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**Coping on the Internet:  
How Widowers Use Modern Technology**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to examine and evaluate how widowers use the Internet. The participants for this study were located through Bulletin Boards, personal ads, Chat Rooms and personal profiles at one Internet site. Research questions were submitted via E-mail; correspondence with the participants was conducted by regular postal mail, ICQ and E-mail. The widowers were from Central America, Northern Europe and North America, had been widowed from 1 to 20 years, and ranged from 26 to 68 years of age. Results of the research indicated that most of the men initially used the Internet as way to combat their loneliness by visiting Chat Rooms. Sites that were also popular included those that provided opportunities to meet potential partners as well as those that supplied information that was needed by the widowers. Based on their own experiences, the participants in this study generally felt that the Internet could be a valuable resource for widowers after they have resolved their grief and are no longer in a fragile emotional state.

## **INTERNET TERMINOLOGY**

<b>Address</b>	<b>The location of an Internet resource; codes that specify where Internet mail messages should be sent.</b>
<b>Bulletin Board</b>	<b>Site where you can swap messages on a wide range of topics.</b>
<b>Chat</b>	<b>Typing messages back and forth with one or more people online. Chat differs from communicating messages via Bulletin Boards or E-mail because everything happens in real time.</b>
<b>Chat Rooms</b>	<b>Virtual rooms where people come and go at will. Chat rooms often have a topic or special interest area.</b>
<b>E-mail</b>	<b>Electronic mail that allows you to send and receive messages almost instantaneously.</b>
<b>ICQ</b>	<b>ISEEKYOU. World's largest Internet online communication network. A user-friendly tool that informs you who's online and enables you to contact them at will, in real time through the Internet.</b>
<b>Internet</b>	<b>The worldwide network of computers communication.</b>
<b>IRC</b>	<b>Internet Relay Chat. A system that allows Internet users to conduct online text based communication with one or more other users.</b>
<b>Online</b>	<b>When you connect to the Internet, you are online.</b>
<b>Password</b>	<b>Set of numbers and/or letters that enable you to access your E-mail, Chat sites or other Web sites for which you have registered.</b>

<b>Search Engine</b>	<b>A tool for searching information on the Internet by topic. Popular engines include AltaVista, Excite, Info Seek, MetaCrawler, and Yahoo.</b>
<b>Site</b>	<b>A single or collection of related Web pages</b>
<b>URL</b>	<b>Uniform Resource Locator. The method by which Internet sites are addressed. e.g. <a href="http://www.communicate.com">http://www. communicate.com</a>, the address of a Web page.</b>
<b>Visit</b>	<b>Viewing a World Wide Web site.</b>
<b>Web Site</b>	<b>An HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language) document. WWW World Wide Web, or Web. A subset of the Internet which uses a combination of text, graphics, audio and video (multimedia) to provide information on almost any subject.</b>



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This paper, and the research that generated it, is the result of the efforts of a number of generous and patient individuals. Since my name stands alone on the title page out of formality, I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the invaluable contributions made by those who shared a part of their lives with me. I know who they are and so do they. I thank them for their efforts, their enthusiasm and their strength.

I would also like to express my gratitude to John Portelli for his advice and guidance.

As well, I wish to acknowledge my parents, Greta and Vinton Baltzer, and my children, Jennifer and Christopher, who kept me in touch with all that was truly important.

*The narratives in this study are based on interviews with widowers contacted through the Internet. However, their names have been changed to preserve their privacy and anonymity, with the exception of those who contributed photographs and gave specific permission that first names could be used.*

*Quotes made within the general text are credited to the widower who made them. Within individual narratives, statements quoted are those made by the widower whose story is being told.*

*This section of the study seeks to explain the particular challenges faced by widowers and the need for those who have lost a partner to receive emotional support during the grief process. It also discusses how current support systems do not seem to be meeting the needs of widowers and describes the unique role of the Internet in relation to widowers.*

*Silence is the prison; sharing is the key.*  
Anonymous

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Phenomenon**

Although our Western oriented society has become more aware of the challenges faced by certain segments of our culture, there still exists a double standard in many situations. One such duality tends to occur following the death of one member of a heterosexual couple. While widows find comfort with their peers, living through their loss with the aid and emotional support of other women, widowers often feel that there is no one with whom they can share their grief (Brabant, Forsyth, Melancon, 1992). Consequently, men often feel the need to throw themselves into their work, believing that this will be an effective way for them to cope with the loss of their partners. Working, however, only keeps the "monsters" (Arthur) at bay; it does not help the widower address his need for emotional support. The physical aspect of work is a temporary solution; camaraderie found at work however, is often just that: camaraderie, since "men are less likely to have intimate friendships" (McGoldrick and Walsh, 1991, p.37). Because of "society's denial of male vulnerability and dependency needs" (Walsh and McGoldrick, 1991, p. 24) men don't easily find emotional support in times of stress; the bereaved male suffers not only from the loss of his partner but also finds little comfort with his peers.

Before the increased mobility of the current population, families often lived close to each other and were able to provide long term support in times of great stress, as in the death of a loved one. Communities tended to be small and close knit; " where groups remain together and are not separated by the demands of a more mobile society, and where the extended family remains in close geographic proximity, it may be easier to ... offer the emotional support required"(Lendrum and Syme, 1992, p. 49). In today's society, the combination of geographic distance from family members, work and organized recreation schedules often create a climate in which people no longer have the time to involve themselves with either their neighbours or their community. Consequently, when a death occurs, one may not only be physically isolated from relatives but there may be few emotional ties with one's peers; " supportive networks ... are frequently missing just when we need them most"(Lendrum and Syme, 1992, p. 49). For men in particular, the stress of bereavement is frequently made more difficult as a result of the physical and emotional barriers that have developed as a result of being a male member of our society due to the "womanly or weak" perceptions associated with an "open expression of grief" (Raphael, 1983, p. 184).

Consider then, what it is like to live in a society in which to be confident, composed, and unemotional are qualities that are not only respected and admired but which are the standards by which men are judged in stressful situations. While women seem to be encouraged to express their feelings openly, men are often disparaged for doing so (Raphael, 1983). Although family and friends help take care of the practical details of living, men still feel isolated in their grief. Self-help groups usually have more female than male members in the group. Even though each person in the group has lost a

partner, men find it difficult to establish a bond and so leave the group, still struggling to work through the grief process.

When society hinders men from living through their loss because of "expectations that (men) will be the strong one"(Raphael, 1983, p. 192) then alternate destructive means of coping are often implemented: drugs, alcohol, a hasty remarriage, none of which assuage the pain, but merely replace it with a substitute(Raphael, 1983)(Schulz, 1978). Instead of relying on these strategies, some widowers may choose to use the Internet to assist them in their grief process. Its effectiveness in providing support to widowers has not yet been determined; this study seeks to find out how widowers are using the Internet and if, indeed, it is a resource which meets their particular needs.

#### **Justification**

Our Western oriented culture tends to hold stoicism in high regard; the demeanour of Jackie Kennedy after the assassination of her husband is often stated as setting back the grief process one hundred years(Schiff, 1977, as cited in McGoldrick, Hines, Garcia-Preto, Almeida, Rosen and Lee, 1991). Displays of emotional outbursts are considered to be unseemly, unnecessary and unwarranted. Men, in particular, who show emotion are often considered to be less in control than men who are able to move through their bereavement period without breaking down(Raphael, 1983). Because our society generally perceives men as emotionally stronger than women, widowers often find it difficult to look for help and so tend to cope on their own(Brabant, Forsyth, Melancon, 1992).

The widowers in this study who attended support groups generally found that the groups were oriented towards women and senior citizens; despite the shared experience of a deceased partner, these men still felt that they had little in common with the other members. Groups such as Widow to Widow, an organization in which mature widows who have resolved their grief visit newly bereaved women, have flourished but there is no corresponding infrastructure in place for widowers (Parkes, 1987). Associations which have the status of being single as a prerequisite for membership are not usually intended to be support groups for the bereaved. Consequently the widowers in this study who attended meetings of these groups were often disappointed and frustrated by the lack of support shown to them.

Faced with the dilemma of not having a support system to which they can turn following the death of a partner, men have often chosen to find the comfort they seek through drugs, excessive work or remarriage. For men, these are the means by which they hope to drown their grief (Raphael, 1983). Drugs and overwork are physically debilitating strategies that extend the grief process unnecessarily by denying widowers the opportunity to resolve their grief. In the case of a hasty remarriage, the expectation is that the new partner will provide the emotional support that the widower has been unable to find elsewhere and that the "new partners be sympathetic to their continuous grieving" (Weiss, 1984, p. 75). While this may appear to be an ideal solution to the widower, the desired support system is temporary at best, and at worst, detrimental to both partners since the relationship is based on his need to be supported in his grief. If the marriage fails, as it frequently does, not only is the widower still struggling with the loss of his first

wife, but his grief is now compounded by the loss of the new partner as well as a shattered relationship(Parkes, 1987).

Although the Internet is a relatively new phenomenon, its usage is becoming more common as computers have become more accessible and affordable. Since men are currently the primary users of this technology, it seems to be a natural resource for widowers to access the Internet to combat their loneliness, make contact with others and share their experiences. Both the distance component and the faceless other(s) seem to generate an atmosphere that is conducive for some widowers to speak more openly about their loss than face to face conversations with members of a support group. As Manning (1995, p. 14), states, " Grief is a two year, natural process people go through in healing a broken heart. It must be given time, and it must be natural. It must also be done in a way that suits the individual". Given that the Internet provides an abundance of unique ways to communicate such as chat lines, personal ads, ICQ, bulletin boards or personal web pages, it seems to be a resource that may accommodate the varying needs of widowers.

Exploring the way in which widowers access and utilize the various Internet sites was a way to learn not only more about the grief process of men, the role of the Internet in their lives after the death of their partners but also, and more importantly, how they felt about the resources that were available to them and what suggestions they had for others who were undergoing similar experiences.

### **What's Special**

This study developed from two of my interests: modern technology and how society deals with death. Although there are thousands of sites containing an abundance of information on the Internet, I questioned the authenticity of the 'knowledge' found on



some sites. I wondered if someone in a state of emotional turmoil who was searching for information and/or support would be able to differentiate between sites that presented accurate and helpful knowledge and those that did not. As I searched the Internet for sites for those in crises, I found a number which promoted their creator's products and/or services and was reminded of the 'there's one born every minute' credo of Barnum and Bailey. I was disheartened to find only one or two sites that provided support for widowers. It took several hours to locate sites (Appendix A) which provided not only support but also relevant information. For recent widowers, searching for hours on the Internet is generally not possible; they find it difficult to focus on their own personal needs so for them, searching the Internet would be a very challenging task (Raphael, 1983).

Chat Rooms, open day and night, attract people from around the world. During my visits to Chat sites, I encountered many people on line who seemed to be lonely and seeking someone who would listen to them. As I became more familiar with one particular chat site I explored the rooms that were available to chatters. Although there were rooms focusing on Teens, Romance, Support and Recovery (mainly drug and alcohol related), Seniors, Sports, Television, Movies, Religion, Students and General Chat, I noticed that there were no specific rooms for those who were bereaved; I wondered if there was a need for such a room. Chatting casually online it became apparent to me that there were a number of widowers who were actively seeking someone with whom to talk about their loss. While the online widows with whom I spoke seemed to have resolved their grief and were ready to move on with their lives, the widowers in the Chat Rooms did not seem to share a similar perspective. Consequently I

decided to investigate and/or explore the ways in which the Internet was being used by widowers following the death of their partners.

My initial investigation indicated that widowers who used Chat Rooms were often seeking someone with whom they could talk about their grief. Although these men were willing to answer questions and share their thoughts and feelings, they were not prepared to commit themselves further to this study. The widowers who became full participants in this study, however, were those who had posted personal ads or participated in bulletin board discussions; they often looked upon the exchanges between us as a means by which they could help themselves in resolving the grief that many of them still felt." I don't know if this helped your research but it did help me a little"(Jim). They also felt that there was a need to be addressed in regards to the support given to widowers and that, having such a lived experience, they could contribute something that might help to alleviate another widower's pain. " I think I will be a good subject for you"(Fred).

Visiting Internet sites seems to be an acceptable and increasingly used resource which widowers access at different stages of the grief process: recently widowed men often visit bulletin boards for information on how to cook and ideas for meals for one; Lonely widowers like Arthur and Dolf sought out the Support and Recovery Chat Rooms so that they would have someone with whom to talk; widowers like Joe relied upon stock and travel sites to provide him with specific information; men like Roger and Jim who are actively seeking new partners advertise in the Personal Columns. Other widowers, like Juan Carlos, create their own Web pages with information about themselves and their families and create links to other pages that interest them. The widowers in this study used the Internet in ways that met their specific needs. Because widowers are seeking

ways to enhance their knowledge, to understand themselves and others, to make contact in a way that is meaningful to them, the Internet may be a means by which they connect with others in the global community in a way that they do not now connect in their own communities. "I'm shy ... but in most chat rooms, I'll ... get into conversation to stir the fires or if I'm interested"(Rick).

