Gabrielle reported that she experienced the death of her father and godmother a year apart. Gabrielle said that her godmother died in 2013 and then her father died in October 2014. Gabrielle disclosed that her father had colon cancer and died two years after his diagnosis. She did not reveal how her godmother died; however, she reported her godmother was ill.

Gabrielle said that when she was younger, she had a good relationship with her father. Gabrielle reported that it seemed like during middle school their relationship changed, and she did not feel as connected to him. It was not until his diagnosis of stage 4 colon cancer that she became close to him again. She reported,

We, well, prior.... like when I was younger... we had a good relationship. But it seemed like, let's say in middle school, we started not being as close up until college, up to the point where he had stage 4 colon cancer when he was diagnosed, but it was like two years before he passed.

Gabrielle shared closeness to her godmother. She stated,

She would baby sit me...um...and even when I was older we were close even though I did not see her as much, but we were pretty close, ...um..., and like maybe like six months before she passed, I actually would go down there and help with her medicine and different things like that.

Although Gabrielle got along with her father and godmother before they died, she described times when she was not as involved in their lives. Gabrielle said there were times when she was emotionally distant from her godmother, but before her death; their relationship grew again, and they saw each other a lot. Gabrielle related, "So again, there

was that period of time when I was pretty distant, but before her passing we were pretty close, we saw a lot of each other.”

Since the deaths of her godmother and father, Gabrielle has been on a quest to figure out what religion or spiritual practice worked best for her current belief system since her godmother and father died, Gabrielle has been looking into different religions and ways of being spiritual without going into organized religion. Gabrielle stated, “I was raised in a religious household, but, like, after as I grew older, I started to not...to not continue that behavior.” At the time of the interview, Gabrielle was trying to figure out what spiritual and religious beliefs worked for her and what did not.

**Lula.** Lula was a single, Caucasian, counseling graduate student working full time. Lula identified herself as middle class. Lula was 23 years old at the time of the interview. Lula was pleasant and cooperative during the interview. Lula talked about her experiences with grief and loss. She talked about the death of her mother, uncle, sister, another sister’s boyfriend, and grandparents. Because of the amount of loss Lula experienced, she considered loss to be around her often. She stated, “I feel like grief has always been around...um... since I was little. I don’t remember when it wasn’t.” Lula began describing her experiences with loss. Lula reported that her maternal uncle died from suicide. She also reported having an older sister die of leukemia. She also reported that her step-grandmother died; however, she did not disclose how she died. Lula also reported that she has another sister who had an ex-boyfriend die of suicide. She also reported her grandfather died of an undisclosed illness.

Lula’s mother’s death due to a brain aneurysm was her most significant loss. Although Lula experienced multiple losses, she described sharing closeness with her

mother, grandfather, and sister's ex-boyfriend. As Lula talked about her losses, she described a close bond with her mother. Lula stated, "We always joked that it (their relationship) was too close." She added, "We didn't just talk every day, we talked all day, every day whether it was texting, or phone calls, or on my walk to class." Although they shared, a special bond, Lula, and her mother had conflicts, especially when she got older. During the interview, Lula did not want to go into their conflicts; however, she reported that she believed her mother had unresolved grief of her own related to the deaths of her parents, brother, and child. She further reported that she felt as though her mother was "spiraling downward" so there were times when she felt more like the mother. Lula went to group counseling right after her mother died and she went to individual counseling the semester after her mother died. At the time of the interview, Lula planned on returning to counseling because she reported having, "unsettled business" regarding her mother's death; however she did not disclose specifically when she will begin counseling treatment.

Lula reported that her grandfather died during either her freshman or sophomore year of college. Lula recalled times when she would go to church with him every Sunday. It was during this period that her sister's boyfriend committed suicide when Lula was a sophomore in college. Lula mentioned that her father did not know his mother; however, he had a stepmother who died. Lula knew her as "Grandma." Her grandma died when Lula was in middle or high school. Lula's uncle and godfather died when she was three years old. She described her godfather as being handsome based on the pictures she has seen of him. As she talked about her uncle, she would laugh. One of Lula's sisters died of leukemia before Lula was born. This particular sister was seven years older than Lula.

After her sister had died, Lula was born followed by the birth of her brother. Lula described herself as a “healthy copier” as it pertains to her mother’s death that occurred October 2012. Her coping mechanisms included journaling and writing to her mother. Lula believed that her mother’s energy is still around. She stated, “Me and my brother have always said that an energy like we felt with my mom...we were so close to her that just doesn’t go away...sometimes I get such a feeling of warmth.” In addition, she said, “Love and connection, I really do still feel connected sometimes.” Writing helped her remain spiritually connected to her mother. Lula also reported that talking about her mother helped her cope with her feelings regarding her mother’s death. Praying is another way she felt connected to her mom. She realized that the connection shared with her mother continues after her mother’s death. As she answered questions, she became unsure if she were giving the “right answers.” At times, Lula would laugh and other times she would become very serious. In participating in coping skills such as crafting, writing, and praying, Lula reported that her mother’s death taught her, “Love doesn’t die.”

**Carmen.** Carmen was a single, 24-year-old, middle class, full time employed, Hispanic female. She worked full time as a counselor. Carmen presented as pleasant and cooperative; however, when the interview began, Carmen was slow to respond to questions. She later began to have a conversation as she expanded answers. Carmen experienced the death of her paternal grandmother in 2009 and her paternal grandfather when she was nine years old. However, more recently, she suffered the death of her maternal aunt due to suicide. The day after the interview was the five-year anniversary of her aunt’s death. Carmen grew up with her siblings and birth parents. Carmen’s aunt lived in another country; however, she would visit Carmen and the rest of the family for

an undisclosed amount of time. Carmen had planned to visit her aunt during her next trip to her country, and when she learned her aunt had committed suicide, she was shocked. Being a mental health counselor, Carmen was aware of mental illness and suicide; however, it felt different because her aunt was “family.” Carmen felt close to her aunt. Carmen described her relationship as one where she did not talk to her aunt daily or weekly because her aunt lived in another country; however, whenever Carmen went to her aunt’s country, she spent time with her. Carmen recalled the last time her aunt came to visit her and her family. She reported that she told her aunt that she would be coming to her country to visit. Carmen did not realize that would be the last time she would see her aunt alive. Carmen’s aunt visited in the summer, and by the fall of the same year, she committed suicide.

Carmen described relationships with other relatives who died. She specifically talked about her grandparents. She remembers going over to her grandparents’ house when she was younger; however, she described her relationship with her grandmother as not being very close. Carmen had an attachment towards her grandfather that her parents shared with her. Although Carmen experienced grief and loss of other relatives, she talked mainly about her aunt who committed suicide. Carmen described her family and faith in God as strengths for her and supports she used when coping with her aunt's death. Carmen used spiritual music, and Bible verses replay in her mind. For example, she stated, “Well it’s a part of me, like using the Bible, for instance, which says in life there will be trials. Um, but take heart and believing in Jesus that He has overcome the world.”

Carmen was able to persevere through difficult times by reminding herself that the difficult times were to help a person grow and change for the better. For Carmen, her

religious beliefs reminded her that difficult times produced “endurance, hope, and strength in character as well as love.” Carmen missed the scheduled follow-up meeting; however, she did call me the same day to discuss the transcript. Carmen apologized for missing the follow-up meeting due to her commute to and from work. Carmen described the commute as long that entailed her catching a subway, and that was why she missed the call for the follow-up meeting. Carmen said that she worked long hours at her agency and reported being very busy at the time of the interview; however, she stated that she was happy to help with the study.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted seven semistructured interviews with participants who were between the ages of 18 – 25 and who had experienced the death of someone they knew. Two participants self-identified as meeting the study criteria and responded to a recruitment letter sent by TGC. After the first two interviews, the information did not achieve data saturation; therefore, following IRB approval for a change in procedures; I solicited participants from listservs, a local college, and a local university. Two participants saw the flyers posted at the local college and local university. Three participants received information about the study from ASERVIC and CESNET listservs. Due to the change in procedures additional, interviews I conducted via phone from my home office. The following paragraphs detail the data collection process.

### **Interviews**

The primary data collection instrument came from individual interviews conducted face-to-face at the grief center or via phone. In the next section, I discuss the location of the interviews.

**The Grief Center (TGC).** Face-to-face interviews were conducted at TGC. As I entered TGC, the lobby had refreshments for visitors along with brochures and pamphlets regarding types of counseling services. A receptionist greeted people as they entered TGC. There was information on how to make donations next the receptionist's desk. TGC had two floors and on each floor there were counseling rooms for individual and group counseling services. I conducted the interviews in an assigned counseling room on the second floor. On the second floor, there also were three other counseling rooms, a waiting area, restroom, and a large aquarium. Each room had a phone and art decorations. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

The interview room was comfortable. There were arts and crafts supplies for children in the room. In addition, there was a sink, hand soap, and lemon scented Clorox wipes. There were chairs for young children and adults and two long tables for arts and crafts. The receptionist alerted me when a participant arrived and I went to the lobby to greet the participant. I then escorted each participant to the assigned interview room. The room temperature in the room was comfortable, and the lighting was adequate. On one of the interview day, counselors conducted grief counseling groups across from the interview room; however, grief counseling clients and study participants did not see one another during the interview because the group meeting times were not the same times as the interviews. Both participants were friendly and eager to help with the study. Both expressed gratitude in being a part of the research. After participants reviewed informed consent, both participants agreed to participate in the study. Each participant signed the consent forms, and then I began interviewing participants and asking them about their lived experiences with grief and loss. Also, I used PVR to record the interviews. I then

transferred the recordings to folders in Microsoft OneDrive (SkyDrive) and Google Cloud.

**Home office.** On the day participants were scheduled for the phone interview, I called each participant from my home office at the scheduled date and time. The interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes. Each participant expressed gratitude about participating in the study, and all were happy to help with the research.

### **Additional Data Collection Instruments**

In addition to conducting interviews, I also collected additional information from follow-up the meeting. After conducting the follow-up meetings, one transcript needed correction. I took hand notes for face-to-face interviews and I used the computer software Microsoft Word to take notes for the phone interviews. In the next section, I discuss additional data collection instruments.

### **Follow-Up Meetings**

Six out of the seven participants attended a follow-up meeting to discuss the transcripts and if there were any discrepancies. One participant at the TGC showed up on the day and time scheduled, and I gave the participant a copy of the transcribed interview. I asked the participant to review the transcript and point out any discrepancies. The follow-up meeting was approximately 15-20 minutes. The other face-to-face participant did not return for the follow-up meeting and although the participant did not show for the follow-up meeting, I continued to use the data from the interview and demographic questionnaire.

Participants who participated via phone scheduled a follow-up meeting as well. The follow-up meetings for these participants were approximately 10-15 minutes. I

emailed transcripts to participants who participated via phone and asked them to review for accuracy. Two of the five phone participants missed their scheduled appointment times; however, they called me on the same day to discuss the transcript. One of the participants reported that she had not had time to review the transcript before the meeting due to work. She read the transcript the next day and emailed me corrections.

### **Demographic Data**

In order to ensure participants met the study, I sent potential participants information about the study including criteria for being in the study. If participants did not meet criteria, I informed them as soon as they contacted me about being in the study. For face-to-face participants, I gave them their data questionnaire following the interview. For phone interviews, I emailed participants the demographic questionnaire prior to the interview and I instructed them to email the questionnaire back before or on the day of their interview. Demographic data helped determine the number of participants, gender, age, marital status, education, employment, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES) (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

### **Journal**

After each interview, I wrote my reflections and biases. I also made notes about the surroundings and participants' nonverbal communication such as silence and pauses through the interviews. During the study, I bracketed my biases and put them in a journal to reflect on later after I completed the study. After I had transcribed all of the transcripts, I made corrections as necessary. After I collected the data from all sources, I began analyzing the data. Next, I will detail data analysis procedures.

### **Data Analysis**

For data analysis, I used Lindseth and Norberg 's (2004) phenomenological hermeneutical approach inspired by Paul Ricoeur (1976) . Dellenmark-Blom and Wigert (2014) suggested that the purpose of interpreting texts is to find deeper new levels of understanding human thoughts, emotions, and activities. I analyzed the text from the interview verbatim to find a deeper meaning to the lived experiences of participates who had experienced the death of someone they knew.

Moving through the hermeneutic circle entails interpreting the text (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). The hermeneutic circle involves a dialectic movement between non-methodological understanding and methodological explanation (Eriksen, Dahl, Karlsson & Arman, 2014; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). To move through the hermeneutical circle, I employed three methodological steps that included naïve reading, structural analysis, and comprehensive understanding (Mentsen Ness, Hellzen, & Enmarker, 2014; Pratt-Eriksson, Bergbom, & Lyckhage, 2014).

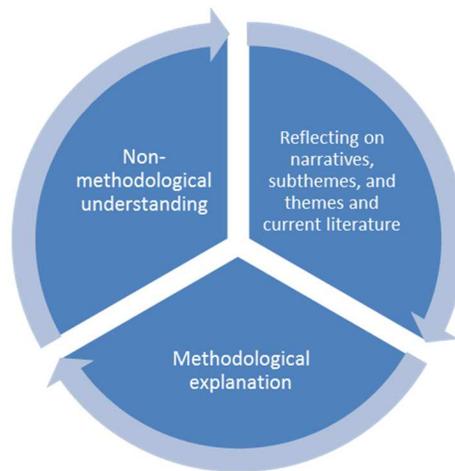
**Naïve reading.** Naïve reading is a first guess approach to what the text is saying. During the naïve reading process, I went from a natural attitude to a phenomenological one. A natural attitude entailed taking for granted the perceived meaning, whereas, a phenomenological attitude entailed getting to the central meaning or essence of what the participant is conveying (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). During naïve reading, I read the text several times to grasp meaning as a whole until the text spoke to me and I was moved and touched by what the participants were saying about their experiences with grief and loss and spirituality (Dellenmark-Blom & Wigert, 2014; Eriksen, Dahl,

Karlsson & Arman, 2014). Naïve reading was an important process in analyzing the data because it served as a guide to the structural analysis (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

**Structural analysis.** The second step in the analysis entailed completing a thematic structural analysis. In order to complete thematic structural analysis, I used different colored pens as I divided the text into meaning units (MU) as a means of organizing the data. I then read over the MU and created condensed meaning units (CMU). MU are sentences of any length that conveys meaning, and CMU are simple words or concepts used to reduce the MU (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). I then read and reflected on each CMU noting the similarities and differences. Next, I sorted and abstracted similar CMU from each transcript formulating subthemes, and themes. In organizing data, I used different colored ink pens along with text to support the subthemes and themes. I also created tables to help organize the MU, CMU, subthemes, and themes. During this structural analysis, I was able to make interpretations of the text by reading part and whole texts in a dialectic movement between (a) reading narratives, subthemes, and themes (non-methodological understanding), to (b) reflecting upon the narratives, subthemes, and themes along with the existing literature pertaining to existentialism, late adolescence, grief and loss and spirituality, to (c) formulating comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences (methodological explanation).

