

Exploring early adolescents' strengths after the suicide of a parent

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requirements for the degree *Magister Artium in Psychology* at the
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PERMISSION TO SUBMIT

LETTER OF PERMISSION

PERMISSION TO SUBMIT THIS ARTICLE FOR EXAMINATION PURPOSES

We, the supervisor and co-supervisor, hereby declare that the input and effort of Mrs. Joey Pienaar in writing this manuscript reflect research done by her on this topic. We hereby grant permission that she may submit this article for examination in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Magister Artium in Psychology.



.....
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DECLARATION BY RESEARCHER

I, Joey Pienaar, declare herewith that the dissertation entitled, **Exploring early adolescents' strengths after the suicide of a parent**, which I herewith submit to the North-West University: Potchefstroom Campus, is my own work and that all references used or quoted were indicated and acknowledged.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Mrs Joey Pienaar

DECLARATION BY TEXT EDITOR

Hereby I declare that I have language edited and proof read the thesis, **Exploring early adolescents' strengths after the suicide of a parent**, by Joey Pienaar for the degree MA in Psychology. I am a freelance language practitioner after a career as editor-in-chief at a leading publishing house.

Lambert Daniel Jacobs (MA, MDiv)

November 2013

PREFACE

- This dissertation is presented in article format as indicated in Rule A.13.7 in North-West University's Potchefstroom Campus Yearbook.
- The article comprising this thesis is intended for submission to the *Journal of Adolescent Research*.
- The referencing style and editorial approach for this thesis are in line with the prescription of the Harvard Referencing System, except in the article where the Publication Manual (6th edition) of the American Psychological Association (APA) applies.
- For examination purposes, the page numbering is consecutive from the title page.
- The study supervisor and co-supervisor of this article, Dr L Wilson and Ms S Weideman, have submitted a letter consenting that the article may be submitted for examination purposes for the degree Magister Atrium in Psychology.

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SUMMARY

Key words: early adolescent; puberty; strengths; well-being; qualitative data collection; phenomenological approach; positive psychology.

This study focuses on the strengths of early adolescents after losing a parent to suicide. Strengths is a global phenomenon and yet little research has been undertaken in South Africa pertaining to strengths in early adolescence. The goal of the study was to determine how the early adolescent experiences the suicidal death of a parent while simultaneously going through puberty, and what strengths were present to help them make meaning out of what happened in their lives. The research was conducted through a phenomenological design and followed a qualitative research approach within an interpretivist paradigm. The research design and approach allowed the participants to give meaning to the construct by sharing their own experiences. A total of 6 early adolescent girls from the ages of twelve to sixteen years were purposefully selected from the East Rand area, Gauteng. Five of the girls were Afrikaans speaking and one was English speaking. Three of the girls lost a mother to suicide and three of the girls lost a father to suicide. The qualitative data was collected in the form of individual in-depth interviews with the early adolescents. The interviews were voice recorded, transcribed and typed out by online transcribers. The raw data was checked by the researcher for accuracy and categorised to ascertain certain emerging themes. Thematic data analysis was used to transform the transcribed data into meaningful information. Principles and strategies to increase the trustworthiness of the data were done through a process of crystallisation. The researcher's objective was to understand and interpret the meanings the participants gave to their own experiences, to identify the strengths that emerged and make findings available to professionals and parents. The findings of the study revealed that early adolescents do present with certain strengths of an intrapersonal nature that assisted and support them through the grief and bereavement process after the suicide of a parent.

OPSOMMING

Sleutelwoorde: vroeë adolessent; puberteit; sterktes; kwalitatiewe navorsingsmetode; fenomenologiese benadering; positiewe sielkunde.

Hierdie studie fokus op die sterktes teenwoordig in vroeë adolessente gedurende puberteit na die verlies van 'n ouer aan selfmoord. Sterktes is 'n globale fenomeen, maar tog is daar baie min navorsing onderneem in verband met sterktes teenwoordig in vroeë adolessente in Suid-Afrika. Die doel van hierdie studie is om te bepaal hoe die vroeë adolessent die verlies van 'n ouer aan selfmoord gedurende hulle puberteitfase ervaar en watter sterktes teenwoordig is in hulle samestelling om hulle in staat te stel om die betekenis van die verlies in hulle lewe te help verstaan. Die ondersoek is geloods vanuit 'n fenomenologiese ontwerp en het 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering gevolg binne 'n interpreterende teoretiese raamwerk. Hierdie navorsings ontwerp maak dit moontlik vir deelnemers aan die studie om betekenis te gee aan die studie deur hulle persoonlike ervarings te deel. 'n Totaal van ses vroeë adolessent meisies, in die ouderdomsgroep van twaalf tot sestien jaar, is doelbewus geselekteer uit die Oos-Rand area, Gauteng. Vyf van die meisies is Afrikaans sprekend en een meisie is Engelssprekend. Drie van die meisies het hulle moeder aan selfmoord afgestaan en die ander drie meisies het hulle vader aan selfmoord afgestaan. Die kwalitatiewe data is ingesamel in die vorm van in-diepte onderhoude met elk van die vroeë adolessente meisies. Die onderhoude is op stemband vasgelê en deur middel van aanlynvertalers vertaal en uitgetik. Die navorser het die stembande en getikte materiaal deurgegaan vir akkuraatheid en om haarself te vereenselwig met die inhoud van die getranskribeerde data. Tematiese data-analise is toe gebruik om die getranskribeerde data in betekenisvolle inligting te omskep. Beginsels en strategieë om die geloofwaardigheid van die data te verhoog is gedoen deur middel van kristallasie. Die navorser se doelwit was om die persoonlike ervaring wat die deelnemers aan hulle gebeurtenis geveg het te verstaan en te interpreteer, om sterktes te identifiseer wat na vore kom en om betekenisvolle inligting bekend te stel aan professionele persone asook aan ouers. Die resultate van die studie beklemtoon die sterktes wat na vore gekom het in hulle ervarings rondom die selfmoord van 'n ouer as intra-persoonlike sterktes.

SECTION A

PART 1: ORIENTATION TO THE RESEARCH

1. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Worldwide a general perception exists that it is not easy to be an adolescent progressing into adulthood (Campbell, 2007:225; Stoop, 2005:6; Theron & Dalzell, 2006:397). The South African adolescent's struggle for survival and growth in a complex and ever-changing culture often occurs in a chaotic social environment that dynamically influences the course of his/her well-being (Andrews & Marotta, 2005:38; Stoop, 2005:3; Theron & Dalzell, 2006:397). The relatively new dynamic movement in psychology, called positive psychology, is very relevant as it concentrates on the understanding of individuals' strengths and factors contributing to their psychological well-being. Positive psychology seeks to study and understand what strengthens, builds, sustains and empowers a person (Fineburg, 2004:197) and aims to understand and foster the factors that allow individuals, communities and societies to thrive (Kobau, Seligman, Peterson, Diener, Zack, Chapman & Thompson, 2011:1). Research shows that these strengths help individuals to cope and still function in traumatic and difficult times (Baylis, 2004:211; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins 2003;72). Peterson (2009:2-3) and Norrish and Vella-Brodrick (2009:270) state that although positive psychology is the scientific study of what goes right in life, it does not disregard that people experience difficulties due to detrimental events. Positive psychology aims to provide a deliberate correction to the focus of psychology on problems and suggests that only focussing on disorder or disease leads to an incomplete view of the human condition. Despite the possible detrimental effects of a traumatic event on the development of the early adolescent, research has shown that some early adolescents possess certain strengths and tend to have personal resources or skills to cope effectively with and overcome traumatic events (Reichel & Schanz, 2003:221-225). Positive psychology explores qualities authentic to the individual that are intrinsically motivating with the aim of increasing the individual's resilience, well-being and engagement (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009:276).

Resilience, a key concept within positive psychology, is described as a person's capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life and the ability to bounce back (Blum, McNeely & Nonnemaker, 2002:29; Minnard, 2002:233) after stressful and potentially traumatising events (Chan, 2009:9; McGeer, 2004:103-104). Resilience is a process of positive adaptation and a strength that is especially associated with coping with loss and trauma and which may lead to greater self-worth after successfully coping with a traumatic incident (Miller, 2003:240; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is expected that most adolescents find themselves severely affected by a traumatic event, such as the suicide of a parent and often present with problems relating to the detrimental impact it has had on their overall development (Miller, 2003:240); however, this study aims to understand what strengths are present in some adolescents that have enabled them to remain psychologically intact and demonstrate resilience in the process.

Various studies state that although adolescents often view themselves as adults, they are developmentally caught in the middle years between childhood and adulthood (Campbell, 2007:224; Park, 2004:50-60; Slate & Scott, 2009:22). Early adolescence is heralded by the onset of puberty around 12 to 13 years through to 18 to 20 years (Slate & Scott, 2009:19). Adolescence is further divided into early (12-15 years), middle (16-18 years) and late adolescence (18 years) (Campbell, 2007:224; Slate & Scott, 2009:19). Erikson (Meyer & Viljoen, 2008:202-207) states that in this phase of development there is a search for personal identity where the adolescent is faced with the task of achieving a stable identity. Personal standards, views and values are shaped according to how others see them and the norms of the culture they live in (Cobb, 2018:8; Eade, 2009:186; Meyer & Viljoen, 2008:202). Keenan and Evans (2009:43) state that Piaget is known for his focus on how children think and views the dynamics in early adolescence as characterised by the development of abstract and logical thinking and the ability to generate alternative hypotheses and test them against evidence. This stage is called the formal operations stage and replaces the concrete operations of middle childhood. The task arises naturally from forces present in early adolescence; puberty, cognitive maturation, and changing social expectations (Cobb, 2010:7). The study will focus on the specific age group

from twelve to sixteen years, as the sample consisted of early adolescents in this group. As indicated by various authors (Collins, 2007:235; Eade, 2009:186; Stoop, 2005:5) adjusting to the early adolescent phase is challenging due to psycho-social and spiritual challenges that take place as well as biological developmental changes and especially rapid cognitive development.