Regardless of their language, economic situation or country of birth, the widowers in this study shared the feeling that value judgements about widowers often affected their actions. As Rick said, " I'm not crippled. I'm just adjusting to unfavorable circumstances. I know they try to help, but I just want to be me and be judged for that alone". This study attempts to understand the needs of widowers by giving them an opportunity to tell what support systems were available to them and how effective they felt these resources to be. The widowers in this study felt that society's attitudes are not only inequitable, but also that support systems are inappropriate. Switzer(1970, p. 184) states that "our society has saddled men with a heavy burden in its expectation of the masking of emotions." Although the participants readily admitted to feeling deep emotion, they felt that they had no appropriate forum in which to share these feelings. They all knew that their partner's death had devastated them emotionally and even those who tried to cut themselves off from others found that they were totally unprepared for the feelings that arose: friends, health care providers or faith had not prepared them for the sense of desolation that overcame them. While physical caretaking existed in abundance and was readily accepted, emotional caretaking did not seem to be relevant to their needs, so the widowers felt that they had to seek out support on their own, often in a haphazard manner and leaving them repulsed and disheartened with their encounters. Perhaps it is

**time to reexamine the way in which widowers are regarded and the services available to them; then our society may find it necessary to adjust its perceptions of widower's emotional needs so that they can receive the same support and understanding as widows.**

*This chapter seeks to give an overview of the literature as it specifically relates to the support systems currently used by widowers during their bereavement. In addition to a commentary on the emotions experienced by survivors there is also a brief discussion of the grief process. One subsection reviews how culture affects widowers while another subsection considers how societal expectations may place an additional burden on men who are already under a great deal of emotional stress.*

*Definitions of bereavement, grief and mourning have been provided to assist the reader in understanding how these terms are used in the context of this study.*

*The summary endeavours to link the findings of the literature to the special needs of widowers: not only must widowers cope with the death of their partners, but they must do so within an environment that often questions their masculinity when they express their emotions. If the support systems that are in place are not addressing the needs of widowers, then either alternative systems need to be developed or the expectations placed upon widowers need to be reexamined.*

*Shared joy is double joy  
Shared sorrow is half-sorrow.*

Swedish Proverb

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Definitions**

Bereavement is the desolating "reaction to the loss of close relationship"(Raphael, 1983, p. 33).

Grief is a deep sorrow that is a highly personal response to a life loss. It is not a sign of weakness; it is a long, slow time-consuming painful healing process(Attig, 1996).

Mourning is the time in which a dead person is grieved. It refers to the "manner of expression of the grief response"(Warren, 1989, p. 47).

Together bereavement, grief and mourning encompass the range of feelings and reactions experienced by those whom death has touched. While bereavement is usually recognized as the nomenclature for identifying those who have experienced the death of a loved one, it is more than that; it is often a traumatic, debilitating and life changing experience which has only recently been actively researched. The literature generally recognizes that emotions, ranging from sorrow to anger to denial and finally acceptance, are normal feelings that are commonly felt by mourners(Rando, 1984)(Bowlby, 1994). In order for widowers to reach a state in which their "world(s) change to meet the new reality"(Parkes and Weiss, 1983, p. 156), they must not only accept the reality of their loss intellectually but emotionally as well(Attig, 1996)(Warren, 1989)(Raphael, 1983)(Pincus, 1974). "For widows and widowers to engage in their activities without additional anxiety, they must continue to feel that the world makes sense. For this to

happen, the loss they have sustained has to have a rationale: they must be able to understand it"(Parkes and Weiss, 1983, p. 156). From the responses of the widowers in this study, like Jim, it appeared that intellectual acceptance was achieved by making themselves cognizant of the facts about their partners' illness. Regardless of the situation, accepting the reality of their partners' death was not a natural progression to emotional acceptance, especially for Arthur, who had no emotional support(Switzer, 1970).

The literature maintains the view that support systems such as Widow to Widow flourish because they are effective in meeting the emotional needs of widows(Parkes, 1987). Widowers, however, do not have a similar association that meets their emotional needs (Osterweis, 1984). Widowers who are unsuccessful in finding emotional support tend to spend inordinate amounts of time at work, like Arthur, quickly remarry or, like Dolf, use alcohol in their attempts to resolve their grief; none of these strategies offers a successful resolution to the grief process of the widower(Shapiro, 1994)(Switzer, 1970). As Arthur and Dolf discovered, the grief remained, regardless of the time spent at work or at drinking establishments.

In 1992 Brabant, Forsyth and Melancon suggested that coping alone was the strategy generally used by widowers; from the responses of the widowers in this study, it appears that resolving their grief is frequently a solitary process. This leaves participants like Rick still struggling with unresolved grief, many years after his wife's death and still searching for the emotional support that will allow him to accept his new role as a widower.

## **The Role of Culture**

Our attitude towards death is affected by the culture with which we are most familiar. Eisenbach(1984a) as quoted in Shapiro(1994, p. 224)

asserts that every culture has its own distinct way of easing the suffering of grief by offering the bereaved an explanation for the meaning of death and a prescription for how to proceed with life. For example, the Western belief in the finiteness of the individual life cycle, especially with the decline of religious beliefs and their replacement with secular or scientific values, makes us more likely to view death as a final separation and heightens our feelings of protest and denial.

Thus our culture places a heavy burden upon those who follow its tenets; those who are bereaved do not generally have their faith to help them through their grief(Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson, 1988). There is a void where once there was an ideology to which survivors could turn; the emotional support and guidance provided by the church is being taken over by support groups. At some point during their bereavement, most of the widowers in this study attended at least one meeting of a support group; while Roger and George emphasized that their faith played a large role in the resolution of their grief, they also relied upon others for guidance and support. Although support groups are flourishing, their participants remain primarily widows, with the needs of widowers remaining unfulfilled(Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson , 1988).

The lack of "significant rituals" in our death denying culture is also a contributing factor in regards to the way that we deal with death(Warren, 1989). There is not the ritualization associated with death that there used to be. Funerals are less



elaborate and a specific mourning period marked by the wearing of dark clothing is a rite that is rarely practiced. These factors contribute to the perception that death does not exist and may complicate the grieving process for the survivors because "we tend to live as if we would never experience the jarring separation by death from those persons with whom we have closely linked our lives"(Switzer, 1970, p. 40).

The attitude also prevails in our culture that grief should occur in a certain amount of time. Many corporations and/or companies provide from one to three days of paid leave to an employee who has a member of his immediate family die. It seems that the expectations are that the time off to attend the funeral and see to familial responsibilities is time enough for any grieving that needs to be done. "Grief among middle class, college-educated Americans is increasingly regarded as an acute transitory stage, to be gotten through as quickly as possible with successful outcome measured in terms of developing new relations and giving up ties to the dead"(Green, 1984, p. 216)(Shapiro, 1994). This was borne out by the participants in this study who generally expressed the feeling that they were not prepared for the length of time that grieving took.

Because we are uncomfortable with the notion of death, we do not know what to say or how to act or react to those who have been touched by death(Lendrum and Syme, 1992). The leader of a grief support group which I attended likened death to having an elephant in the room with you: everyone knew it was there, but each person was careful to avoid it, staying near the walls, neither addressing it nor speaking to anyone else about it, even though it was obvious to all present that this enormous behemoth existed and was taking up much of our concentration. The widowers in this study often found that others shunned the topic entirely; Joe dined weekly with the same couple, yet the conversation

never included references to Kathie's death. Although physical caretaking was evident, the emotional support from friends and family was either of short-term duration or absent altogether.

Even our terminology evades the reality of death; words and phrases such as 'passed on', 'in heaven', 'lost', are commonly used to describe when someone has died. This in itself makes acceptance of the death of a loved one difficult when we cannot even use words to accurately describe what has happened. "Death is an embarrassment to the majority of people. There is a conspiracy of silence about it. We cannot say the word 'death' out loud without the kind of frisson that indicates we are breaking a powerful taboo. You only have to think of the number of euphemisms we have invented to prevent us from having to speak the word 'death', to be assured of that(Perry, 1989, p. 221).

#### **Societal Expectations**

"Our society has saddled men with a heavy burden in its expectation of the masking of emotions. The tendency to inhibit such emotions is built into many men on an unconscious level as a result of this cultural expectation and they struggle to control them and not give expression to them too openly when they are consciously felt"(Switzer, 1970, p. 184). Men living in our culture have been shaped since early childhood to be neither emotionally demonstrative nor reliant upon others for support; the expectation is that men will be strong in their silence and draw upon their own inner resources to resolve any problems that may arise(Raphael,1983). "Social factors, such as differences in gender, age, economic class, ethnic origin, and culture often decisively influence our individual coping. Others expectations of us and the support they provide for us as we

**grieve are similarly socially conditioned"(Attig, 1996, p. 155). Because the expectations often exist that men will be the supportive ones, their needs to be "comforted and consoled may not be met"(Raphael, 1983, p. 193). The belief that males are more resilient since they are predisposed to have the internal fortitude which provides them with the stability and support that they need in times of stress seems to be reinforced throughout our society from childhood and into adulthood; in reality, "society's denial of male vulnerability and dependency needs and the sanctions against men's emotional expressiveness undoubtedly contribute to marital distress after the loss of a family member"(Walsh and McGoldrick, 1991, p. 24). The men in this study tended to feel that they were weak if they exhibited emotions, referring to themselves as "crying like a baby"(Arthur) and "not being strong enough"(Rick). They often tried to hide their feelings from others by doing their grieving in private, like Jim, and being embarrassed when someone happened upon them. Because of the image of males as the emotionally strong members of our society, the widowers in this study often found it difficult to not only share their feelings but also felt ashamed when they did give vent to their emotions in the presence of others.**

**As well as perceiving that men are emotionally stronger than women, our society places the additional burden on them of expecting that they are able to cope well under adverse circumstances and "be the 'strong one' who supports the rest of the family through their loss"(Raphael, 1983, p. 192). Men who yield to their emotions and publicly demonstrate their feelings are considered to be less in control, not emotionally stable and weak willed so they "take refuge in their work ... seeing (mourning) as a threat to their**

desperate need to remain in control"(McGoldrick, 1991, p. 65)(Lendrum and Syme, 1992). According to Thompson(1997, p. 82)

A masculine preference for active coping in situations of bereavement can be seen to be potentially problematic in terms of: a reluctance to undertake the emotional tasks of grieving; the greater likelihood of tension in relationships with other professionals and other carers; the possibility of support not being offered when needed due to the perception of men not needing to grieve in the same way as women (or not needing to grieve at all).

Widowers in this study, like George, often felt obligated to take charge by organizing childcare as well as maintaining their role as the breadwinner. Whether they were from Central America, North America or Northern Europe, the participants in this study felt that emotional support was lacking for widowers. Like Arthur, they felt inhibited in the grief process because of societal perceptions and/or expectations(Switzer, 1970) but attempts to resolve their grief by joining support groups left widowers like Fred feeling alienated and even more isolated.

### **Summary**

In reviewing literature related to this study, I chose to focus on resources that discussed how death was perceived not only in our culture but in other cultures as well. Because the widowers in this study were from around the world, I wished to be able to understand their experiences within the context of the society in which they lived. Since I also wished to have a thorough comprehension of the grief process, I reviewed literature that used a variety of styles to explain the ways in which individuals faced the death of a

loved one. Concentrating on literature that dealt with death and the grief process enabled me to strengthen my perspective in regards to the struggles of widowers and the resources that were available to them.

Although there was an abundance of literature to be found on widows and the ways and means by which their needs were addressed, finding information on widowers was much more difficult. In the texts on grief, bereavement and death that I read there was an occasional mention of widowers and their needs but most of the literature focused on widows with occasional references to widowers, parents who had lost a child(ren), or siblings.

Literature that concentrated on widowers tended to take on a narrative format, with the story of the widower being followed by an analysis of the way in which he had resolved his grief. Because I believe that " respect for any one of us as a survivor requires learning of our unique life histories"(Attig, 1996, p. 10), I chose to present the interviews of the widowers in this study in a narrative style, followed by a discussion of their unique grief processes, with particular attention being paid to their use of the Internet during this time.

It appears that there is a lot of information available about the emotions experienced by survivors, the process of grieving, the effects on mourners, and bereavement as it affects both men and women (hasty remarriage, etc.). However there does not seem to be any concerted attempt to address the special needs that men in our Western oriented culture face despite the recognition of this issue in previous research(Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson, 1988). Not only do widowers have to cope with the death of their partners, but the culture in which they live "authorizes categories and

norms for labeling the consequences of loss, priorities for ranking loss among other stressful life events, expectations about social support and coping styles, sanctioned idioms for articulating personal and family distress, and shared ways of regarding and responding to death"(Kleinman, Kaplan and Weiss, 1984, p. 204). For widowers, this makes the grief process more challenging, as they feel they have to be the ones who deal with the "big problem"(Arthur).

None of the literature which I reviewed indicated or discussed the use of technology by widowers at any level: as a means of securing information about the grief process, as a way of connecting with others, as a strategy for lonely evenings, as a way to share their sorrow or as a resource for finding new partners. For two of the widowers in this study, Rick and Jim, the Internet offered them a chance to develop their confidence within the safety of their homes. For them, the Internet provided a means by which they could access information and participate, or not, in discussions at their convenience since "family and social networks ... offering support, consolation, and comfort"(Raphael, 1983, p. 47) were not available to them. When familial resources are not available, widowers often participate in a variety of different self-help groups, which may or may not meet their specific needs(Parkes, 1987). This necessitates widowers investing not only their time and energy but requires a concerted effort on their part to leave the security of their homes and actively engage with others, something that they may not have done as a single for many years.

Although the literature acknowledges that "coping requires that we actively respond to what has happened to us, that we change our daily life patterns and direction in life"(Attig, 1996, p. 55), it also recognizes the particular problems faced by widowers

such as early death, hasty remarriage, and alcohol use(Klerman and Clayton, 1991).

