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“Cycling Around an Emotional Core of Sadness”: Emotion Regulation in a Couple After the Loss of a Child

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Abstract

In contrast to the traditional view of working through grief by confronting it, recent theories have emphasized an oscillating process of confronting and avoiding the pain of loss. In this qualitative study, we sought a better understanding of this process by conducting a detailed case study of a bereaved couple after the loss of their infant daughter. We employed multiple data collection methods (using interviews and written feedback) and an intensive auditing process in our thematic analysis, with special attention to a recurrent metaphor used by this bereaved couple in describing their personal and relational experience. Our findings suggest the presence of a dialectic tension between the need to be close to the deceased child and the need for distance from the pain of the loss, which was evidenced on both individual and relational levels. For this couple, the image of “cycling around an emotional core of sadness” captured their dynamic way of dealing with this dialectic of closeness and distance.

Keywords

bereavement / grief, case studies, communication, complexity, relationships

After the loss of a child, most parents safeguard the continuing presence of the child in their lives. In one way or another, by silently reminiscing or verbally sharing experiences, parents adhere to and cherish the memories of the child (e.g., Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). Indeed, the grief and the pain themselves can be treasured, because they can serve as the representation of the continuing connection with the child (e.g., Moules et al., 2004; Rosenblatt, 1996). However, feeling intense and protracted grief over one's child can be so anguishing and overwhelming that distancing from such memories is often necessary to go on with daily life. In that sense, the regulation of their intense emotions is a central process in the parents' grief process.

Emotion Regulation in Bereavement

For several decades the assumption prevailed in the grief literature that the bereaved need to engage in intensive "grief work" to go on with life after the death of a loved one (Freud, 1917; Worden, 2002). In this long-established view, the bereaved need to confront the pain of the loss, express grief and adjust to a changed life without the deceased. Accordingly, avoiding the intense feelings of grief traditionally has been linked to denied grief, associated with pathological physical as well as psychological symptoms. In recent years numerous scholars have called this assumption into question (e.g., Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa, & Folkman, 2005; Boelen, van den Hout, & van den Bout, 2006; Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe, 2005; Wortman & Silver, 2001; Znoj & Keller, 2002). Generally it has been found that intensive grief processing does not unequivocally bring the assumed salutary effects for the bereaved, and moreover, that there is no clear association between the avoidance of grief and grief symptomatology. Subsequently, it has been suggested that the avoidance of grief might reflect the resiliency of the bereaved, the ability to distract oneself from the loss and redirect attention to other aspects of life (Boelen et al, 2006; Bonanno, 2004).

On a theoretical level, the Dual Process Model (DPM, Stroebe & Schut, 1999) extends the conceptualization of grief adaptation by the incorporation of both loss and restoration oriented coping strategies and the core feature of oscillation between them. Loss orientation refers to attention to aspects of the death itself, such as confronting feelings of grief and confiding in trusted others, whereas restoration orientation refers to confronting the need to reengage in life and adapt to a changed life following the loss. The DPM postulates that, for the bereaved individual, attention to both is needed for favorable psychological adjustment after bereavement. An important aspect of this model is the dynamic regulatory mechanism of oscillation between the two coping strategies. At times the bereaved will confront aspects of the loss/restoration, while at other times avoid them. As the authors of the model postulated, “coping with bereavement thus is a complex regulatory process of confrontation and avoidance” (Stroebe & Schut, 2010, p. 278). Rather than concentrating merely on grief processing or grief avoidance as beneficial or detrimental coping strategies, it is assumed that the use of multiple and flexible coping strategies is optimal (Zech, Ryckebosch-Dayez, & Delespaux, 2010).

Since the introduction of the Dual Process Model, many scholars have been stimulated to empirically test and refine its key propositions (e.g., Bennett, Gibbons, & Mackenzie-Smith, 2010; Lund, Caserta, Utz, & de Vries, 2010; Richardson & Balaswamy, 2001; Richardson, 2007, 2010), and grief treatment programs have carried its implications into practice (Lund, Caserta, de Vries, & Wright, 2004; Shear, Frank, Houck & Reynolds, 2005). Incorporating insights from the DPM, Shear (2010) further explored the concept of avoidance from an attachment theory perspective. With the concept of experiential avoidance she referred to the distancing of the bereaved from painful emotions and other internal experiences. However, in partial distinction from the DPM model, she proposed that the bereaved do not oscillate between loss and restoration focused coping, but rather that these

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processes overlap, occurring in tandem. She stated, “What oscillates is the private experience of thoughts and emotions. Oscillation progresses through use of experiential avoidance” (Shear, 2010, p. 363).

