In their Own Words: The Familial Experiences of Suicide Survivors

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BACKGROUND

▪ Much evidence suggests that suicide survivors (individuals who have lost a loved one to suicide) may be at risk for developing complicated grief responses and experience other psychiatric and medical hardships post-loss that include engagement in self-destructive behaviors (Bartik, Maple, Edwards, & Kiernan, 2013; Jordan, 2001; Jordan & McMenamy, 2004; Mitchell, Kim, Prigerson, & Mortimer-Stephens, 2004)

▪ Suicide survivors are also prone to post-traumatic stress symptoms and confront distinct feelings of anger, shock, guilt, blame-worthiness, and shame (Cvinar, 2005; Jordan, 2001)

▪ Surviving families are profoundly affected and typically experience dysfunction, changes in communication and interaction patterns, low cohesion, marital dissatisfaction, and face social isolation/social network destruction post-loss (Cerel, Jordan, & Duberstein, 2008; DeGroot, DeKeijser, & Neeleman, 2006; Dunn & Morrish-Vidners, 1988; Nelson & Frantz, 1996; Séguin, Lesage, & Kiely, 1995)

▪ Some experience a strengthening of the family post-loss and it is unclear how this occurs (Clark & Goldney, 1995; Nelson & Frantz, 1996)

▪ However, the general level of family functioning prior to the suicide is not commonly addressed
  ▪ Scant evidence suggests families were disengaged and low in cohesiveness or psychological availability (Cerel et al., 2008)
  ▪ The comparative nature that experiencing suicide has on the family structure and dynamics pre and post-loss is very unclear

▪ Qualitative research methods could effectively and authentically probe the intricacies of loss and family problem solving/interaction style

PURPOSE & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

▪ Purpose: Examination of the experiences of suicide survivors by focusing on their individual and familial experiences of coping both pre- and post-loss

▪ Interview questions:
  ▪ Pre-loss context:
    ▪ Most families experience multiple stressful times and all families go through stress. Please tell me about a stressful time before your loss.
    ▪ How did you all deal with this, could you tell me how this was handled in your family?
  ▪ Post-loss context:
    ▪ I know that you lost your loved one and I want you to tell me about that. Could you describe that?
    ▪ How did you all deal with this, could you tell me how this was handled in your family?
  ▪ Examination of what has been helping in healing/coping process
    ▪ How are you feeling today and is that different from immediately after your loss?

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METHOD

▪ 21 adult United States residents who lost a family member to suicide more than six months ago participated in a semi-structured interview (16 females, 5 males; M age= 53 years old; M time since loss = 9.32 years)

▪ Participants were informed of the study via flyer distribution to peer support groups and other organizations supporting suicide survivors

▪ All participants indicated a willingness to speak about their loss and were interviewed in-person, by telephone, or via an internet-based communication format (Skype)

▪ All participants were asked the five interview questions and were encouraged to elaborate via follow-up questions or probes for the purpose of clarification

▪ Following the interview participants completed a demographic questionnaire

▪ All of the interviews were transcribed and the lead author identified dominant themes according to a Grounded Theory Approach

▪ A validation team of three professionals in the practice of psychology and/or qualitative methods reviewed the transcripts
    ▪ The group met to discuss the emerging categories and noteworthy examples
    ▪ The data became further aggregated through the process of ongoing analysis, reading, and discussion

▪ From the dominant themes, a collection of theoretical proposals were developed and conceptualized within an existing framework of suicidal risk given the family factors identified in the present study (Van Orden et al., 2010; see Figure 1).

"I mean, nothing against suicide loss- if anybody tells you it makes you stronger, it doesn't. I mean- it destroys you. Uh, I mean, if…you don't have some kind of strength there, if you don't have some strong bond there, there's nothing about that kind of loss that brings you back together."