Despite the identification of the special needs of men, the widowers in this study felt that regular support systems were inadequate. While Juan Carlos found that the Internet did not meet his needs, Dolf felt that it opened up his world. Whether the Internet could be a viable resource for widowers needs to be explored further.

*Whether the literature relied upon quantitative or qualitative strategies, it recognized that the death of a partner is a traumatic experience and that widowers often have greater difficulty in resolving their grief than do widows. In this chapter, there is an attempt to explain the significance of critical theory in relation to this study and how this methodology facilitated the process, as well as contributing to the exploration of means by which widowers' needs could be better met.*

*As well as outlining the development of this study, there is a description of the environment in which the widowers were contacted, the type of questions that were asked and how they perceived their participation.*



*If you free what is inside you,  
it will make you free;  
if you hold onto what is inside you  
it will destroy you.  
Zen Proverb*

## **METHODS**

### **Methodology**

Because this study is examining and evaluating how widowers use the Internet, I feel that a methodology that values not only the active participation of “communicatively competent individuals”(Braaten, 1991, p. 64) but also takes an “active interest in advancing a more rational and just organization of social life”(Ray, 1993, p. 20) is one which will facilitate the understanding of practices within our culture(Hoy and McCarthy, 1995).

Initially I was drawn to critical theory because this methodology “expressed an explicit interest in the abolition of social injustice”(Bronner, 1994, p. 3); I felt that bereavement was often more difficult for widowers due to the societal perceptions of inner strength and control which are presumed to be male characteristics(McGoldrick, 1991). Since critical theory approaches research from the perspective that “everyone is socially located and thus the knowledge that is produced will be influenced always by a social interest”(Usher, 1996, p.23), this methodology seemed to lend itself to this study in that the information given by the participants would be affected by their unique viewpoints (Braaten, 1991). Therefore the nine widowers would make a meaningful and relevant contribution to “producing knowledge for the uses of particular publics and constituencies”(Morrow, 1994, p. 300) through the sharing of their lived experiences.

Critical theory espouses truth as experienced by individuals so that the personal histories related by the participants “contribute to the sense of the situations in which they are given”(Hoy and McCarthy, 1995, p. 66)(Bronner, 1994). Through their narratives, the financial and legal difficulties faced by George, the suicidal feelings overcome by Rick, and the deep emotional connection that each widower had shared with his partner as well as hopes for the future were an integral part of their accounts. The participants also shared recent experiences, ranging from the birth of Roger’s first grandchild to the devastation wreaked on Juan Carlos’ country by the forces of nature. Not only did critical theory nourish this communication process but I feel that it also engaged the participants in the development of knowledge that they had been seeking.

Our society needs to reframe its perceptions of widowers by recognizing that gender is not a buffer against grief and our culture needs to make a concerted effort to acknowledge and accommodate the grief which widowers experience in a way that is significant and appropriate to them(Attig, 1996)(Morrow, 1994). Widowers are as emotionally fragile as widows, maybe even more so, since they generally do not outlive their partners and are often not prepared to face the world alone(McGoldrick and Walsh, 1991). Although self-help and support groups seem to be effective for widows, the widowers in this study generally felt that their needs were not being met through these types of resources; all of those who are bereaved should have access to support(s) that help them to resolve their grief(Osterweis, 1984).

Critical theory advocates extending knowledge as well as changing the system(Morrow, 1994)(Ray, 1993). Using this methodology allowed widowers to share their stories so that others would have a better understanding of their emotional needs. All of those who participated felt that they were an integral part of a process that was depicting the reality and inequalities of male bereavement within society. "The various agencies (and) bureaucrats would not seem to care"(George). Each of the widowers viewed their participation as a way to help others understand that the grief and loneliness associated with the death of a spouse is not exclusive to widows. "I felt I would rather be with my wife in the grave than living alone in this house"(Fred). In addition, the participants often expressed their disappointment with a society and culture that seemed to neglect them when they were at their most vulnerable. "There was nobody"(Juan Carlos). "While critical social theory does not take participants' views of their practices as the last word in interpreting and assessing them ... it seeks critically to appropriate them in the struggle for a better world"(Hoy and McCarthy, 1995, p. 20).

## **Method**

Because my initial research suggested that the Internet was being used as a part of the grief process, I believed that locating and contacting widowers through the Internet was a natural step to take. Since widowers were already accessing the Internet, then E-mail and/or ICQ would be a means of communication with which they were familiar. Using the Internet as a resource for participants also enabled me to broaden the scope of my research and find widowers in a wider geographic area than would have been possible if I had done interviews locally. Developed countries did not appear to be any more

effective in meeting the needs of widowers than developing countries. The widower from a developed country often found it a frustrating experience to join a group or association, only to find that it did not meet his needs; the widower in a developing country knew that support was not available and therefore did not have the additional disappointment of seeking for that which did not exist. The international scope of the study provided an opportunity for me to listen to the experiences of widowers worldwide and, from their stories, to gain a global perspective on the challenges that they faced during bereavement.

The selection of the primary Web Site(Appendix A) for contacting participants through Personal Columns and Chat rooms was a random one, chosen from an extensive list of chat sites found after doing a Web search for these sites. After checking out several Chat sites, I found that most of them offered similar types of discussion(s) and had rooms for not only different ages, but for various topics. Some Chat sites did however, have a target audience (e.g. adult) in mind, but these were the exception. Bulletin Boards could be found under almost any topic area and but I chose to request interviews from widowers who had responded to comments and/or queries at a site which focused on widows and widowers.

Although Roger identified himself as a widower on his Chat profile(Appendix B), not everyone did, so I always identified myself as a graduate student researching the use of the Internet by widowers at the beginning of every conversation. I answered any questions that were asked and sent a Letter of Introduction (Appendix C) to all those who expressed an interest in learning more about the research. Included in the letter was the Acadia University Internet site with the School of Education Graduate page so that

widowers could verify my status if they chose to do so. Included with the Letter of Introduction was a consent form (Appendix D) which I requested be signed before any questions could ethically be sent. Should anyone check my profile (Appendix E), it provided the information that I was "in the process of writing a thesis on widowers and how they use the Internet" so that those who wished to chat with me would be aware of my research interests.

Within the chat site, I used two different procedures to contact widowers. I alternated between creating a Public room entitled "Widowers Welcome" and visiting different Public rooms, chatting with those who were there. Through creating my own Public room I came in contact with Rick and Arthur, who agreed to be interviewed. In the chat rooms, I visited Support and Recovery Rooms, Seniors Rooms and Romance Rooms as well as Adult Rooms. Because they tended to be actively engaged in finding female companions with whom to chat, there was considerably less interest for participation in this study shown by widowers visiting the Adult and Romance Rooms than for those in the Seniors and Support and Recovery Rooms. George and Dolf, whom I met in the Seniors room, felt that they could make a worthwhile contribution by becoming involved with this study. When I entered the key word 'widower' in the Personals columns, eleven ads identified the writer as a widower. I sent a brief description of my research (Appendix F) to each of these individuals and received requests for additional information from five of them with Jim, Roger and Juan Carlos wishing to participate in this study. At the Bulletin Board site, which gave information to and from widowers, I contacted six individuals who had provided their E-mail addresses in their Bulletin Board responses. Of these six individuals, four requested more information with Joe and Fred agreeing to

be interviewed. I chose not to follow up on the individuals who did not respond to my Letter of Introduction E-mail since I did not wish to impose upon them if they had no desire to participate.

The most effective means of contact seemed to be through Bulletin Boards and personal ads, perhaps because the widowers had already made an initial overture of seeking direct contact with others by providing an E-mail address.

The nine participants ranged in age from 26 to 68 with most of them having had little previous experience with either a computer or the Internet. They came from North America, Central America and Europe. The majority of these individuals became involved with the technology through their children who often either purchased a computer or paid for Internet access so as to provide their parent with a new interest.

In most instances the interviews were conducted through E-mail. There were limitations and difficulties with this method of communication though: a firewall prevented the receipt of George's replies for two months; E-mails were not received on at least three separate occasions by Juan Carlos and Joe; Hurricane Mitch took precedence over the research as Juan Carlos became heavily involved in facilitating the restructuring of his country; the first anniversary of the death of his partner necessitated Fred taking some time for himself. On the positive side, E-mail allowed the widowers time to think about their responses and to answer the questions when it was convenient for them to do so. Although ICQ provided immediate feedback when it was used with Roger, I found a major drawback to be that the technology would not permit long replies so responses were limited to a few lines. In addition to the Internet text communication, consent

forms, photographs and copies of letters to friends were sent by means of electronic technology.

As a part of the research, the interview questions included what type of support widowers received and what kind of support they accessed. In most instances, the support provided was of a practical nature, such as childcare, house cleaning, etc. while the emotional support was rarely evident. Although the widowers turned to others for advice, assistance, and support, they often felt alienated in groups whose membership was primarily female. The stories that were told by the members of this study support the findings of the literature in that widowers felt that their needs in grief were not being addressed to the same degree as that of (Brabant, Forsyth, Melancon, 1992).

My contact with widowers has shown me that their use of the Internet is as varied as the individuals who access it. While Arthur did not see any connection between his circumstances and his Internet usage, Dolf, after an initial uncertainty, embraced the technology that he felt helped him through his lonely evenings. Because the Internet knows no political boundaries and is open for business twenty-four hours a day, it is a resource that provides not only immediate interaction with others, as Arthur and Dolf found, but also information needed by individuals like Joe and Rick. The user however, must be both discriminating in his use of the information found through the technology and cautious when he is online so that he does not become a victim when he is vulnerable.

Each widower had his own way of sharing his story but often there was specific and detailed information about the last days and/or months of the deceased partner. It seemed to be important that they share how they came to be widowers. As the interviews

progressed, however, they tended to spend more of their letters making comments about future plans and concentrated less on the past, even though none of the questions asked for that information.

The research questions seemed to have great personal significance to the participants because it required them to focus on their experiences, how they had coped and the consequences of the coping skills that they had utilized. Sample questions included:

What type of support and or resources did you seek or receive after your wife's death?

What was the extent of this support?

What means did you use to cope?

Did you seek support later on and if so, what kind?

When did you start using the Internet?

How has your Internet usage developed and/or changed from the time that you started using it?

What resources of the Internet do you use? E.g. pen pal Clubs (what type and how many), Chat Rooms (preferences).

Did you post a profile of your own or search other profiles?

Do you have E-mail correspondence with those whom you met on the Internet? If so, how frequently? How does that work for you?

Have you posted your own Web page?

What suggestions do you have for widowers who might consider using the Internet?

Are there any particular sites that you would recommend that widowers either visit or stay away from? If so, what are they and why?

Are there any particular features of the Internet that you feel have been either helpful or hurtful in your usage? Can you elaborate?

What comments/ideas do you have regarding Internet usage for widowers?

Do you feel that the Internet has the potential to help widowers? If so, how? If not, why not?

Is there any other information that you feel is relevant that you would like included in this study?

Do you have any general or specific comments about Internet use by widowers?

Correspondence consisted of E-mail as well as regular postal mail with approximately twenty messages being sent and received. The exchange of interview questions and answers took place over an eight-month span of time. When answering the



research questions, the amount of detail and type of response varied. Some widowers chose to incorporate their replies into two or three page E-mails or letters while others answered each point specifically. Although some participants were prompt in their responses and others took several months to complete the interview questions, no one dropped out during the course of this study. Regardless of how they responded, each widower felt that participating in this research was meaningful to him for one of two reasons: either he felt that participating in this study would help him "a little"(Jim) or as Joe said, " I endorse your endeavor and will try to do whatever I can to assist you in completing this important work".

*In this chapter, the lived experiences of the nine widowers who participated in this study are told. Included in their narratives are the particular challenges that they as widowers faced, the strategies that they implemented to resolve their grief and their perceptions of the entire experience.*

*Following each narrative, there is a section that examines the resources utilized by the widower and how effective these were in meeting his needs during the grief process. Within this segment there is an analysis of the widower's use of the Internet as well as its impact on him and its capacity to influence, both positively and negatively.*

**Remember**

*Remember me when I am gone away,  
Gone far way into the silent land;  
When you can no more hold me by the hand,  
Nor I half turn to go, yet turning stay.  
Remember me when no more, day by day,  
You tell me of our future that you planned:  
Only remember me; you understand  
It will be late to counsel then or pray.  
Yet if you should forget me for awhile  
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:  
For if the darkness and corruption leave  
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,  
Better by far you should forget and smile  
Than that you should remember and be sad.*

Christina Rossetti  
1830-1894

## **NARRATIVES**

### **George**

George is a 52 year old chief financial officer and legal counsel for a large corporation in the United States. He has been a widower for 20 years, dividing his time since his wife's death between raising his four young sons and working. Because his wife, Sue, died at home alone, her death was considered suspicious; the police interrogated George on three different occasions until the autopsy proved that Sue's death was due to natural causes.

At the time of Sue's death, George's employer allowed him to take one week off work to make funeral and child care arrangements. When the members of the local parish stopped providing care for the boys several weeks after the funeral, George had to seek alternate private care; the cost of day care for four children eliminated it as a viable option. Although George "finally found a woman who ran a daycare out of her house and was affordable", she refused to care for the children if they were ill. Because the benefit

program provided by his employer did not cover daycare leave for men, George had to stay home from work to care for any of his children who became sick. "Eventually my employer told me that I had to find other means of taking care of the boys or risk losing my job".