**Comprehensive understanding.** Comprehensive understanding is the last part of the hermeneutic circle and the last part in analyzing data. During the comprehensive understanding part of analysis, I had to summarize the themes and subthemes as they related to the research questions. Comprehensive understanding allowed me to gain more awareness of late adolescents' experiences with grief and loss and the role spirituality

played in their loss. Gaining awareness of the lived experiences of late adolescents experiences with grief and loss aided in answering the study's research questions. Figure 1 illustrates the hermeneutic circle.



*Figure 1.* Hermeneutic circle

## **Themes**

During naïve reading and structural analysis, I was able to discover descriptive themes that came from participants' rich narratives regarding their lived experiences with grief and loss and spirituality. I identified meaning units (MU) and condensed meaning units (CMU) that helped in the discovering of themes. In identifying the MU and CMU, three themes emerged from the data along with 12 subthemes. These themes aided in answering the research questions which included four research questions that consisted of one central question and three subquestions. Tables 2, 3, and 4 are examples of the structural analysis that led to the three themes and 12 subthemes.

Table 2

*Theme 1: Experiences with Death*

Participant	Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit	Subtheme	Theme
Tasha	Well three years ago well actually about to be four years my mom died at 42...	Mom died almost four years ago	Time	Experiences with Death
John	My best friend committed suicide	Suicide	Cause of Death	Experiences with Death
Kelley	She (grandmother) was like a another mom for me... I was very close to my grandmother	My grandmother was like another mom	Relationship with Deceased	Experiences with Death

Table 3

*Theme 2: Surviving the Loss*

Participant	Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit	Subtheme	Theme
Lula	Um gosh um I mean it sounds silly, but I try to do things I enjoy like it sounds so stupid, but like crafting. Like making candles	I enjoy crafting and making candles	Creative Arts	Surviving the Loss
Diane	I read a book called <i>Motherless</i> <i>Motherless</i> <i>Daughter</i>	Read <i>Motherless</i> <i>Daughters</i>	Reading	Surviving the Loss
Gabrielle	Currently, um I see a therapist which helps	Individual Counseling	Counseling	Surviving the Loss

Carmen	<p>I mean I think I cope pretty well considering that um I use family support and my faith as of basically as a source of strength and support for me</p>	<p>Found strength in family and faith</p>	<p>Support Network</p>	<p>Surviving the Loss</p>
Lula	<p>I pray every night... maybe even the writing, because I do write directly to my mom.  Praying and I guess I am trying meditate</p>	<p>Staying connected to mom by praying, writing, and meditating</p>	<p>Spirituality</p>	<p>Surviving the Loss</p>

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Table 4

*Theme 3: Changes*

Participant	Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit	Subtheme	Theme
John	I think it's for me it's that I need to be more comforting towards people and that I am basically here because people need me.	More comforting and helpful towards others	Change in Life Purpose	Changes
Diane	There is something more than what this is, There is hope for the better, you know it's not just about your	Death affects and changes people	Change in Worldview	Changes

loss it's about

who has been

affected who

has been

changed by it

too

Kelley

Praying helps... Praying to God Change in Faith Changes

relying on my helps with

faith and difficult times

my belief in

God to get me

through those

difficult times

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One central question and three sub questions guided this study. My primary question was: What are the lived experiences of late adolescents between the ages of 18 and 25 who are coping with the death of someone they know? To develop this question further, I designed the following subquestions: What lived experiences do late adolescents have in using spiritual practices in coping with the death of someone they know? What meanings do late adolescents associate with the role of spirituality when experiencing the death of someone they know? And what role does spirituality play in the grieving process for late adolescents after someone they knew has died?

As Table 2 reflects, during the structural analysis, experience with death emerged from the data as the first theme. Subthemes for the first theme consisted of time, cause of death, and relationship with the deceased. Each participant was able to provide meaning units that detailed rich descriptions of the person that died and when they died, as well as, how the person died and the type of relationship they had with the deceased before their deaths. I used theme one and the subthemes in answering the central research question: what lived experiences late adolescents between the ages of 18 and 25 have in coping with the death of someone they know?

As Table 3 demonstrated, surviving the loss was the second theme that emerged from the data. The subthemes for theme two consisted of creative arts, self-help, counseling, support network, and spiritual practices. I used theme two and associated subthemes to answer sub research question number one: what lived experiences do late adolescents have in using spiritual practices in coping with the death of someone they know?

As shown in Table 4, changes was the third theme that emerged from the data. The subthemes from theme three consisted of change in life purpose, change in worldview, and change in faith. I used the third theme and related subthemes to answer the following sub research questions: What meaning do late adolescents' associate with the role of spirituality when experiencing the death of someone they know? and What role does spirituality play in the grieving process for late adolescents after someone they know has died? I will answer the research questions later in the chapter. In the next section, I will detail each theme and related subthemes.

### **Theme 1: Experiences with Death**

The first theme that emerged from the data was experiences with death. Participants gave in detail their lived experiences with loss. I discuss below each subtheme related with participants' experiences with death.

**Time.** Time was the first subtheme that emerged. I noticed that as participants began to tell their stories, each participant began telling me when the person died. Some participants dealt with grief for over two years or more, while others were dealing with the death of someone they knew for less than two years. For example, Tasha and Diane experienced the death of someone they knew for more than two years. Tasha stated "Four years ago my, well, three years ago...well actually about to be four years...my mom died". Likewise, Diane reported, "My mother passed away ten years ago...I was 10. So probably 14 years ago." On the other hand, John and Gabrielle experienced the loss of someone they knew less than two years ago. John reported, "December 9th (2014) my best friend committed suicide." Gabrielle stated, "But the major one I would say is my father who passed away last October (2014), and then I had a godmother that passed

away a year before that.” Carmen reported, “I have lost an aunt a few years ago in fact...five years ago...actually tomorrow.” Although no one can predict how long a person should grieve and will grieve, Holland and Neimeyer (2010) postulated that there are grief theorists who suggest grief tends to proceed along a series of predictable stages. Holland and Neimeyer further contended that these stages range from disbelief or numbness through an intermediate stage that may result in depression until the person reaches the final stage process that consists of accepting the lost. Participants in the study were able to tell when the person died and gave an approximate of the death anniversary date. Time was significant to highlight because some of the anniversary dates were around the same time as the interview.

**Cause of death.** After re-reading text, the next subtheme that emerged from the data was cause of death. The cause of death linked with the time of death as participants began telling their lived experiences. Participants volunteered how they experienced the death of someone they knew. Like the anniversary dates and when the deaths occurred, participants were able to talk about the cause of death for the person they know.

John and Lula lost friends due to suicide. Carmen and Lula also experienced deaths due to suicide. Carmen lost her aunt due to suicide and Lula stated that she also lost an uncle and her sister’s boyfriend due to suicide. Supiano (2012) reported that suicide is a devastating life event. Three of the participants in this study had experienced a death of someone they loved due to suicide. This seems to be evident in how Lula reported that her sister’s boyfriend committed suicide and that his death was significant to her.

John and Carmen discussed in detail their feelings regarding their experiences with suicide. John, for example, reported “He hung himself and I did not find out until two days after he committed the act so that was my most recent experience.” John also reported, “I felt really lost and I didn’t understand what was going on.” Carmen was also shocked to learn that her aunt had committed suicide. Carmen stated,

Taking my aunt’s loss into consideration how sudden it was um...I mean she was here one summer and in the fall she was gone and nobody really knew this was going to happen of course it wasn’t a medical reason, it was because suicide so um to me it really took mental health for to a different level um and take that act more serious I knew about suicide and mental health, but it really hit home because it was actually family.

Other participants (Diane, Gabrielle, and Lula) experienced the death of someone they knew through a medical illness. Some of the deaths due to illness were a surprise (Diane, Lula). Diane indicated “It was well it was a sudden death, my mom we didn’t know that she was sick.” As Lula discussed her mother, she stated, that her mother died “very suddenly she had an aneurysm it was a junior year of college.” Whereas, Gabrielle reported her father had cancer for two years before passing. More specifically, she stated, “He had stage 4 colon cancer when he was diagnosed, but it was like two years before he passed.” Whereas, Tasha reported, “My mom died at 42 of a drug overdose.” Kelley experienced the loss of her grandparents; however, she did not disclose how they died.

Tasha reported that her mother died of drug overdose at 42 years old. According to Da Silva, Noto, and Formigoni (2007) death by overdose is loaded with social, moral stigmas, in addition to strong feelings of anger, helplessness, guilt, and shame in the

families. Tasha discussed her mother's death and how she and her family found out her mother was using drugs. As far as being ashamed about her mother's addiction and ultimately dying from the addiction, Tasha stated, "I usually talk about it a lot. I'm not scared to tell others that she died from drugs," unlike Da Silva et al. findings that drug-related death (DRD) would hold stigma Tasha did not feel ashamed or embarrassed to talk about her mother's death.

Some participants spoke of the person that had died but did not elaborate on the cause of death. For example, Kelley experienced the death of her grandparents; however, she did not disclose their cause of death. Likewise, Diane reported her mother being ill; however, she did not disclose her mother's illness or her mother's cause of death. Gabrielle, who reported both her father and her godmother's death only, shared that her father died of colon cancer; she did not disclose how her godmother died.

**Relationship with the deceased.** As I continued to read the text from the verbatim transcripts, I noticed that participants spoke about their relationships with the person that died. Participants did not talk about what the people meant to them that died. Instead, they talked about the closeness they shared with them prior to death. The relationship seemed to appear as an important subtheme in the interviews. Again, like time and cause of death, participants freely shared information about their relationship with the person that died. Although some participants had experienced the death of many people, their interview responses focused on the death of the person closest to them emotionally and appeared the most significant. John, Kelley, Gabrielle, Lula, and Carmen had a close relationship with the person before they died. John related,

I knew him for 16 years, he like I said was my best friend he really he was really more of a brother I've known forever he was over for everything, my birthdays, uh I just felt so close to him and I didn't even see what was happening kinda so it was the relationship I just felt so close to him and I was surprised after what happened.

In talking about her relationship with her grandmother Kelley related, "I was very close to my grandmother because she would care for me and my sister a lot. She would help us get ready in the morning or afterschool like we would stay over her house. Like another parent for me." In talking about her mom, Lula related, "We always joked that it was too close, we didn't just talk every day, we talked all day everyday whether it was texting or phone calls or on my walk to class." Diane, on the other hand, wished her relationship was better with her mother before she died. She reported that she wished she was closer to her mom prior to her death. Diane stated, "Now I wish it was much better than it was, but being 10 years old I was very self-centered, and um it was more about what can she provide for me...um and I didn't realize how much she did until I had to do it on my own."

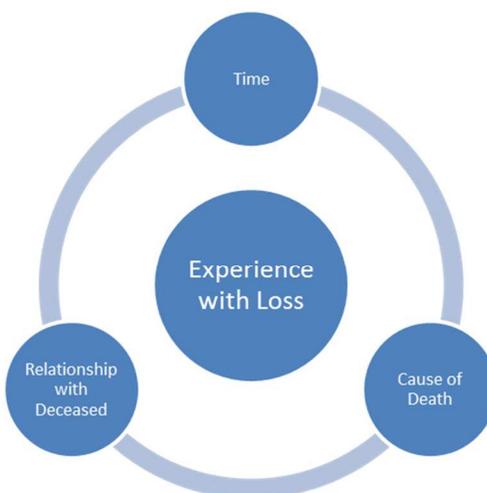
Participants described their relationships with the deceased. Words such as "just like a brother," as expressed by John and "like a second mother to me," as posited by Kelley in reference to her grandmother described the close connection participants felt towards the deceased person. Gabrielle described a close relationship with her father and godmother who died. She explained how her relationship had changed over the years but reported being close to her godmother at the time of her death.

Regarding her relationship with her godmother, Gabrielle stated,

We were really close...when I was younger, I would go there and she would baby sit me, um and even when I was older we were close even though I did not see her as much, but we were pretty close...6 months before she passed, I actually would go down there and help with her medicine and different things...there was that period of time when I was pretty distant, but prior to her passing we were pretty close, we saw a lot of each other.

Finally, Carmen, whose aunt died, described her relationship with her aunt as being close. She stated, “I would say we were close, not close to the extent where we spoke everyday or every week but every once in a while we spoke uh she actually lived in (another country).”

Figure 2 illustrates the theme of experience with death and the subthemes. Participants gave in detail their lived experiences with loss. Each participant discussed who the person was that died, when and how they died and their relationship with the deceased.



*Figure 2.* Experience with death.

Once participants began sharing their lived experiences with people they knew, they began talking about how they were coping with or surviving the loss of someone they knew. I discovered the second major theme: surviving the loss from the text. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the various ways participants were surviving their loss.

### **Theme 2: Surviving the Loss**

Surviving the death of a loved one can be challenging, and ways of coping varied depending on the person left behind. Participants in the study often discussed how they coped with the death of someone they knew. Coping mechanisms are behaviors, thoughts, and emotions a person uses to adjust to life stressors (Semel Institute, 2015).

Participants in this study chose an active approach to coping with the death of someone they knew leading to five subthemes consisting of creative arts, self-help, counseling, support network, and spiritual practices. In the next section, I discuss each one the subthemes associated with surviving the loss.