Although perceived as the most important feature of the DPM, the process of oscillation has been acknowledged as difficult to conceptualize and operationalize (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Because oscillation is a dynamic process that varies depending on contextual factors, traditional questionnaires often fail to assess its nuances. Therefore, Stroebe and Schut (2010) recommended other data collection techniques to provide rich descriptive information. A qualitative case study, rigorously exploring the complexity of the lived experiences of the bereaved, might render such a deeper understanding (McLeod, 2010; Yin, 2009). Indeed, to advance theoretical understanding, the interaction of different factors can best be observed at the level of the case. Moreover, investigating a specific case, combined with the use of systems theory (Anaf, Drumond, & Sheppard, 2007), allows for the real-life context to be incorporated (McLeod, 2010).

Following Znoj and Keller (2002), we assume that the regulation of emotion is a highly challenging coping task for bereaved parents. It might even be the case that deficits in emotion regulation are crucial factors leading to complications in bereavement (Gupta & Bonanno, 2011). Consistent with the general literature on emotion regulation (e.g., Gross, Richards & John, 2006; Snyder, Simpson & Hughes, 2006), we presume that successful emotion regulation is a prerequisite for adaptive functioning, and that it serves as a foundation for more complex forms of social engagement (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997).

Unfortunately, empirical studies concerning these emotion-regulating processes in grieving parents are lacking, and therefore warranted. A deeper understanding is needed of how bereaved parents themselves experience the regulation of emotion in the course of grieving (Shear, 2010). Moreover, there is an explicit need for future research to include

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interpersonal processes in the study of emotion regulation (Snyder, Simpson & Hughes, 2006). Within the context of a partner relationship, the regulation might not be limited to one's own emotions, but might also entail strategies to provoke or contain the partner's affect. In addition, encountering the emotions of the partner, here feelings of grief, might also affect one's own feelings of grief and thus the process of emotion regulation in bereavement. Taken together, inasmuch as mourning occurs in a social field, and most intimately in the family, the study of emotion regulation in grief requires the inclusion of relational and interactional processes (e.g., Rimé, 2009).

In light of the studies reviewed above there is a clear need for further research documenting how emotion regulation processes might play out within and between individuals suffering a critical loss, such as that of a child to death. Therefore we drew on multiple sources of data and conducted a meticulous analysis of the process of emotion regulation as described by a bereaved couple after the loss of their child.

The Present Study

This study is part of a broader research project on the experiences of parents sharing grief with each other after the loss of their child to cancer. In conformity with the ethical board guidelines (of the University Hospital Leuven in Belgium), a hospital psychologist first contacted all parents before their identities could be given to the researchers. In cooperation with the Department of Pediatric Oncology we randomly selected twenty couples who lost their child after cancer treatment between 2002-2007. We sent them an information letter about the rationale of the study, with notification of the potential emotional impact of possible participation to the interview. We emphasized that they were free to stop participation at any point in the research process. In case they wanted more information or emotional support they were free to contact the psychologists of the department.

Throughout the data collection by means of in-depth interviews with bereaved parents and subsequent narrative analyses, it surprised us that parents recurrently referred to not talking about the loss with each other and with others as a way to create some distance from the intensive pain, protecting themselves against the ripple effects this distress might have on their functioning in the following days. To gain a deeper understanding of this theme, we thoroughly explored a metaphor used by one of these bereaved couples. They used this metaphor, which they articulated as “an emotional core of sadness inside, surrounded by a crust, around which we cycle,” to convey their grief and the way they carry it closely with them, and, also, at a bearable distance. In this article we describe and discuss this metaphor. We attempt to reach toward a better understanding of the complexity of the process of emotion regulation in grief. Special attention is paid to the talking and not talking about the child and the pain of the loss as one way to regulate their emotions. We specifically focus on the dynamic ways in which these parents deal with the dialectical forces of closeness and distance, for example by making “a detour” around the pain. To protect the privacy of the participants we changed their names. The couple gave informed consent for the disguised use of their interview responses.

A Case Study: Els and Gunter, Parents of Flore

Els and Gunter, a Belgian couple in their early 30's, lost their daughter Flore when she was six months old. Flore was only nine weeks old when she was diagnosed with leukemia. An intensive period of chemotherapy followed. For months the three of them lived closely together in a small hospital room. During these months Flore fought through a few infections, but the last one was too strong and thus fatal for this little girl. Flore was a first child for Els and Gunter. The interviews took place six years after Flore died. Meanwhile they had two other children and are expecting a fourth child.

Data Collection

We used multiple data collection methods for this study. In a first interview we explained the purpose of the study and confidentiality procedures and both Els and Gunter gave their informed consent for participation. During the interview they both talked very openly about Flore, her struggle and her death and the way they cope with their loss as parents and as a couple. The day after this first interview Els sent an email to add a story that she forgot to tell in the interview. One month after the interview, we called them to inquire about their experiences related to the interview. After eight months we contacted this couple again, explaining the subsequent steps in the research and asking them if they would be prepared to further participate in our study. Both Els and Gunter asserted that they were pleased to engage in this research, which gave them the opportunity to help other bereaved parents with their experiences, and to learn from this experience themselves.