During the first few years following his wife's death, George spent a considerable amount of time and effort in seeking financial aid for himself and his children. He applied for assistance so that he could keep his sons with him. Because both he and wife had held Canadian citizenship at the time of her death, George applied to the Canadian government for financial help. His claim was denied because "we (were) living in the United States". George's applications to the local diocese and to various other programs were also turned down on sixty-three separate occasions because his income was "\$1000 more than the income limit". Eventually George ceased his applications for assistance as the efforts were draining him financially and emotionally.

When George submitted a claim on the insurance policy held by Sue, the insurance company refused to honour the agreement because of legal claims made by his in-laws regarding the cause of his wife's death. After six months of legal wrangling, the matter was settled out of court for approximately 80% of the amount of the policy with the lawyers receiving half as compensation for their efforts. Sue's Social Security payment of less than four hundred dollars was caught up in red tape for over two years.

On the legal side, the Department of Children and Family Services informed George that his sons would be taken from him until a proof of death was completed. With the help of the family lawyer, George obtained an injunction against the Department of Children and Family Services until cause could be shown. Meanwhile, Sue's parents

took it upon themselves to take the boys under their care, claiming that he was incapable of providing for the children and that he had been an abusive husband. The Department of Children and Family Services was again brought in and three months and several continuances later, the judge ruled in George's favour and dismissed the case.

In addition to caring for his sons George looked for support with the grief process for himself. George sought advice from a clinical psychologist neighbour who was able to help him understand and work through his feelings of resentment, anger and loneliness. George also joined a Parents Without Partners group in his search for support but only attended a few meetings as "it was like a pickup bar" with the women heavily outnumbering the men and where most of the men were taking advantage of such odds. Because he was "disgusted and frustrated" with the situation, George chose not to return to this support group. The Young Single Parents meetings that George attended he found to be not only a "meat market" similar to the Parents Without Partners support group, but also depressing as well since the members had a uniformly negative outlook in regards to their futures.

George "hung on to (his) faith. I did not blame God for taking my wife and abandoning me and my sons. When in my darkest moments, I read and re-read Psalm 91:

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.  
I will say to the Lord, " My refuge and my fortress,  
My God, in whom I trust!"  
For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper,  
And from the deadly pestilence.  
He will cover you with his pinions,  
And under His wings you may seek refuge;  
His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.*

*You will not be afraid of the terror by night,  
Or of the arrow that flies by day;*

*Of the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
 Or of the destruction that lays waste at noon.  
 A thousand may fall at your side,  
 And ten thousand at your right hand;  
 But it shall not approach you.  
 You will only look on with your eyes,  
 And see the recompense of the wicked.  
 For you have made the Lord, my refuge,  
 Even the Most High, your dwelling place.  
 No evil will befall you,  
 Nor will any plague come near your tent.  
 For He will give His angels charge concerning you,  
 To guard you in all your ways.  
 They will bear you up in their hands,  
 Lest you strike your foot against a stone.  
 You will tread upon the lion and cobra,  
 The young lion and the serpent you will trample down.*

*"Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him;  
 I will set him securely on high, because he has known My name.*

*"He will call upon Me, and I will answer him;  
 I will be with him in trouble;  
 I will rescue him, and honor him.*

*"With a long life I will satisfy him,  
 And let him behold My salvation."  
 (New Testament, p. 459)*

over and over again. When I accepted my situation as final, I guess I 'grew up'. After that the years were a blur. Each son has turned out great. I have a grandson (the light of my life). I will admit that there were a couple of times I felt like giving up. But then something good would happen and I endured."

\*\*\*\*\*

George relied upon a number of resources ranging from work, previous military training and a competent psychologist neighbour to help him cope with Sue's death.

Because of his knowledge in the financial and legal fields, George was aware of benefits to which he was entitled and pursued them vigorously in the early months following Sue's death. Being absorbed in either an activity or work of some kind is a common reaction of widowers trying to dull the pain of their loss(Lendrum and Syme, 1992). In George's case he chose to fill his days with not only a regular work schedule and attending to his children but also supplemented his time with proactive methods of acquiring financial assistance which required a great deal of concentration and attention to detail.

George realized that he needed emotional support in his time of grief. He not only sought out and accepted help from his neighbour, the clinical psychologist, but he also explored situations which he felt might be supportive: Parents without Partners and Young Single Parents. Both these organizations failed to meet his needs. Rather than continue to attend meetings which he felt were inappropriate and improper, he relied on the techniques that he learned in Viet Nam in order to survive: who to team up with and who to avoid. " I saw first hand what drugs and alcohol can do to people. I stopped drinking in Nam and haven't touched it since. After my wife's death and during my period going to YSP and PWP meetings I saw how down people try to bring you down. So I started to consciously avoid them." George recognized his strengths and weaknesses and avoided situations that did not provide him with the support that he needed(Parkes, 1987).

Eventually George's search led him to a more active participation in his Church and a deeper involvement in family activities which in turn helped him develop a more positive attitude towards himself and others. Whenever he felt like giving up, George

chose to talk with his psychologist friend who was able to help George focus on aspects of his life that brought him satisfaction. Since "a caring relationship requires the engrossment and motivational displacement of the one-caring, and it requires the recognition and spontaneous response of the cared-for"(Noddings, 1984, p.78), this relationship enabled George to rethink what was happening to him and realize that he was not powerless and alone.

George's actions are typical of widowers in that he initially found various ways and means to absorb his time(McGoldrick, 1991). In George's case, he spent countless hours applying for and appealing decisions related to financial assistance before taking care of his own emotional needs. As "men are less likely to have intimate friendships to facilitate emotional griefwork"(McGoldrick and Walsh, 1991, p. 37), George found it necessary to seek support elsewhere; because the groups in which he chose to participate were not able to meet his emotional needs, he again sought support, this time finding it first with a psychologist neighbour, ("He helped me to understand the resentment, anger and feeling of isolation") and then with his renewed faith.

Although George did not have access to the Internet at the time of Sue's death, he is now committed to spending a minimum of two hours a week on it because of his association with an Internet Ministry. George visits various Chat Rooms, seeking out those in need and encouraging them to contact one of the Eucharistic counsellors found in the Support and Recovery Chat room. Because each of the nine members of this Ministry were subjected to emotional trauma ranging from the sudden death of a partner to imprisonment as a Viet Nam Prisoner of War, they feel that their experiences provide them with an unique perspective in recognizing and guiding troubled or lonely Internet



users to professional help(Solsberry, 1984). In order for George to tell me about his Ministry, he had to receive permission from his Archbishop; George's willingness to share this information is indicative of both his pride in his Internet work and in his fellow members. "Our mission is to minister to those in real need". For George, the Internet is a means to reach people who may need assistance and who do not have either the stamina or the wherewithal to actively search for support.

George felt that Internet effectiveness would depend upon how recently an individual had been widowed. His concern was that widowers would use the Internet to hide from their pain rather than seek help to resolve their grief. Because of his experience with Chat Rooms, George felt that Adult and Romance Rooms would be inappropriate while Support and Recovery and age appropriate Rooms might provide the communication and support that a widower needed. Generally, George preferred the organizations and sites that assist a widower with understanding the grieving process; the downside to this is that not all servers can access a URL. For example, AOL (America On Line) has a specific Chat site for Widows and Widowers but this is not available to those who access the Internet through other servers. George reiterated what the literature stated: "It is very important for the widower to understand the grieving process. And because he is very vulnerable during the first couple of years he should avoid making any relationship decisions. Most of the widower(s) that I know that were remarried within the first two years after the death of a spouse were divorced after two years"(Attig, 1997)(Raphael, 1983).

Even though George's Internet usage is taking place many years after the death of his wife, it plays a significant role in his life. Not only does George have an ongoing commitment to helping those who are vulnerable on the Internet but he is also deeply involved in his community, working with safe houses for women who are unable to cope with their present circumstances through pregnancy or abuse. In effect, George is helping to provide the emotional and practical assistance that he himself did not receive when he most needed it. As Attig(1996, p. 14) says, "We strive to adapt our behaviours and daily life patterns to new circumstances not of our own choosing and to recover our sense of daiiy purpose. We seek means of meeting our physical and biological needs (including our need for closeness with others). We seek ways of being with fellow survivors and to connect meaningfully once again with others at home, within our families, with friends, at work, and in the world at large".

In helping others, George has not limited himself to traditional means of support through the giving of money or volunteer work, but has branched out to include the Internet in order to try and meet the needs of people using it. Through his involvement with the Internet Ministry, George comes in contact with a variety of people, some of whom he guides to others and some with whom he merely chats. Regardless of the circumstances under which they meet, George is using the Internet to reach out to others and support them to the best of his ability, in ways in which he himself was not supported at a very stressful time in his life.

**Roger**

Throughout the illness of his wife, Roger found support from the members of his church as well as from his children. The women of the church took it upon themselves to organize daily visits to Dorothy while Roger was away at his job in a computer consultant firm. Each member of Roger's immediate family, consisting of his four children and himself, was put in touch with someone from the church from whom they could receive support and advice. Although this one-on-one support was available to him, Roger only spoke with his personal counsellor on a few occasions. Roger attributed the lack of feelings of anger or denial that are usually associated with bereavement to his faith but "thinking back, I can see that there was a lot of grieving going on during her illness". This is in accordance with the findings of Schulz(1978, p. 141), in that "two decades of experimental, social-psychology research have taught us that stressful life events are less aversive to the extent that they are predictable". Roger "was quite lonely in the first few months", a feeling which Raphael(1983, p. 199) describes as "most painful for the bereaved person". Since Roger felt that his "emotional trauma" was minimal, he only met with his personal counsellor a few times. Roger did however, find that he could "pick his (brother's) brains about a number of things". Questions and concerns were raised by Roger and answered by this brother who had experienced the loss of a partner and who was now happily remarried.

Because of his firm foundation in his faith, Roger did not feel the need to seek help in coping with his feelings following Dorothy's death.

For many folk without the firm faith in our loving Lord that you know I have, losing a loved one must be terrible. There must be a sense of finality and waste about it. But we both knew where she was going and that heaven is a far more wonderful place than here. So there is not the same bite to it at all.

Attig(1996. p. 85) states that "some of us simply are better prepared than others for the psychological and emotional challenges of dealing with loss". Although his primary use of the Internet is to find another partner with whom to share his life, Roger does not restrict his search to that technology alone. He is also a member of a Christian Friendship Fellowship that supplies him with the names of Christian ladies who are looking for companionship.

Roger's use of the Internet started when his son offered to share the cost of a computer and a server became available in his area at the same time. Although he posted a profile on several different sites, the few responses that he received were "negligible". For Roger, E-mail is difficult as he finds that he must perfect everything before sending it, which tends to be extremely time consuming as he constantly makes changes and does rewrites on everything that he types.

ICQ or private chats are the means of communication that Roger prefers. After checking out almost two dozen chat providers, Roger selected a few that he finds meet his requirements of age, interest and general topic of conversation. Within these sites Roger prefers to talk with someone whose viewpoint is opposed to his own so that communication leads to challenging and "thought provoking" statements. Roger has found that women correspondents seem to be more sensitive to the needs and concerns of the person with whom they are speaking and that in addition, rooms with women in them

are " often less blasphemous, childish and macho". Chat has an "immediacy" that Roger finds " appealing and convenient", something that he feels is lacking with E-mail.

According to Roger, men with whom he talked about his status as a widower were more concerned with the practicalities of his life: children, work, etc. while the women tended to focus on his emotions following the death of his wife. Again, while the men would talk only once with him about his situation, the women often connected with him more than once, just to touch base and see how he was doing.

Like McGoldrick and Walsh(1991) Roger felt that "some men in their 60's and on (might) lose a lot of social contact when they lose their wives"; Roger felt that when widowers lacked a social support system, the Internet might provide a means by which they could still have contact with others. Since Roger had his church, his computer club and a full time job, he felt that he had a network in place that did not deprive him of contact or connections with others; if a husband did not have such an extensive structure in existence before his wife died, then he might have a more difficult time connecting to those who might be able to assist him in his time of grief(Parkes, 1987).

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Roger's faith held him in good stead during Dorothy's illness and immediately following her death; he did not feel the anger or go through the denial that many widowers have to deal with. In his heart Roger felt that Dorothy was "With Christ, which is far better", a partial quote from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, Chapter 1, verse 2, which is also inscribed on her tombstone. Despite his faith and his deep belief that he

would join Dorothy some day, Roger felt indescribable loneliness that was not alleviated by his children, his church or his work. As Raphael(1983) noted, it is familial influence that had the most impact on the bereaved; indeed, conversations with his happily remarried brother seemed to have the most effect on Roger and his perception of his future.

Because Roger did not access the Internet until approximately two years after Dorothy died, there is no way to determine if Chat Lines would have been helpful to him, as they were with Dolf, or difficult for him, as they were with Juan Carlos. Since Roger is a gregarious individual, the Internet may have provided him with an opportunity to connect with others in a way that he felt a connection with his brother. If however, Roger was still emotionally vulnerable in his loneliness, then the Chat sites that he now visits may have led to situations that were harmful to the successful resolution of his grief.

Even though he has an extensive and close knit family, his work, his church and his computer club, Roger uses the Internet to not only find people with whom to have stimulating conversations and to pass the time, but to search for a new partner. "It is clear to me that I could do with a good woman in my life and that has been one of the underlying reasons for my use of the Internet". Roger does access the Internet nearly every day and most days more than once, chatting from one to several hours, finding this to be an effective way for him to talk with other people.