*Figure 3.* Surviving the loss and associated subthemes.

**Creative arts.** Some participants chose to use their creativity in coping with their loss. There were innovative approaches participants used to help in surviving the death of someone they knew. Tasha related, I came here (grief center) to learn how to deal with it and how to like write down my feelings and stuff like that.” John reported, “I’m a runner I like to run and one of the things I like to do is physical exercise get some music in.” As Lula talked about her mom and using art to help her cope, she reported,

I mean it sounds silly, but I try to do things I enjoy like it sounds so stupid, but like crafting. Like making candles, but like I try to immerse myself in things that I enjoy...I love telling funny stories...hat’s keeping her around”.

**Self-help.** Two participants chose to use self-help practices to help them cope with their loss. Self-help methods included reading or researching the various religions and spiritual practices. Diane stated, “I think something that helped me personally was this book called, um, *Motherless Daughters*, um, by Hope Edelman.” Gabrielle reported, “I read about different ways to cope.” In addition, Gabrielle related, “I’ve looked into like religions and ways of being spiritual that doesn’t really don’t go into organized religion.” Participants seemed to be looking to written accounts of others who had dealt with a loss as a way to survive the loss. Gabrielle also looked into different types of religion and spiritual practices.

**Counseling.** Counseling emerged as a method for younger adults to surviving the loss of someone they knew. Some participants talked about choosing to attend individual and group counseling. Lula, Tasha, and Diane reported going to grief support groups and individual counseling. John and Gabrielle said going to individual counseling. Lula reported,

I've gone to counseling; I was in groups right away. Some were more helpful than others...I did individual counseling the semester after...kinda got something out of it, I think it was just helping to keep me sane and now I recently started going to see a counselor again because I feel like there is some unsettled business with it.

For Gabrielle, counseling was her main way of coping with her loss as evidenced when she said, "Currently, um I see a therapist which helps...I read about different ways to cope, but for now, therapy and talking about it is my go to." Tasha reported, "I've done two groups and done individual counseling."

**Support network.** Participants reported that they found or established Support Networks to help Survive the Loss of someone they knew. For example, Diane reported, "I had a great support system from grandparents." Also, Tasha stated, "Me and my brothers and sisters we got really close, so they were like a rock, they are everything to me now. They are my best friends." Some participants reported feeling supported through church friends and their faith in God. John related, "Talking to my friends and uh my family." Carmen also contended, "I use family support and my faith...basically as a source of strength and support for me." Kelley reported,

Having that sense of community with each other was very helpful and we (family) are very close in general. We all live in the same town. I grew up across the street from my aunt and cousins...Just having that support system has been very helpful.

It appeared that support networks during the different stages of grief and loss were useful to participants. These support networks helped participants survive the loss of someone they knew.

**Spiritual practices.** Spiritual practices emerged as another subtheme of Surviving the Loss. Tasha stated, “I attend church on Sunday...I do pray a lot and do say the Rosary a lot.” While Lula revealed, “I pray every night. I don’t so much go to church. But, um, for me I think spirituality played a big part because I still feel connected to my mom...Praying may have been the biggest one, maybe even the writing, because I do write directly to my mom. Praying and I guess I am trying to meditate a little bit more.” John reported, “I would stop somewhere where I could at least take a look at nature running by creek preferably. I’ve gone a chapel a few times and church...I just sat down and tried to understand what at was going on...I did meditate a few times.” Kelley related, “Praying helps...relying on my faith, and my belief in God to get me through those difficult times...active in my church too.” Diane stated, “I read the bible, and I think that helped, I have a relationship with Christ certainly helps.” Carmen like the other participants reported that spirituality has helped her cope with her aunt’s death. Carmen discussed the spiritual practices she finds helpful. Here, Carmen stated, “Prayer, spiritual music, and reading the bible...you know as far as prayer, (spiritual) music and reading the bible just knowing bible verses and kind of saying those things in my head at the time, and in time knowing that things are going to be okay.”

Not all participants coped by using spirituality. Gabrielle, for example, discussed how her father’s death caused her to question her belief system about religion and spirituality. Gabrielle reported that her losses caused her to be in a questioning phase in

life. Gabrielle related, "I've looked into, like, religion and ways of being spiritual that doesn't really... don't go into organized religion, but nothing really outside of me reading about it and me kind of researching what would work for me and what hasn't."

Figure 3 illustrates the theme of surviving the loss and the sub themes that I identified and discussed above. Participants gave in detail their preferred way of coping with their loss. Although coping with loss was very personal for each participant, there were five subthemes that emerged consisting of creative arts, self-help, counseling, support networks, and spiritual practice that I outlined above.

As participants talked about how they survived the loss of someone they knew, participants began to discuss the changes in their lives after the death of a loved one including what the deaths meant to them. Often participants stated that their experiences with death, grief, and loss caused them to take an introspective look at their lives. Taking an introspective look at their lives led to changes in their life purpose, worldview and faith. Changes occurred in how each late adolescent participant viewed his and her life after the death of someone they knew. In analyzing the text for each participant, this third theme emerged: Changes. I discuss the third theme and the associated subthemes in the next section.

### **Theme 3: Changes**

The next theme that emerged from the data was changes. Participants began to talk about the changes that occurred in their lives after the death of someone they loved. For some participants they described a change in life purpose. Others described a change in worldview. Finally, some participants described change in faith.

Participants noted how the death of someone they knew affected change in their life purpose. In the next section, I will discuss how participants had a change in their life purpose following the death of someone they knew.

**Change in life purpose.** Change in life purpose was another subtheme that emerged from the analysis. In talking about change in life purpose, participants provided responses that indicated more altruistic changes while hinting that the death of someone they know helped them find life purpose. Tasha, for example stated, “At my church we work a lot with disabled kids and that’s what I want to be when I grow up.” John also reported, “I think it’s for me it’s that I need to be more comforting towards people and that I am basically here because people need me.”

Diane related,

I think it (spirituality) leads to I think to be compassionate and like counselors be authentic with people you know? God gives us the experiences for a reason so we have those tools in our tool belts that we can pull them out to help others.

Carmen stated,

It also just reminded me of the importance of life and others um definitely being taking not advantage, but appreciating every single moment that you are given and every day that you are given with someone.

Gabrielle continued to struggle with her life meaning and purpose. Gabrielle reported, “A major thing for me is just knowledge, like finding out who I am, finding out things I do, finding out what I believe is kind of my meaning.” Meanwhile, Lula reported,

I think the meaning, I think again the connection, but I’ve also learned that it’s helping me to help other people, um, like I can honestly say, oh I know how that

feels because I have been there. So I think like, paying it forward, kinda, I guess helping other people.

As participants talked about a change in the life purpose, they talked about how their worldview changed. In the next section, I will discuss how participants changed their worldviews.

**Change in worldview.** Another subtheme that emerged from the data was change in worldview. All young adult participants reported a change in their worldview after the death of someone they know. Spiritual practices have helped participants (Tasha, John, Kelley, Diane, Lula, and Carmen) change their worldviews about life following the death of someone they knew. For example, Diane stated, “It’s not about me anymore, not that I am perfect at it because I certainly get sucked into it, but I think that you realize what’s really important.” Gabrielle reported currently being in a “questioning phase” and stated that spirituality has not helped her worldview change. Instead, after the death of her father, her grief process has caused her to “question” her spiritual and religious beliefs, while other participants highlighted the change in their faith. Tasha related,

When my mom died I was very depressed and I didn’t want to do anything with my life and now, I go to church all the time and I like wanna like make something out of myself, I want to be successful and I want like, sometimes I get really scared that I’m not going to go anywhere in life, but when I like go to church on Sundays, I feel like everything is going to be okay. I feel like have a purpose there.

Like Tasha, John reported his worldview changed for the death of his best friend. John reported,

I've kind of accepted with my spirituality that it's not always going to be the best times, but it's also a point where I have to kinda of make the best of it and that um the world is only going to give me so much and I have to kind of grasp just kind of grasp everything for myself, and help other people do that.

Diane related, "There is something more than what this is. There is hope for the better, you know it's not just about your loss, it's about who has been affected... who has been changed by it too". In addition to Diane, Gabrielle reported,

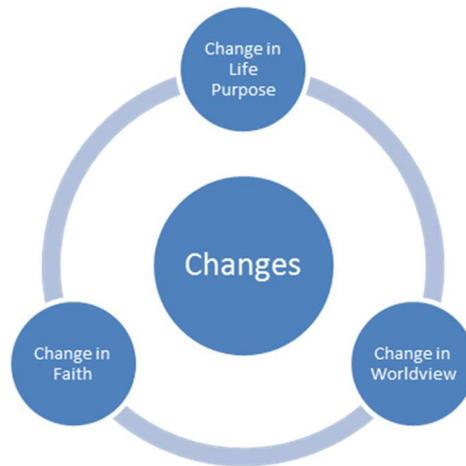
I'm still in that phase, but I am not relying for other people to answer that for me like I don't have a concrete definition on what I feel what life is... I think through the loss it's kind of made me want to figure out those things.

Lula reported her worldview has changed after her mom died. She stated, "Love doesn't die ... me and my brother have always said that an energy like we felt with my mom... we were so close to her... that just doesn't go away."

Participants reported how grieving the death of someone they knew and the use of spirituality caused them to have a change in their faith. In the next section I discuss how participants had a change in faith.

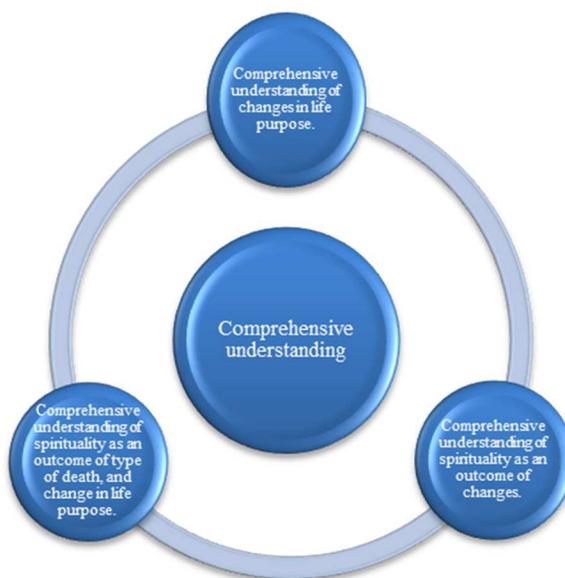
**Change in faith.** The last subtheme that emerged from the data was change in faith. Even though this study is focused on how late adolescents used spiritual practices, I chose not to address their spiritual affiliation formally. Instead, all of the participants voluntarily discussed their spiritual and religious beliefs. Gabrielle did not disclose the faith used in her upbringing; however, she did mention going to church with her godmother. Some of the participants identified themselves as Catholic; while others did not identify a formally institutionalized religion. Some participants talked about going to

church on a regular basis. For example, Tasha stated, "I'm Roman Catholic I go to a little church in the city I live in called St. M. I was baptized there...I've been going there my whole life. I do pray a lot and I do say the Rosary a lot." In addition, Tasha related, "When my mom passed away I was mad at God, but I feel like now, since it's been three years, I am so much closer to God." While John seemed to indicate a change in faith related to his attendance at church. He stated, "I've gone to a Chapel a few times and church. I just sat down and tried to understand what was going on." He went on stating, "I wasn't too much of a spiritual person before my friend's passing and I really heavily leaned on that because I didn't think people understood what I was going through, but I understood." Kelley also reported how the death of a loved one lead to a change in faith. In the following she stated how her grandfather's death leads to a change in her faith. Kelley stated, "I've gotten much more active in my faith, probably like in my late teens I believe different things now, I did notice a big difference (at) 20 and how I coped with (it at) 15." Figure 4 illustrates the theme of change and the sub themes that were identified and discussed above. Participants gave in detail how their mindsets changed following the death of someone they knew. There were subthemes that emerged that were outlined above consisting of change in life purpose, change in worldview, and change in faith were outlined above.



*Figure 4.* Change and associated subthemes.

The third phase of analysis entailed comprehensive understanding. In reflecting on all of the themes, subthemes, research questions, literature review pertaining to existential theory, late adolescents, spirituality, and grief and loss, I was able to have an understanding from participants' perspectives their experiences regarding grief and loss and spirituality. I first found that there was a relationship between the person that died, the time of their death, and the cause of the death which appeared to result in an overall change in the life purpose of the late adolescents in the study. Secondly, the data suggested that spirituality seemed to be a result in a person's change in life purpose, change in worldview and change in faith. Finally, from the data comprehensive understanding occurred revealing that the sudden death of loved one and a change in life purpose often resulted in participants' spirituality. These are illustrated in Figure 5. In the next section, I will illustrate each of these relationships.



*Figure 5.* Comprehensive understanding.

**Comprehensive understanding of changes in life purpose.** I found that the majority of participants experienced the death of a parent, primarily their mother. Some participants experienced the death of grandparents and extended relatives such as aunts and uncles. Others experienced the death of close friends. Some participants experienced intergenerational grief in which they lost multiple relatives. Even though participants may have had experiences with the death of more than one person, they primarily talked about the death most significant to them. I found a relationship between the person that died and the way they died. Some participants stated that their loved one died from a sudden death while others experienced the death of someone due to a prolonged illness. These variables seemed related to the changes that people made in their lives. For example, John reported, “December 9<sup>th</sup> (2014) my best friend committed suicide. He hung himself and I did not find out until two days after he committed the act so that was my most recent experience.” John considered his best friend like a brother. He related, “My best

friend he really he was really more of a brother.” After John’s best friend died, he reported through the use of spirituality, he was able to find his purpose. He related,

I’ve kind of accepted with my spirituality that it’s not always going to be the best times, but it’s also a point where I have to kind of make the best of it and that...the world is only going to give me so much and I have to kind of grasp... everything for myself and help other people do that... changing me as a person how I need to help people I feel like I’m living my life for (friend’s name) now, my friend and ...it’s kinda hard to explain. It feels like a purpose I have to achieve.