According to Gertler, Martinez, Levine and Bertozzi (2004:1), the death of a parent is one of the most traumatic events an early adolescent can experience, and is exacerbated by the challenges experienced due to the transitional period they find themselves in. A traumatic event, as defined by the DSM IV (2000:218,219) is an event in which a person “experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the integrity of self or others” and states that children may express fear, helplessness, and horror as disorganized or agitated behaviour. For the adolescent, the loss of a parent certainly constitutes a traumatic event. Taking into account that parental loss can also be caused by natural death, accidents and homicide, it should be highlighted that parental loss through suicide might, according to Erikson's theory, cause an identity crisis impacting on the integration of the early adolescents' identification (Who am I?), drives, wishes, expectations, abilities and skills (Meyer & Viljoen, 2008:203; Wrench, 2008:8). Research also found that a traumatic event, such as parental loss, is statistically linked with a vulnerability to major depression, problems with spirituality, social exclusion, youth offending, substance abuse, school drop-outs and teenage pregnancy (Balk, 1991:1; Barlow & Durand 2002:196; Collins, 2007:467, 475; Ginott, 2003:207; Klopper, 2012; Stroebel, 2006:2; Willis, 2005:8-9; Worden, 2009:230). This may lead the early adolescent to experience intensified feelings of sadness, depression, hurt or pain (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005:238; Klopper, 2012). Particularly so if death was due to a suicidal act, which may cause secondary trauma with associated feelings of self-blame, shame, frustration and ambiguous feelings (Ginott, 2003:171; Klopper, 2009a:107; Klopper, 2012). To the early adolescent death is not only confusing but they could struggle to comprehend that death is permanent (Ginott, 2003:171; Klopper, 2009:107). They furthermore react in different ways to the death of someone close to them depending on their developmental level, closeness with the deceased parent and support available

(Andrews & Marotta, 2005:38; Black, 2005:26; Branch & Brinson, 2007:41; Monroe & Kraus, 2005:38). The loss of a parent has an immense emotional impact on the early adolescents' life (Collins, 2007; Stroebel, 2006:38). The symptoms of grief and bereavement are described as being similar to a major depressive episode and anxiety, emotional numbness, and denial are at a very intense level (Barlow & Du Rand, 2002:196). Similar findings by various authors indicate that child and adolescent bereavement and failing to grieve adequately, often results in clinical diagnoses of depression, anxiety, and behavioural disturbances (Ginott, 2003:207; Kaufman & Kaufman 2005:237; Worden, 2009:230). Bereaved early adolescents are often misdiagnosed with behavioural disorders when they are not grieving appropriately and may be more prone to violent and suicidal behaviour (Gertler, *et al.*, 2004:16; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005:237). The proneness to depression, aggression and suicidal behaviour should be seen as important in contributing to overwhelming emotions and reactions opening the 'gateway' to subsequent psychopathology in early adolescence (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005:238).

People develop certain positive character traits or strengths before the age of fifteen years that could provide them with the ability to understand a traumatic event; the confidence that they can deal with the traumatic event; and the capacity to give deeper meaning to the traumatic event (Hamlett, Pellegrini & Katz, 1992:33-47). The nurturing of these strengths are greatly influenced by the early adolescent's external and inner resources, and research showed that unless managed effectively during adolescence there is a strong possibility that the early adolescent may be prone to low self-concept, depression, anxiety and/or other psychological problems (Fineburg, 2004:201; Hamlett, Pellegrini & Katz, 1992:33-47). Miller (2003:240) is of the opinion that the early identification of strengths in the early adolescent can have a positive influence on their overall development and well-being which can be nurtured to assist with a preventative approach towards healing. As these adolescents may be confronted with fears, insecurities and questions (Klopper 2009:102-103), exploring their feelings and the strengths they possess may reveal what is happening in their world after a parental suicide. Norrish and Vella-Broderck (2009:274) see a strengths approach as based on the principle that each individual has unique strengths that can be used to enhance well-being. Therefore it is crucial to explore, through this

study, what strengths are present in the life of the early adolescents, in order to be able to “bounce back” from diversities (Blum, McNeely & Nonnemaker, 2002:29; Minnard, 2001:233). From the problem formulation the following research question was formulated: *What strengths do early adolescents’ exhibit after the suicide of a parent?*

2. RESEARCH AIM

The purpose or aim of a study refers to why one does something or why something exists (Brink, Van der Walt & Van Rensburg, 2012:12; Fouché & De Vos, 2011:94). This study aimed to conduct an explorative, descriptive study into the strengths of early adolescents after the suicide of a parent.

3. CONCEPT DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of the research the following concepts are defined:

3.1 Early adolescent

Campbell (2007:4) states that adolescence is chronologically heralded by the onset of puberty at approximately 12 years of age and progresses in different phases until the early twenties when theoretically, the young adult should have reached a somewhat more integrated identity and the capacity to commit to an intimate relationship and find his/her own niche in life. Cobb (2010:6-7) states that adolescence spans the years from 11 to 19.

For the purpose of this study the early adolescence will be seen as generally beginning with puberty around the age of 12 to 16 years of age where the mid-adolescence phase begins. Cobb (2010:28) adds that early adolescence is a period of transition that differs in length for each individual and is a growing up process that includes making decisions and making mistakes.

This is to be considered the period of human development during which a young person must grow from dependency to independence, autonomy and maturity (Cobb, 2010:6; Keenan & Evans, 2009:94). Early adolescence is characterised by biological, cognitive, psychological and social changes in the young person's life.

The participants were between 12 and 16 years of age and observed to be in the early adolescent phase.

3.2 Strengths

Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan & Hurling (2010:15-16) define strengths as "characteristics that allow a person to perform well or at their personal best" and include personal, physical and psychological strengths. Hodas (2006:37) states that, "strength-based beliefs include the presumption that the early adolescent is doing the best that he/she can do, and wants to do well". Factors that may involve limitations in effective functioning may involve lack of support, stability, knowledge, and/or skills.

3.3 Resilience

Resilience in psychology refers to the idea of an individual's tendency to "bounce back" or recover from adversity (Lam & McBride-Chang, 2007:160; Miller, 2003:240; Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2006:17).

3.4 Grief

Grief can be defined as the distress and intense sorrow in response to the loss of someone or something to which one is strongly attached, usually through bereavement and in severe cases can amount to an adjustment disorder (Colman, 2009:326).

3.5 Bereavement

Bereavement is defined by Colman (2009:86) as the grief reaction that often occurs following the loss of a relative or friend through death.

3.6 Parental suicide

Suicide refers to the act or an instance of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally, especially by a person with years of good judgment and of sound mind (Colman, 2009:743). In this study we deal with the wilful act of a parent, who has children in the early adolescent phase and that committed such an act.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Literature review

For the proposed study an initial overview of the following themes was done: adolescents' development, positive psychology, parental suicide, grief and bereavement. The literature research for this study was conducted through the search engines of North-West University Library, EBSCO, E-Journal finder, JSTOR, ProQuest, Psynet, SACat, SAGE. These search engines were used to conduct an in-depth literature review on strengths, resilience and positive psychology.

4.2 Empirical investigation

4.2.1 *Research approach, paradigm and design*

A research paradigm is an all-inclusive philosophical framework of the way in which scientific knowledge is produced (Brink *et al.*, 2012:25; Mouton, 2001:113). Moody (1990) in Brink *et al.* (2012:25) explains that a paradigm organises a researcher in his/her thinking, observing and interpreting processes. The latter further states that a paradigm frames the way in which a discipline's concerns are viewed, as well as direct the research project regarding structuring of questions.

Paradigms for human research are considered in terms of three characteristics in which they respond to basic philosophical questions concerning a problem or need. Firstly, a paradigm is made up of ontology where the researcher asks the question: "What is the nature of reality?" Secondly, the epistemology where the researcher looks what is known about that reality by exploring the relationship between the inquirer and the phenomenon being studied. Lastly, the methodology refers to the particular ways of coming to know about that reality by choosing a method to obtain knowledge (Brink *et al.*, 2012:24,25). Nieuwenhuis (2007a:59) and Effendi and Hamber (2006:123) state that researchers working from an interpretivistic paradigm believe that people's subjective experiences are genuine and should be taken as real (ontology), that others' experiences can be understood by interacting with them and listening to what they tell us (epistemology), and that qualitative research techniques are well-matched to this task (methodology).

As illustrated in this next table (Table 1) is the lens through which the researcher experienced and saw the nature of reality and how truth can be discovered.

Qualitative research		
Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology
What is the nature of reality?	The researcher looks what is known by exploring phenomenological studies.	Particular ways of coming to know about phenomenon studied
Positive psychology	Interpretive paradigm	In-depth interviews, field notes, drawings

Table 1: Summary of lenses used for this study

Interpretivism refers to an approach in social science that focuses on the significance of “insiders” perceptions to understand truth (Brink *et al.*, 2012:25). Researchers that use an interpretive paradigm rely on actual accounts and try to describe what they see in rich, descriptive detail and present the findings in engaging, expressive, and sometimes striking and revealing language (Brink *et al.*, 2012:25; Fouché & Schurink, 2011:309; Effendi & Hamber, 2006:124). Within this study the researcher tried to understand the strengths of early adolescents whose parent committed suicide, within their life-world (socio-economic setting; psycho-emotional environment). The theoretical underpinning of interpretivism is therefore seen as best fitted for this study as the researcher explored the subjective experiences of early adolescents. With an interpretive paradigm that recognises the value of the qualitative research approach, the researcher aimed at gaining a holistic understanding of the meaning the participants attach to their experience in order to understand the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2007:36; Nieuwenhuis, 2007b:75).