For Roger the Internet is a resource that allows him to seek a life partner and provides him with the opportunity to engage in stimulating conversations with a diversity of people. "I am happy to talk to anyone who will sustain a proper conversation

especially those with whom I do not see eye to eye. This often leads to some quite thought provoking stuff." Since Roger has "a fair amount of social contact already", the Internet is a small, yet stimulating part of his life.



**Dorothy and Roger at their daughter's wedding**

**Arthur**

Arthur, a widower for four years, holds firm to the belief that grief "is something that everyone has to be handle in his own way". Attig(1996, p. 90) attributes the attitude of some bereaved to the fact that "some of us simply lack experience with grieving; the unprecedented experience surprises us and catches us unprepared to deal with challenges that we perceive to be unlike any we've faced before". Arthur believes that sharing his feelings with others or involving himself in his childrens' lives in his time of grief is not something that is acceptable or necessary. Because he felt that it was better to "work it out alone" Arthur did not try and contact any support groups, nor did he find any comfort in his faith.

In order to keep "the monsters at bay" following the death of his wife, Arthur "got a job that I could work as long as needed if 24 wasn't enough to wear me out, I kept going". He worked until he was exhausted and then continued to work some more(Lendrum and Syme, 1992). These long hours served a purpose for Arthur. Since his time was either taken up with work or sleep brought about by extreme fatigue, he did not have to think about his wife's death.

When Arthur was not concentrating on work, his thoughts turned to suicide as a way for him to end the deep pain that he felt following Jean's death. McGoldrick and Walsh (1991) noted that the suicide rate for widowers is higher than the national average. Arthur found it hard to accept Jean's death, since men aren't "supposed to outlive their wives". Consequently, he was unprepared for a life without her, a characteristic of widowers who, like Arthur, do not expect to outlive their wives(Walsh and McGoldrick(1991). Any support systems that may have been available to him were



rebuffed because he believed so strongly in the concept that, being male, he should be able to handle the "problem" by himself and not rely on anyone else. "Pain is like dying - you do it alone."

Arthur was insistent that people "would be better to depend on themselves than counsellors" and did not feel that he needed the support of grief groups, counsellors, or friends. . Even though his adult children live within a 30 minute drive of his home, Arthur found it impossible to initiate conversations about how Jean's death was affecting him, stating that "everyone has their own cross to bear." He thought that most people would be better off if they relied upon themselves instead of others as it had been his experience that others often let you down. Arthur seemed to take no great pleasure in being self-reliant, but assumed that was the only option available to him, based on his belief that "you have to do it alone".

Although he was adamant that helping yourself instead of relying on others makes you stronger, Arthur did admit at times to "crying like a baby", which he referred to as being "sissy". Lendrum and Syme(1991, p. 30) noted that "men more often find it difficult to express the sadness of grief". Even though it has been several years since Jean died, Arthur feels that the healing is still not complete, as his wife still "sneaks up" on him when he is at home. He feels that the possessions that they shared (e.g. house, furniture) are a constant reminder of Jean; "it would probably help if I got rid of all the stuff that reminds (me of her) but that is kind of hard to do". Arthur thinks that if he were able to part with some possessions, he would not feel Jean's presence as intensely or as often and that fact alone might ease his pain.

Because he is a "curious sob" Arthur started to use the Internet; he was interested in the technology and strongly believes that "if you quit learning, (you) just pull the dirt over your head". Because of his long hours at work, Arthur is online at various times. Since the Internet is always accessible, Arthur finds it a convenient way to pass the time, even though he proudly declares that his grandchildren are much more adept and quicker to learn than he is.

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Even though he denies that his usage of the Internet is a means of combating his loneliness, Arthur uses chat lines to listen and talk with others. His usage is dependent upon his variable work schedule so his time and duration of chatting is flexible but erratic. Arthur's work schedule is still quite extensive, but he finds that with the passage of time the pain is "like a deep cut, sooner or later it gets better". It has only been within the last few months that Arthur has been able to spend less time working and more time in exploring the Internet.

Although he had no trouble in discussing his feelings about his status as a widower Arthur strongly believed that individuals should be responsible for their own actions and take care of their own feelings. Arthur stated several times that to share his feelings with someone else would be a burden to the other person and he was unwilling to add his emotional needs to their "plate".

All of Arthur's sons and their families live within a 30 mile radius of him, yet he does not spend a lot of time with them as he believes that "they all have their own (lives) to live" and that his loneliness should not be a concern to them. Arthur uses the Internet to while away the evenings or early morning hours when he is at home as a way of connecting with other people. He doesn't use it for informational purposes or for E-mail, but participates in chat lines. Although Arthur strongly feels that "men suffer more than women", he is unyielding in his belief that individuals need to work through their feelings alone and that "after awhile, they sort of heal themselves".

For Arthur, his perception of his need to be strong combined with his refusal to seek support are cultural factors which has resulted in him having a very difficult time adjusting to his wife's death(Raphael, 1983). Only recently has Arthur started to interact with others and that has been through his use of the Internet. Although Arthur is often too tired to join in the conversations in Chat Rooms, he does access the Internet when he returns home from work, rather than fall asleep in front of the television as he previously did. The Internet seems to be a way for Arthur to connect with others again, on his own terms and in his own way.

**Joe**

After retiring from his job as a supervisory engineer in 1995, Joe and Kathie, his wife of almost 30 years, bought a new home in the northeastern United States. Just over a year later, Kathie died after complications resulting from liver transplant surgery.

Throughout Kathie's illness and after her death, Joe was supported by his adult daughters as well as immediate relatives and close family friends. For the first three months Joe's daughters alternated in staying with him on weekends. Joe was not only "obsessed with keeping the house clean" but filled his time with completing projects that he and his wife had planned, bike riding 15-20 miles daily, maintaining trails at a local park, tutoring students, writing the newsletter for the local homeowners association, golfing, working part time as a consultant and dining out on a regular basis. Despite the heavy regimen of physical activity, Joe felt "lost without Kathie and needed help and support", sustaining the research of Attig(1996) and Switzer(1970) that survivors do indeed need emotional support during the grief process.

At the suggestion of a friend "to help (him) get over the loss", Joe joined a grief support group which met monthly. This support group, sponsored by the hospital is an acknowledgement that there is a "responsibility for providing emotional support"(Green, 1984, p. 216) on the part of medical facilities. Because he was the sole male member of the group, Joe felt conspicuous and out of place amongst the other participants. Joe also felt that the continuous intake of members each month, with each new member relating her feelings of grief to the group, did not contribute to the development of a healing environment. For Joe, there was no progression of the bereavement process so he left each meeting still immersed in his own grief, with no relief in sight. Because he "didn't

see any future in continuing", he stopped attending meetings, but contacted one of the social workers who led the group and advised her of his decision.

Four months after leaving the group, Joe was contacted by the social worker and asked if he would be interested in facilitating a small trial male bereavement group. Based on his experience with the other support group, Joe accepted on the condition that this group not accept new members at every meeting. The social worker provided Joe with one hour of training, an agenda to follow and the knowledge that she was nearby if needed. Although this group met formally for only a few weeks, the three men still get together "once a month at a local restaurant to talk about how we are coping", thereby providing continuous and ongoing support to each other.

Joe felt that each group in which he participated had its advantages and disadvantages. While both groups allowed him to hear different stories and therefore put his own grief into perspective in a safe environment, the all male group enabled Joe and his fellow widowers to bond rapidly. However, Joe felt that the absence of female members in the widowers group seemed to inhibit the men from talking about their deepest feelings; the short time that the male group officially existed, combined with the fact that there were only three participants were also limiting factors in the grief process. In regards to the largely female support group, Joe believed that the long time between meetings and the focus on only one aspect of bereavement (telling the story about the loss) with the continuous intake group were deterrents to accepting and moving on with his life although the "relatively safe forum to get your feelings out in the open" was positive. With the experience of associating and participating in both groups behind him, Joe considers that a closed group comprised of an equal number of each gender meeting

weekly "under the guidance of a trained professional" would have been most beneficial to him.

Joe and Stan, a member of the all-male support group, attended a Parents without Partners meeting together. Neither attended further meetings as both felt that the priority of the men and women in attendance was in finding partners to prove that they were still virile and/or desirable. As Joe and Stan had been seeking a supportive environment for those who had suffered the loss of a partner, they were disappointed that the group was not able to meet their needs.

In order to assist Stan with his grief, Joe surfed the Internet in an attempt to find out what widows thought about their situation and how they were coping with their grief. On the Bulletin Board at the widow/widower site that Joe located were discussions on a range of topics. Joe found messages stating that widows who had had a good relationship with their husbands were reluctant to become intimate with someone else as they still felt a strong emotional bond with their deceased spouses. According to Glick et al in Green (1984, p. 75), "widows usually could not engage in new relationships soon after their husbands' death without feeling disloyal". Joe, although surprised by his discovery that widows felt as if they were "committing adultery" if they entered into a new relationship, admitted to feeling the same way.

The anonymity and public nature of the Internet make Joe wary of it as a resource since he believes that those who use it do so at their own risk. "Let the Buyer (or seeker of knowledge) beware!" True to his beliefs, Joe was very cautious before agreeing to participate in this study, requesting and receiving information about supervisors, details about the study and a copy of the proposal.

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Joe reached out in a number of ways to others following Kathie's death; initially he relied on family and friends to help him through everyday activities; later he filled his life with activity, trying to resolve his grief through "exaggerated activity"(Switzer, 1970, p. 105) and then with a support group "expecting to find something that could help me get through my grieving." Rather than the passive interaction of the Internet, Joe needed the physical contact with others (e.g. dining out with friends, involving himself with his family, support groups) that he felt was not only supportive but which would give him the opportunity for personal growth. Instinctively Joe recognized that he needed to "resist whatever might attract us to lingering in grief. We must choose to cope rather than to succumb"(Attig, 1996, p. 55).

Although Joe is still busy, the pace of his life is not so frenetic as it was when Kathie first died. "Very slowly, over many months and often many years, the reality of the death is acknowledged and integrated into ongoing patterns of living, thinking, and feeling (Shapiro, 1994, p. 22). It seems that Joe is now making time for new interests (e.g. a subscription to the local opera company) as well as renewing old ones (e.g. skiing). He now recognizes that the activity, which dominated his life after Kathie's death, was a means of keeping himself busy to block out the pain that he felt.

Joe's use of the Internet is as a tool for communication with family and friends and as a source of information that is relevant to his current needs. Joe is a dynamic person and this is reflected by his use of the Internet; he is too involved with his own life to rely upon the Internet for either conversation or companionship. He seeks specific

information for himself or for others when it is convenient for him to do so. In that respect the Internet is a resource that is always available.

However, Joe remains circumspect in regard to the information that he finds there. "Anybody can tap in and make claims that may be false or misleading". For him, as for Roger, the Internet is a forum where ideas and information are to be found in abundance, where a diversity of opinions is present and where different perspectives challenge him and cause him to think about situations in new ways; along with this technology, however, he feels goes the responsibility for learning about this new "environment" and using it wisely.

Joe's outlook of "having something pleasant to look forward to is one way to keep the blues away" is obviously a philosophy that he follows, regardless of his personal situation, for his dissatisfaction with the first grief group was that the retelling of each individual's story did not generate growth in his grief but increased his pain as he was unsure of "where (to) go from here". By being physically and mentally active, Joe is following the credo of "Happiness is having something to do and something to hope for". In Joe's case, the Internet is a resource used only on "rainy days or nights when there is absolutely nothing else to do".





**Kathie and Joe on their 25th wedding anniversary**

**Rick**

Rick's wife, Angie died in childbirth leaving him a widower and a new father at the age of 20. Because his twin brother had been killed in a car accident just five months previous to Angie's death, Rick's family "tried but (they) were still really shook up by my brother's death" and were therefore not able to provide any emotional support to him. Although his parents and in-laws provided practical assistance by caring for the physical needs of his newborn daughter, that was the extent of their support. Two of Rick's "buddies kept a close eye on (him)" for some time after Angie's death, as he was feeling suicidal. The knowledge that his friends were physically there for him meant a lot to Rick but they could not provide the emotional support that he needed. In his search for this support, Rick went to a psychiatrist who told him that he "couldn't do anything for me". Because he "like(s) to work things out in (his) head, Rick feels that it is possible to "hold it all in and fool everyone, even a professional". Rick's choice of MT as a chat name, however, is his direct yet subtle way of telling others that he feels there is a great void in his life.

Rick's relationship with his daughter is affected by the circumstances of her birth. "My wife died giving birth to my daughter. I just don't want it to hurt my relationship with her. I worry about that a lot." Rick's predicament is best described by Pincus(1974, p. 42) as "cop(ing) with the anguish of abandonment and of guilt". Not only is Rick struggling with the loss of his wife but he is afraid to express his grief around his daughter for fear that he may "affect her negatively". Although he realizes that this is not healthy, Rick feels that he has no choice as he wishes to shield Gillian from the fact that

she was born at the cost of her mother's life. In protecting his daughter, Rick has prevented himself from growing(Shapiro, 1994).

Because he lives in a sparsely populated town, Rick feels that everyone there knows "his story". Even if he's "being an ass to them", people still treat him with "kid gloves" because his wife died in childbirth. In addition, Rick feels that his distinctive physical appearance as well as his profession set him apart from others. The combination of the patronizing attitude displayed by the townspeople and feeling that he is "different" make it difficult for Rick to feel comfortable in opening up to anyone in his community since he doesn't "connect with many people in public. I watch but I don't connect".