Time played a role in comprehensive understanding in that some participants had experienced the death of someone they knew recently; within two years of the interview. Other participants had experienced the death of someone they knew more than two years before the interview. In either case, participants knew and marked the anniversary dates of the deaths of someone they knew. As participants began talking about their experiences with grief and loss, they immediately started talking about who the person was and the type of relationship they had with the person. For example, Tasha reported, “Three years ago well actually about to be four years my mom died at 42 of a drug overdose.” In addition, Diane reported, “My mother passed away 10 years ago... I was 10. So probably 14 years ago.” Too, Carmen related, “I have lost an aunt a few years ago in fact...five years ago um actually tomorrow.” Similarly, John reported, “December 9th my best friend committed suicide.” Likewise, Gabrielle reported, “I would say is my father who passed away last October and then I had a god mother that passed away a year

before that.” Too, Lula reported, “I’ve had quite an experience with grief and loss um it’s actually coming up three years next week of my mom.”

The cause of deaths varied per participant; however, some participants experienced the death of someone close to them due to suicide. There were similar deaths such as John for example reported, “My best friend committed suicide. He hung himself.” Lula also reported, “My sister had a boyfriend who committed suicide... That was a big one too, that was a close person.” In addition, Carmen related, “I wanted to go visit with her and next thing you know she committed suicide.” Others shared a similarity in losing their mom’s due to unexpected illnesses. Lula for example reported, “Very suddenly she had an aneurysm.” Diane also reported, “It was a sudden death, my mom we didn’t know that she was sick.” Likewise, Tasha experienced the death of her mom due to an overdose on drugs. Tasha related, “We found out she had overdosed and she was in a coma for seven day she was on life support and she was being fed through a tube.”

Gabrielle, on the other hand, did not lose her mother to death. Instead, she lost her father to death of a prolonged illness. In talking about her father being ill, she related, “He had stage 4 colon cancer when he was diagnosed, but it was like two years before he passed.” Even though Gabrielle’s father died two years after his diagnosis, his death was a significant loss to her. Gabrielle reported, “I would say there have been a few people in my life that passed away, but the major one I would say is my father who passed away last October.”

Some participants lost grandparents whose deaths were significant. Kelley, for example talked about the death of her maternal grandparents. Even though both grandparents died, Kelley reported being closet to her grandmother. She related, “I was

very close to my grandmother because she would care for me and my sister a lot. She would help us get ready in the morning or afterschool...Like another parent for me.”

John lost his paternal grandfather. John reported that he and his grandfather shared a close relationship. He related, “I was really close to my grandpa too. He would watch me all the time he and my grandmother...when my father wasn’t around the house, he was basically my second dad.”

Change in life purpose appeared to be related to who the person was who died, the time of their death and the cause of the death. As participants discussed their relationships with the deceased, they focused primarily on the relationships with people who were closest to them. Relationships that were most significant were the ones participants talked about for the duration of their interviews. Lula for example mentioned deaths in her family; however, she spoke primarily about her mom’s sudden death with whom she appeared closest. The death of Lula’s mother caused Lula to identify her life’s purpose. Lula related, I’m kinder, not that I was ever unkind to people I am more appreciative of things, I’m more grateful I’m more like in the moment.” In addition, Lula related, “I’ve also learned that it’s helping me to help other people.” Like Lula, Carmen experienced multiple deaths in her family; however, when her aunt died, it caused her to identify her life’s purpose. Carmen stated, “I’ve just been able to appreciate life the life that God has given me and the things that are around me but not just another day, but the people that are around me that I have that I don’t have um just really trying to be grateful.” In addition, John’s grandfather died in 2007; however, his best friend’s death caused him to also identify his life’s purpose. John related, “I think it’s for me it’s that I need to be more comforting towards people and that I am basically here because people

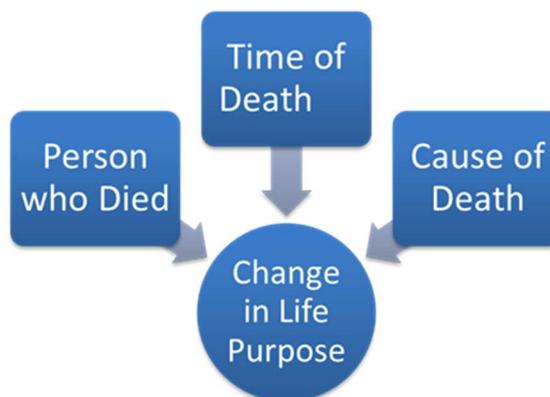
need me.” Gabrielle’s father and godmother died; however, when Gabrielle’s father died, it caused her to re think her religious upbringing and begin her quest for what spiritual practices work best for her. For Gabrielle, her father’s death was the catalyst for her searching for her life’s purpose. Gabrielle stated,

A major thing for me is...finding out who I am finding...finding out what I believe is kind of my meaning I suppose...understanding myself in this world... has been affected by the death of my father because going through any loss like that makes you question different things... I think that has kind of led me to wanting to know who I am and the things I want my life to be...is what I am looking for.

Tasha’s mother died and her death was the impetus for Tasha to be more forgiving towards others and wanting to work with children with disabilities. Tasha related, “At my church we work a lot with disabled kids and that’s what I want to be when I grow up.”

Likewise, Diane’s mother died and her death caused Diane to also identify her life’s purpose. Diane stated, “It’s about helping and loving on others.”

Figure 6 illustrates how these concepts related to participants making changes.



*Figure 6.* Comprehensive understanding of changes in life purpose.

### **Comprehensive understanding of spirituality as an outcome of changes.**

Secondly, data from this study indicates that spirituality seemed to be a result of a person's change in life purpose, change in worldview and change in faith. Late adolescents, who experienced the death of important people to them, were able to recall when the person died and how they died. These late adolescents were also able to discuss how they coped with their losses. As a result of their coping, spirituality became a significant factor that resulted in participants changing their life purpose, worldview, and faith. Based on the narrative text from participants, I discovered spirituality played a significant role in the grieving process for late adolescents. Specifically, spirituality appeared to be the conduit for changes in participants' life purpose, worldview, and faith. Surviving the death of someone is a personal experience. In their personal experiences participants reported that spirituality played a significant role in their lives. In using spiritual practices, participants reported a change in life purpose and worldview. These changes consisted of participants becoming more kind, forgiving, and compassionate as well as grateful, appreciative and helpful. Tasha related, "I'm more forgiving, I like, when I was a little girl, I was a little brat." Carmen likewise, related, "I've just been able to appreciate life the life that God has given me and the things that are around me." Diane also related, "God gives us the experiences for a reason so we have those tools in our tool belts that we can pull them out to help others." Lula also related, "I've also learned that it's helping me to help other people." John also stated, "I need to help people... I feel like I'm living my life for (friend's name) now, my friend."

In sum, change in faith entailed participants utilizing spirituality to help cope with their loss. Participants reported that in using spirituality, they changed their lives and worldviews which led them to find life purpose.

Figure 7 depicts the changes participants experienced based on using spirituality as a coping mechanism.



*Figure 7.* Comprehensive understanding of spirituality as an outcome of changes.

As I continued the comprehensive understanding of the text, I noticed that spirituality also resulted in coping with the sudden death of participants' loved ones. Based on the text from participants, I discovered spirituality played a significant role in coping with the sudden death of a loved one. Below I will describe how participants used spirituality as a coping skill and the role spirituality played in them finding life purpose.

**Comprehensive understanding of spirituality as an outcome of type of death and change in life purpose.** Finally, data analysis revealed that the sudden death of a loved one and a change in life purpose often resulted in participants' spirituality. Tasha, Diane, and Lula experienced the deaths of their mothers due to sudden deaths. Tasha reported,

She told us she was going to the hospital because she was depressed because the year before, my grandpa passed away because of cancer...long story short...we called every hospital and we couldn't find her...we went through all of her contacts and we ended up calling her drug dealer...we found out she had overdosed and she was in a coma for 7 days, she was on life support and she was being fed through a tube.

Diane described her mother death. She related, "It was a sudden death, my mom we didn't know that she was sick. Like Diane, Lula's mom also died suddenly. Lula reported, "It's actually coming up three years next week of my mom. Um very suddenly she had an aneurysm". Tasha and Lula talked about being close to their mothers whereas Diane talked about not being as close as she wished. Carmen's aunt died of suicide and John's best friend also died of suicide. In coping with the deaths of loved ones' sudden death, participants used spirituality as a coping skill. Lula wrote letters to her mother directly and discussed how these letters helped her remain connected to her mother. Lula reported, "I actually journal to my mom...when I write to my mom it's that connection I still feel connected to her and also it gives me hope that I'll see her again someday." Lula reported writing to her mother helped her remain connected to her mother's energy. Lula reported that in using spirituality, she learned to have more peace. Spirituality taught her to be kinder, grateful, and appreciative. In addition, Lula related, "I've matured a lot and I'm much more I don't know if confident is the right word but either or I'm not as wound tight I guess."

After Tasha's mom died, Tasha attended counseling to learn how to write down her feelings. She also attended church and participated in religious practices she stated, "I

do pray a lot and I do say the Rosary a lot.” Tasha reported that spirituality changed her mindset of wanting to spend time with friends and not go to church as often to wanting to be around her family and attend church on weekly basis. She related,

I feel like I’m more, like I said when my mom passed away I was mad at God but I feel like now, since it’s been three years, I am so much closer to God . I used to hate going to church on Sundays with my mom. It was a drag I had to wake up, it so boring, sitting there listening to stuff I didn’t even know, but now I cannot go without a week without going to church. I love going to church.

Although Tasha did not disclose a particular disability, spirituality helped her identify her career interest in helping children with disabilities. John talked about running and meditating as a way of coping with the sudden death of his best friend. He related,

When I went running I would run through the Metro Parks and that is the one thing I like to do if I were taking a quick break I would stop somewhere where I could at least take a look at nature running by the creek preferably...I did meditate a few times.

John reported that in using spirituality, he learned that he needs to be more helpful towards others. Carmen remembered bible verses and listened to spiritual music. Carmen reported,

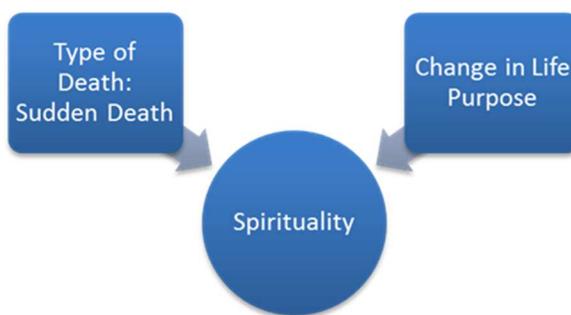
Spiritual music helped bring peace to my grieving process. Prayer allowed me to leave things in God's hands and music reminded me that everything is in God's hands. The music also reminded me that I'm not alone in going through tough times...there are millions of people hurting just like me...the music was about the bible and God's promises.

In participating in spirituality, Carmen reported that she learned to be more appreciative of not only her life, but the lives of others. Diane reported that she read the Bible and had a relationship with Christ. Diane reported, “I am Christian, I read the bible, and I think that helped, I have a relationship with Christ certainly helps.” As Diane continued to talk about the death of her mom, she related,

The year of her passing, we had gone to Catholic classes, to get our first confirmation or conciliation and um I think I always wanted more, but did not know how to get it and it lead me down a path of going to a Christian college for my undergrad and I realize that now how important it was for me...it’s like that golden thread in your life that changes everything.

In using her spiritual practices, Diane reported that she learned to be less self-centered and more compassionate towards others.

In sum, each participant, that experienced the death of someone through a sudden death utilized spirituality to help them cope with their loss. In using spirituality, participants became more aware of their losses and how these losses changed their lives. Participants became more willing to help others and being more present for others. Although each experience was unique, each person’s lives were changed in using spirituality to help them cope with their losses. Figure 8 illustrates spirituality as a result of sudden death and change in life purpose.



*Figure 8.* Comprehensive understanding of spirituality as an outcome of type of death and change in life purpose.

In conducting naïve reading, thematic structural analysis, and comprehensive understanding, I was able to discover that the person that died, when they died, and how they died, caused participants to have a shift in how they viewed their life purpose. Further analysis showed that using spirituality, participants' worldview, life purpose, and faith changed. I further discovered that participants who experienced the sudden death of a loved one and used spirituality as a coping mechanism also experienced a change in life purpose. During naïve reading, thematic structural analysis, and comprehensive understanding, I discovered the role spirituality played in the grieving processes for late adolescents. In the next section, I will answer the study's central question and sub questions.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In conducting this study, I used a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological research design. Creswell (2014) suggested that qualitative researchers rely on data from texts or images, have different steps in data analysis, and use diverse research designs for the data to have evidence of trustworthiness. A research study has evidence of trustworthiness when the researcher can demonstrate that that the data that the results are

based on are sound and worth of the conclusions made about the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers employing qualitative methods look for the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study to determine its worth. In the next section, I discuss the evidence of trustworthiness in this study.

### **Credibility**

Credibility entails the internal validity of a qualitative study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I used triangulation to establish validity in this study. I also used triangulation to develop deeper understanding of participants' experiences with grief and loss. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) (2008a), there are four types of triangulation that consists of methods triangulation, triangulation of sources, analyst triangulation, and theory/perspective triangulation, (RWJF, 2008a). For this study, I employed two of the four types of triangulation consisting of triangulation of sources and analyst triangulation. Sources of triangulated data consisted of the participants' demographic survey, transcribed interview, and additional information obtained during the follow-up meeting as well as my journal entries. Another type of triangulation I employed for this study is analyst triangulation. Analyst triangulation consists of using different analysts to review findings in order to understand data in multiple ways (RWJF, 2008). Analyst triangulation consisted of consulting with my dissertation chair during the coding and analysis process to get an additional perspective of the findings. In addition, I asked my dissertation chair and committee member to help cross-examine data analysis procedures and findings for additional viewpoints. An additional means of establishing credibility consisted of member checking in which I asked participants to identify any discrepancies in their transcribed interview (Creswell, 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I

recorded participants' responses as honestly, accurately, and precisely as possible with the help of my interview notes, PVR, and in my journal (White et al., 2012).