The research approach for this study was a qualitative research approach as qualitative research tends to be concerned with the meaning and understanding of the phenomenon in its entirety, rather than to focus on specific concepts (Brink *et al.*, 2012:11). Within qualitative research the researcher is interested in how people make sense of the world and how they experience events (De Vos & Strydom,

2011:31). The aim of the research, in using qualitative research, was to explore and describe the strengths of early adolescents after the suicide of a parent. Creswell (2008:4) furthermore states that within qualitative research, the researchers are concerned with exploring and understanding the meaning people attribute to events or human phenomena. In this study the researcher explored the meaning early adolescents give to their experience after a parent committed suicide to identify possible strengths in the early adolescents. The process of qualitative research involves the asking of questions and observing participants (Creswell *et al.*, 2007:245; Fouché & De Vos, 2011:95). The focus is therefore on the people's interpretations of events rather than the researcher's interpretation (Brink *et al.*, 2012:11). The nature of qualitative research studies is highly personal and experiential and is undertaken to explore what meaning participants make of their experiences to produce results accurately (Jansen, 2007:9; Nieuwenhuis, 2007b:76).

The research design is described as phenomenology and is considered a philosophical viewpoint as well as an approach of qualitative methodology, that focuses on people's subjective and lived experiences and interpretations of their world (Creswell, 2008:13; Fouché & Schurink, 2011:309; Mouton, 2001:113). Phenomenology furthermore focuses on the subjective understanding of the participant as well as having insight into the social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the participants involved (Brink *et al.*, 2012:121; Fouché & Schurink, 2011:317). The focal point for this study, was therefore how the participants construct meaning and interpretation of their experiences, how they understood, had insight in and made meaning of their world (Brink *et al.*, 2012:122; Krauss, 2005:763). Phenomenology starts with the understanding that our experience is never of the world as it is, but the world as filtered through our senses and our understanding of the world. It is a search for understanding and insight based on what is clear or revealed by the situation rather than the interpretation of the observer (Creswell, 2008:13). A phenomenological design was used to enable the researcher to understand the subjective meaning of early adolescents' perceptions of their experiences after the suicide of a parent.

4.2.2 Participants

A population is defined as the entire group of persons or objects that is of interest to the researcher (Brink *et al.*, 2012:131), in other words, that meets the criteria that the researcher is interested in studying. Purposive sampling is based on the judgement of the researcher as it may not be possible to reach every early adolescent in the East Rand area and the criteria that the researcher outlined as the most characteristic and representative of the population and that served the purpose of the study best (Brink *et al.*, 2012:131, 141; Monette, Sullivan & Dejong, 2005:148; Strydom & Delpont, 2011:392). The participants for the research were purposively selected from the population as described by using a non-probability, purposive voluntary sampling design (Strydom & Delpont, 2011:392). For the purpose of this study the sample referred to all early adolescents (12-16 years) referred to a Christian Counselling Centre in the East Rand who had lost a parent due to suicide within the past three years.

Due to the purposive sampling design, the following inclusion criteria were required for participation:

- Participants were from the ages of twelve to sixteen years;
- Participants who experienced the loss of a parent due to suicide within the past three years to explore what strengths are present and helpful in the grieving process;
- Participants were early adolescents referred to a Christian community centre on the East Rand where the researcher has access to the community in the East Rand;
- Participants were bilingual in that they spoke Afrikaans and English;

Exclusion criterium:

- Participants who received counselling from the researcher were excluded from the study.

Liamputtong (2013:19) states that saturation refers to a process where data is collected until no new data is added to the unfolding analysis. Sampling numbers were not predetermined at the start of the research but sampling continued until the

researcher found that new data no longer added to the unfolding analysis (Liamputtong, 2013:19; Kelly, 2008:288).

4.2.3 Research procedure

The procedure for the study was as follows:

- Written permission for the study was obtained from the senior pastor of the Christian Community Church as the study as well as the interviews were done at the community counselling centre which falls under the community church;
- Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from NWU: NWU-00060-12-A1;
- A literature study was conducted;
- All participants were identified and made aware of the nature and aim of the study;
- Written consent (Addendum 3) was obtained from the parents of the participants and written assent (Addendum 4) from the participants for the undertaking of the study as well as written permission from the parent and adolescent for voice recording and note-taking of individual interviews. The confidentiality of the information disclosed were discussed and appointments for the individual interviews scheduled;
- Data was gathered, transcribed and analysed;
- The findings are discussed in Section B.

4.2.4 Data collection method

4.2.4.1 In-depth interviews

Qualitative methods include any data that is captured that was not numerical in nature and one of the methods used to capture data is through in-depth interviews (Greeff, 2011:352). The researcher made use of in-depth interviews as the main method to collect the data, with the aim of obtaining information regarding the early adolescent's strengths after the death of a parent due to suicide (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:322).

In-depth interviewing has the potential of discovering what is inside people and results in the qualitative inquiry being more intrusive and involving greater reactivity than quantitative studies where surveys, tests, and assessments ask for quantitative data (Brink *et al.*, 2012:158; De Vos & Strydom, 2011:32). During the in-depth interviews the researcher was engaged with the participants and not detached. This was done through the process of attentive listening, showing interest, understanding and respect. Caring trust was also built and the researcher worked towards a more intimate interaction (Greeff, 2011:351).

During the in-depth interviews responses of the participants were used for further exploration and probing for deeper meaning and understanding (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2011:1). A detailed description of the participants' experience of a traumatic event was gained and gave the researcher and the participants much more flexibility to follow interesting avenues that surfaced during the interview (Fouché & Delport, 2001a:75; Fouché & Schurink, 2011:312; Greeff, 2011:351; Mouton, 2001:53).

The purpose of the interview was to use an open-ended question, probing and follow-up questions, to allow the participant's story to unfold in his/her own language (Brink *et al.*, 2012:159). The interview was opened with a general discussion on how the early adolescent experienced early adolescence and followed by an open question: Would you please tell me what happened with your mom/dad? The researcher asked follow up questions and probed for deeper meaning to get a thick description and an understanding of the participant's experience – all through the eyes of the early adolescents.

Six in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants at the counselling centre on days that were suitable for the participants. The interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes per participant with a second interview to address the gaps that were identified.

4.2.4.2 Observation

In-depth interviews allow the researcher the opportunity to use the technique of observation to observe behaviour as it occurs and collects descriptive data on

behaviour, events and situations (Brink *et al.*, 2012:150). Brink *et al.* (2012:151) state that in unstructured observation the researcher has the opportunity to describe events or behaviours with no preconceived ideas of what he/she will see.

Observation offers the researcher a diverse way of collecting data. It does not only rely on what the participants say, do or think. Brink *et al.* (2012:153) state that scientific observation has several advantages as a data-collection method as what people say that they do is not often what they actually do. The researcher observed for the manifestation of pre-operative signs of anxiety, displays of emotions like sadness, aggression or hostility, and no other data collection method can match the depth and variety of information that can be collected through observational techniques (Brink *et al.*, 2012:152).

4.2.4.3 Field notes

Field notes were used to enhance the observation process in that notes were taken of how the participants' emotions impacted on their bodies and were captured soon after the meetings and interviews with the participants. Brink *et al.* (2012:159) state that field notes are written record-keeping devices for unstructured interviews (in-depth interviews) and assisted the researcher in deriving meaning as the researcher thinks or reflects on experiences and observations to herself in the process. Field notes and observations were useful to add to the thick description.

4.2.4.4 Drawings

Theron, Mitchell, Smith & Stuart, (2001:19-36) state that drawings have been used for a long time to measure cognitive development; as projective techniques; to explore conscious and unconscious experiences; and as a research tool to complement verbal research methods. Although in-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection, drawings were used (not as a projective technique) to encourage meaning-making that allows the drawer to give voice to what the drawing was intended to convey (Theron *et al.*, 2011:20). Because of the sensitive nature of the topic being the suicide of a parent, "children have the ability to capture feelings and emotions through drawings and painting while lacking an equally expressive

written or spoken language" (Burke & Prosser, 2008:414). Robin Goodman (in Theron *et al.*, 2011:20) stated in one of the opening essays to *The Day Our World Changed: Children's Art of 9/11* when he wrote:

Special x-ray cameras for examining what children saw and felt on September 11, 2001, don't exist. The art in this collection, created in the first four months after 9/11 does, however, provide a snapshot of children's raw and immediate reactions. A private corner of the children's world of uncensored memories, thoughts and feelings is explored here in their drawings and paintings (p.14).

The use of drawings allowed the researcher to get to the memories, thoughts and feelings of the participants as the drawings were not interpreted by the researcher but explained by the participants from the meaning they gave to it. The participants were asked to make a drawing of what helps them to cope well (after the suicide of the parent) and write three to four sentences about the drawing or ask the researcher to write it for them (Theron, *et al.*, 2011:109).

In a second interview the participants were asked to write a paragraph/short essay on reflecting back on the past two to three years and what strengths could they draw on that helped them in their grieving process. As strengths is a new concept the researcher introduced the VIA-strengths (Park & Peterson, 2006:891-909) which are specifically designed for the age group of 11-17 to help them in identifying what possible strengths they can relate to that were helpful and that they apply in their daily life.

4.3 Data analysis

The researcher used qualitative data analysis. Nieuwenhuis (2007c:99) states that qualitative data analysis is based on an interpretative perspective that aspires to explore significant content of qualitative data. The data analysis process involved the transformation of a variety of data generating experiences (in-depth interviews, observations, drawings) into text material. The researcher constantly kept in mind the research question while reflecting on the collected data, noticing certain gaps, collecting more data and moving in a circular manner where all the components are

interlinked. Due to the qualitative nature of this study the focus was on the analysis of words (themes) and the choice of qualitative thematic analysis was best suited and relevant to the research question. Thematic analysis is defined as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Liamputtong, 2013:109). It minimally organises and describes the data set in rich detail. However, frequently it goes further than this and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006:77-101; Liamputtong, 2013:109). Thematic data analysis is outlined by various authors as phases or a step by step guideline to analyse the data. These phases or steps are not necessarily unique to thematic analysis and are also found in other forms of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87; Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011:403). The data for this research was analysed as follows:

- Step 1. Familiarisation and immersion: The researcher read and reread the transcripts multiple times until said researcher became familiar with the data. Subsequently, when a preliminary understanding of the meaning of the data started to surface, field notes were reviewed, diagrams were made and brainstorming took place between colleagues, professionals and experts.
- Step 2. Generating initial codes: Coding refers to a process of breaking up the data, categorising it in analytically relevant ways (Schurink *et al.*, 2011:411-412). The researcher used a method of colour coding of similarities and contradictions in the data, relevant to the research question.
- Step 3: Searching for themes: The coding process allowed sub-themes to surface during the familiarisation phase and could then be categorised into main themes related to the research question.
- Step 4: Elaboration: Sub-themes were explored and elaborated on and further categorised into main themes. In this way, data that previously seemed unrelated, could be constructed together to form a rich and meaningful description and thereby forming a thematic “map”.
- Step 5: Interpretation and checking: The researcher discussed the data with colleagues and experts in the relevant fields, as this is one way of verifying the findings.