Based on a narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations, called “restorying stories” (McCormack, 2004), we sent this couple a restoried story, a report of our understanding of their story, focused on our research question, the sharing and not sharing of their grief as a couple. This 7-page long narration, which had the form of a poem, only used their own words and phrases and is structured in titles and subtitles on many levels. We sent this restoried story to them together with a letter explaining our intention, this narration being a starting point for further dialogue. In a second interview we talked about the way they had experienced the first interview (the impact this had on each of them and on their couple relationship), and their experiences related to receiving and reading the restoried story. Next, we further explored some of the themes they talked about in the first interview that were “given back” to them in the restoried story.

To grasp some of the complexities of human interaction (Pistrang, Barker & Rutter, 1997), we wanted to explore unspoken reflections during the interview. Therefore we used a Tape Assisted Recall procedure (TAR, Elliott, 1986, 2004) the day after the second interview.

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In this third interview (TAR), we looked back at the video recording of the interview from the previous evening. Both partners as well as the interviewer stopped the tape at times they wanted to add or ask about unspoken reflections at a certain moment. These reflections yielded insights into the meaning of their interactions, including silences.

All interviews lasted around two hours. We videotaped the interviews and audio recorded the telephone call. A master's thesis student made the transcripts under supervision of the first author. During analyses we used the video files and continually adapted the transcripts, and added nonverbal behavior noticeable on the video. Furthermore, we included notes of the inner dialogue of the interviewer, which were made shortly after the interviews. The transcripts, email, restored story and notes were included as primary data in this study. Because this family lives in the Flemish part of Belgium, the interviews and the restored story on which we drew were originally in Dutch.

Data Analysis

We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis on the transcripts of the interviews and email. A first step in the analysis process consisted of identifying and selecting all passages in which they referred to their ways of dealing with the loss of their child in their daily lives, as individuals and as a couple. We specifically focused on those aspects related to talking and not talking about their deceased child and the pain of the loss. In a next step, we concentrated on a central metaphor the couple used to convey their experience: they said it was as if they were constantly “cycling around an emotional core of sadness inside, which is surrounded by a crust.” Gunter initially generated this metaphor in the first interview, and they recurrently further elaborated on it in the following interviews by both partners in dialogue with the interviewer. This is consistent with a dialogical view of language according to which meanings are co-created in the interactional context of the interview (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Mazeland & Ten Have, 1996). In this perspective the metaphor was not an image pre-

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existing, fully developed in the inner world of the participants, but rather it unfolded and developed through the dialogue between Gunter, Els and the interviewer.

We performed a thematic coding using MaxQda software 2 (MAXqda, 2007), identifying descriptive categories by using line-by-line coding and the constant comparison method, assessing meaning units and categories for similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This resulted in a hierarchical category structure, with categories and subcategories, reflecting the experience of proximity regulation in the grief process, captured in metaphorical language. To check the trustworthiness of this analysis, we incorporated an extensive auditing process (Hill, Thompson, & Nutt-Williams, 1997; Rober, 2004). Specifically, when we finished the coding, the first author gave a detailed report to three external auditors, researchers at three different universities.

Independent of one another, these researchers read the report and reviewed the overall category structure for coherence/consistency as well as elegance/nonredundancy. They audited all meaning units (in Dutch with English translation) for their fit into the category to which they were assigned. All three auditors then provided feedback to the first author, who used this to modify the category system and the assignment of meaning units. Then we made a second report and again sent it to the three independent auditors. After this second round in the external auditing process we reached an overall consensus about the report.