### **Transferability**

Transferability entails showing the applicability of the findings to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Based on the delimitations of this study, results will not be transferable to all populations. I did provide a thorough description of the research background, nature of the study, and theoretical framework for other researchers to be informed about transferability of the results to populations of interest. I also identified assumptions, delimitations, and limitations that were vital to this study. Researchers interested in conducting new studies will be responsible for deciding whether it will make sense to transfer the information to a new study.

### **Dependability**

Dependability of a study means that the data is reliable. Reliability refers to showing that the findings of the study are consistent and can be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the dependability of the study, I completed an audit trail to help establish reliability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I diligently recorded the criteria for the participants, the data collection procedures and how long it took to collect data. I also explained the data analysis in detail in chapters 3 and 4 and discussed the interpretation of the results in chapter 4. I noted the specific procedures that determined credibility. Easily obtained and accessible computer software was used to record data and to transcribe data. I used Microsoft Word to store my journal and reflective thoughts regarding the interviews and participants as well as notes from the interviews.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the degree of objectivity. Confirmability entails the degree to which the results of a study are shaped by the participants in the study and not my own bias, motivation, or interest (RWJF, 2008b). For ensuring confirmability, I conducted an audit trail that encompassed accurate and comprehensive records of all approaches used in this study. I read and re read transcripts to ensure that I was sharing what participants said during their interviews. I also used triangulation by asking my dissertation chair to review transcribed interviews for an additional perspective. Additional means of ensuring confirmability entailed reflexivity (RWJF, 2008b). I used my journal as a part of reflexivity. During the research process, I made regular journal entries to reflect my own values and beliefs (RWJF, 2008b). As I interviewed participants and they shared their experiences, I journaled my thoughts and feelings after each experience. For example, Diane reported feeling sad that her mother will not be around to witness her wedding or birth of her children in the future. During my time to reflect about my interview with Diane, her comments resonated with me because I thought about my father who is now deceased will not be present for milestones in my life. Diane cried as she was talking about her mother not being present for special events in her life, I thought about the times when I felt the same regarding my father. I was able to document my feelings in my journal, and I also spoke with my dissertation chair about my feelings associated with what Diane mentioned and my own experience with losing a parent to death.

I provided evidence of trustworthiness for this study by attending to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transformability as described above. The next section will provide a discussion of the results.

## **Results**

The overall research question for this study was: What lived experiences do late adolescents between the ages of 18 and 25 have in coping with the death of someone they know? This study attempted to fill the gap in the literature regarding spirituality and the role it plays in the grieving process for late adolescents experiencing the death of someone he or she knew. I explored the lived experiences of seven late adolescents aged 18-25 years old. Each participant had lost a significant person or people due to a death. I used Lindseth and Norberg's (2012) phenomenology hermeneutical to provide an analysis in finding the answers to the study's research questions. Themes emerged from the data and were presented above. In this section, I discuss each particular research question below.

### **Use of Spirituality in Surviving Loss**

Participants in this study discussed their experiences of using spiritual practices when someone they were close to had died. In answering the first subquestion, What lived experiences do late adolescents have in using spiritual practices in coping with the death of someone they know? Participants talked about various ways of dealing with their loss. Participants explicitly discussed in detail different spiritual coping strategies. For example, Tasha, John, Kelley, and Diane reported attending church and receiving support from church members. Lula, Tasha, and John as well as Kelley and Diane, reported praying helped in their coping. In addition to praying, John and Lula meditated. John related, "I did meditate a few times". Likewise, Lula reported, "Praying and I guess I am trying to meditate a little bit more." Diane also reported it was helpful having a relationship with Christ. Diane related, "I read the bible, and I think that helped, I have a

relationship with Christ certainly helps.” Carmen reported that she remembered bible verses and listened to spiritual music. Carmen stated, “Prayer and spiritual music helped bring peace to my grieving process.” Gabrielle began researching and being on a quest to find which spiritual practice worked best for her. She related, “I’ve looked into like religions and ways of being spiritual that doesn’t really don’t go into organized religion.” Spirituality was either the source that helped most participants to make changes that led to them either finding purpose, or caused one of them to be on a search for identifying purpose.

### **Meaning of Spirituality**

In answering the second subquestion, What meaning do late adolescents associate with the role of spirituality when experiencing the death of someone they know?

Participants discussed how their lives changed as a result of using spiritual practices to cope with their losses. Spirituality also played a role in how participants developed life meaning after the death of someone they knew. For example, Diane stated, “I think it leads to, I think to be compassionate, and like counselors to be authentic with people you know?” Also, Lula stated, “Love doesn’t die” and “ I’ve also learned that it’s helping me to help other people.” In addition, Carmen stated, “It also just reminded me of the importance of life and others um definitely being taking not advantage, but appreciating every single moment that you are given.”

The themes surviving the loss and change also related to the second and third subquestions, what meanings do late adolescents associate with the role of spirituality when experiencing the death of someone they know? And what role does spirituality play in the grieving process for late adolescents after someone they knew has died?

Participants who used spirituality as a means of coping or surviving the loss reported their lives changed. The theme change and associated subthemes emerged such as life change, change in worldview, change in life purpose and change in faith from the data that supported the idea that participants using spirituality in their grieving processes had either identified their life meaning or were in the process of identifying life meaning. For example, John stated, “One of the main things that spirituality has brought to me and that is I needed to be there for people that I wasn’t there for before.” Also, Diane stated, “It (spirituality) gives you hope” and “it’s not just about your loss, it’s about who has been affected.” Even though Gabrielle was questioning and in search of her spirituality, she believed that religion and or spirituality is supposed to provide some type of comforting when a loved one dies. Gabrielle stated,

I think the main point of any sort of religious or spiritual purpose in dealing with the death of a loved one is a major comfort for a lot of people and even myself even though I was questioning. Just knowing there is some sort of purpose in life whether it be a religious or spiritual I think helps a lot of people deal with the death of a loved one or any loss or change in their life.

Lula reported, “I think again the connection, but I’ve also learned that it’s helping me to help other people... um... like I can honestly say oh I know how that feels because I have been there.” Carmen reported,

I should say like going back to the Bible where it says being able to rejoice in difficult situations because it produces endurance, and hope and strength in character um love... all of those characteristics that are of God so you know just being able to have that in my heart and my mind gives me peace about it.

## **Spirituality and Grieving**

In answering the third and final subquestion, What role does spirituality play in the grieving process for late adolescents after someone they know has died? I took a look at the second and third themes and their associated subthemes (see tables 3 and 4). Participants reported that spirituality was the cause for them to reexamine their lives following the death of someone they knew. So, in answering the sub question what role does spirituality play in the grieving process for late adolescents after someone they know has died? Spirituality played a significant role in helping with either finding meaning or a new quest for finding meaning. In reviewing the second theme that emerged from the data, surviving the loss, and its associated subthemes, participants reported participating in spiritual practices such as praying and attending church, meditating, running in nature, listening to music, crafting and making candles, writing letters to the deceased and journaling. Also, participants reported talking about their loss in individual and group counseling, having a support network consisting of family, friends, and church members.

Gabrielle reported that the deaths she experienced caused her to think about the differences between religion and spirituality and caused her to question her belief system. Although she attended individual counseling, she was on a quest to find out what worked for her spirituality. Although Gabrielle reported that she grew up in a religious household, her beliefs changed after her father's death. Since her father died, she has been on a quest to find out what spiritual practices and beliefs work best for her. On the other hand, for the other six participants, spirituality was noted as not only playing a huge role in their process, but also, a viable coping mechanism. For example, Kelley reported

going to church, praying, and having a support system has been important in her grieving process coping with the death of her grandparents. Kelley stated, “My spirituality is like the main thing that can get me through stuff.” She also reported that spirituality has played a “big role in her grief and loss process.” Kelley also reported her belief system has taught her grandparents are in a better place and that she will see them again one day.

Participants who had mainly experienced the sudden death of someone they knew reported the significance and role spirituality played in their grieving process. John, for example, reported that in losing his best friend to suicide, spiritual practices he participated in consisted of going to chapel, meditating, and running. Also, as it pertained to spirituality and grief, John reported, “It was a little bit of a crutch I felt that I had something I could lean on if I was having a hard time with what was going on.” Likewise, Diane reported attending church with her grandparents after her mother died suddenly due to an unexpected illness. After Lula’s mom died due to an aneurysm, she reported praying, crafting, and writing letters to her mother was her way of coping. Lula indicated, “It (spirituality) gives me hope that I’ll see her again someday.” Like John, Diane, and Lula, Tasha also reported spiritual practices beneficial to her in her grieving process. Tasha reported going to church, praying, and saying the Rosary after her mother’s sudden death. Carmen reported reciting Bible verses, listening to spiritual music, and praying as a means of coping with her aunt’s suicide. Too, as it related to spirituality and its role, Carmen stated, “It was my main source of strength, where I was able to get a good understanding of what life and death is about to be able to mourn in a way where it was appropriate and where it was not interfering with my daily functioning.”

## **Awareness**

Late adolescents in this study had profound losses that changed their lives. I found that participants who had experienced a death of someone they knew discussed specific details about the death which included the time the person died, the relationship they had with the deceased, and the reason the person died. Next participants would discuss what they did or what they were doing to cope with the loss. Finally, I discovered that participants who experienced a loss often found their lives changed in various ways. Participants discussed changes in their worldview, life purpose, and faith. Regarding the overall research question, what are the lived experiences of a late adolescent who experienced the death of someone they knew? Participants shared the awareness of the death and the surrounding context, and the awareness of how to cope with the death. Resulting in an awareness of how their lives changed since having experienced the death.

This circle of awareness seemed to mirror the stages of grief by Kubler Ross (2005) who postulated that there are five stages of grief and loss consisting of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. For example, Tasha stated, “When my mom passed away I was mad at God, but I feel like now since it’s been three years, I am so much closer to God.” Diane also reported, “I think it’s changed my view on you go through that part of grieving when you ask what did I do? Am I being punished?”

## **Moving On**

Participants had to create a new life following the death of someone they knew which aligns with Worden’s four-phase task model of bereavement that consists of accepting the reality of the loss, working through the grief pain, adapting to a new environment, and finding an enduring connection with the deceased while learning to live

without them (Smit, 2015). I found for each participant grief was not a linear process; instead, it was an unique experience. Therefore there were no exact time frames when each participant grieved the death of someone they knew (Smit, 2015).

In reviewing Worden's task model of grieving, I found participants coming to terms with their loss and choosing to find ways to remain connected to their loved ones after their deaths. Lula, for example, found a new way to remain connected to her deceased mother in that she reported, "I love telling funny stories... to me, that's keeping her (mother) around in a way." In addition, Lula reported, "I keep coming back to the writing...I still feel connected to her, and also it gives me hope that I'll see her again someday." Tasha reported getting a tattoo in her mother's memory and going to the cemetery on her mother's birthdate, death anniversary date, and holidays such as Mother's Day.

Since the theoretical lens for this study was the existential theory, in the next section, I discuss the study through the theoretical lens.

### **Existential Constructs**

Existential constructs of death, freedom and responsibility, and meaninglessness were in the themes that emerged in this study. Each participant experienced the death of someone that although was unspoken may have caused some thought on their mortality. For example, Carmen expressed the importance of being grateful and appreciative of life and others. Each participant discussed how their lives had changed during their experience with loss. Freedom and responsibility and meaninglessness are two other existential constructs related to this study. In reviewing the themes that emerged, more participants identified with freedom and responsibility and meaninglessness. Participants

verbalized their life changes since the deaths illustrated in Table (4) and their new awareness about their life purpose, worldview, and faith.

Gabrielle questioned her beliefs, and her questioning can also be considered existential. To question what is real and true for oneself is an existential concept. The deaths these late adolescents experienced were life changing. Through the use of spirituality, Tasha, John, Kelley, Diane, Lula, and Carmen were able to allow their loss to help them grow spirituality and become closer to God. Although Gabrielle did not necessarily grow using spirituality, she changed by deciding to research what spiritual practice was better for her and not relying on her religious upbringing. Each participant's experiences with grief and loss were unique; however, some commonalities in their grieving process were presented in the MU and CMU that helped formulate the subthemes and themes. Using healthy coping skills including spiritual practices to help with the symptomology of the grief has helped each participant create new meanings for their lives.

### **Summary**

In summation, this chapter included the results of the current qualitative study about the role spirituality played in the lived experiences of participants between 18-25 years old who had experienced the death of someone they knew. I discovered three themes consisting of experiences with death, surviving the loss, and change and 12 subthemes using phenomenological hermeneutical analysis. I was able to answer the central research question and the subquestions. For the central research question, What lived experiences do late adolescents between the ages of 18 and 25 have in coping with the death of someone they know? I found that participants who have experienced a death

of someone they knew discussed specific details concerning the death of the person they knew including the time of the death, the relationship they had with the deceased and the reason the person died. I also discovered what participants did to cope with the loss.

Finally, I discovered that participants who have experienced a loss often found their lives changing in different ways. I was able to answer the sub questions associated with this study. For example sub question 1, What meaning do late adolescents associate with the role of spirituality when experiencing the death of someone they know? I found that participants had participated in using spirituality in experiencing the death of someone they know. I discovered that one participant was searching for what her new beliefs are following the deaths of her father and godmother and had not identified one particular spiritual practice that helped her even though she grew up in a religious household. I found in answering sub question 2, What meaning do late adolescents associate with the role of spirituality when experiencing the death of someone they know? Participants reported being able to either identify or begin the quest in defining their meaning through the role of spirituality following the death of someone they knew. In answering subquestion 3, What role does spirituality play in the grieving process for late adolescents after someone they know has died? Spirituality played a significant role as a viable coping mechanism for participants particularly those who had experienced a sudden death.

