



Colleague to Colleague



Dr. Heather Servaty-Seib

Heather Servaty-Seib, PhD, is a Dean's Fellow for Analytical Assessment in Purdue's Honors College. She is also Professor of Counseling Psychology in the Educational Studies Department of the College of Education where her primary scholarly areas include adolescent/college student bereavement, loss/gain impact of life events, and support and communication in the grieving process. Professor Servaty-Seib received her BA (honors) from Concordia College in 1992 and her Master's and PhD in Counseling Psychology from the University of North Texas in 1995 and 1997. She teaches Honors courses connected to her research—most recently courses entitled Death and Dying and Loss. Dr. Servaty-Seib is a past president of the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) and received the ADEC 2013 Death Educator Award. Much of her recent scholarship has been focused in area of college student bereavement including a co-edited volume (published by Jossey-Bass) entitled *Assisting Bereaved College Students*, an edited volume of narratives by grieving college students (published by Jessica Kingsley), and empirical articles published in journals such as *The Counseling Psychologist* and *Death Studies*. She is on the editorial boards of four academic journals including three of the top research journals of the field of thanatology.

What led you to work in the field of grief and bereavement?

As with most people in this field, I can point to many factors, including some non-death/loss experiences (which has led to using loss as a way of looking at development.) But one particular loss really affected me deeply.

When I was a teenager I was very connected to my church. I grew up in Minnesota in the Lutheran church (sort of like Lake Wobegon!) I was very close to our pastor; he was such a genuine, open person. The congregation was aware that he had been diagnosed with cancer but he had survived for many years. While I was studying with other teens in our church for confirmation, he started one of our conversations with the group with the question, “What would you do if you had six months to live?” Then he shared with us that his cancer had returned and that was now his prognosis.

As he got sicker, I experienced what I now know is termed “communication apprehension”—I was scared to go see him, but angry that I felt that way. Our families had been close for years, so spending time with him had always felt comfortable. I did finally go to visit—we played cribbage, and it was a very meaningful time. But I never forgot that initial feeling of apprehension; in fact, I ended up writing about the concept of communication apprehension with the dying in college and worked with the author of the original study when I got to graduate school. The experience of my pastor’s dying and death influenced me in so many ways; at one point, I even considered going to seminary. But now that I work professionally in the field, I see this impact of loss experiences on many young people.

How did you decide to particularly focus on college students and emerging adults?

I began my work in grief and loss by working more with younger adolescents; at that time, the high school years were when young people were developing their sense of self and I was highly interested in the interaction between grief and identity development. My focus on older adolescents (i.e., past high school) began as we saw a societal shift in identity development occurring later than it had. I remember going to a presentation at an ADEC (The Association for Death Education and Counseling) meeting with Dr. David Balk, where he basically said, “If you are working in a college setting and not studying this age group, you are missing the boat.” And I was hooked! Some researchers still consider the ages of 18-25 “late adolescence” but the more current thinking is “emerging adulthood.”

What other changes have you seen in this field?

I have appreciated being a part of the journey of the field of thanatology. I admit, the first grief group I ran while I was in graduate school was based on the stage model. Whereas that work certainly played an important role in the progression of our field, I would never use that format now.

One change I have seen in the field has been a greater openness to the impact of culture and diversity on the loss experience. I appreciate that the focus has become broader, dynamic, and more idiosyncratic.

In the specific study of bereavement and college students, we have become more aware of the developmental issues that these students face. Being away from their family of origin, usually for the first time, makes them more susceptible to isolation; they are genuinely trying to figure out how to fit in. And for students experiencing loss, also many for the first time, that isolation is even greater—when you

are grieving, you don't fit anywhere. Emerging adults are in the process of emotionally and physically disengaging; how does that process affect their experience of death and loss?

Are there particular interests that you are focusing on within this area?

Currently the issue of grandparent death intrigues me. For emerging adults, the situation often prompts them to observe their parents in a different way. Often for the first time, they gain the capacity to have empathy as they see their parents experiencing loss. The death affects the whole family system. The studies in this area are so interesting. Young adults in this situation are torn; where do they fit in the family? They may feel they owe their family support when a grandparent dies, but they are also grieving themselves, and developmentally need to find their own path. There is a sense of responsibility—they are part adult, part adolescent.

Where emerging adults are developmentally is also connected so much to the gain/loss framework my research team and I have developed. College is generally a great time for young people, but loss is also there. There are unique losses in the lives of college students, these might include in relationships, or even just in negotiating a new “system” of friends, living arrangements, schedules, etc.

Do you think there are adequate support systems for grieving college students?

Generally, in higher education, I have found that universities are much more open to the mental health needs of students than in the past; overall, mental health is less stigmatized. Millennials come to college with lots of difficulties. But grieving students don't see grief as a mental health issue. We know that for most people grief is normative. Most grieving students do not need therapy, but they could definitely benefit from support, and often it is difficult to find in a campus setting. And realistically, most grieving students do not typically access the counseling center for support.

That is one reason I love working with AMF—Actively Moving Forward, a national peer-led group for grieving college students. In general, I think peer support groups are the most appropriate intervention for most grievers. I find this even more true for college students. Yet as we discussed, they tend to be more isolated; getting them to come to groups can be a challenge. At Purdue, I started one grief group for students; as the word spread, we now need two. But we do call it a “discussion group.” Each campus has its own culture; the challenge is to figure out where grief “fits” in that culture.

What aspects of your work have you found the most rewarding?

One huge issue that I have been involved with has been advocating for bereavement leave policies for college students. I worked hard and collaborated with colleagues to move this issue forward at Purdue, and I am proud that about 20 colleges have followed suit. In the past, students had to get permission from faculty to take time after a death, and that was often intimidating. Having a formal policy, much like the policies that faculty and staff have, strengthens the support that bereaved students receive. Working on this process was a learning experience for me. I had to find ways to translate what I knew as a psychologist and researcher into a “language” that the administration would understand. So, for instance, I worked with a colleague in the Dean of Students office to conduct a study that indicated grieving students had lower GPAs, than their matched peers, during the semester of their death loss.

I've also been so gratified by the recent book I worked on with David Fajgenbaum, entitled “We Get It: Voices of Grieving College Students and Young Adults.” We believe it is an approachable book because

it's not academic per se. The book has the potential to be so empowering for students because it includes the voices of their peers, and that is quite rewarding to me as an author and teacher! I've also enjoyed working with my doctoral students—their passion for research and practice in our field continues to inspire me.