4.4 Trustworthiness

Liamputtong (2013:25) states that the participants were purposively and carefully selected for their knowledge and unique characteristics to enhance trustworthiness and credibility. Trustworthiness was further improved by the researcher staying within her scope of practice as registered counsellor and “bracketing” to ensure accurate reflection of the participants' experience and not being biased by the assumptions of the researcher.

Trustworthiness was furthermore enhanced through the researcher relying on the interpretive process. In this process the researcher's experiences and preconceived ideas and beliefs which the researcher might have about strengths in adolescents, which could have influenced the interpretation of the data and in turn have influenced the trustworthiness of the study, were bracketed (Brink *et al.*, 2012:122; Schurink *et al.*, 2011:421). Burns and Grove (2011), in Brink *et al.* (2012:126) perceive the researcher's self-understanding as an interactive process between the researcher's personal history, values, gender, social class, race and ethnicity and those of the participants. The researcher therefore thought of her own assumptions (Palmer, 2009:16) from her experience as a registered counsellor as well as someone who lost a parent (although not suicide). This was acknowledged, during self-reflection, in the context of the study and the researcher therefore made a conscience decision to bracket assumptions about how an early adolescent feel and think after losing a parent to suicide. The researcher furthermore developed an awareness of the lived experiences and tried to be open to the meaning that participants attached to the phenomenon. The researcher was aware of the sensitivity, sadness and confusion surrounding the issues of suicide and approached the participants with empathy (Brink *et al.*, 2012:122).

The trustworthiness of the research was further improved by the verbatim transcribing of the voice recordings to ensure accurate reflection of the participants' experiences. During the analysing of the data the researcher reviewed the data again and again until there were clarity and understanding. The researcher read the transcribed notes and field notes multiple times until themes formed. A thick description of how data was collected, captured and analysed, was provided (Brink *et al.*, 2012:122).

Trustworthiness was further enhanced by persistent observation by focussing on the early adolescents' life-world and observing and listening for strengths present or the absence thereof. The researcher consistently looked for multiple influences through a process of continual and tentative analysis to determine what had significance for the study (Brink *et al.*, 2012:172).

Lincoln and Guba (cited in Schurink, *et al.*, 2011:419) have suggested four constructs: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which were used to ensure the trustworthiness and assisted in determining the "truth value" and soundness of the current study.

4.4.1 Credibility

Rossouw (in Delpont & Fouché, 2011:428) states, that credibility in qualitative research is a concept equivalent to internal validity in quantitative studies. It refers to the degree to which findings and methods, that are used to generate the findings, can be trusted. When conducting research it is therefore of utmost importance that the researcher aims to ensure that the data gathered is reliable and suitable for the research (Delpont & Fouché, 2011:428). Credibility is furthermore the strength of a qualitative study as it aims to explore a problem or describe a setting, a process; a social group or a pattern of interaction (Strydom, 2001:116).

Credibility was established by the researcher by spending enough time to gain insight and learn about the phenomenon of interest as well as to communicate with experts in the field of positive psychology, strengths, grief and bereavement and the phase of early adolescence. Credibility was also ensured through using considerable time in the interviewing of the participants and exploring the early adolescents' strengths. The researcher continued contact with the participants to verify and clarify any vagueness. Familiarity with the early adolescent phase was build up generally over the last seven years by the researcher spending considerable time with the age group of 12 to 16 years in order to develop a comfortable relationship with them by mostly observing them and listening attentively to what is important to them and not to be led by own opinion and preconceptions. The researcher stayed in the process

of data collection until data saturation had been reached where no new information came to light (Brink *et al.*, 2012:172).

Schurink *et al.*, (2011:420) suggested methods to establish credibility and peer debriefing were used on a continual basis with the team of professionals at the counselling centre as well as experts in the field of bereavement for new insights to come to light. Furthermore, Brink *et al.*, (2012:172) states that a neutral peer's input and guidance from the study leader presented the opportunity to have others' viewpoints as well as to be made aware of own attitudes (Brink *et al.*, 2012:172).

The credibility of the study was furthermore established through data triangulation by using multiple data gathering methods such as in-depth interviews, field notes, the use of a drawing and incomplete sentences. The multiple data sources ensured a greater degree of understanding and insight (Brink *et al.*, 2012:172).

4.4.2 Transferability

Brink *et al.* (2012:173) define transferability as the ability to apply the findings in other contexts or to other participants. The qualitative researcher does not focus primarily on generalising and statistical means to produce the results, but rather on defining observations within the specific situations in which they take place. To establish transferability in qualitative research the responsibility to do so lies with those who wish to apply it in another context. The researcher used thick descriptions (Brink *et al.*, 2012:173) by collecting sufficient detailed descriptions of the interpretive data from the participants' experiences and meanings. Purposive sampling enhances transferability when the range of specific information obtained is maximised from and about the particular context, through purposefully selecting participants relevant to the research question and in terms of knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation and the locations (Brink *et al.*, 2012:173).

4.4.3 Dependability

Dependability is parallel to reliability and is concerned with the stability of the data over time (Brink *et al.*, 2012:172). Researchers need to be able to demonstrate any changes or shifts in how the research was conducted. The research process was

documented and audited, through frequent contact with the research supervisors throughout the research process (Brink *et al.*, 2012:172). The dependability was further established by dense description of the research methods used in the research, continued data tracing through meta evaluation and critical reflections from colleagues, peer examinations and supervision by research supervisors (Brink *et al.*, 2012:172).

4.4.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is described as being parallel to objectivity and can be verified by conformability audit, triangulation, audit trail and reflexivity (Brink *et al.*, 2012:173). The purpose of confirmability is to evaluate the accuracy and evaluation of data, whether or not the findings, interpretations and conclusions are supported by the data, apart from the evaluator and not simply figments of the evaluator's imagination. All data must be able to be tracked to its source and the logic used to assemble the interpretations into structurally coherent and corroborating wholes must be both explicit and implicit in the narrative of the case study (Brink *et al.*, 2012:173). Inquiry audit aims to examine the accuracy and evaluate whether or not the findings, interpretations and conclusions are supported by the data. The conclusions in the study were supported by empirical data as well as literature (Brink *et al.*, 2012:173; Schurink *et al.*, 2011:420).

The researcher aimed to establish confirmability by means of a degree of neutrality where the findings were shaped by the participants' perspectives and not through research bias (Brink *et al.*, 2012:173; Schurink *et al.*, 2011:421). The researcher furthermore reviewed the transcribed data against the voice recordings of the participants to verify that the information received is accurate. The researcher aimed to ensure confirmability further by reviewing the congruency of the information provided by the participants' drawings and the interpretations of the research participants on their drawing to avoid that the interpretations were fuelled by the researcher's imagination (Brink *et al.*, 2012:174). The researcher used collected qualitative data in the form of voice recordings that were transcribed for accuracy. Written text material interpreted by the participants in their own words enhanced credibility. Evaluating the congruency of the collected data from multiple sources was

discussed for clarity and understanding with the participants involved (Brink *et al.*, 2012:174).

4.5 Ethical considerations

Research in the social science field comes with a list of ethical issues, problems and pitfalls as humans are researched in this field (Graziano & Raulin, 2004:67). Ethics are therefore a set of principles formed by a group or an individual which is widely accepted and which in turn provides rules and behavioural guidelines towards correct conduct to those participating in research (Brink *et al.*, 2012:43; Strydom, 2011:113).

The researcher as a registered counsellor adhered to the ethical code of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) when working with the participants. The researcher also obtained permission to proceed with the research from the reviewing panel of the Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies as well as the research committee of NWU. Ethical permission was obtained from the NWU ethics committee with reference number NWU-0060-12-A1, and written permission was obtained from the Community Church and the Counselling Centre (See Annexure 6 – Letter of permission granted).

For the purpose of this study, the following ethical aspects were taken into account during this research (Brink *et al.*, 2012:174; Strydom, 2011:113):

4.5.1 Informed consent

Written consent was voluntarily obtained by research participants as well as their remaining parent and they were informed about the process of interviewing, voice recording, confidentiality, the goal and objectives of the study, the duration of involvement of the research study, the procedures that were followed and also about the results of the research study (Brink *et al.*, 2012:38, 40; Strydom, 2011:117). Parents signed a consent form (Addendum 3) and the participants signed an assent form (Addendum 4).

4.5.2 Voluntary participation

The participants took part voluntarily and were not coerced into doing the research. They were informed that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time if they feel uncomfortable and ensured of their right to privacy as well as respect and sensitivity (Rubin & Babbie in Strydom, 2011:116).

4.5.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Protecting the identities of research participants was a top priority and names were kept anonymous by not describing any identifying characteristics and by using pseudo names (Brink *et al.*, 2012:39). Research material and all information shared by the participant were locked in a safe, in the researcher's study at the counselling centre. The data will be saved for five years at the Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies, NWU. The researcher informed the participants of this anonymity and highlighted it on the consent form (see Addendum 4). Interviews were scheduled at the counselling centre at a convenient time for the participants.

4.5.4 Avoidance of harm

Research participants were protected against physical or emotional harm by the researcher being sensitive for what they were going through. They were seen in a safe and private setting at the counselling centre to ensure that other counsellors were available if they needed to talk to someone after the interview. No names were put down on field notes or transcribing material to ensure their anonymity. Participation was completely voluntary and therefore withdrawal at any point in the study was accepted and made known to the early adolescents (Brink *et al.*, 2012:35).