Results

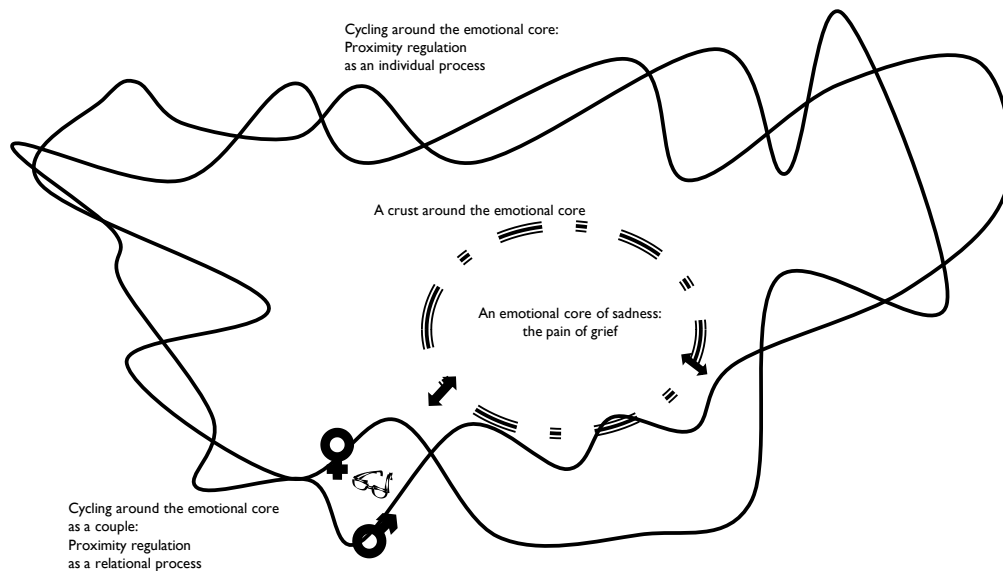
The thematic analysis resulted in a taxonomy of 107 different codes with 223 meaning units coded. We labeled the overall theme “Proximity regulation in a grief process.” In the hierarchical tree structure we distinguished four general domains of categories, all four connected with a part of the metaphorical image (see Table 1 and Figure 1): (a) An emotional core of sadness: the pain of grief; (b) A crust around the emotional core: a dynamic protection from the pain of grief; (c) Cycling around the emotional core: proximity regulation as an

individual process; (d) Cycling around the emotional core as a couple: proximity regulation as a relational process.

Table I. Proximity Regulation in a Grief Process: Hierarchical Tree Structure

Metaphorical image	First order categories	Second order categories	Third order categories
An emotional core of sadness	The pain of grief		
A crust around the emotional core	A dynamic protection from the pain of grief		
Cycling around the emotional core	Proximity regulation as an individual process	The need for closeness The need for distance Dynamic ways of dealing with the dialectics of closeness and distance	Not directly talking about it Talking in the context of research Talking in another language
Cycling around the emotional core as a couple	Proximity regulation as a relational process		

Figure 1. Proximity regulation in a grief process



The Emotional Core of Sadness: The Pain of Grief.

The metaphor of “an emotional core of sadness” is used by Els and Gunter to describe something that is filled with sadness, and is experienced as something inside, as something essential, emotional and vulnerable. While talking about this core Els and Gunter often gestured, showing something round that is held by two embracing hands. They both experienced this core as existent ever since their daughter died and as something that would never go away.

Gunter (G): (. . .) that is, that’s something very fundamental, since Flore died, in which we are hit as a person. It really is like a first layer, which is there.

Els (E): What do you mean?

G: Uhm [thinking], like an emotional core [shows something round, held with his two hands], around which one always cycles.

E: Yes, yes.

Since this moment in the first interview, when Gunter created the metaphor for the first time, Els also began to use it in the following interviews. Generally this metaphor seemed to have the same meaning for both partners. A slight difference in meaning, however, was that for Els this core was filled with memories, though this was not so for Gunter. He sometimes referred to this emotional core with other metaphors, like a little pitcher filled with sadness, or a knot. For us, the metaphor of the pitcher suggested something full of feeling that might at times be poured out, just as the knot evoked an image of something that was tied together, twisted, and perhaps invited loosening or untying.¹ Although Gunter used these metaphors interchangeably, each image could illuminate a different aspect of the same experience. However, the fact that for all these metaphors Gunter showed the same gesture with his hands, something round which is held with two hands, strengthened the view of these different images as having a similar meaning for him.

G: For me these are not memories. It really is, there is a knot [shows something round held with his two hands], a knot that is inside there. By actively thinking about it, it comes closer and closer, closer to the surface.

Interviewer (I): That knot?

G: Yes. A little pitcher filled with a lot of sadness. But nothing concrete actually. It's not that, then, I'm thinking back about something concrete. I don't know if that is the case for you too [to E]?

I: Is that the same image as you used in our previous interview, an emotional core that is there?

G: Yes, that's that.

For Els and Gunter it was hard to share this emotional core with people who did not go through the same kind of loss, partly because such people did not ask about it. With some parents who also had lost a child they could sometimes share this core, because they also knew what it is. Although the couple also could share this feeling with sensitive professionals, the core of their grief eluded narration. The struggle to give voice to the experience was evident for this couple:

G: I wouldn't be able to, in a way it's confronting. I really would not know how to put it into words.

E: Hmm, I don't know.

G: But yes, that's [shakes his head].

E: But not, not spoken words.

I: Not spoken?

E: Not, not out loud. Well, maybe that would be okay, but I never dared to try.

When they thought about their daughter, this brought the emotional core closer. When they talked spontaneously about Flore, or were asked to do so as in the context of the interview, they experienced this as a difficult confrontation because of the emotions it created.

Therefore, not talking was often a way not to evoke the painful emotions.

A Crust Around the Emotional Core: A Dynamic Protection From the Pain of Grief.