Originally Rick purchased his computer to keep in touch with a "couple of cheap friends who didn't want to call me long distance" but he has discovered that the Internet allowed him the freedom to escape from the small town where he lives. Participating in chat lines enables him to be a part of the action without the "pity" that he feels is prevalent in his own community. When meeting new people in Chat rooms, there is no knowledge of his history to colour how he is treated; Rick finds that fact alone helps him to feel that he wants to start to open up again and let people into his life.

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Using the Internet has broadened Rick's world and as he stated, " the PC has made me want to start to open up again. It has helped, not entirely, but helped". The people that he meets in chat rooms or through E-mail have no knowledge about his past and this enables him to be free to communicate without the aura of "pity" that he feels

surrounds his relationships in his hometown. The Internet gives Rick the freedom to be himself without the ever-present label of widower, a title that he abhors and never uses. As well as providing him with the chance to communicate with others, information is there at his fingertips, whether it is “looking up car stuff, bike stuff (or) work stuff”. Because he can access the Internet at any time of the day or night, Rick can choose what he wishes to read when it is convenient for him to do so. He finds this aspect of the Internet compatible with his lifestyle as he spends much of his time alone.

Rick has also established some E-mail correspondence with people that he has met in Chat Rooms so he is gradually expanding his communication with other people - something which he himself admits that he is slowly feeling better about doing. He feels that the Internet is a safe place in which to talk with people and that it is helping him to feel more confident in himself. He feels that he is more than a label and the Internet enables him to “meet new people and not know so many intimate things or reveal them”, thereby removing the stigma of widower that he feels generates “the pity thing”.

Rick’s long recovery period is characteristic of widowers, since men tend to take longer to resolve their grief than do women (Parkes, 1987). For Rick, the Internet is an outlet that “has made (him) want to start to open up again” by letting others into his life. Aspects of the Internet that do not appeal to him are cyber sex and cyber dating, as both are “just plain silly”. He is most comfortable in chatting or using E-mail, both of which are tentative steps towards communicating with people face to face, something that he has been avoiding since Angie’s death.

Because of the relative anonymity associated with the Internet, it appeals to Rick on many different levels. Neither his appearance nor his past influences the way that he

is treated in chat rooms. If he is rude, others let him know immediately and don't hold back; Rick is treated with no special consideration. For him, the Internet is a great leveler, so that visual images or previous knowledge do not shape responses to his words and that provides him with a sense of comfort and belonging that he does not feel in his own community.

**Jim**

Jim's wife Jodie died just over three years ago after a lengthy battle with cancer, leaving him as the sole care provider for their fourteen year old son. During the course of Jodie's illness, Jim lost his job twice. He found a new job but it was 300 miles away so he "traveled across state every weekend for six months until Jodie had the strength to travel and find a house". While Jim "knew from the day of the surgery that the cancer was terminal I never let her know that I knew." They found that they were able to comfort each other with the words, " I won't let what might happen tomorrow ruin today" because "it helped to force ourselves to appreciate each other at the moment".

Because he knew that he needed support during Jodie's illness and after her death, Jim requested a transfer and relocated his family to their original home. At no time did Jim even consider contacting or participating in any groups at all since he "did not want to get involved". He felt that a grief support group would only have a negative impact on his own grief in that he would either feel worse after hearing about the ordeals of others or that he would not be emotionally ready for stages of grief which others in the group might be experiencing. As a result, Jim did not seek out either individuals or groups, but chose to rely upon work, spending more time with his son and trying to "keep myself busy". He did however give vent to his emotions when he "felt strong enough to cope, I just let it happen. I just let my feelings flow. I didn't hold anything back and let my emotions take control. I had to do that from time to time".

Although he had been instrumental in facilitating his mother's grief when her sister died, by sharing with her that she should "enjoy the memories but also enjoy a new life", Jim found it hard to follow his own advice. During the time of his most intense

**grief, Jim spent a lot of time at his new business or rebuilding a classic car with his son. Jim used his work and his hobby to avoid the memories associated with his surroundings. Like Arthur, he found it difficult to spend time at home because “it generated an empty feeling that I chose to avoid whenever possible”. It took him two years to part with Jodie's clothing. As a single parent, life was challenging rather than enjoyable since both he and his son worked through their grief separately. Telling his son that he missed Jodie and wished that she were still there was the extent of Jim's sharing of his grief. Jim's son modeled what he saw his father doing and kept to himself, spending his free time driving aimlessly for hours at a time, “stopping only at the cemetery”. Although Jim “is beginning to get the feeling that (he) will eventually be able to let go (he) still can't imagine caring for someone ... and someone caring for (him)”.**

**If he had been aware of a chat room "strictly for the mourning process", Jim says that he would have tried it because he feels that it would have been easier to begin communicating in a safe environment with others who were also bereaved; he could have exited a virtual grief group immediately if he had felt emotionally unprepared. It was Jim's concern regarding his own emotional state that prevented him from seeking help with local support groups and caused him to work through his grief alone.**

**Jim chose to use the Internet for the primary purpose of meeting someone since he finds that he “enjoy(s) the company of a woman and do(es) miss it”. Initially he started with Chat Rooms but found that the "rewards were not worth the effort" as people presented themselves as other than what they truly were. This experience led Jim to try the personal ads. By this means he was able to communicate with others of similar tastes.**

Currently, Jim uses the Internet once or twice a week to view profiles of women who live nearby and with whom he may develop a friendship or a long-term relationship.

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Despite the fact that he knew that he needed emotional support and moved his wife and son in order to be near such familial support after Jodie's death, Jim did not try and connect emotionally with anyone in his family nor did he seek out any support groups at all. "The perceptual or emotional defense mechanism the bereaved most often describe comes closest to what we would call dissociation: one part of us recognizes the external, lived reality even at the same time that we remove or reject it from working, ongoing consciousness"(Shapiro, 1994, p. 22) He felt that he "could not allow himself to vent in front of others" and on one occasion when his son found him crying, he quickly pulled himself together and they went to the cemetery together.

Through coping with Jodie's death, Jim has changed not only his "daily life patterns and direction in life"(Attig, 1996, p.55) but he has also met the challenges presented by bereavement. It was two years before Jim felt comfortable enough to reenter the social scene. He found "the Internet helps because it is a little easier to begin communications (with) that 'FIRST STEP". It is also easier to end communications". Even though some of his experiences have been negative ones, in which the person with whom he was corresponding was "pretend(ing) to be someone else", Jim still feels it is a good way for widowers to initiate relationships. He felt "communicating via the Internet



seemed to give me more confidence in myself and the nerve to go out and try the bar scene”.

If Jim had had access to the Internet during the period of his intense grief, he feels that he would have used it for informational purposes to assist him with understanding the grief process and to help him with his grief work. If he had been aware of a chat site for widowers at that time, Jim believes that he would have also visited the site. Although Jim's purpose in using the Internet now is to find someone compatible with whom he can share the rest of his life, he believes that the Internet has the potential to help widowers in many different areas. "As time goes by, I believe every widower needs, wants and desires changes and I feel the Net could help him in many of them, all from the comfort and security of being in his own territory, with complete control." Jim has found the Internet to be both a hazard and a help. With chatting he has to keep in mind that the text that is printed is not necessarily an accurate portrayal of the person doing the typing. Chatting has also helped him to become confident enough to initiate exchanges with others. For Jim, the Internet “was a significant factor in getting me out of the house and out of my shell”.



**Jodie and Jim at home with their son Michael**

**Dolf**

Dolf is a 52 year old customs agent from Northern Europe. After his partner Heika's death nine years ago, Dolf concentrated on his two 10 and 12 year sons and their needs. Because he felt that he had to deal with the "loss all by myself", Dolf refused offers of assistance from friends and family. At no time did he seek support from any organizations or groups nor did he rely upon any religious beliefs to help him through his grief. Dolf's life revolved around his sons to the extent that he resigned memberships in various soccer organizations in which he had been active and although "many clubs asked me after the death of my wife to do something I kept the 'boat' off". Dolf felt that his sons were his priority and that he had no time after work to participate in any activities that did not involve his children.

Since he had no financial worries and a flexible timetable, Dolf "spoiled (my sons) very much ... (because) they missed their mother a lot", not only spending time with them at their soccer games and practices but also taking them to games in other countries. Dolf's financial security allowed him to not only be at home with his sons when they were not in school but also permitted him to relocate to his birthplace so that his immediate family could provide practical help with the household chores.

Gradually Dolf took over the household tasks in his own home while maintaining a close relationship with his sons. Although his sons have developed interests and friends of their own, Dolf still misses Heika and spends most evenings at home by himself. Dolf prefers either to be alone or with his sons and their friends to socializing with friends of his own in his community.

Eight years after the death of his partner, Dolf's oldest son, who now has his own source of income, suggested the Internet and also paid for the cost involved. Originally Dolf was "against the Internet. I didn't see the use of it. But now I like the Internet very much". He spends a lot of time on it and has communicated with people from around the world whom he considers to be his "good friends". His regular chat partners exchange photos and have established a Friday night social where they all gather and talk about their past week and their future plans.

Because of his involvement with the Internet, Dolf is doing a lot of reading so that he can have an accurate and informative Web page with links to other sites related to his favorite sport of soccer. Dolf credits the Internet with opening up his life by keeping him busy and not giving him time to think about "losing your partner" during evenings at home alone.

Despite his increased communication and interaction with others on the Internet, Dolf says that "after all the discovery of the world and the chatting with the most interesting people you go alone to bed after kissing the photo of the one you lost".

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Previous memberships in clubs and an active social life ceased with the death of his partner because Dolf, like Juan Carlos, felt that he needed to dedicate his energy to becoming an active participant in the lives of his children so that he could fill the void left by the death of their mother. Overtures by friends and colleagues were refused as Dolf felt he had to "deal with the loss all by myself". It was only after his sons had

matured, and started lives of their own that they were able to help him expand his world again by “pay(ing) the costs” for the Internet.

After only a year on the Internet, Dolf chats with “mostly the same people” on a regular basis on Friday nights. Although he was at first reluctant to become involved with the technology, he now recognizes that the Internet is an “easy way of communication” which enables him to “talk with people all over the world. So I (have already made) many good friends”.

Through the common interests of sports and the Internet, Dolf continues to form a bond with his sons, as they are all avid soccer fans and computer literate. Although Dolf’s soccer knowledge had been limited in recent years to his sons’ activities, his increasing skill with the Internet has enabled him to incorporate his familiarity with the sport into the creation of his own Website with links and data related to other related sites. In order to provide the most accurate and up to date information, Dolf is spending more time “working off-line. I have to read a lot of soccer books and magazines so I always have something to do. I am a lot alone at home because my sons have their friends and girlfriends. And when you then are alone you feel sad about the loss of your partner but now I have no time to be sad”.

Although his family helped with the physical aspects of housework, there was little emotional support when Heika died, and as a result there was “little encouragement”(Lendrum and Syme, 1992, p. 37) for him to express his feelings (Raphael, 1983). Rather than visit with friends and family, Dolf used to spend a considerable amount of time at the pub, using alcohol to avoid the grief that he felt and which, according to Schulz(1978) and Switzer(1970), is a common form of denial for

widowers. The Internet, however, in Dolf's words, "keeps me off the street" and does not allow him time to be "sad".

Although Dolf's first language is not English, he communicates with others on the Internet in that language as well as in his mother tongue. He uses the Internet primarily for its Chat rooms and doesn't access bulletin boards or information sites on a regular basis. Based on his own experiences, Dolf says that widowers "need good information on how to use the Internet. And then they can discover the whole world. Everybody will use the Internet in his own way. And sometimes it can help in difficult times but you have to stand open for it." Dolf believes that the life experiences of others with whom he has chatted have helped him to solve some personal problems. He feels that the Internet has the potential to help widowers to meet other people, as it has helped him, but that the widower must not only be ready for such an experience but must go into it open-eyed.

Not only has the Internet opened up Dolf's world by giving him the opportunity to develop friendships worldwide but it has also given him a means by which he can share his lived experiences with others worldwide.



**Heika and Dolf at a local club**

**Juan Carlos**

Juan Carlos, a 45-year-old business executive in a Central American country has been a widower for eight years. His primary concern, as was Dolf's, was in raising his two young children so that they would not feel traumatized or neglected because of their mother's death. Support from family, friends or church groups was minimal or non-existent. Because Juan Carlos lives in a developing country, the infrastructure is not in place to provide such services as grief counselling; providing the basic necessities of life in the form of housing and food is the foremost objective of the government. Realizing that "there was nobody (groups or individuals) who could give me any kind of support because in non development countries like .... , people have many daily problems to fulfill their most basic needs" Juan Carlos chose not to even attempt to seek out support groups but to try and "heal (his) wound by (himself)".

After recovering his emotional stability, Juan Carlos started to use the Internet to maintain contact with others. He did this because he felt that the Internet was a safe environment where he could meet other people. Although he was always looking for his "perfect woman", he did not find her, not because he was "too demanding or selective" but because in reality, he didn't want to find someone and risk losing another partner. It was "something like a trick I was making to me with my total permission".

Because English is not his first language, Juan Carlos found Chat Rooms too fast for him and now no longer uses them. He did post a profile in a Lonely Hearts Clubs but his "blue princess" or "perfect woman" did not respond. The only people who did reply to his profile were "gay, satanic persons or jokers", which left Juan Carlos feeling that his efforts were a "disaster". To him, posting a profile had been a safe way to reach out to



others without having to go through the process of meeting and conversing with "real" people.