4.5.5 Deception of participants

Participants were informed about every step in the research project and information was accurately portrayed pertaining to the research study. They were encouraged to ask questions and were provided with relevant information regarding their questions (Struwig & Stead in Strydom, 2011:118).

4.5.6 Compensation

Strydom (2011:121) states that it is reasonable to reimburse participants for costs incurred such as transport. The researcher kept the sessions at the Counselling centre as it is central and easily reachable. No compensation was provided to the participants. They were only provided with light refreshments.

4.5.7 Debriefing of participants

McBurney (in Strydom, 2011:122) explains debriefing sessions as sessions during which participants get the opportunity to work through their experience of taking part in the research and have possible questions answered. The researcher allowed for an opportunity where the participants could discuss their feelings about the research by having other professional counsellors available if they felt the need to talk to someone (Babbie in Strydom, 2011:122).

4.5.8 Cooperation with contributors and sponsors

The researcher acknowledged all contributors that participated and helped in the research process at the counselling centre (Strydom, 2011:124). A written agreement was signed by those who have contributed to the research and stated that they willingly partook in the research process so as to assist the researcher in conducting and completing her research. A copy was provided to each contributor and the Community Church in Kempton Park.

4.5.9 Publication of findings

Strydom (2011:126) states that the findings of the study must be introduced to the reading public in written form. The findings of this study will be published in a thesis format and kept at the NWU library as a requirement of NWU.

4.5.10 Honesty with professional colleagues

The researcher ensured that she is competent and skilled to conduct the research by regularly engaging in supervision with her study leader and continuously consulting literature (Brink *et al.*, 2012:35).

4.5.11 Ethics of report writing

Brink *et al.* (2012:203) state that researchers have an obligation to the participants of the research, colleagues and the profession to make sure the data they publish are honest and accurate. The researcher agreed to publish data that was not invented or manipulated and those limitations and problems hindering the research process were not concealed or ignored. The researcher also generated honest analysis and as far as possible interpreted without personal political and emotional bias.

5. CHOICE AND STRUCTURE OF RESEARCH ARTICLE

The dissertation follows the article format as prescribed by the North-West University. The dissertation consists of the following sections:

Section A

Part I: Orientation to the research (Harvard referencing style)

Part II: Literature review (Harvard referencing style)

Section B: Article (APA referencing style)

Section C: Summary, evaluation, conclusion and recommendations

Section D: Addenda

The *Journal of Adolescent Research* has been identified as a possible journal for submission.

6. SUMMARY

The way the early adolescent experiences the early adolescent phase and puberty was explored and introduced as well as how a traumatic incident like a parent committing suicide may impact on the early adolescent. Strengths and positive psychology were introduced and it is hoped by the researcher that the exploration of the problem may reveal new data in this light. The problem formulation, aims and objectives and research question were discussed. Key concepts were briefly defined and described. Part II will include the literature review.

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PART II: LITERATURE REVIEW

1. INTRODUCTION

The literature review focuses on the early adolescent's biological, psychological, social and spiritual development as well as what strengths enhance their well-being in the face of adversity. There will also be a focus on the early adolescent in trauma and dealing with grief and bereavement. A new focus area, positive psychology, will be introduced to see how early adolescents manage in times of diversity in helping themselves, to be of help to their families and for their communities. Positive psychology refers to the study of positive behaviours and traits that have been used to define "character strengths" which are seen as central to well-being (Compton, 2005:6-8).

2. DEFINITIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 The early adolescent

When defining adolescents, Cobb (2010) emphasises that three concepts, biological, psychological and sociological changes, must be considered in order for a clearer understanding of what adolescence is. A biological definition emphasises the events of puberty that transform the bodies of children into those of sexually and physically mature adults. A psychological definition distinguishes adolescence in terms of the developmental tasks to be accomplished, each of which relates to the central task of achieving a personal identity. A sociological definition defines adolescents in terms of their status within society, specifically, as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood (Cobb, 2010:28).

The biological, psychological and sociological definition will be elaborated upon under the following areas of adolescent development:

2.1.1 Physical development of the early adolescent

The adolescent years refer to the biological and physical transformation of children's bodies into those of sexually and physically mature adults which is universal in all cultures (Brinthaup & Lipka, 2002:6). An influx of hormones accounts for these

dramatic events. The growth spurt consists of several processes and is regulated by different hormones that occur at different rates and may leave the early adolescent confused as to what to expect from one day to the next (Cobb, 2010:6). This growth spurt is one of the first noticeable changes and begins just after age 10 in girls and peaking at about age 12, with boys following about 2 years later and peaking at about 14 years of age. The developmental process mostly associated with puberty is menstruation in girls and ejaculation in boys which occur fairly late in the process (Cobb, 2010:6; Keenan & Evans, 2008:94).

Various authors (Berk, 2013:4; Campbell, 2007:224; Keenan & Evans, 2008:93; Slate & Scott, 2009) agree that adolescence is chronologically heralded by the onset of puberty around 11 to 12 years through to 18 to 20 years and can further be divided into early (11 to 15 years), middle (16 to 18 years) and late adolescence (18+ years). Brinthaupt and Lipka (2002:30) state that early adolescence happens between ages 10 to 15 years and as such it is a time of maximal discontinuity with the past.

Various studies (Weinberger, Elvevag, & Giedd, 2005; Park, 2004:52), however, state that physiological changes in the brain which typify adolescent behaviour continue until the mid-twenties and therefore suggest that adolescence possibly continues until 25 years of age. Trying to connect a specific age to this phase is difficult because of the various levels of maturity due to biological, psychological, cognitive, cultural and sociological differences (Cobb, 2010:6; Gouws, Kruger & Burger, 2000:2). The early adolescent leaves behind the childhood phase of concrete thinking and is growing into the distinct developmental phase of adolescence characterised by enormous physical, emotional and psychological shifts that can and often do manifest in quite dramatic changes in behaviour (Andrews & Marotta, 2005:38; Stoop, 2005:3; Theron & Dalzell, 2006:397).

2.1.2 Psychological development of the early adolescent

Finkenauer, Engels, Meeus and Oosterwegel (2002:26-30) describe the developmental task of early adolescence as "the pains and gains of knowing who and what you are". In order to form an identity the early adolescent needs to let go of the safe and protected environment childhood provided and find a way to be able to

get a firm hold on adulthood. Meyer, Moore and Viljoen (2008:202) state that this is the time when adolescents seek answers to questions like "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?". Erikson (in Meyer, *et al.*, 2008:202) calls this the time of the adolescent (12 - 18) to pursue a self-image and seeking congruence between the self-image and the role expectations society has. Questions like "What am I in the eyes of other people?"; "How do images that people have of me correlate with my self-image?"; "How can my previously acquired roles and skills fit into the career world and my projected future?" are on the foreground for the early adolescent (Collins, 2007:235; Eade, 2009:186; Smith & Handler, 2007:237; Stoop, 2005:5; Videon, 2005:56).

Erikson identified these central most pressing questions of adolescence as a search for personal identity where an awareness exists that they are not children anymore but also not part of adulthood yet (Cobb, 2010:19). Adolescents reach a point where they are faced with the task of achieving a stable identity by achieving a sense of themselves that goes beyond the many changes in their experiences and roles which will present an opportunity to leave childhood behind and move towards adulthood that they have yet to enter (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2002:4; Cobb, 2010:8; Keenan & Evens, 2008:24). This sense of self influences how they shape their personal standards according to how others see them and the norms of the culture they live in (Cobb, 2010:8; Gouws *et al.*, 2000:94; Meyer *et al.*, 2008:202). Puberty may furthermore bring about a degree of self-centredness in children who grow into early adolescents as they become very aware of the changes that take place in their body (Grills-Taquechel, Norton & Ollendick, 2010:494).

Early adolescents' search for the truth about who they are, begins when the separate world they live in allows for more independency as they seek to establish themselves as separate, self-governing individuals (Berk, 2013:319). One of the ways in which the early adolescent can gain a sense of who they are is, according to Cobb (2010:141), by practicing to make their own decisions.

Another characteristic next to autonomy that is critical in early adolescent development is the ability to think in the abstract. Cobb (2010:131) states that the ability to do so underlies a form of egocentrism in which the early adolescent fails to

distinguish their own concerns from those of others. As so much of what they think revolve around themselves, early adolescents believe that others too are thinking about them thereby creating an imaginary audience (Cobb, 2010:132; Muus, 2006:302). Cobb (2010:132) further states that this self-centeredness can create the perception that no one understands him/her and the danger is that the early adolescent may fail to see that what happens to others could happen to them as well. The ability of the early adolescent to think about their own thoughts and to envision the thoughts of others bring about a new awareness of their own separateness from others and of what they have in common with others through shared values and behaviours (Cobb, 2010:132; Keenan & Evans, 2009:142). Intellectual development in adolescence makes it possible for the early adolescent to react emotionally in new ways, considering what a situation might mean as well as the way it appears (Cobb, 2010:136).

Early adolescence is also a period where important school transitions take place that add to the stresses in trying to define their self-concept in part through their successes in school by increased abilities to learn and apply skills mastered (Finkenauer *et al.*, 2002:31). The lack of success or failure can influence the early adolescent to such an extent that a low or completely declined self-concept develops. Failure in this may also have a detrimental effect on the self-evaluation of other abilities, while success may enhance the self-evaluation of abilities in other areas (Finkenauer *et al.*, 2002:31; Gouws *et al.*, 2000:83).