Around the emotional core, a crust had grown, which was variable: it had become thicker over the years, and it varied in thickness depending on the situation. In Figure 1 this is represented by an arrow, indicating the variable thickness of the crust.

G: There is a core of great sadness, uh, yes, around which there is a crust, which gets thicker every year, which, when one is tired or sick, or if things are not going well, or at a certain point.

E: or disturbed by hormones. [E was pregnant at the time of this interview.]

The crust had a protective value because it shielded the emotional core. One could pierce through the crust, and in so doing, come closer to the core. Piercing through the protective crust was usually associated with talking about the child or the loss.

G: Imagine that you would ask me to talk about the time when Flore was sick, or the moment of death or something, then I feel I am piercing through that crust.

Gunter and Els both emphasized that this was something they did themselves, but some situations also gave rise to this piercing through.

E: Sometimes people say a lot without it happening. Well, I don't feel like anybody is doing this to me, like you [to G] say, piercing through that crust, sometimes that happens, and sometimes it doesn't. It's a little like piercing and picking, as you [to G] would say it.

G: Yes.

E: But not like you [to interviewer] are doing that, it's just something is coming too close for me.

Although they usually preferred not to pierce through the crust, it was tolerable when it was in a controlled way, not being forced to.

I: Are you saying now that piercing through that crust is not always something that you experience as negative?

G: That's right. Uh, rather not, but especially when it is in a controlled context, or uh, ultimately we gave you the permission to talk about it, then it's okay. [E nods]

I: Oh, yes.

G: That's very different than being forced to bring it to the surface.

Consequently, not talking about it could be a way of controlling the proximity to the core, avoiding piercing of the crust when the context seemed inappropriate for them.

Cycling Around the Emotional Core: Proximity Regulation as an Individual Process.

Cycling around the emotional core was one of the metaphors Els and Gunter used to describe the way they dealt with the dialectic of closeness and distance. It was depicted as a dynamic activity of proximity regulation: approaching the core, but always careful not to approach too close, or for too long. In the following, we first describe the two opposing dialectic forces: the need for closeness to Flore, and the need for distance from the pain of the loss. Subsequently, we briefly describe how this couple deals with these dialectic forces. In Figure 1 this cycling is represented by two dynamic lines (one for Els and one for Gunter), each following their own course, sometimes closer, sometimes further from the core.

The need for closeness. In their grief process it was important for Els and Gunter to keep a certain closeness to their deceased daughter in daily ongoing life. Flore was in the background of everything they did, and she would always remain their daughter.

G: (. . .) and memories also fade a little.

E: Which is regretful, of course.

G: Yes, yes, also the positive sides.

E: Yes, well, that is your child, you also want to keep her close. [silence]

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They sometimes sought out her memory and pursued projects related to her (e.g., lighting candles in churches when they were on a holiday). Talking about Flore was also a way for Gunter and Els to keep their daughter close to them, to honor the child's memory, to keep her present in their lives and in the life of the children. They often found it enjoyable to talk about her, and it was important to them that she kept being mentioned by others too. When the first author talked to Gunter on the phone one month after the first interview inquiring about the way he had experienced the interview, he told her how he liked the opportunity to talk about his daughter, and compared it with the remembrance day of the hospital where Flore died, which they went to every year.

G: (. . .) then we mostly have that same feeling, it's nice to talk about it again. Well, not really like that is a pleasant thing, but just to be able to talk about Flore. Like, well, which is, well, pleasant, yes.

The need for distance. Besides the importance and need for closeness to their daughter, there was also a need for distance from the pain of the loss, not to be overwhelmed by it in daily life. In the interviews they often showed this distance with their hands, making a movement with their hand away from their body. One strategy to create some distance was by avoiding the confrontation. They would rather not think about it, avoiding confrontation with reminders, or searching for other contexts, not to be reminded of the pain. In the third tape assisted recall interview, they described how, even in the interview, they had their ways of creating some distance, as by laughing at what the partner was saying.

G: And for you it's a, well, a kind of, uh, defensive reflex.

E: Yes, yes, absolutely.

G: to create some distance.

E: Yes, yes.

G: Well, that is very shortly after the emotional part, so that's very, that's a part of it.

E: Yes, of course.

I: And you [to G] know it too, that, at times, she uses humor, some laughing, and some, that that is something for her, to, oops this is coming close for her, and she tries to create some distance for herself? Do I understand correctly?

G: Yes.

E: Yes. That is a strategy that we have used very often.

Another strategy is not talking about it, with each other, and with others.

E: Mostly I ask others how they are doing, and I sort of avoid talking about myself [hand movement: going around it].

Dynamic ways of dealing with the dialectic of closeness and distance. To deal with this dialectic of closeness and distance, Gunter and Els used several metaphors to describe this dynamic of simultaneously approaching the core of sadness, while also preserving a certain distance by not approaching it too closely or for too long, like “cycling around the emotional core,” “dosing” (balancing the amount of time and intensity in which they approach the emotional core), and “detours.” All metaphors were described as active ongoing processes in their grieving process.