E-mail seemed to be a method of communication that worked for Juan Carlos as he found a pen pal who shared his "love for music, and in special jazz music" and with whom he communicates on a weekly basis. To him this kind of relationship is enjoyable since he is able to connect with someone with whom he shares a common interest.

Although Juan Carlos feels that Lonely Hearts sites, Chat rooms and personal ads are a way for "sad persons looking for communication into their loneliness", he believes that the Internet is a "safe way" to open up to others without "emotional damages". Despite his negative experiences and the difficulties that he had in communicating with others due to language, Juan Carlos maintains an interest in the Internet. Like Dolf, he is currently working on creating his own Web page with links to other related sites and finds that takes up a lot of his time.

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Although Juan Carlos has a high profile career, nearly ten years after the Lisa's death, he still felt lonely, sad and uncomfortable in communicating with "real" people. Focusing on his daughters' emotional needs to ensure that they grew up to be healthy and well-adjusted young women took a great deal of Juan Carlos's time and effort; this resulted in his own socialization with friends and peers decreasing so that the resolution of his own grief process was delayed while he focused on his daughters' emotional needs. Depriving himself of grieving left Juan Carlos in the position of "experience(ing) the past

as too painful to remember, ... the present ... too distressing and confusing, and many ... expectations, hopes and dreams as no longer viable"(Attig, 1996, p. 149).

Approximately three years ago, Juan Carlos started using the Internet in order to maintain some communication with "normal" people again. Initially he sought out Lonely Hearts Club sites to find others who were lonely and sad but found that it was like "attend (ing) a masquerade" in which there were no "real" people, only "illusions". Chat lines, Juan Carlos discovered, were too rapid and vacuous for him. Again the people with whom he came in contact were abusive and/or unreal to him. Private chats were "too scary" so Juan Carlos stopped visiting Chat Rooms. By browsing through personal ads, Juan Carlos found someone who shared his love of jazz music; this common interest has led to a sharing of information that Juan Carlos finds very satisfying, as he is able to communicate with a "normal" person.

During the first part of the research, Juan Carlos relied upon the Internet to provide him with contact with others, in spite of his negative experiences. When a natural disaster occurred in his country, Juan Carlos ceased his Internet activity and became heavily involved in the reconstruction of his nation. Following his return to work, Juan Carlos noted that he now felt that he did not "need to meet people in the web because I found that (it) is better to attend real meetings with real persons". It seems that working closely with others in a crises situation helped Juan Carlos to rely less on the Internet for his communication with others and more on individuals with whom he came in contact. A decade earlier, Juan Carlos had not been able to find emotional support for himself; the disaster may have provided an opportunity for him to be involved with those offering support and comfort and thus finally resolve his grief(Attig, 1996).

For Juan Carlos, the Internet had mixed results. Although Chat Rooms, Lonely Hearts Clubs and posting his profile did not work out for him as he had planned, he was able to find someone through personal ads with whom he still communicates. In addition, the Internet has provided him with an opportunity to share his knowledge about jazz with others through the creation of his own Web page. Through this site, Juan Carlos hopes to find others who share his interests and who will communicate with him about their shared hobbies.

Although Juan Carlos feels that the Internet might be helpful “if somebody or an organization open(ed) a site special for widowers” where they could access information or share their grief, he did not seek to find such a site himself, but relied upon previously existing sites to try and find someone compatible with whom he could talk. He now uses the Internet as a tool for his convenience, recognizing that it did not meet his needs as a widower, and that associating with "real" people is far better than chatting with people who put on false faces and take advantage of others.



**Lisa and Juan Carlos on holiday**

**Fred**

At 52, Fred is fulfilling his life long dream of operating a catering business in the small town in northeastern United States where he and his wife vacationed for 25 years of their 31 year marriage. They had relocated and worked together in the business for three years before Ronnie died just over a year ago. Although grief counselling was suggested to Fred by the social worker with whom he came in contact almost daily during the last six weeks of Ronnie's life, Fred relied upon a "very close life long friend who (was) one step below a brother" and whose presence every day was supportive both physically and emotionally. Fred was not able to find support with his family as they are "all over the country"; neither was he able to find comfort within his religion as he "had the blame thing with God".

At one point soon after Ronnie's death, Fred did attend a group for the grieving but felt that he had nothing in common with them as the other members were considerably older and had "nothing to share" with him. As well as being the only male member of the group, he was the only one whose partner had died. Consequently he felt "totally out of place" and had difficulty in relating to those in the group who had lost a child or parent; Fred also found it "very hard to believe that (one member) was really still grieving after (ten years)." As a result, Fred did not attend any further meetings but he "tried to read books that were recommended" to help him understand the grief process.

To help him "pass the time of the approaching winter of being alone" Fred's children bought their father a computer. Playing with it one night, he found the area of 'men seeking women' and found it "interesting reading and amusing", but never attempted any interaction with those listed. Fred's Internet activity consisted mostly of "seek(ing)

out pen pals ... . This had no lasting success as I was only looking for something to pass the time". He also posted a profile "to give it a try" but received no responses.

Ten months after Ronnie's death, Fred "went to one-on-one counseling with a professional counseling service" to provide him with a greater understanding of the grief process. Although he felt an instant rapport with his counsellor, Fred believes that he must "work through this alone and hope for less pain" so eight weeks after he started private counselling, Fred was once again preparing to deal with his grief in his own way. Fred is philosophical about the "hard times" that his counsellor told him to expect during the second year following Ronnie's death, taking a "we will see" attitude.

Even though Fred works long hours at his business he takes time for himself by seeking out literature which may help him to better understand his situation. His time spent on the Internet last winter to pass the lonely evenings, has been decreased due to his return to the social scene and the subsequent friendship that has developed between himself and a local woman. For Fred, the Internet seems to have been a temporary measure that provided him with some activity in the evening that kept him from missing Ronnie.

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Because Ronnie's final illness was a sudden development, Fred struggled emotionally during her final weeks and after her death. Lendrum and Syme(1992, p. 49) note that "what is needed most of all is emotional support, for this enables us to talk". Fred's reliance upon his friend as well as his immediate involvement with grief

counselling indicates that he was seeking support that he felt was not available within his family or his church.

Fred did extensive reading, on his own and after he entered grief counselling, obviously seeking to understand the intense and varied emotions that he was feeling. He was willing to try different means of helping him through his loss, but he needed affirmation and acceptance that his needs were being met before he could continue. The original grief group to which he turned did not meet his needs so it was of no use to him; the books that he read provided him with some emotional support but also tended to play upon his vulnerability. One book led him to believe that he could talk to his deceased wife and he tried to contact the author for more specific information.

Fred did initiate correspondence with various pen pals but discontinued writing, as it was only a means for him to pass the time. As Ronnie had been dead for less than a year, Fred was still very vulnerable and therefore very susceptible to people who might take advantage of his raw emotional state.

Just a year after his wife's death, Fred has decided to "deal with this in my own way from this day on", and is slowly coming to terms with his status as a widower, fluctuating between "hop(ing) for less pain" yet still willing to look up the author who he feels can reconnect him with Ronnie.

In their need to support their father after Ronnie's death, Fred's children provided him with Internet access. Fred however, had the wisdom to not rely upon the Internet for contact because he recognized that he needed more than pen pals or 'men seeking women' sites to help him in resolving his grief. Fred's previous negative experience with grief counselling did not deter him from revisiting grief work as a means to help himself; he

found a counsellor with whom he was comfortable and worked with that person until he was confident enough to take charge of his own grief work.

For Fred, at this early stage of grief, the computer could have been more of a hazard than a help since any serious attempts to communicate with others on it may have resulted in financial hardship, additional stress and/or entanglement with others when he had not yet resolved his grief. In Fred's case the Internet was only a tool which helped him through the long winter nights. For that purpose, it was somewhat effective, but it did not seem to assist him in finding the answers that he sought nor in providing the emotional support that he needed.

Fred's situation brings home the point that the widower is in a precarious emotional state, whether he is in the safety of his own home or with others who share the pain of loss. The Internet is not a panacea for those who mourn but is an instrument like any other in that it is appropriate for some widowers and applicable to certain situations; it can also be misused as well as any other resource.





**Ronnie and Fred on the banks of the river near their business**

*Although their search for understanding and meaning followed different paths, each of the widowers in this study felt overwhelmed by the emotions that they encountered after the death of their partners. The means by which they attempted to address these feelings varied greatly: Arthur, Jim, Juan Carlos, Rick, and Dolf depended upon themselves for various reasons; Joe and Fred sought counselling while George and Roger trusted in their faith but also relied upon others to facilitate their personal growth.*

*Regardless of whether friends, family and professionals were used to assist the widowers, each of them eventually turned to the Internet as a resource that served a specific purpose. For Roger and Jim it is a means by which a life partner may be found while for Arthur, Juan Carlos, Rick, George, Fred, Joe, and Dolf, it enables them to connect with others or to find relevant information.*

*Based on the positive and negative experiences of the participants, the finding is that the Internet may be a viable resource for widowers, but that it must be approached with caution and used with discretion.*

*God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.*  
Reinhold Niebuhr

## CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken in order to investigate how modern technology, in the form of Internet usage, was being used by widowers. Interest in this subject developed from random online conversations with both males and females from around the world; in stressful situations individuals who were using the Internet for communication seemed to be able to share their feelings with faceless strangers with more ease and with fewer inhibitions than people generally seemed able to do with their families and friends. This seeming 'instant rapport' with only the printed word as a link between the parties intrigued me, as it is my understanding that the major influences of a working relationship between one individual facilitating the personal growth of another, is that of trust and empathy. This process takes time to develop, particularly in a professional client and therapist relationship, with the clients needing to feel that they are in a safe environment before they are comfortable enough to access their true feelings and/or discuss the impact that these emotions are having on their lives.

Within the Internet, however, there did not appear to be a need to develop a trusting relationship, as I observed that frequently individuals would initiate a conversation with a synopsis of what they perceived to be their particular problem and how they were dealing with it emotionally. In addition, personal profiles often contained

intimate information about a person as well as a description not only of their physical attributes but also a depiction of their mental health and how they were adjusting to a stressful situation. As I had been aware that males in our Western oriented society generally had difficulty in expressing their emotions, I wondered if the Internet might be a means by which they could emote and yet preserve the image of masculinity that was projected upon them both by our society and our culture.

In 1992 Brabant, Forsyth and Melancon stated that "[The widowers] hurt and they knew they hurt. What they did not do was to reach out to others for help. For the most part, they coped alone". In this 1998 study the widowers not only knew that they hurt but they recognized that they needed emotional support in order to successfully resolve their grief. Often family and friends could not provide the ongoing support that they needed so the widowers sought other means of facilitating their grief by participating in groups or organizations such as Parents without Partners that they felt might meet their needs. This proved to be a frustrating experience, as the associations that they chose did not meet their specific needs. In the case of grief support groups, the men found it difficult to relate to members of the group when the other members consisted primarily of women or had not lost a partner. "The group did not work for me"(Fred).

Even though they knew that they were hurting, the widowers who participated in this research were overwhelmed by the intensity of their feelings and often found it distressing to talk about their feelings. "It was very, very difficult and depressing for me to talk about losing Kathie"(Joe). To help them better understand what it was that they were experiencing some of the widowers sought information regarding the grieving process. Fred searched the literature and, like Joe, attended grief support groups; George

relied upon his psychologist neighbour and Roger spoke with his brother who had also lost a partner while Rick, Dolf, Arthur, Jim and Juan Carlos felt that they had “to do it alone”(Arthur).

The way in which the Internet was used varied among the nine participants, depending not on the length of time that each had been a survivor, but on how he viewed his needs. Those participants who were able to perceive their partner's death, not as an end point but as a turning point in their lives, used the Internet to reintegrate themselves into social situations. Initially most of the widowers surfed the Internet until they found either chat rooms or personal ads, looking for a human connection within a technological medium. Whether they used the Internet to hone their social skills as Jim did, to make contact with others in ways that they had neglected since the death of their partners as Rick did, to engage in passive conversations like Arthur, or active dialogues like Roger, they were looking for ways to connect with others. As they became more comfortable with themselves and with the virtual presence of others, they were able to reach out and establish links with others through E-mail, chats or actual socialization. For them, the Internet was a resource which facilitated their reintegration into society and alleviated their loneliness.

Roger, Jim, Dolf, Rick and Juan Carlos started with Chat Rooms when they felt that they were emotionally ready for the interchanges and conversation. Because of his experiences there, Jim gained the confidence to participate in further communication by posting or reading personal ads. On the one occasion that the Internet was used for widower related informational purposes, Joe was seeking to help a member of his support

group through his grief. None of the participants chose to seek support for themselves through widower oriented sites, although Joe and Roger visited such sites.

Arthur, Dolf, Fred and Rick chose to use the Internet for chatting only. They tended to visit Chat Sites to feel a connection with others, and were slowly beginning to open up and communicate their feelings. Generally they felt that they had to cope with their grief alone and found it difficult to let go of the control over their emotions for fear of being perceived as “weak”(Arthur). For them the Internet is a safe and convenient place to connect with others when they feel the need to do so.