2.1.3 Social development of the early adolescent

Early adolescence is also a period of social change and relationships within the family change in various ways as the early adolescent begins to spend less time with family members and more time at school and with their peers (Cobb, 2010:178; Finkenauer *et al.*, 2002:33). As the early adolescent is an inevitable part of their life world, they should never be considered in isolation, but always in the context of a relationship. Therefore the importance of the interpersonal and very intimate nature of the early adolescent's environment includes not only where they live and where they go to school but also includes the self in the form of how they experience themselves in relation to their family, friends, teachers and others as well as the

meaningfulness of such relationships (Cobb, 2010:12, 169). Psycho-social growth and development can particularly be observed in relationships and therefore all relationships impact on all areas of the early adolescent's well-being (Crosnoe, 2011:149; Beeka, 2008:49). The life world is meant to be the world in which the early adolescent conducts both a way of life and mode of being and can be represented as a network of relationships with him/herself, others, objects, ideas and God (Velarde, Starling & Wallerstein, 2002:267).

Berk (2013:318) states that puberty magnifies gender differences in appearance, causing adolescents to think about themselves in more restrictive gender-linked ways. As the early adolescent becomes aware of their sexuality and starts to date, they often become more gender stereotyped as a way of increasing their attractiveness to the opposite sex. Parents and society with traditional gender-role beliefs encourage "gender appropriate" activities and behaviour to a greater extent in this stage of development.

During the adolescent years of becoming more independent, the relationship with parents changes significantly. Their relationships are not as warm as when they were younger and more needy of their parents, as in their striving to autonomy and independency they came to experience more conflict with their parents (Cobb, 2010:169, 178). The relationship with parents is the first and most important relationship in the early adolescent's life and when practised with love it implies mutual knowledge, care, trust and authority (Deutsch & Hirsch, 2002:293). Parents who educate their children according to strict but fair authority, provide them with security and diminished doubt and anxiety and subsequently may empower them to be more resilient to traumatic events (Deutsch & Hirsch, 2002:293; Velarde *et al.*, 2002:267).

The size of the family also has an impact on the development of the early adolescent as living with brothers and or sisters brings a different experience to family life and growing up and those early adolescents are exposed to different joys and frustrations (Cobb, 2010:194). Buist, (in Cobb, 2010:194) state that over three-quarters of adolescents have at least one sibling with whom they, despite conflicts, develop close bonds of affection and these increase with age. Siblings which are

closer in age to each other provide emotional support, friendship, and company, which cause them to be more in touch with one another's problems and can often offer better advice than a parent (Cobb, 2010:194).

Friendships change with age and the pre-adolescents' concern with being accepted starts to reflect a concern with self-discovery, and self-disclosure in early adolescence (Cobb, 2010:232). Friends in adolescence contribute to their well-being and allow the opportunity for experimenting new behaviours with their friends and in so doing discover new things about themselves. This also allows for the development of a group identity and the formation of an ideal self-image that are important for the building of a positive self-esteem (Cobb, 2012:232; Nicholson, Irwin, & Dwivedi, 2010:232).

Sometimes society and/or parents expect a lifestyle from the early adolescents that is contrary to the norms and values formed within their peer-group and are acceptable to them such, as their view on sexuality, pregnancy and abortion, alcohol and substance abuse (Gouws *et al.*, 2000:7). While primary changes in the bio-psycho-social and spiritual development of early adolescents take place universally, not all early adolescents undergo a period of "storm and stress" as for some their early adolescent years are the beginning of an exciting road to adulthood (Crosnoe, 2011:40; Keenan & Evans, 2009:94).

Early adolescents have a strong group identity and often define themselves through their peers as they acquire a sense of accomplishment based upon the achievement of greater physical strength and self-control (Gouws *et al.*, 2000:66). As social relationships outside the family become important, relationships with others undergo dramatic transformations and social recognition, acceptance and approval by others become a major concern for them (Finkenauer *et al.*, 2002:33). To not be accepted in their peer group might cause the early adolescent to experience social rejection that may impact on their social development. Social rejection is associated with loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem, whereas acceptance in the peer-group may enhance their self-confidence and may have a positive influence on the early adolescents' self and identity formation (Finkenauer *et al.*, 2002:40). Psychological and social changes affect and transform the early adolescent's relational identity and

they express more insecurity about their social position than younger children (Finkenauer *et al.*, 2002:41).

2.1.4 Spiritual development of the early adolescent

The intellectual changes that occur in adolescence make it possible for adolescents to view God, religion and their spirituality in new ways and to question beliefs they once accepted uncritically (Cobb, 2010:375). The early adolescents' maturity enhances the spiritual development in ways that allows for insight in distinguishing between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable (Collins, 2007:236). For more than 60% of adolescents, religion remains very to moderately important in their lives (Cobb, 2010:375). Early adolescents become increasingly personal and acquire a deeper meaning because of their intellectual development as they venture into their adolescent years. They strive to think for themselves, which manifests as critical thought and becomes evident in their religious development (Gouws *et al.*, 2000:117).

Gouws *et al.* refer to Hurlock's (1980) stages as early adolescents grow and develop in the spiritual domain of their lives, which is firstly a spiritual awakening leading to an increased interest in religion. Secondly, early adolescents go through a period of religious doubt as their critical reasoning skills develop and they become sceptical about dogma. Some even lose interest and move away from the religious institution of their parents to explore alternative religions. Thirdly, early adolescents who went through a traumatic incident discover that they need religious commitment in their lives, which may lead to involvement in occult movements, especially if they have no religious ties (Gouws *et al.*, 2000:117).

2.2 Trauma and the early adolescent

Various studies have shown that early adolescents do not cope with adversity the same way adults do (Andrews & Marotta, 2005:38; Hodas, 2006:9; Mouton, 2011:38), because early adolescents have different emotional and cognitive capacities to that of adults (Van As, 2005:39). Early adolescents may not have the cognitive and emotional maturity to report their psychological reaction to the trauma unless they are specifically asked about specific aspects of trauma. This is a result of

their limited cognitive and expressive ability, which makes it difficult to infer their thoughts and feelings and secondly because they might not always get the opportunity to talk about what happened which manifests as anxiety and depression (Hodas, 2006:9; Kar, 2009:7).

Trauma can be defined as a serious injury or shock to the body, as from violence or an accident; an emotional wound or shock that creates substantial, lasting damage to the psychological development of a person, often leading to neurosis; and an event or situation that causes great distress and disruption (Colman, 2009:780). Hodas (2006:7) refers to the DSM-IV that define a “traumatic event” as one where the individual experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the integrity of self or others. A second component is highlighted where the individual experiences and/or expresses intense fear, helplessness and horror as disorganised or agitated behaviour (Shear & Smith-Caroff, 2002:1).

The effects of trauma are cumulative and the child exposed to previous, chronic and/or complicated trauma will be at greatest risk of developing symptoms of having the normative developmental sequence disrupted. The more the child's neurobiological system needs to make adaptations to traumatic situations, the greater the chance that these adaptations will become long-term (Hodas, 2006:9). However, the early adolescent learns to understand a traumatic event (e.g. the suicidal death of a parent); develop the ability to believe that they can deal with a crisis as they know that they have some control over what happens in their own lives; and grow the capacity to give deeper meaning to the traumatic event (Hamlett, Pellegrini & Katz, 1992:33-47).

2.2.1 Parental suicide as form of trauma and the effect on the adolescent

Although parental loss can be caused by natural death, accidents, homicide and suicide, global suicide rates are alarming. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2009) have indicated that about one million people commit suicide every year worldwide, with one suicide every hour and over 400 more unsuccessful attempts per day. The WHO (2009) predict that this number will rise to 1.53 million by the year 2020. In South Africa 6000 to 8000 people commit suicide every year, which

makes suicide the third greatest cause of unnatural death in the country after AIDS and homicide (Schlebusch, 2011). With every suicide there are people directly affected by this traumatic event, which includes an average of 2 - 3 children in the family, some who are in the age group of early adolescence (WHO, 2009).

Gumede (2009:58) states that the death of a parent leaving children behind opens a gap in the support system of a family. A spouse may be left grieving while children and the entire family lack a breadwinner. When the suicide of a parent happens, every member of the family is affected. The suicide may be concealed to avoid stigmatisation of the person who has taken his/her own life or to protect the person's family (Schlebusch & Govender, 2012:525). As suicide carries a social stigma, the at risk early adolescent might be overlooked when he/she is silent about what they feel and experience (Phetla, 2003:219). Kar (2009:7) states that early adolescents who lose a parent to suicide may never be brought to attention as the nature of suicide has its own stigma attached to it. The stigma that society puts on suicide places the early adolescent therefore in the at risk group where they can be easily overlooked because of the silence that comes with it (Schlebusch & Govender, 2012:525) and the fact that the adolescent may be silent about what they feel and experience (Balk & Corr, 2009:262). The silenced early adolescent that cannot talk about what happened in their lives, cannot get the necessary help to guide them through their feelings and emotions (Hodas, 2006:9). Klopper (2009:7) agrees with Kar (2009:7) that the secondary factor of the trauma may cause feelings of self-blame, guilt, shame, frustration and ambiguous feelings along with the perception of how they should act as not to upset the remaining parent even further. This may cause early adolescents to not come forward for therapy out of their own.

The identity-related difficulties of undergoing multiple transitions within different arenas of development at the same time, as having to deal with a parental suicide might be an overwhelming situation for the early adolescent who has to deal with grief and bereavement (Brinthaup & Lipka, 2002:7).

2.2.2 The early adolescent's grief and bereavement

Internationally, significant efforts have been made to understand how children and adolescents grieve (Opperman, 2004:1; Garzouzie, 2011:88). The death-related loss

of a primary relationship leaves the bereaved vulnerable to grief reactions that are multifaceted, involving somatic, psychological and behavioural distress (Balk, 1991:1; Barlow & Durand 2002:196; Collins, 2007:467,475; Ginott, 2003:207; Klopper, 2012; Opperman, 2004:1; Steyn, 2006:1; Stroebe, 2001; Willis, 2005:8). The grieving process has been conceptualised as stages, models, tasks and phases of grief. Regardless of the particular configurations, grieving involves psychological, spiritual, social, and physiological changes (Meyer & Viljoen, 2008:203; Wrench, 2008:6).