E: I recently talked about it with a friend. About yes, that you do both things. You need some distance, but not a distance that is too much. But you need to find a balance in this [G nods]. It's clear to me, that it, that it is not cycling away from it, really.

In the following we look closely at what Els calls “a detour” around the pain, which was most apparent in “talking with some distance.” We discuss three different illustrations here (a) not

directly talking about it; (b) talking in the context of research; (c) talking in another language, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Dynamic Ways of Dealing with the Dialectics of Closeness and Distance, Examples

Talking with some distance	Examples
Not directly talking about it	<p>E: Two weeks ago it was Flore's birthday, and I emailed it to one of the other mothers and she said, 'I hope you have a strong rubber band (E starts to cry), to keep her close to you (brings her hand to her heart) (7 sec silence). She understood. And she always wants bananas, because monkeys eat bananas and they are happy. And in the mean time we both say how sad it is (shows a detour with her hands).</p> <p>E: Always when it snows I think, "Oh, wouldn't she be cold in her little vase?" And then Gunter says, "No, Els." (Both laugh)</p> <p>G: Yes, but that is...</p> <p>E: In that way we talk about Flore. (Silence)</p> <p>E: I'm very easily overwhelmed by my emotions. I fear that she would be cold in her little vase. I think that is just a way to say something else.</p>
Talking in the context of research	<p>G: This (research interview) is actually a safe context. Sometimes there are moments that we are more troubled by [the memories], and if we can express them in this research context, then that is safe.</p> <p>E: Yes, a little distance.</p> <p>E: The fact that it's your doctoral study, that creates a distance again, well, [we] can actually look at what [we]'re doing in the context of your research. That is more</p> <p>I: Oh, that creates some distance?</p> <p>E: Again a detour, actually (laughs).</p>
Talking in another language	<p>E: I also did my therapy in English. I looked for, yeah, it is a little strange. I was looking for a therapist. I just told an English friend, and she she told me, "I am going to a sweet person, who is English". And I thought, oh, that was, that was just so much to the good, that was like (arm distance from body). Then, you can be easier, tell it like a story, with a little distance.</p> <p>I: That is special. (Els laughs, shows a detour with hands.)</p> <p>E: All tricks from the fair, everything that might help a little.</p> <p>I: Oh, these are tricks that can help you apparently to create some distance in your talking, so that it doesn't come too close?</p>

E: I really think so, not too close.

"E" = Els, "G" = Gunter, "I" = Interviewer

Not directly talking about it. Sometimes it was easier to talk about the pain of the loss in ways that did not explicitly verbalize it. Instead, metaphorical language or stories were used to talk about the child. Talking about a rubber band, monkeys and bananas, or the fear of Flore being cold in her urn, were ways for Els to speak indirectly about her grief for her child. This way she could feel close to her child, and at the same time protect herself from overwhelming feelings of grief.

Talking in the context of research. For Gunter and Els it made a difference that their talking about Flore and the loss of Flore was in the context of a research project. Their participation in the interviews gave them the opportunity to talk about their daughter, to feel close to her again, while at the same time they experienced the research context as a way to create some distance in speaking about her.

Talking in another language. Some months after the loss of Flore, Els decided to seek psychotherapy, mainly because she wanted to talk about her new pregnancy and the fears related to having a new child. Remarkably, she did not choose a therapist who spoke Dutch, which was her first language, but instead chose to pursue therapy in another language, in English. Talking about the pain of the loss in another language was a way for Els to speak about her grief while at the same time preserving some distance needed so as to not approach too closely the overwhelming pain.

Cycling Around the Emotional Core as a Couple: Proximity Regulation as a Relational Process.

Cycling around the core also had its relational aspects. Generally, Gunter and Els described this proximity regulation as an individual process, such that the partner stood at a relative distance at times that this regulation process was satisfactory. They were not really focused

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on the other in this and trusted in the other's ability to regulate his or her own proximity from the emotional core. They tried not to disrupt the other's attempt to manage this process by drawing too close. However, they did not describe this process as entirely individual. Instead, they kept an eye on each other and guarded each other's boundaries. While talking about how this regulation was a continuing individual quest, they both remarked that it was not entirely personal or subjective:

E: Until the moment you say something about it...

G: A little margin, uh, keeping an eye on the edges, I would think [Els smiles].

I: Keeping an eye on each other's edges?

G: Yes, or being alert for it.

In Figure 1 we represented this cycling around the emotional core as a couple by spectacles, suggesting that they kept an eye on each other.

In general, Gunter and Els only sporadically talked about their grief with each other. Not talking, they tried not to affect, and not to be affected by, the other. However, when, at times, there was not enough distance from the pain, they would approach the other. Then, they trusted they could relate and rely on each other.