I presented in chapter 4 a detailed discussion of the data analysis and results from this study. The setting and population sampled were discussed. Themes were introduced from the text during data analysis and were presented along with corresponding tables. I presented the existential theory and the themes of the study that corresponded with the

existential constructs. In Chapter 5, I discuss an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, as well as implications for social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the meaning and role of spirituality in the grieving process for late adolescents. My goals were to examine the lived experiences of late adolescents coping with the death of someone they knew, to explore the role spirituality played in their coping process, and to determine whether spiritual practices had helped them find life meaning following the death of someone they knew. I used existential theory as the theoretical lens for this study, and a phenomenological hermeneutical approach to data analysis, which resulted in a comprehensive understanding of late adolescents' experiences of the death of a loved one. This study is significant because of the contribution it makes to existing literature regarding spirituality and late adolescents' grieving process. Specifically, my study fills the gap in the current literature by identifying the meaning late adolescents associated with spirituality during grief recovery.

The results may help counselors meet competency standards established by ASERVIC by assisting counselors in distinguishing between spirituality and religion, and becoming knowledgeable about how clients' beliefs and worldviews can influence psychosocial functioning. The results from this study may also help counselors communicate with clients about their spiritual beliefs with sensitivity and acceptance while using concepts consistent with the clients' spiritual and religious perspectives. My findings may also help counselors become more confident during the initial intake assessment process, especially when asking clients questions about their spiritual and religious beliefs. The results of this study indicate that counselors may want to include spiritual practices as therapeutic techniques in clients' treatment planning.

This study may instigate social change by encouraging counselors to learn more about and receive training on the spiritual practices I outline in the results. Further, the results may encourage counselor educators to incorporate more classes on spirituality and counseling into counseling program curricula. In this chapter, I offer an interpretation of the findings, identify the limitations of this study, make recommendations, discuss social change implications for counselors, and provide a conclusion.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Participants in this study discussed their lived experiences with grief and loss and the role spirituality played in helping them find meaning after the loss of someone they knew. In my analysis, I identified three descriptive themes: experiences with death, surviving the loss, and change. In the next paragraphs, I discuss the findings of the study in the context of the literature presented in Chapter 2 compared to the findings of this study.

#### **Theme 1: Experiences with Death**

Participants discussed their experiences with death. Participants gave detailed narratives including a description of how the person died, how they were related to the person who died, and when the person died. The theme of experiences with death is discussed next in relation to previous research in the area of adolescents' experiences with spirituality and death of a loved one.

Wolfnet (n.d.) and Wolchik et al. (2009) reported that the death of a parent or legal guardian is considered one of the biggest stressors for adolescents. Wolchik et al. reported that when a parent dies during a person's childhood or adolescence, the person may experience depression, academic problems, and social withdrawal long after the

parent has died. Wolchik et al. conducted a 6-year longitudinal study on participants' experiences with death of a parent during childhood or adolescence. Wolchik et al. extended knowledge about the positive outcomes of parental death by examining predictors of posttraumatic growth consisting of five factors in childhood or adolescence including, "new possibilities, relating to others, personal strengths, spiritual, and appreciation in life" (p. 114). Wolchik et al. found that participants experienced posttraumatic growth following the death of a parent.

The results from my study confirmed Wolchik et al.'s findings for participants who had experienced the death of a parent during childhood and adolescence. Diane and Tasha gave accounts of their mothers' deaths during elementary and high school. Diane related, "My mother passed away 10 years ago...I was 10. So probably 14 years ago." In addition, Diane related, "I think later on it has taught me I certainly wouldn't be the woman I am today if my mother did not pass...I certainly am less self-centered...I can be more compassionate with people." Tasha reported being 18 the date of the interview. Tasha related, "Three years ago, well actually about to be four years my mom died at 42." Tasha related, "When my mom died I was very depressed and I didn't want to do anything with my life and now, I go to church all the time and I like wanna like make something out of myself."

As participants talked about their experiences with death, they also began talking about the cause of death. Cause of death was the first subtheme to Theme 1. Participants discussed how their loved ones died. Some participants experienced sudden loss such as through illness or suicide. Bagge et al. (2014) conducted a study and reported suicide being the third leading cause of death among college students. Bagge et al. found that

correlations between risk factors and current suicidal ideation were partially due to Reason for Living (RFL) and the subscales from coping beliefs subscale and self-evaluation subscale. Bagge et al. also reported that suicide had negative effects on survivors. However, the results from my study did not align with this finding. In my study, participants who had experienced the death of someone they knew due to suicide discussed how the deaths changed their lives for the better. John for example stated, “My best friend committed suicide...He hung himself.”

In addition, John stated,

I didn't understand how some people could be so upset and sad ...about certain things and I didn't always look at that with a wide range of vision. I...looked at it from my perspective without anything else and from my own experience. I gained a general sense of sorrow for those people...like understanding if they were going through something rough it wasn't it wasn't something funny or something easy to get...I understood how their pain felt. That really helped me because I felt better about helping...people that were upset and being comforting.

Like John, Carmen reported, “I have lost an aunt a few years ago in fact we're going on five years...actually tomorrow.” Carmen also stated,

Taking my aunt's loss into consideration how sudden it was...I mean she was here one summer and in the fall she was gone and nobody really knew this was going to happen of course it wasn't a medical reason, it was because suicide...to me it really took mental health for to a different level um and take that act more serious I knew about suicide and mental health...it really hit home because it was actually family.

Carmen also related,

It also just reminded me of the importance of life and others um definitely being taking not advantage, but appreciating every single moment that you are given and every day that you are given with someone because you really don't know when would be someone's last...not even your own and... really appreciating the small things any little giving day, or of someone's presence...who knows what even let's say who you're spending some time with you don't know what their thinking...what they're going through like my aunt. I made plans to visit her a few months...I mean I didn't have set plans, but I wanted to go visit with her and next thing you know she committed suicide...I didn't have that chance so it's really making the most of everything whether it's people, a day, an event you know.

## **Theme 2: Surviving the Loss**

Participants in the current study discussed ways they learned to cope with their grief symptoms. Surviving the loss emerged as the second theme from participants' narratives. Participants discussed the role spirituality played in their grieving process. Haasan and Mehta (2012) found that some adolescents cope with their grief and loss through the use of spirituality. Other researchers found that some adolescents have been able to discover a spiritual connection or life meaning, or find God or a higher power in the grieving process (Lyness, 2013; Musleman & Wiggins, 2012). In the next section, I discuss ways participants used spirituality to help them cope with their loss in relation to previous research.

Surviving the death of someone using spiritual practices varied among participants in this study. In the literature, researchers explored the use of creativity as a

spiritual practice in coping with grief and loss. For example, Edgar-Bailey and Kress (2010) and Sylter (2012) summarized the literature regarding the use of creative interventions in working with clients coping with grief and loss. Edgar-Bailey and Kress (2010) found support for using creative interventions based on cognitive behavior therapy in working with children and adolescents who experienced traumatic grief. Sylter (2012) found that art and music therapy are viable forms of coping with illness and grief. Sylter suggested that art may consist of music, visual arts, bibliotherapy, drama, and cinema therapy. The results from my study extend the findings by Edgar-Bailey and Kress (2010) and Sylter (2012). Participants in my study talked about how beneficial it was for them to use creative intervention to cope with their grief and loss. For example, Diane reported bibliotherapy helped her. She related, "Read a good book called *Motherless Daughters*." Diane also reported, "Looking through pictures," was her way of remembering her mother. Lula liked crafting as a means of coping with her loss. Lula related, "I enjoy like...crafting...like making candles."

Another creative approach that is also considered a spiritual approach to grief and loss is writing. Wiggins (2011) and Ihrmark et al. (2012) conducted studies addressing the importance of writing when coping with grief and loss. Wiggins (2011) suggested that spiritual journaling can aide in helping clients explore their belief systems, deepen their sense of connection to the holy, struggle with unanswered questions, process loss and grief, examine vocational directions, and come to terms with their own mortality. The results from my study support the notion suggested by Wiggins that writing can be a viable coping skill for helping adolescents cope with grief and loss in that some of the participants reported writing had been very therapeutic in their grief recovery process.

Ihrmark et al. (2012) conducted a study on grief recovery in which participants attended a grief course to learn ways of coping. Ihrmark et al. found that writing a letter to the lost person was the most successful practice. The findings from my study confirm that writing a letter to the deceased can be a successful means of coping. Lula related, “When I write to my mom it’s that connection I still feel connected to her and also it gives me hope that I’ll see her again someday.”

Some researchers wrote articles about the usefulness of spirituality in coping with difficult life events (Hassan & Mehta, 2012; Lyness, 2013; Muselman & Wiggins, 2012). The results from my study extend information regarding spirituality being a viable coping mechanism when dealing with grief and loss symptoms. Koenig (2010), Koszycki et al., (2010) and Hasson and Mehta (2011) conducted studies regarding spirituality as a viable coping mechanism for dealing with anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and grief and loss. Koenig (2010) examined literature that supported the use of spirituality to help people cope with anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Koenig suggested that spirituality has been shown to help decrease anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Koszycki et al. (2010) argued that spirituality has been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety. Koszycki et al. found a reduction in anxiety and depressive symptoms, and enhanced spiritual well-being. The findings from my study neither confirm nor disconfirm Koenig’s literature review because participants in my study did not discuss substance abuse in their grief recovery. Instead, the results of my study support the claim that spirituality can be a viable coping skill for depression and anxiety, as suggested by Koszycki et al.’s findings. For example, Tasha stated, “When my mom died I was very depressed and I didn’t want to do anything with my life and now, I go to church all the

time and I...wanna make something out of myself...I want to be successful.” John stated, “I get really anxious now.” As it relates to his best friend and spirituality, John related, “Changing me as a person, how I need to help people. I feel like I’m living my life for (friend’s name)...if feels like a purpose I have to achieve.”

Haason and Mehta (2011) conducted a study on use of spirituality in coping with grief and loss among Malay/Muslim adolescents. Haason and Mehta found that there were different means of coping including problem focused, emotion focused, and spirituality focused that reflected on death and focused on transcendence. Spirituality focused was the most significant. The findings from my study confirm the results presented by Haason and Mehta. Not only did my participants discuss the role spirituality played in their grieving process, they also considered spirituality the most significant form of coping. For example, Tasha related,

When I was 15 all I wanted to do was hang out with my friends, have nothing to do with my family, I hated to go to church, but since my mother passed away, my life revolves around my family, what I do with them and how I see them and going to church is so important to me and family life, I feel like, it makes me look, how can I say this, it makes me want to find someone like me someone who enjoys church just as much as me.

John related,

I wasn’t too much of a spiritual person before my friend’s passing and I really heavily leaned on that because I didn’t think people understood what I was going through but I understood. It’s complicated and weird, it’s just that if felt like if I could figure it out myself sometimes, then it would help me mentally and it did

because it helped me recognize things in people that I really didn't understand at first.

Kelley related,

When I am like grieving, I need my spirituality is like the main thing that can get me through stuff, it's what I turn to first whenever like you know like initially whenever we were going through those losses just like in daily life as well. Um like especially if something happens I feel like that is the first thing I turn to It's kinda like the main thing a run to yeah it's like the biggest part.

In addition, Diane related,

I am Christian, I read the bible, and I think that helped, I have a relationship with Christ certainly helps...I had a great support system from grandparents who were Catholic at the time...when my mother passed away and you know and ...going to church during that time really helped too...God gives us the experiences for a reason so we have those tools in our tool belts that we can pull them out to help others.

Lula likewise stated,

We were raised somewhat religious, I pray every night. I don't so much go to church. But um for me, I think spirituality played a big part because I still feel connected to my mom...Praying may have been the biggest one, maybe even the writing, because I do write directly to my mom I don't know if that would count. Praying and I guess I am trying to meditate a little bit more I mean I don't do it so much I'm trying to meditate to relax sometimes, but it's something that I try to practice.

Carmen also stated,

The Bible for instance which says in life there will be trials...but take heart and believing in Jesus that He has overcome the world...that is something that replays in my mind when I have difficulties...just knowing that things will happen and that it is all a part of life...part of being able to grow in a sense...first of all having peace about a situation knowing that they are going to change someone for the better, change me for the better.

### **Theme 3: Changes**

Participants discussed changes that occurred in their lives following the death of someone they knew and the use of spiritual practices. From participants' narratives, the third theme changes emerged and consisted of participants reporting changes in their life purpose, worldview, and faith. Participants were able to discuss the role spirituality played in finding meaning. Researchers such as Muselman and Wiggins (2012), Lichtenthal et al. (2010), and Bussing, et al. (2010) conducted studies where participants reported the use of spirituality and finding meaning. In the next section, I address changes participants' reported in relation to previously reported literature presented in chapter 2.

Muselman and Wiggins (2012) conducted a study regarding adolescents' experiences with grief and loss and spirituality. The purpose of their study was to explore counseling approaches that incorporate adolescent clients' spiritual beliefs while grieving the death of a loved one. The participant in this study included a 16 year old who was in grief counseling following the death of her mother killed by a drunken driver. The authors used spirituality as an intervention to help her cope with her grief and loss. The authors found the use of spiritual practices helpful in helping the adolescent make

meaning after her significant loss. The findings for this study confirm the findings of Muselman and Wiggins' study. As it pertains to meaning, John reported, "I think it's for me...I need to be more comforting towards people and that I am basically here because people need me." Kelley related, "Things happen for a reason like even if it is hard now it's all a part of a plan." Carmen stated, "I've been able to be more mature about situations, negative situations especially losses, um giving me a lot of personal strength."

Lichtenthal, Currier, Neimeyer, and Keesee (2010) used an existential lens in conducting their study on parents who had lost a child. The authors reported that the purpose of their study was to identify themes of meaning making among bereaved parents and examine associations of these themes to the severity of grief symptomatology. The authors found that the parents discussed 32 distinct approaches in finding meaning in their child's death of which 14 of these approaches involved sense making and 18 involved themes of benefit finding. The authors further suggested that the most common sense-making themes included spirituality and religious beliefs. The most common benefit-finding themes according to the authors included an increase in the desire to help others and show compassion for others' suffering. The authors sample included participants between 23-77 years old. Although some of the participants in Lichtenthal's study were older than participants in the current study, there were participants in both studies between 23-25 years old.