Jim and Roger are actively involved in using the Internet to find a life partner. Jim expressed the opinion that visiting Chat Rooms had given him the self-assurance that he needed so that he could begin to develop new relationships. “Communicating via the Internet seemed to give me more confidence in myself and the nerve to go out”(Jim). Even if a new partner is not readily found, the men felt that the interaction with others through chat and E-mail was a necessary part of their continued growth. Although they still felt deeply and passionately about their deceased partners, Roger and Jim feel that they are now ready to move on to another phase of their lives.

Joe uses the Internet to provide him with information while George uses it to be there for someone else when needed. For them, the Internet is a tool, a resource which can be used, but which should be used with caution since “desperate and vulnerable (people who) don’t know where to turn”(George) may be “fleece(d)”(Joe).

Regardless of how they used the Internet, most of the participants felt that it was a resource that could be of help to widowers, but that recent widowers should be wary when accessing sites. Because of the difficulty in finding an appropriate group or

organization to facilitate the grief process within the community, a site on the Internet devoted exclusively to the needs of the bereaved was felt to be of optimal use. AOL does provide a chat site for widows and widowers but it can only be accessed if AOL is your service provider. Widownet is accessible, but it is difficult to find.

Specific rooms for the widowed within different Chat sites have the potential to reach many of those who are bereaved. Hosts, such as provided by Widownet who monitor and mentor the conversations, would ensure that the recent widower is not subjected to unnecessary or inappropriate chat. Although it is easy to say that one can leave a virtual room at will, those who are online sometimes find it difficult to do so. Juan Carlos attested to the fact that he was afraid to venture into a private room to chat. The Internet is only as safe as the people who use or abuse it.

Regardless of the length of time, however, that a participant had been widowed, ultimately it was communication in some form that led to a reconnection with others. While support groups helped widowers like Joe and professionals facilitated the grief process for George, most of the participants used the Internet in some way to commence communication and reconnection with others. The participants in this study generally felt that the Internet was a positive influence in their lives: it helped Fred and Dolf through long evenings at home; it gave Roger an opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with others; it provided Joe with prompt information; it offered Arthur a chance to learn new skills; it allowed George to help others who were troubled and it laid the groundwork for Jim, Juan Carlos and Rick to include others in their lives again.

Despite the fact that these participants came from four different countries, spoke three different languages and ranged in age from 26-68, each of them felt that their needs

as widowers had not been adequately met. Positive interaction with others seemed to be the major influence that facilitated the participants' grief: they sought this interaction through both inappropriate means such as drinking at local establishments and attending singles meetings as well as accessing more appropriate resources such as grief support groups and professional therapists. Even though these strategies were often unsuccessful at first, some widowers continued to reach out in order to comprehend what was happening to them and to incorporate this understanding into their lives so that they could feel that there would be an end to their pain. As a result of their bereavement experiences they wished to participate in the "accountability and accounting ... of social interaction"(Hoy and McCarthy, 1995, p. 66) to raise the level of awareness regarding the disparity that exists in our social and cultural environment.

Based on the narratives of the participants in this study, it seems that although widowers now recognize the need for emotional support, that they feel that these needs are still not being met. Although there is often short term assistance with household tasks such as that provided by the families of Dolf, Jim and George, emotional support is often lacking. Not only do men like Arthur and Dolf refuse to share their feelings with others but any display of emotion is quickly hidden. This seems to be consistent with the literature in that societal and cultural expectations placed upon widowers makes bereavement more difficult for them(Raphael, 1983). Men like Arthur, who had more difficulty in expressing themselves, found the Internet to be a bridge to others, enabling them to connect in a way that they felt unable to do so in face to face situations Thus it makes the task of facilitating the grief process for widowers more challenging when men still feel emotionally constrained in social situations.



For the widowers in this study, males provided the best type of support system, especially if they had also lost a partner and were happily remarried: this seemed to be the one factor which had the most impact on newly bereaved males: the widowers seemed to regard this as hope for their own future in that the emotions associated with the death of their partners would eventually yield to new emotions that might generate a new relationship, echoing Joe's belief that "happiness is having something to do and something to hope for". Even as they expressed deep affection for the deceased partner and regret at the upheaval in their lives caused by the untimely death, the widowers seemed to need to know that it was possible to live a life that involved inclusion and not exclusion.

The participants in this study who actively sought emotional support tried not one but several resources in attempts to resolve their grief; ultimately it was other males with whom they felt comfortable in sharing their feelings, with the implications for counselling and support group facilitators being that widowers seem to have an easier time in developing a mutually satisfying relationship with other bereaved males.

The widowers in this study were able to present their lived experiences within a framework that accepted the truths as rendered by their unique social locations. Although each participant's partner had died under different circumstances, each found that the loneliness was overwhelming. Through sharing their ordeals, the widowers felt that they were contributing to the development of awareness of the social disparity that deprived them of emotional support when it was most needed. In addition, the participants in this study believed that their contributions would broaden society's knowledge base as well as impact on how widowers are viewed and treated.

The literature, through the writings of such authors as Raphael(1983), Weiss(1984) and Parkes(1987) supports the experiences of the widowers in this study in that the strategies used by men in dealing with the death of a partner were often self-defeating; the widowers in this study did generally go through long periods of grief denying activity, consisting mostly of busying themselves with work/activities, thereby avoiding facing the reality of their new status as widowers. Attempts to resolve their grief with methods that stifled their needs to share their feelings are setbacks however, rather than facilitating resources that undermine the healing process . Not only did the widowers feel that they needed to keep themselves busy, most often through work, but they also seemed to need to feel that there would be an end to the grief process. This seemed to be a common thread among the widowers in this study: they researched (Fred) or sought support(George, Joe, Roger, Rick) as they struggled to understand what was happening to them in ways that were meaningful to them.

Since societal and cultural perceptions often inhibit the intense feelings brought about by the death of a partner, widowers like Dolf, Rick and Arthur remove themselves emotionally from the rest of the world for extended periods of time. Widowers like Joe, George, Fred, Jim, Juan Carlos and Roger, who have worked through the grief process are no longer on the sidelines but are actively involved in their own lives and also often contributing to the personal development of others. Within a critical theory context, the widowers' experiences affect their personal perspectives through a desire to make changes in themselves and society.

Despite having often sought out others for support and understanding, the widowers in this study frequently felt isolated and neglected by their peers. What the

widowers in this study sought was a safe environment in which to share their experiences and be supported in their grief. When they felt that their social network failed to meet their needs, they turned to modern technology. Although most of the participants had had no previous experience with either computers or the Internet, they visited sites that they felt helped them to either establish or maintain connections with others. Because the Internet is a global phenomenon, widowers from around the world can use this technology to both give and receive support in a way that is meaningful to them.

In my opinion, there needs to be further research done regarding support systems available through the Internet. Some questions that may need to be explored in a study of both Internet and non-Internet users include:

Should online support groups be available within Chat Rooms? If so, how should they be monitored, if at all?  
 How do widowers feel about online support groups?  
 How should such support groups be set up? (open, closed, specific times, drop in, etc.)  
 At what point would a widower feel comfortable in participating in an online support group?  
 What type of support would be available off line, in conjunction with on line support?  
 How does anonymity facilitate the grief process for widowers?  
 Would informal discussions/information sessions be more relevant to widowers than grief support groups? If so, how? If not, why not?

Neither geographic location nor age seemed to make no difference as to a widower's decision to withdraw from society. Whether they were in isolated communities or in the heart of a major city, in their twenties or in their sixties, some widowers preferred to isolate themselves socially once the basic fulfillments of life were met. However, they found that removing themselves from situations or people who might have generated an emotional response from them was not a lifestyle which they wished to maintain.

Because their self-imposed exile made it difficult for them to reinitiate associations with others, the Internet was a resource that permitted them to communicate on a level with which they were comfortable, at a time that was convenient for them and without any pressure to engage in conversation. Establishing the degree of interaction on the Internet seemed to give most of the widowers a feeling of control over these exchanges which in turn seemed to generate more self-confidence and assertiveness, thereby empowering them both in virtual and real life situations,

The internet was often a bridge for those who had difficulties in connecting with others, opening up lines of communication again and allowing widowers to engage in conversations/dialogue in an environment of their choosing. This communication process was vital to their return to the society for although they may have technically been a part of it, they had emotionally removed themselves from interaction with others. The Internet is one resource that may be used by widowers to facilitate their return to the social scene. Even those participants who were in the early stages of bereavement used the Internet more to combat their loneliness than to share their grief, perhaps because of the difficulty in accessing sites that addressed these particular needs. Although the participants in this study used the Internet primarily for the purpose of establishing links with others, rather than as a direct means of working through their grief, successful interaction may be a precursor to a resolution of their grief.

From this study, it is evident that the grief process is a time consuming as well as an energy consuming process that is an emotionally debilitating experience, made particularly difficult for widowers who often feel constrained by societal and cultural perceptions of manliness. These participants effectively demonstrated the resilience of

the human spirit as they sought to connect with another human being within a technological environment. Like any other resource, however, the Internet must be used with caution since unscrupulous and insensitive people can manipulate and distort the truth at the expense of others.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Web Sites**

##### **Chat Sites**

[http://www.aol.com.mkenwest/aol\\_ww.html](http://www.aol.com.mkenwest/aol_ww.html)

Several widowers recommended this site, but it can only be accessed by those who have AOL as their server.

<http://chat.yahoo.com>

Chat site that has extensive links to other Yahoo related sites ranging from stock information to travel. Includes personal ads and private E-mail secured with personal passwords.

[http://duke.thirdage.com/chat/world/html/login.html?uri=/\\*index](http://duke.thirdage.com/chat/world/html/login.html?uri=/*index)

"This is the logon URL for the chat site I use most. The Personal Portraits mechanism is really useful and works easily for me. So you can quickly see what this chatter is like."(Roger)

##### **Church Sites**

<http://www.tcal.org/>

"No wonder they have won all sorts of awards! Someone must spend all their time polishing this! If you can stand some preachy bits try some of the links just below the keyboard. One lasts nearly an hour!"(Roger)

**Singles sites**

<http://www.napanet.net/~mbost/>

The Loners of America is a Recreational Vehicle travel club for widows, widowers, divorced, or single adults who wish to travel. It provides information on rallies, campsites and excursions taken by members.

<http://onlinedate.lfhosting.com/club.html>

This site allows for voice recordings as well as for the posting of profiles and E-mail exchanges for those who are looking for someone with a similar lifestyle.

<http://www.ukscmp.demon.co.uk/index.html>

"This one is actually completely free and has produced some contacts."(Roger)

**Support sites**

<http://www.fortnet.org/WidowNet/>

Grief, bereavement and recovery information as well as self-help resource with bulletin boards, literature and other links for anyone who has suffered the death of a spouse or life partner.



<http://www.groww.com/gr.htm>

Grief Recovery Online (founded by) Widows and Widowers. Extensive site with E-mail, bulletin boards, chat rooms with 'hosts' who monitor and mentor the conversations as well as links to local resources.

<http://www.rivendell.org/supportgroups.html>

E-mail support groups and two web site links for widows and widowers.

**Appendix B****Participant Profile****Basics****ID:****Interests:****Real Name:**

I spend quite a lot of my time up at my church. I help run the sound/vision system.

**Location:** London**Age:** 64**Marital Status:** Widower**Latest News:****Sex:** Male

I'm a grandad.

**Occupation:** Computer work  
(Mainframes)

I'd like to retire and find someone new with whom I can spend the rest of my earthly life.

## **Appendix C**

### **Letter of Introduction**

Each of us experiences loss at some time during our lives. This loss may be due to death, divorce, or may be a physical separation from something that is truly important to us.

Following the loss is a period of grief in which various stages (denial, anger, depression, acceptance, recovery) are undergone. How people cope with death affects their lives – their relationships, their perceptions and their choices. The grief that accompanies death is, I believe, not fully understood by those who have not experienced it; the methods chosen or imposed by society upon the bereaved are therefore not always appropriate to the individual.

Men, in particular, often feel isolated and unable to successfully complete the grief process. Since widows generally outlive their husbands, they often have more support among their peers. Widowed men tend to be the exception rather than the rule; the self-imposed constraints of society to not show emotion further inhibit their ability to cope with the loss of a loved one. In our culture, I find it surprising that the needs of such a large segment of society are not addressed. In order to find the support that is lacking in their lives, some widowers have turned to the electronic highway. I feel that the use of the Internet has the potential to make a difference in the grief process of widowers. Consequently this is the area of study that I am interested in pursuing: How do the services of the Internet facilitate the grief process of widowers?

**This study seeks to understand the needs of widowers, to research the use of technology by widowers and to generate ideas, proposals, actions and/or plans which others who are living through loss may find helpful.**

**Appendix D****Consent Form**

I, (print name) \_\_\_\_\_, having read the project outline understand the nature of the research and agree to participate in interviews through E-mail.

I understand that identifying names, places and events will be altered to preserve my anonymity.

---

**Signature**

---

**Date**

## **Appendix E**

### **Personal Profile**

#### **Basics**

**ID:**

**Interests:**

**Real Name:**

**Writing a thesis on how widower's use the Internet following the loss of a partner**

**Location:**     **Canada**

**Age:**

**Marital Status:**

**Latest News:**

**Sex:**           **Female**

**Looking for input from widowers to help me with my research. Please E-mail if you wish more details.**

**Occupation:**   **Student**

## **Appendix F**

### **Brief description of research sent on initial contact with participant**

I am in the process of writing a thesis about widowers and their use of the Internet. I have a more detailed letter of introduction and a consent form that I can send to you if you feel that you might be interested in participating in this research.