E: Yes, if I would have a hard time, if I would have the feeling that I got stuck, then I would say that.

Gunter added that he thought the most important thing was that as partners, they could be the first support figure for each other in times of need: "Being the first confidant, if needed. I think that is important."

In this proximity regulation the couple also described an existing relational dynamic of counterbalancing for each other. When one partner noticed that the other was too close to

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the emotional core and was having a hard time with it, the other tried to create some extra space, for instance by taking over the conversation, so that the partner could recover and move back again. In Figure 1 we represented this by the lines that occasionally cross each other. Sometimes these lines simply cross because each is going his or her own way, but sometimes these lines cross because one adjusts his or her route to create some space for the other.

Reflecting on a part in the second interview in which Els had a hard time and Gunter was talking, Els pointed to such a moment where they take care of each other:

E: Here you are making a little space for me, right?

G: Yes, I am, absolutely.

I: You are making a little space?

E: Yes, that's, I also recognized it at that moment.

G: Yes.

E: You sometimes do that.

G: I try to sell some rational theories.

E: Gunter takes over then and is just talking until I'm back in.

G: Whereby Els slowly comes back on board [gesture: pulling on a rope to get someone into a boat].

I: Oh, yes.

G: Right [to Els]? That's true, right, we do that. Then we catch each other a little.

E: Yes [both laugh].

Discussion

In this study we attempted to gain a deeper and fuller understanding of the challenges of emotion regulation faced by bereaved parents after the loss of their child. Therefore, we

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focused on one bereaved couple and carefully analyzed multiple data from several interviews we had with them, carrying out a systematic thematic analysis. We gave special attention to a metaphor used by this couple to convey some of the complexity involved in the process of regulating emotions in their grief process: “cycling around an emotional core of sadness.” In this analysis we mainly focused on the aspect of proximity, the distance and closeness from this core, and the way this couple dealt with the simultaneous need for both. Although we could easily have chosen to explore a different metaphor, for example, the meanings of “dosing intensity over time” or the meanings of “coming on board again,” we chose the “cycling around” metaphor because our interviewees gave this metaphor a central place in their accounts.

Even though we did our analysis systematically, some issues remain open for discussion. For instance, we could question if Gunter and Els were talking about one core or two cores. Did they both have their own core, or were they talking about the same shared core? In our data we found no evidence referring to two cores, but, on the contrary, they referred to “that” core, as if they were both talking about that same core. So it seemed that in their view, there was but one core.

Another issue that remains open for discussion is the question of what exactly did this core comprise? Did the core include the memories of Flore, to which they wanted to stay close? Or did the core represent the pain of grief, the loss of Flore, from which they needed some distance? Or maybe these two meanings were merged into a single core? Or was this core comprised of different and perhaps overlapping parts? Our data did not unequivocally answer these questions. It seemed that for Gunter and Els too there was some confusion and it seemed that it was difficult for them to disentangle Flore, and the pain of the loss of Flore. As Els said: “It really belongs together. I can not think about my daughter without being very sad that she is dead.”

Another question that remains unanswered is, what did they mean by a core inside? For Gunter and Els this core was experienced as situated inside their body, as something that could be approached by talking or thinking about it. Still, this was not like a concrete substance somewhere in the body, but rather was meant as a metaphorical way of speaking. Stories of “embodied grief” are common in talking with the bereaved (Gudmundsdottir, 2009, Hentz, 2002). Some experience their grieving body as fundamentally changed since a profound loss. Although some bereaved experience real physical pain, often metaphorical language is used to point to a burden that needs to be carried inside their body, as for example “a heavy heart,” “a hole inside” or “a strangled throat.”

This case study has serious limitations. Although we meticulously executed this study, it was an analysis of only one specific Flemish couple’s struggle with their emotion regulation in the process of grief over the death of their baby daughter. Therefore, it does not lend itself to any generalizations across bereaved couples or across cultures. One could wonder to what extent “cycling” around an emotional core, and maybe also “talking with some distance” is a typical Flemish way of dealing with intense emotions. Therefore, at most, our findings only illustrate the central importance for some couples of relational-dialectical dynamics of dealing with emotions of grief.

A traditional formulation of “grief work” emphasizes the importance of approaching anguishing emotions and encouraging the bereaved to “work through” the grief. In contrast, our qualitative study suggests that at least in some grieving couples there is a dynamic of emotional regulation, which entails an oscillation between maintaining closeness to the deceased child and establishing a functional distance from the pain of grief. Similar to the Dual Process Model (DPM, Stroebe & Schut; 1999, 2010), our findings suggest that the couple we interviewed engaged grieving as a dynamic process balancing confrontation and avoidance. However, our case study of this couple suggests a process that differs from the

oscillation process in the DPM, insofar as it points to the simultaneous attempt to ensure closeness to the child and distance from the pain of the loss. Most explicitly in their account, the couple captured this dynamic of opposing forces in analogical ways through their use of metaphors like “cycling around” an emotional core of sadness, making “detours” around the pain, and “talking with some distance.”