Like Lichtenthal et al., Bussing et al. (2010) conducted a study regarding the interconnection between life satisfaction and self-centeredness. The authors surveyed 900 17 and 18 year olds. From their study they found that the differential patterns of the altruistic/helping attitudes with respect to distinct aspects of spirituality. The authors also

found the best predictors of the ideal to help consisted of compassion/generosity, conscious interactions, and religious orientation. The findings from the current study confirm Lichtenthal et al. and Bussing et al.'s studies in that through spiritual practices participants learned to be more helpful and compassionate toward others.

Diane related, "I can be more compassionate with people". Participants in this study reported that in experiencing the death of someone they knew, they either maintained the religious beliefs from their upbringing, or they began searching which spiritual practice worked best for them. Tasha stated, "Since I was born, I had to go to church every Sunday and they were no excuses to not to go to church and I had to go to church and I like feel like my faith in God has so much closer." However, Gabrielle related, "I was raised in a religious household, but like after as I grew older I started to not to not continue that behavior."

Bussing et al. (2010) and Muselman and Wiggins (2012) found in their studies the existential theme of meaning as an important factor in their participants' use of spirituality as a means of coping with grief and loss. Muselman and Wiggins reported that their participant was able to find meaning of her mother's death using spiritual practices. In Bussing et al.'s study, participants revealed a longing to be guided, sheltered, and beloved by a transcendental being that provided meaning and direction for their complicated lives. This coincides with Yalom's terrestrial meaning. Terrestrial meaning entails embracing or fulfilling a purpose and cosmic meaning entails some magical or divine ordering of the universe (Yalom, 1980). The findings from this study also confirm the findings of Bussing et al. (2010) and Muselman and Wiggins (2012) in that through spiritual practices, participants were able to find meaning. The findings of this study

revealed that participants experienced both terrestrial and cosmic meaning. Participants reported that they had identified their life's purpose which coincides with terrestrial meaning. For example, John reported that his life's purpose entailed helping others and living his life for his friend now. Also, Diane stated reported that her life's purpose entailed being more compassionate and authentic towards others.

The findings of this study also revealed cosmic meaning this is evidenced in Kelley who reported, "Things happen for a reason like even if it is hard now it's all a part of a plan and that you know there is a better place after this." Also, Diane reported that her mom's death changed her in that she became closer to Christ. Diane said she would not be the person she was during the interview. She reported, "It's like that golden thread in your life that changes everything... I wouldn't know Christ, and wouldn't have that relationship with Him."

The findings from this study supported the belief that there is a transcendental being that provided meaning and direction for complicated lives as presented by Bussing et al., (2010). Participants in this study reported that their spiritual practices assisted them in believing that everything happens for a reason. Kelley, for example reported, "There is more to this world than what's happening right now...there is something else to come." Diane related, "My life is much bigger than me...I'm just a little piece of puzzle that God has planned out." In addition to everything happening for a reason, participants also reported through the use of spirituality, they have been able to find purpose and life meaning. Life meaning for Lula entailed love continues even after the physical death. Lula reported, "The meaning for my life is...just because someone dies doesn't mean that the relationship is over with them." Carmen related, "Things will happen and that it is all

a part of life and part of being able to grow in a sense.” Bussing et al. suggested that some believe that meaning occurs when a person has fulfilled his or her purpose whereas; Yalom suggested that that meaning is associated with a belief in a transcendental being or a divine ordering of the universe. Counselors need to be aware that meaning is different for everyone. In addition, counselors need to educate clients on what meaning is and how the client defines meaning.

Participants in this study learned to be resilient following the death of someone they knew. Participants credited spirituality being the conduit for helping them to develop resiliency. Previous researchers conducted studies of ways adolescents have had to cope with their grief while moving on with their lives following the death of someone they knew. Raftopoulos and Bates (2011), for example, conducted a study regarding spirituality and resiliency. Kim and Esquivel (2012) also provided a literature review in support of the role spirituality played in resiliency. Raftopoulos and Bates reported that three dimensions of spirituality emerged. These dimensions consisted of having a relationship with a Higher Power or God, life meaning, and connection with the inner self. Kim and Esquivel reported that spirituality is an asset in promoting positive outcomes, such as overall psychological well-being and academic success. The findings from this study add to the existing literature provided by both Raftopoulos and Bates’ study and Kim and Esquivel’s literature review. In using spirituality, participants not only were able to build resiliency but also identify their life’s purpose. For example, Tasha related, “I feel like I am better person now. And I feel like I look at the world differently. I appreciate things more... I’m more forgiving.” She also related, “At my church we work a lot with disabled kids and that’s what I want to be when I grow up. It (spirituality)

helps me find out who I am...who I want to be as a person...and who I want people to look at me as a person.” John related, “I am basically here because people need me.” John also related, “I’ve kind of accepted with my spirituality that it’s not always going to be the best times, but it’s also a point where I have to kinda make the best of it. The world is only going to give me so much, and I have to kind of grasp...everything for myself and help other people do that.” Kelley related, “I feel like...when I am turning to my spirituality, there is a purpose for it.”

### **Limitations of the Study**

I made attempts to ensure the trustworthiness of this study; there still were some limitations that I discuss in the next section. Limitations on transferability occurred with participants’ demographics. I made efforts to attract participants from various parts of the United States and globally by advertising this study on CESNet and ASERVIC counseling listservs. Counseling students, counselors, and counselor educators would respond and would inform me that they sent the information regarding this study to groups of potential participants. I made additional efforts advertising this study to a local grief center, hospice center, college, and university. Participants that agreed to participate came from the Eastern and Midwestern parts of the United States. For this study, I wanted to have more racial diversity. I also hoped to get equal representation of women and men. Instead, there were six females and one male in this study. Also, all participants were either in college at the time of this study, working on their first degree, or second degree. Some participants had graduated from college and were working. In addition, three of the seven participants were either counselors or counseling majors. Based on these limitations, this study will not be transferable to other populations if other

researchers choose to replicate this study. In addressing the transferable limitation, I produced a clear and concise write up following the data; therefore, if another researcher wanted to duplicate this study, I provided sufficient information.

Dependability was another limitation to the trustworthiness of this study. I experienced some mechanical errors using Nvivo; therefore, I ultimately used hand coding practices instead of computer software Nvivo during data analysis. I experienced technical errors with audio recorder Sound Recorder; therefore, I changed to PVR. I uploaded all audio recordings from PVR to Google One Drive and Microsoft Cloud. I made sure the audio recording was working properly prior to each interview. I also made sure the sound from each audio recording was clear after each interview and prior to transcribing interviews.

Based on the findings from this study, there were recommendations for future studies. In the next section, I address these recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

Further research is recommended and grounded in the strengths and limitations of this study and the literature review in Chapter 2. Based on the literature review in Chapter 2, few studies addressed the late adolescent population coping with grief and loss and spirituality. Previous researchers have explored spirituality, grief and loss, and adolescents; however, no other studies specifically addressed the role spirituality played in the grieving process and whether or not participants were able to identify their life purpose as a result of using spirituality.

In this study, I provided an illustration of late adolescents impacted by the death of someone they knew along with the role spirituality played in discovering meaning and

played in the grief process. Late adolescents were able to identify their life purpose and meaning by using spirituality. I found spirituality to be a viable coping mechanism for facilitating healing and change. Participants were able to identify which spiritual practices were necessary for them identifying purpose and meaning. For participants, spirituality came in diverse forms such running in the metro parks by a creek, crafting, writing letters, journaling, meditation, prayers, attending church, reading, and listening to music. Although this study did not explore participants' religious beliefs, participants were able to identify themselves as Christian, while others indicated going to church and not necessarily stating their religious preferences. Even though I attempted to solicit an equal representation of males and females with diverse ethnic backgrounds, to participate in this study, I was unable to do so. Instead, one male and six females participated in this study. Also, one Hispanic and six Caucasians participated in this study.

There are recommendations for future research that stem from this study's outcomes. Recommendations include a need for additional research on exploring the role of spirituality in grief and loss and spirituality with culturally diverse late adolescent populations globally and within the United States (US). Information obtained from different communities living globally and in different parts of the US may add to the existing literature including this study. Although this study is not a religious study, some participants identified themselves as either Catholic or Christian; therefore, another recommendation includes conducting this study about grief and loss and the role spirituality plays to culturally diverse late adolescents from diverse faiths and religions.

The findings in this study did not demonstrate an extended body of knowledge pertaining to unhealthy behaviors associated with grief and loss, spirituality, and late

adolescents as presented by previous researchers. Some late adolescents may behave unhealthily to cope with their grief. Participants in this study did not disclose whether or not they used unhealthy means of coping with their loss. A recommendation includes conducting a study with late adolescents who behaved unhealthily as a means of coping and received negative consequences that stemmed from their inability to cope with their loss.

The findings in this study supported the notion that spirituality was a viable coping technique used to help with their grief. Participants in this study discussed how spiritual practices helped them cope with their loss. Another recommendation includes conducting a study where late adolescents did not find spiritual practices helpful in their grieving process.

Existential constructs of death, freedom and responsibility and meaning emerged from the data; however, existential isolation did not. Therefore, another recommendation is researchers to conduct a study regarding exploring existential isolation within the same context of grief and loss, spirituality and culturally diverse late adolescents. In the interview questions, I did not specifically address participants and their own mortality. Asking participants' questions about their own mortality as it pertains to the death of someone they know may address existential isolation.

From the findings of this study, participants discussed various spiritual practices. Recommendations include using the spiritual practices to conduct studies that specifically address the late adolescent population and the use of specific spiritual practices to aid in grief recovery. Another recommendation includes informing counselors of spiritual practices as interventions. I conducted this study to help feel the gap in the current

literature regarding grief and loss, spirituality, and late adolescents. From the findings of this study, the information may promote positive social change. In the next section, I address positive social change associated with this study.

### **Positive Social Change**

The present study will facilitate positive social change. In working with late adolescents who are dealing with grief and loss, positive social change can take place in that once the late adolescent learn effective ways of dealing with grief and loss, their symptoms may decrease, and the person is left to create a new life without the person that died. In the next section, I discuss how this study can aid in positive social change.

The findings from this study will promote social change impacting individuals and their families. When someone dies, the people left behind to mourn may need to learn healthy ways of coping with their grief. Teaching clients healthy ways of coping may cause family members to want to learn ways to cope with their grief symptoms. Participants in this study discussed their support system including their families providing support for one another following the death of a loved one. Each participant reported that they grieved healthily the death of someone they knew.

In conducting this study, I attempted to fill the gap in the literature regarding spirituality, grief and loss, and late adolescents. I also attempted to identify the role spirituality played in the grieving process for late adolescents and whether or not spirituality played in role in helping specifically late adolescents find meaning. There have been some research previously conducted that addressed the developmental process of late adolescence, the relationship with the person that died, the impact the cause of death can have on the survivor. The results of this study extend the body of knowledge

that late adolescents are coping with being in a transitory position in their lives and the impact grief and loss has on growth and development. The findings from this study also extend the body of knowledge pertaining to coping techniques including creative ways late adolescents can use to help them cope with symptoms associated with grief recovery. The findings of the study also extend knowledge regarding late adolescents' beliefs about spirituality and their relationship with God after the death of someone they knew. Although previous researchers conducted study regarding spirituality, few conducted studies on the role spirituality played in the grieving process specifically for late adolescents and even fewer on the role spirituality played in helping late adolescents find life meaning following the death of someone they knew.

The findings from this study indicated that spirituality and spiritual practices were significant in helping participants learn ways of coping with grief and loss that led them to becoming more resilient in their grief recovery. The findings showed that spirituality helped participants in healthy ways to grieve that allowed them to continue on with their lives following the death of someone they knew. In addition, I discovered, spirituality assisted participants make positive life changes such as being kinder, helpful, and being more compassionate towards others while surviving their loss. The findings also demonstrated that spirituality was a conduit in helping late adolescents find purpose and meaning for their lives.

The results of this study are important because they may promote positive social change. In promoting positive social change, the results of this study may help counselor educators and supervisors (CES) inform counseling department chairs the need for and the inclusion of more classes on spirituality and counseling into existing counseling

program curriculums. The findings from study will illustrate to counseling departments the importance of incorporating spirituality into existing counseling curriculums. The results may help counselors-in-training learn evidenced treatment modality in working with clients suffering from grief symptoms.

The findings of this study may promote social change in that counselors may decide to receive additional training in spiritual practices to provide evidenced based treatment working with grief and loss symptoms. These findings may support counselors' choice in providing psychoeducation to clients about the usefulness of groups during grief and loss. The findings may also support the claim that groups are a viable means of coping with grief for counselors who want to develop their own grief groups for clients.

Informed counselors may use spiritual practices in working with clients individually and in groups. Clients who choose to go to individual and group counseling for help with their grief may learn active and effective ways of treating their grief symptoms and with their new learning, they will be able to help their family members and friends cope with their loss. The change may have a ripple effect in that once the client learns ways of coping with his or her grief; he or she will be able to impart their knowledge onto others, thus impacting those around them.

Counselors will need to adhere to ethical guidelines when employing spirituality when working with grieving late adolescents. Working with grieving clients, there are ethical considerations. In the next section, I address ethical considerations in working with the grieving late adolescents.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In conducting this study, there are implications for counselors choosing to use spirituality in working in grief counseling. In working with culturally diverse clients counselors are to be culturally competent (ACA, 2015). To remain ethical, counselors should follow the ACA code of ethics and the competencies established by ASERVIC. According to ASERVIC (2009) counselors are to explore their own beliefs and values about religion and or spirituality. Also, counselors are to explore clients' religious and spiritual beliefs during assessments. Results from this study may cause some counselors to explore their beliefs about religion and or spirituality as well as explore their clients' beliefs about religion and spirituality.

ASERVIC provides competencies recognizing that client beliefs and worldviews about religion and spirituality impact their overall well-being. ASERVIC (2009) suggested that counselors are to recognize that client's beliefs or absences of beliefs about spirituality and or religion are essential to his or her worldview and can influence psychosocial functioning. The findings from this study may aide counselors in recognizing how their clients' beliefs and worldviews impact their overall psychosocial functioning during grief and loss. For example, participants in this study suggested that in using spirituality following the death of someone they knew their worldviews changed, therefore impacting their psychosocial functioning. In using spiritual practices participants were able to continue attending in school, working jobs, and maintaining interpersonal relationships while going through their grieving process.