- Vince, 65-year-old man who lost his son to suicide 17 years ago
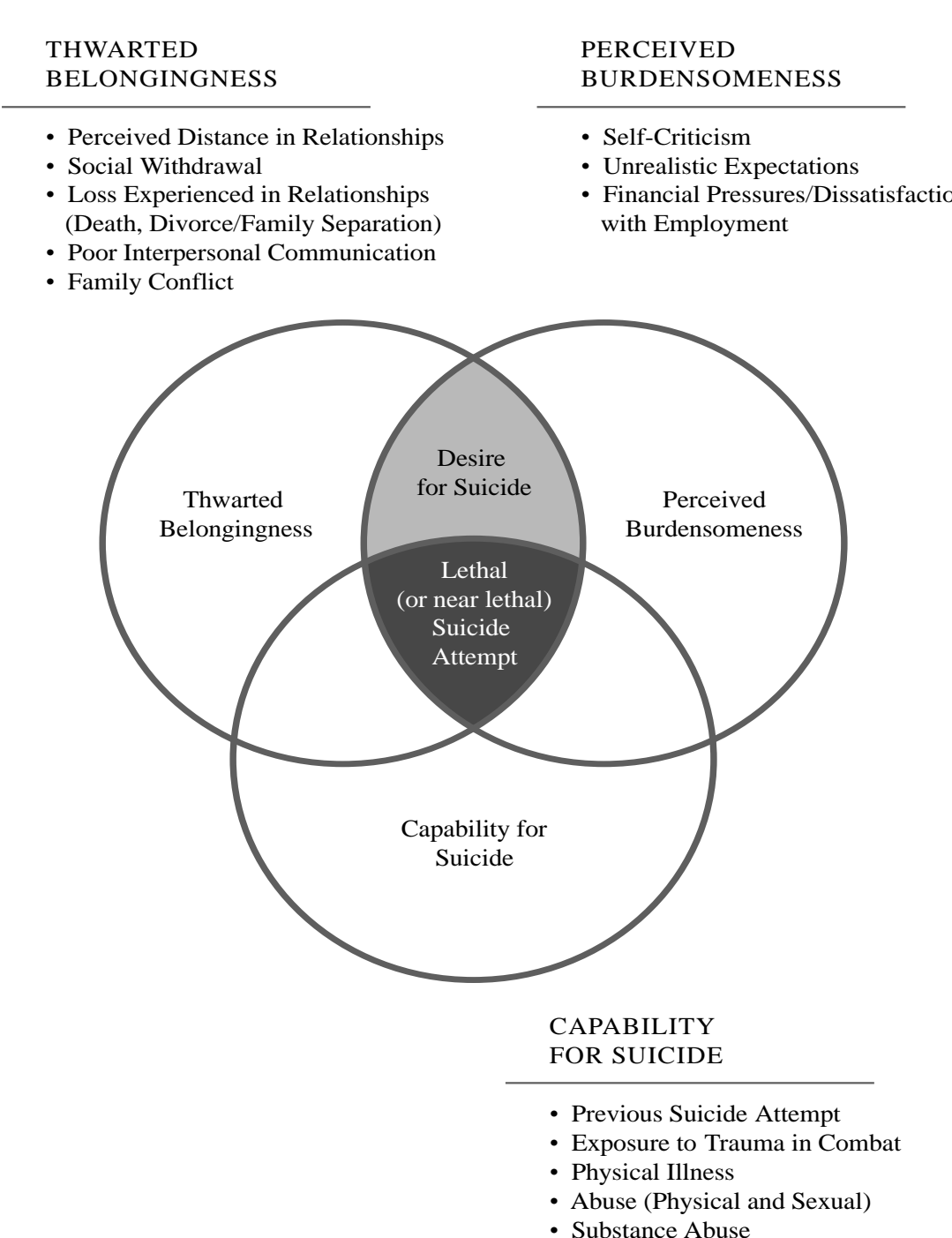
Figure 1. The Perfect Storm Model: Assumptions of Joiner's interpersonal theory of suicide (adapted from Van Orden et al., 2010) with elements identified via analysis of the interview transcripts that constitute the proposed perfect storm model included outside the venn diagram as bulleted lists.

RESULTS

Questions 1 & 2 elicited the following themes in regard to the presence of risk factors/management of general stress prior to suicide loss:

❖ Mental Health Concerns ❖ Abuse ❖ Divorce/Family Separation ❖Exposure to Violence ❖ Family Patterns of General Dysfunction ❖ Substance Abuse ❖ Physical Illness ❖ Problematic Familial Communication Patterns ❖ Narcissistic Patterns ❖ Emotional Pain in Childhood ❖ Prior Experiences of Suicide Loss ❖ Accumulation of Loss/Disappointment/External Stressors ❖ High Expectations/Self-criticism/Un-fulfillment ❖ Resilient Patterns

Questions 3 & 4 elicited the following themes in terms of handling the suicide loss:

❖ Stage of Pure Pain ❖ Isolation ❖ Blame ❖ Guilt ❖ Anger ❖ Shock ❖ Missing the Deceased/Experience of Sadness ❖ Use of Objects/Favorite Things as a Way to Re-acquaint ❖ Conscious Decision to be Open about Suicide ❖ Search for Meaning and the "Why" ❖ Feelings that they Should have Seen it Coming ❖ Keeping Busy ❖ Intellectualization ❖ Significance of "Firsts" ❖ Trauma of Experience ❖ Consistency in Interpersonal Response Style Pre and Post-Loss ❖ Loss that Occurred Closely After Suicide Loss ❖ Family is Left to Pick up the Pieces ❖ Segmenting in Family ❖ Seeking Support Outside of the Family ❖ Importance of Familial Physical Togetherness ❖ Newfound Appreciation for Certain Family Members Post-Loss ❖

Question 5 elicited the following factors involved in healing post-loss:

❖ Seeking out Support of Friends ❖ Importance of Support Groups and Empathetic Others ❖ Desire to Spark Change ❖ Use of Humor ❖ Family's Focus on Young Children and the Next Generation ❖ Importance of Caregiving ❖ Keeping Rituals/Honoring the Victim ❖ Use of Social Media and the Internet ❖ Shift in Life Mission/Advocacy ❖

CONCLUSIONS

▪ There was overall consistency in family patterns of interaction both prior to and post the experience of suicide loss
    ▪ Although mostly maladaptive patterns were noted, there were also participants who endorsed consistency in family interaction patterns that were largely positive and supportive (e.g., family togetherness and expressiveness)

▪ A collection of dominant factors were identified as present in the decedents' family histories and the accompanying family interaction patterns (e.g., perceived distance, overt anger, poor communication) are proposed to contribute toward the low perceived belongingness, feelings of burdensomeness, and the capacity that may weaken an individual's threshold for suicide ("The Perfect Storm Model"; see Figure 1)

▪ Participants highly endorsed speaking with others who have lost loved ones to suicide

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