Conceptualizing the processes of “confrontation” and “avoidance” in terms of “closeness” and “distance” fits with a relational dialectical view on personal relationships, in which both processes are considered to be opponent forces that are co-existent and in no need of resolution in one way or another (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, Hess, 2002; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007; Toller, 2005). For the bereaved couple in this study, “cycling around an emotional core of sadness, shielded by a crust” was a way to deal with these dialectics, to stay close to their deceased child, while at the same time staying at a bearable distance from agonizing pain associated with the loss of their child. This continuing quest was a challenge for both parents individually, but also one that played out at the level of the couple relationship. They kept an eye on each other, at times relying on one another, to create some distance for the other. At other times, when the pain was too great, they sought out one another as confidants. In this way emotional regulation was also a relational process.

Looking through this lens of relational dialectics, we might also gain a deeper understanding of the need of the bereaved to talk or not talk about their grief. Bereavement counselors typically emphasize the importance of expressing grief openly. However, our findings join those of others pointing to the complexity of the dialectic tension between openness and closedness (Baxter, 2011; Hooghe, Neimeyer, & Rober, in press). For Gunter and Els, talking about their child was an important way to keep her present in ongoing life, even though doing so risked piercing through the protective crust around the emotional core of sadness. Not talking, or talking with some distance (such as talking in another language, or

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talking indirectly) then was a way to detour around the core, not cycling away from it, not approaching it too closely.

This flexibility in regulating one's emotional expression has also recently been found to be a core capacity in the grief process of bereaved spouses (Gupta & Bonanno, 2011). The ability to both enhance and suppress emotional expression might be important in daily functioning in the wake of loss. Although both Els and Gunter seemed to have found their own ways of regulating their emotions, we also noted the imperfection and vulnerability of this regulating dynamic. It is likely that people do not always notice when they go into areas beyond what they want to talk about. Els, for example, generally protected herself by not approaching the painful topics too closely in the interview, but also recounted that, to her surprise, she had some sleepless nights following its conclusion. Apparently, only afterwards she experienced that talking about her daughter this intensively brought her closer to her grief in the days that followed. Hence, although Els and Gunter continued their search for a bearable distance, and adjusted their talking and not talking about it, it seems that sometimes the effect of talking, and the proximity to the core could only be felt afterwards.

Looking through a relational dialectical lens of emotion regulation, our findings might carry implications for research practice, in particular for scholars conducting interviews with the bereaved. We wonder whether the choice to participate in this kind of research for some bereaved might be a way to search for some kind of closeness with the deceased child in a safe context. Often intense and unexpected emotions are experienced during the interview (Dyregrov, 2004), which might generate the need for a dynamic movement toward more distance from the painful story. When the interview is conducted with partners or families, we might even be aware of the relational dynamics in this regulation, family members taking care of each other. Moreover, consistent with our dialogical perspective (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986), we should not forget that the interviewer is also part of the interactional dynamics related to

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emotion regulation during the interview. An illustration of this was found in the interviewers' notes made shortly after the interviews with Els and Gunter. The interviewer asked herself, for example, "Am I coming too close now to this question?" "I don't want to be the one who is piercing through the crust," "How can I respect their boundaries?" and "I'll just trust their own decisions; they'll tell me if this is too much."

All of this points to the importance of creating a safe dialogical space to conduct interviews with bereaved research participants. Being able to determine both the place and content of the interview has been shown to be important for bereaved interviewees (Hynson, Aroni, Bauld & Sawyer, 2006). Moreover, it might be important that the interviewer indicates a time frame for the interview to enhance the feeling of safety and control for the couple. In this way, they can estimate how long the conversation will last, and perhaps, how long they need to bear the emotional intensity, or perhaps modulate it throughout.

For psychotherapy practice, we suggest creating a dialogical space to explore with the bereaved how it would be to talk about the pain related to the loss of their loved one, while simultaneously acknowledging the hesitations the bereaved might have to speak, as well as their good reasons to choose to be silent and maintain a safe distance, at least for the time being (Rober, 2002). Through this "talking about talking" (Fredman, 1997), the dialectical tensions related to openness and closedness and to closeness and distance in relation to the child and the pain of the loss can be explored (Hooghe, Neimeyer, & Rober, in press). This careful and respectful therapeutic approach acknowledges bereaved people's own ways, as individuals and as couples or families, to search for a bearable distance in their psychological and social lives following a profoundly emotional loss.

Notes

1. During the analyses process these different metaphors were the subject of discussion with the external auditors.

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