Counselors need to be aware that religion and spirituality are different. ASERVIC (2009) further suggested that counselors need to be able describe the similarities and differences between religion and spirituality, major world religions, and various spiritual

systems as well as agnosticism and atheism. The findings from the study may help counselors and counselor educators have a better understanding of the differences between religion and spirituality. Religion is a set of beliefs, doctrine, or rules a person choose to follow based on his or her belief system (Doka, 2011). For some participants, religion entailed their belief in God and their Christian faith. Some identified as Catholic while others talked about having a relationship with Jesus or Christ. Spirituality can encompass religious beliefs; however, spirituality is different and varied. Doka further suggested that spirituality is the real essence of a person that entails the act of someone looking for authentic meaning. Participants used spiritual practices to help them connect to their Higher Power or God and find meaning. Spiritual practices included meditation, prayer, attending church, writing, music, running in nature, attending individual and group counseling, reading, and receiving emotional support from church members and family.

Grief is a sensitive topic and counselors working with grieving clients may require additional training. Counselors who choose to use spirituality and spiritual practices in working with clients may need to obtain additional training on how to effectively use spirituality in counseling. Therefore, I recommend for counselors to attend workshops, training, and seminars on grief and loss and spiritual practices.

In this study, I reflected often on my overall experience in conducting research for this study. Next, I report my reflections on this study which was detailed in my journal.

### **Researcher's Reflection**

In writing my reflection, I had to go back to my journal and review personal notes I made during my data collection process. In this reflection, I will share thoughts pertaining to this study and the narratives I collected for this study.

The present study gave me experience collecting data, coding, analyzing, and interpreting data. This experience gave me a different perspective of the amount of work that goes into conducting a qualitative study. I enjoyed collecting data. I realized during the data collection process participants had different experiences with grief and loss. As I read and re read each transcript, I realized not only were the experiences different for each participant, but also, similar for some. Some participants experienced the deaths of their mothers. Some participants experienced their loved ones dying due to suicide. Participants talked about using similar spiritual practices such as attending church, prayer, and sharing a Christian faith.

Data collection was good for me; however, I found coding the data challenging. I found reading each transcript enlightening because of the rich details of each person's story. Participants' narratives moved me and changed my views on grief and loss and spirituality especially as they pertained to the late adolescent population. In spite of each loss, each participant found a way of coping while attending college, working jobs, and achieving milestones in their lives.

In my career as a counselor, I have worked in the school, community mental health, and private practice sectors. During my tenure as a counselor, I worked with students and clients who experienced the death of someone they knew and ways they dealt with their loss. I also experienced multiple losses in my personal life that had an impact on my worldview and my purpose. Spirituality played a significant role in my

grief and loss. Therefore, when I began this dissertation journey, I realized that I had preconceived ideas about the role spirituality played in grief and loss.

What resonated with me in analyzing the data was how each participant's life changed for the better following the death of people they knew. I found moving from a natural attitude of taking for granted of what I understood grief and loss and spirituality to be prior to interviewing participants and changing to a phenomenological approach where I had to ask myself questions to get to the participant's meaning and essence of each person's story informative. I had to refrain from judging and I had to learn how to bracket my biases while participants told their stories about their lived experiences. I did not bracket my prior understanding of grief and loss and spirituality. Instead, I bracketed my biases and wrote them in my journal. Bracketing my biases helped because I was able to read each participant's story over again to get to the true essence of each story without my biases interfering with the process. I went into collecting data and analyzing with a different mindset than when I finished. I went from understanding grief and loss through my perspective, to seeing the essences of the participants' lived experiences with grief and loss and spirituality. My insight was expanded through this process because I realized that even though late adolescents are grieving, through spiritual practices they remained resilient in their recovery. Through critical reflection, I was able to expand and deepen my awareness of participants' lived experiences with grief and loss, and the role spirituality played in their process.

In conclusion, death is inevitable and learning healthy ways of coping will aid in moving forward in life. Spirituality is often confused with religion; however, they are two separate constructs that mean something very different (Busseri, 2010; Doka, 2011; Good

et al., 2010; Ruddock & Cameron, 2010). Previous researchers had conducted both qualitative and quantitative studies on spirituality and adolescents; however, few researchers explored the lived experiences of grief and loss, and the role spirituality played in finding meaning, and the role spirituality played in grief and loss. Late adolescents are emerging into adulthood. During this time of developing, experiencing the death of someone you know can result in the person responding positively or negatively. This study provided information to help fill the gap in the literature that exists regarding the role spirituality plays in the grieving processes of late adolescents.

In experiencing grief and loss, late adolescents could turn to negative behaviors to help them cope with their grief; however, participants in this study chose to use healthy and positive coping skills to deal with their grief. None of the participants reported behaving negatively or destructively in coping with their grief. Participants reported spirituality was a viable coping skill to use to help with grief and loss. In using spiritual practices, participants reported having a new awareness of their life meaning and purpose. For example, John, Lula, and Tasha reported that spiritual practices led them to be more helpful towards others. Diane reported that through spiritual practices she learned to be more authentic and compassionate towards others. Kelley reported that spiritual practices helped her believe that there is a better place we go to when we die and there is a bigger plan. Carmen reported that through spiritual practices she learned the importance of not taking for granted your life and the lives of others. Gabrielle was finding her way during the interview as it pertained to spirituality and religion. Gabrielle reported spirituality brought major comfort to her even though she was researching different religions and types of spirituality during the interview. Gabrielle believed her

life's purpose during the time of the interview was to be on a quest to find the right spiritual path for her even though it may differ from her upbringing.

Each participant in this study experienced deaths of people they knew and with whom they shared a close relationship. Participants were either coping with the death of someone they knew due to a sudden death or prolonged death due to illness. Each participant had to learn ways to survive his or her loss and learn ways of grieving while maintaining jobs, careers, and college, as well as, interpersonal relationships and milestones. One participant was graduating from high school and another participant was getting married. Although participants were still in their grieving process, spirituality was the conduit for helping them in creating their new normal that consisted of moving on with their lives even though they were grieving the loss of their loved ones.

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## Appendix A

## Letters of Cooperation

## The Grief Center



The Grief Center

A Center for grieving children, teens, and adults

Re: Letter of Cooperation

Dear Dana Matthews:

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Spirituality for Late Adolescents Coping with Grief and Loss within (The Grief Center). As part of this study, I authorize you to contact potential participants for your study, schedule and conduct interviews for former clients between the ages of 18-25 years old. I also authorize you to conduct follow up meetings with participants for member checking and administer \$10.00 gift cards. I authorize dissemination activities such as submitting dissertation to Pro Quest, writing articles for publication in counseling journals, and presenting at professional counseling associations on the state and national levels. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: a space to conduct the informational and follow up meetings, and interview. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University's IRB.

Sincerely,



C. Ty Morgan, MSW

## Appendix B

### Informational Letter

Hello!

My name is Dana Matthews and I am a doctoral student in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Walden University. You were selected to receive this information regarding a research study because you meet the criteria for an upcoming research study for my dissertation project. Participants for the study have to be between the ages of 18-25, have experienced the death of someone they know, and have completed an 8 week young adult grief support group.

My dissertation project will explore the lived experiences of 18-25 year olds experiencing grief and loss from the death of someone they know and the role and meaning spirituality plays in the grieving process.

Throughout the study, there will be confidentiality measures implemented to keep your information safe including changing your actual name to a pseudo names. Participation in this or any research has potential risks. Risks of this research include but are not limited to emotional distress talking about the death of loved one. If participation in the study causes you to experience emotional distress; however, you are not at risk of hurting yourself and/or others, please contact:

Although every effort will be made to keep your information confidential, I am a licensed supervising professional clinical counselor and I am mandated by law to report if you are at imminent risk of hurting yourself and/or others during the interview, debriefing, or follow up meeting. If this should happen, I may have to disclose your identifying information.

For your participation, you will receive a \$10.00 gift card to either Target or Walmart. You will receive your gift card during a follow up meeting. During this meeting you will be asked to review your transcribed interview to ensure accuracy. Afterwards, you will receive your gift card as a token of appreciation. If you choose to not continue with the study, there are no consequences; therefore, you will still receive the gift card. If questions arise regarding your participation, please do not hesitate to contact me.

If you are interested in participating, please email at [dana.matthews@waldenu.edu](mailto:dana.matthews@waldenu.edu) . I will then contact you and schedule an appointment with you to come in for the interview. Prior to your interview, I will ask that you sign an informed consent. After the interview, I will ask that you complete a demographic questionnaire. Once the demographic

questionnaire is completed, we will debrief the interview and I will give to you a debriefing handout to take home with you.

Thank you for your consideration!

Dana Matthews, NCC, PCC-S  
Doctoral Student-Walden University  
Dana.matthews@waldenu.edu

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

1. What experiences do you have with grief and loss?
2. What experiences do you have in coping with the death of someone you know?
3. What type of relationship did you have with the person that died?
4. What do you do to help you cope with grief?
5. Have you used spirituality and/or spiritual practices to help you cope with your grief?
6. If you have used spiritual practices or spirituality in your grieving process, what spiritual practices did/do you use to help you cope with your grief?
7. If you have used spiritual practices or spirituality in your grieving process, what was your experience like in using spirituality as a coping mechanism following the death of someone you know?
8. If you have used spiritual practices or spirituality in your grieving process, what role did spirituality play in your grieving process?
9. If you have used spiritual practices or spirituality in your grieving process, how has your life changed in using spirituality as a way of coping with your grief?
10. If you have used spiritual practices or spirituality in your grieving process, what meaning have you arrived at for your life in using spiritual practices while coping with the death of someone you know?
11. If you have used spiritual practices or spirituality in your grieving process, how has your worldview on life changed?

12. If you have used spiritual practices or spirituality in your grieving process, what meaning do you associate in using spiritual practices in coping with the death of someone you know?
13. What haven't I asked that you think is important for me to know about this experience?

Appendix D

**Demographic Questionnaire**

Thank you again for your participation in the interview. Your responses are valuable to the study in that they will help counselors understand additional treatment modalities to help late adolescents who are experiencing grief and loss. In addition to the interview, please take 5 minutes to complete the demographic questionnaire below. Once you have completed this questionnaire, please return it to Dana Matthews prior to leaving today.

**How would you describe yourself on the following?**

- *Gender* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Age* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Marital Status* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Education* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Employment Status* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Race/Ethnicity* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Socioeconomical Status* \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you!

## Appendix E

### Debriefing Handout

Thank you for participating in this very important study. Your participation is greatly appreciated.



Talking about your grief experiences could cause you distress. Common stress responses could include anxiety, depression, anger, and forgetfulness.

If your needs are not an emergency, please follow up with your current counselor to help you work through your emotions. You may certainly contact me if you would like me to provide an overview of the interview contents to your counselor to provide greater understanding of your participation in the study. If you do not currently have a counselor, you may also refer to your insurance plan's directory for counselors in your network.

Self-care practices may be beneficial in helping you cope with your emotional distress. Some self-care practices include: Journaling, Listening to music, Exercise, Expressive art activities such as drawing or photography, or spending time with family and friends.

Here are some additional self-care resources you may find helpful:

<http://solacetemple.wordpress.com/tag/self-care-during-grief/>

<http://www.griefwatch.com/self-care>

<http://www.opentohope.com/grief-and-self-care1/>

If you find that your level of distress requires immediate assistance, the Mobile Crisis response team from your current grief center may be contacted right away

**You may contact your local mobile crisis.**

## Appendix F

## Flyer

**Spirituality for Late Adolescents Coping with Grief and Loss Study**

- Are you:
- 18-25 years old
- Experienced the death of someone you know

If so, you are invited to participate in a study

Conducted by Dana Matthews, M.A.Ed., PCC-S, NCC

Doctoral student, Walden University

*Upon completion of the study, participants will receive a \$10.00 gift*

*card of your choice to either Target or Walmart*

**For more information contact:**

**Dana Matthews**

**[dana.matthews@waldenu.edu](mailto:dana.matthews@waldenu.edu)**

*Walden University's approval number for this study is  
03-02-15-0307818 and it expires on March 1, 2016*

## Appendix G

## ASERVIC Listserv Email

Dear Colleagues,

My name is Dana Matthews and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am currently looking for participants for my research study. I am conducting a qualitative research study that explores the lived experiences of people between 18-25 years old who have experienced the death of someone they know and the role spirituality played in the process.

Participants will also be asked to:

- Attend in person, via phone, or Skype an interview approximately 1 hour
- Complete a demographic questionnaire
- Participate in debriefing the interview
- Attend a follow up meeting to review the transcribed interview to ensure accuracy

Participants will receive a \$10.00 gift card or e gift card to either Walmart or Target for their participation.

In order to participate in the study participants have to be:

- 1). 18-25 years old
- 2). Experienced the death of someone they know.

If you know anyone that fits the criteria, please pass on my flyer and contact information. Those interested may contact me directly at [dana.matthews@waldenu.edu](mailto:dana.matthews@waldenu.edu).

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Dana Matthews, M.A.Ed., NCC, PCC-S

Doctoral Student

Walden University

## Appendix H

## CESNet Listserv Email

Dear Colleagues,

My name is Dana Matthews and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am currently looking for participants for my research study. I am conducting a qualitative research study that explores the lived experiences of people between 18-25 years old who have experienced the death of someone they know and the role spirituality played in their process.

Participants will be asked to:

- Participate in an interview either in person, via phone, or Skype. The interview will last approximately 1 hour
- Complete a demographic questionnaire
- Participate in debriefing the interview
- Attend a follow up meeting to review the transcribed interview to ensure accuracy

Participants will receive a \$10.00 gift card or e gift card to Target for their participation.

In order to participate in the study participants have to be:

- 1). 18-25 years old
- 2). Experienced the death of someone they know.

If you know of anyone who fits the criteria, please have them contact me directly at [dana.matthews@waldenu.edu](mailto:dana.matthews@waldenu.edu).

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Dana Matthews, M.A.Ed., NCC, PCC-S  
Doctoral Student  
Walden University