The early adolescent will be the most capable of understanding his or her own journey concerning the grief process (Prigerson, Jacobs, Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe & Schut, 2001:613-646). Words encountered when talking to experts and reading articles regarding grief and bereavement can be listed as shock, numbness, denial, pain, yearning, guilt, anger, emotional despair, bargaining, depression, sadness, withdrawal, reflection, loneliness, reorganisation, the upward turn, reconstruction, working through, acceptance, letting go, moving on, and hope (Johnson, 1998:77, 134).

Distinctions between normal and complicated grief are not easy to make as factors such as culture, religion, personality, age, mode of death, relationship with the deceased and society all impact on the early adolescent's manner of coping with the loss (Drenth, Herbst & Strydom, 2010:1). Early adolescents often experience complicated grief and their grief experiences are profoundly personal in nature (Fargher & Dooley, 2011:162).

Grief may follow a life-long developmental path and the impact of the loss may be felt throughout the lifespan, as they finish school, find a job, get married and grow older than the parent who has died. However, for the past several years, guided by the perspective of positive psychology, studies have been done where the way early adolescents cope with adversity, grief and bereavement were addressed from a different angle as just the negative consequences of what went wrong (Park & Peterson, 2006:892). From the perspective of positive psychology, researchers started to focus on what is right about people and find that not all adolescents experience the negatives following trauma but that some children and adolescents

bounce back from adversity with more strength and character than they possessed before (Hodas, 2006:37; Lahad, 2009:890).

2.3 Positive psychology and strengths

Fineburg (2004:197) states that positive psychology has emerged as an antithesis to negative psychology, in that the focus is on the qualities that strengthen, build and foster us rather than studying the clusters of symptoms that make up psychological disorders. Positive psychology (Baylis, 2004:214; Fineburg, 2004:197) emerged as direct opposite to the study of psychological disorders, which is seen as negative psychology. It seems that positive psychology strives to focus on the positive by studying well-being, happiness, positive emotions, and character strengths (Baylis, 2004:214). Baylis (2004:214) states that positive psychology should not be mistaken for positive thinking as positive psychology is an entire field of scientific inquiry while positive thinking is merely a thinking technique. Positive psychology is the study of the positive attributes, psychological assets, and strengths to be able to understand and foster the factors that allow individuals, communities and societies to thrive (Kabau, Seligman, Peterson, Diener, Zack, Chapman & Thompson, 2011:1).

The phenomenon of strengths, stemming from positive psychology, is relatively new to the field of psychology (Park and Peterson, 2006:894). Lahad (2009:890) states that everyone is born with coping skills that help them deal with complex situations, but that not everyone handles their challenges all the time. Lahad (2009:890) furthermore suggests that those who have undergone loss and bereavement and are able to carry on leading a relatively normal life after a period of grieving, have resilience. Resilience seems to be a compilation of strengths that people use to help them normalise distressing emotions and adjust their reactions to new realities (Berger & Lahad, 2009:890). The development of skills to manage a traumatic event is greatly influenced by the early adolescent's external and inner resources and how they apply these resources in the grief and bereavement process (Crosnoe, 2011:149). Hodas (2006:10) states that a child growing up in a strong social and familial support prior to a traumatic incident has likely benefitted from significant protective factors that promote healthy development and well-being.

Various post-disaster studies report of early adolescents who are resilient towards trauma due to protective factors stemming from internal and external factors (Kar, 2009:7). Relationships, such as a good support system, family cohesion and societal care, as well as good peer-group relations softens the grief and bereavement process of the adolescent going through a complicated trauma (Gouws *et al.*, 2000:18, 20; Kar, 2009:7).

Resilience in psychology refers to the idea of an individual's tendency to cope after stress and adversity that result in the individual "bouncing back" to a previous state of normal functioning or even better than expected (Miller, 2003:240; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Resilience is most commonly understood as a process or umbrella term, and not a trait of an individual whereas strengths can be seen as traits or skills that the individual possesses. Recently there has also been evidence that resilience can indicate a capacity to resist a sharp decline in functioning even though a person temporarily appears to get worse (Miller, 2003:240). Resilience has been shown to be more than just the capacity of individuals to cope well under adversity (Yates & Masten, 2004:522). It is better understood as the opportunity and capacity of individuals to navigate their way to psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that may uphold their well-being, and their opportunity and capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways. Focussing on strengths has renewed an interest in positive psychology and is consistent with the perspectives of positive psychology where promoting competence through positive models of intervention prove to reduce the detrimental effect of adversity on children (Yates & Masten, 2004:522).

The Values in Action Inventory for Youth (VIA-Youth) is a self-report questionnaire fitting for adolescents that measures 24 widely respected strengths of character (Park & Peterson, 2006:891). See Addendum 5 for the full classification. This classification was used in this study as a guideline to identify strengths present in the early adolescent.

2.3.1 Identifying and recognising early adolescents' strengths

Hodas (2006:37) states that strengths based beliefs include the presumption that the early adolescent is doing the best that they can do and wants to do well. Hodas further identifies four areas that can hinder the well-being of the child as well as effective functioning as: lack of support, stability, knowledge, and/or skills. Strengths based practice according to Hodas (2006:37) involves building on the strengths of the early adolescent over time by “presuming the positive” about the child and family, and through engagement, listening, partnering and mutual learning. This positive foundation of identifying and recognising strengths and competencies become the direction for change especially in the trying times of puberty since this promotes development of a constructive relationship and also offers tangible starting points for treatment planning (Hodas, 2006:37). Johnson (1998:204) states that the acquisition and understanding of these skills amount to a strengthening process, a development of inner strengths to detrimental incidents in life that cannot always be avoided. Seligman (2002) states in Mutrie and Faulkner (2004:147) that building strengths are one of the key principles of positive psychology. The strengths approach focuses on what comes natural for the individual strengths and talents and to develop these areas whereas until recently clinical settings gave little attention to the idea of building on strengths and rather focused on correcting weaknesses (Kobau, Seligman, Peterson, Diener, Zack, Chapman & Thompson, 2011:1; Park & Peterson, 2006:894).

Nicholson, Irwin and Dwivedi, (2010:93) state that it is necessary to continue to develop more constructive ways of managing strong feelings such as anger, anxiety, fear, confusion and loss of hope, as is found in grieving a loved one who committed suicide. The transitional process of insight to self-awareness and behavioural choice advance the development of healthy autonomy and healthy interpersonal relationships. Nicholson *et al.*, (2010:233) conclude that often the strengths (bravery, humour, commitment to change, resilience) present in the bereaved individual are not properly acknowledged. Balk and Corr, (2009:ii) state that while death is encountered throughout life the child to adolescence it is met by the individual with using all their developmental strengths and resources. Balk and Corr, (2009:357) refer to Bonime, (1989) who emphasised that validation of strengths locates the strengths within the adolescent.

3. CONCLUSION

In this literature review the researcher provided a brief overview of the bio-, psycho-, social and spiritual development of early adolescents, their strengths in the face of adversity and the influence trauma has on their overall well-being. The researcher intended to make clear how the interaction of these concepts impacts on early adolescents' future development regarding identity formation, ability to build relationships and their overall mental well-being. It also became clear to the reader why we need to build on the strengths of the early adolescent to instill and nurture certain strengths in this early phase of adolescence. In addition to exploring the experience and often denied grief, it is imperative to also pursue the often overlooked strengths, skills and resources of the grieving early adolescent.

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SECTION B

ARTICLE

**Exploring early adolescents' strengths
after the suicide of a parent**

Exploring early adolescents' strengths after the suicide of a parent

Lizane Wilson*, Joey Pienaar and Suzette Weideman

Abstract

The death of a parent is a life-changing experience for any young person. Few experiences are as devastating especially if the young person is an early adolescent and the death is a result of the parent committing suicide. The aim of this study was to explore what strengths are present in adolescents after a parent commits suicide. A qualitative, interpretive phenomenological method was utilised in order to identify what strengths they drew on to assist them through their grief and bereavement process. The strengths that stood out as important to the early adolescent's well-being were of an intra-personal nature and interpersonal support, which included strengths of humanity; wisdom and knowledge; courage; and strengths of transcendence.

Key words: early adolescent; strengths; positive psychology; trauma; grief; suicide.

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Despite the possible detrimental effects of a traumatic event on the development of the early adolescent, research has shown that some early adolescents have strengths and personal resources enabling them to deal with and overcome traumatic events (Reichel & Schanz, 2003). The aim of this study was to explore and describe the specific strengths authentic to the adolescents who were bereaved through the suicide of a parent. This was motivated by using the principles identified by the positive psychology movement which seeks to study and understand what strengthens, builds, sustains and empowers a person to thrive as an individual within communities and societies (Kobau, Seligman, Peterson, Diener, Zack, Chapman & Thompson, 2011). Positive psychology explores traits that are true to the individual and are intrinsically motivating towards happiness and increasing well-being (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009).

Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan and Hurling (2010:15-16) define strengths as “characteristics that allow a person to perform well or at their personal best” and include personal, physical and psychological strengths. Hodas (2006:37) states that, “strength-based beliefs include the presumption that the early adolescent is doing the best that he/she can do, and wants to do well.” Factors that involve limitations in effective functioning may involve lack of support, stability, knowledge, and/or skills. Wood *et al.* (2010) state that the definition of strengths, as characteristics that allow a person to perform well or at their personal best, is preferred as it marks the point of agreement between various descriptions of strengths, avoids moralistic or evolutionary overtones and allows participants to interpret for themselves the meaning of strengths, rather than imposing a restrictive definition. Several perspectives have focussed exclusively on psychological (or character) strengths, or

traits, for example Peterson and Seligman (2004). However, Mutrie and Faulkner (2004:16) in Wood *et al.* (2011) state that there is a broader positive psychological prediction that when using one's strongest characteristics, it will lead to increased well-being. Research indicates that strengths help individuals to manage and function more effectively when experiencing trauma and difficulties (Baylis, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2006).

In South Africa 6 000 to 8 000 people commit suicide yearly which makes suicide the third greatest cause of unnatural death after Aids and homicide (Schlebush, 2011). Statistically there are two to three children in a family in which a suicide takes place, some being in the early adolescent group (WHO, 2009).

The death of a parent is one of the most traumatic events an early adolescent can experience (Collins, 2007; Gertler, Martinez, Levine & Bertozzi, 2004; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005; Stroebel, 2006). It may cause an identity crisis impacting on the integration of the early adolescents' identification, drives, wishes, expectations, abilities and skills (Meyer & Viljoen, 2008; Wrench, 2008). Reaction to such trauma will be determined by their developmental level, closeness to the deceased parent and available support (Branch & Brinson, 2007; Monroe & Kraus, 2005). Although adolescents may view themselves as adults, they are developmentally between childhood and adulthood (Campbell, 2007; Park, 2004; Slate & Scott, 2009). Adjusting to early adolescence is challenging due to developmental changes taking place physically, psycho-socially, and spiritually, alongside rapid cognitive development (Collins, 2007:467,475; Eade, 2009). If confronted with fears, insecurities and questions (Klopper, 2009), exploring their feelings and linking it with their possible strengths may be helpful in dealing with the trauma. Therefore, it could

be important to explore what strengths are present in the life of the early adolescents through an in-depth study (Blum, McNeely & Nonnemaker, 2002; Fineburg, 2004; Minnard, 2002; Reichel & Schanz, 2003). From the problem formulation the following research question was formulated: *What strengths do early adolescents exhibit after the suicide of a parent?*

Conceptual framework

The phenomenon of strengths stems from positive psychology which is relatively new to the field of psychology (Boniwell, 2006). A positive perspective provided the lens through which the research was planned and conducted. Positive psychology focus on studying well-being, happiness, positive emotions and character strengths (Baylis, 2004; Kabau *et al*, 2009; Park and Peterson, 2006). The phenomenological design is well-placed with-in positive psychology where an understanding is seek based on what is revealed by the situation rather than the interpretation of the observer (Cresswell, 2008:13). This enabled the researcher to understand the subjective meaning of early adolescent's perceptions of their experiences after the suicide of a parent. The definition preferred to describe the phenomenon of strengths would be the one of Wood *et al*. (2010:15-16), "characteristics that allow a person to perform well or at their personal best" and includes personal, physical and psychological strengths.

Research method

A qualitative research approach was used in this study as it provided an opportunity to understand the meanings, interpretations and subjective experiences of the participant rather than conducting the study from the researcher's own perspective (Liamputtong, 2013). As such a phenomenological research design was considered suitable (Krauss, 2005). Data was gathered by means of in-depth interviews

(Fouché & Schurink, 2011; Greeff, 2011), observations (Brink, Van der Walt & Van Rensburg, 2012), field notes (Brink et al., 2012) and drawings (Makunga & Shange, 2009; Theron, Mitchell, Smith & Stuart, 2011). In a follow-up interview the VIA-strengths (Peterson, 2009) specifically designed for the age group of 11-17 were introduced to the participants to help them choose from those strengths that they could personalise and apply to themselves with examples to their own life in a paragraph or short essay. Thematic data analysis (Liamputtong, 2013) was utilised to reduce and analyse the data. The steps of Braun and Clarke (2006), as cited in Liamputtong (2013), were followed during this process.

Research context and participants

The research was conducted at a counselling centre on the East Rand. The sample consisted of six participants, from twelve to sixteen years. Five of the participants were Afrikaans speaking and one was English speaking. The sampling method described by Brink *et al.* (2012) and Strydom and Delport (2011), that comprises a non-probability, purposive voluntary sampling design from the population, was utilised. The participants all experienced the loss of a parent due to suicide within the past three years. They were referred to the community centre on the East Rand and had received emotional support from pastors in their community, school counsellors, and/or a significant adult in the early adolescent's life.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the initial larger research project study was obtained from the North-West University's Ethics Committee (NWU-0060-12-A1). Informed consent was obtained from the parents of the participants and written assent was obtained from the participants. Confidentiality was maintained by securing the voice recordings and process notes and after completion of the study all transcribed

interviews are stored at the NWU. The names of participants were kept confidential and no identifiable information appears in the writing up of the research. Before starting the research participants were given all relevant information and they were also informed of the possible effects of the research on themselves. Their participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the research at any time (Strydom, 2011). Debriefing was made available with a professional counsellor at the end of interviews if required. All contributors that participated in the research process were acknowledged in the publication as prescribed by Strydom (2011).

Results

Four main themes emerged through the thematic analysis, relating to the strengths of the early adolescents and how it was personalised in each participant's life after the suicide of a parent. Interviews conducted in Afrikaans were translated into English.

Theme 1: Strengths of humanity

Strengths of humanity refer to interpersonal strengths that involve tending, nurturing, befriending and taking care of others. The subthemes that emerged through this theme were love, social intelligence, and kindness.

Sub-theme 1.1: Love

The strength of love refers to the valuing of close relations with others (family, peers), in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated. The majority of the participants indicated that they experienced these close relationships through family closeness by saying that *"My family ... just to be with my family and then to visit with my friend and just to chill with them"* (P4). The relationship with the remaining parent was also found as adding to this strength. *"Us three girls (mom & daughters) will go out and do something together"* (P3). Some participants also

referred to a significant other being helpful and growing closer when they needed it most. This was evident in the following statements *"My gran ... helped me ... with making food ..."* (P1). The majority of the participants indicated that they valued the support of their peers as is evident in the following statements, *"like I have many friends whom I can talk to and that makes it so much better"*

Sub-theme 1.2: Kindness

Kindness refers to generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness" by doing favours and good deeds for others. Most of the participants agreed that they grew in kindness as shown in the following statements: *"I learnt to be much kinder to people"* (P2).

Sub-theme 1.3: Social intelligence

Social intelligence refers to emotional and personal intelligence by being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself. All of the participants felt they became more aware of the feelings and emotions of others as well as their own as is evident in the following statements: *"I become aware of how she feels by her reactions and sometimes we took care of one another"* (P3).

Theme 2: Strengths of wisdom and knowledge

Strengths of wisdom and knowledge refer to cognitive strengths that entail the gaining and use of knowledge. The subthemes that emerged through this theme were love of learning, creativity, open-mindedness and perspective.

Sub-theme 2.1: Love of learning

Love of learning entails mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally. Some of the participants felt that their love of learning made things easier for them: *"I enjoy school a lot ... and I am ready for the year"* (P3).

Sub-theme 2.2: Creativity

Creativity entails the ability to think of novel and productive ways to conceptualise and do things. Most of the participants indicated that they improved in independent learning through creative ways of looking at their studies and making the choice to focus on their school work as stated: *"I started to take my studies seriously because I realise I am growing up and decisions need to be made"* (P3).

Sub-theme 2.3: Open-mindedness

Open-mindedness refers to the ability to judge and do critical thinking. It entails thinking things through, examining them from all sides and weighing all evidence fairly. Some of the participants showed critical thinking in judging what happened as is stated in the following: *"I don't blame God for it, because my mom chose to take her own life. No one told her to do it, and no one forced her to do it."* (P2).

Subtheme 2.4: Perspective

Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people. Some participants felt that they developed internal motivation by changing the perception about wanting to do their school work for themselves as is stated: *"I learnt that what happened to me happens to others as well, and I learnt to be brave"* (P2).

Theme 3: Strengths of courage

Strengths of courage refer to emotional strengths which involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of external and internal opposition. The sub-themes that emerged through this theme were bravery, persistence, authenticity and zest.

Subtheme 3.1: Bravery

Bravery refers to behaviour in which a person does not shrink from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain and acting on conditions even if the event is disliked. Most of the

participants were very brave in how they became vulnerable and bravely shared their stories about what happened in their lives as stated in the following comments: *"I accept it now and know that it is what happened now and you have to just help yourself through it"* (P4).

Subtheme 3.2: Persistence

Persistence refers to perseverance and industriousness. It entails finishing what one starts and persisting in a course of action despite obstacles. Most of the participants felt that they persevere through academic and social difficulties notwithstanding how difficult it was for them in their situation as is clear in: *"Life sometimes gets difficult but you have to press through"* (P3).

Subtheme 3.3: Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the way you present yourself in a genuine way, speaking the truth and taking responsibility for your feelings and actions (Park & Peterson, 2006). Some of the participants became aware of an inner power that allowed them to rely on themselves to handle situations and not having to wait for and depend on others. *"I'll do it myself, because no-one can make it perfect or no-one can help you make it perfect"* (P2).

Subtheme 3.4: Zest for life

A zest for life entails approaching life with excitement and energy; feeling invigorated, enthusiastic, and alive and activated. Some of the participants felt that a zest for life returned as is evident in the following: *"Funny ... outgoing ... a person with a big heart that care about others ... I enjoy it to laugh that is why I permanently smile"* (P6).

Theme 4: Strengths of transcendence

Strengths of transcendence refer to strengths that build connections to the larger universe and provide meaning. The sub-themes that emerged through this theme are humour, hope and spirituality.

Subtheme 4.1: Humour

Humour entails liking to laugh and tease, bringing smiles to other people, and seeing the lighter side of situations. Some participants found that their sense of humour became a valuable asset, as stated by the following participants: *Humour is the number one thing that gets me through my day (P4).*

Subtheme 4.2: Spirituality

Spirituality entails having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose, the meaning of life, and the meaning of the universe and includes concepts such as religiousness, faith, and purpose in life. Spirituality appeared to be an important strength assisting the participants in alleviating their hurt and pain as is evident: *"I've come to know Him more than before. I speak to Him, I talk to Him about everything as well" (P5).* All the participants agreed that together with their families they became aware of a need for God which led them to joining a church as is evident in the following: *"... we never went to church and since my dad's passing away we are going to church and it is meaningful" (P4).*

Subtheme 4.3: Hope

Hope entails optimism, future-mindedness and future orientation. Hope expects the best in the future and working to achieve it. From the data it became evident that all of the participants are still hopeful for their future. *"... to be just hopeful and to play and laugh, it lets you just forget after about a year" (P1).*

Discussion of findings

Balk and Corr (2009) state that when the early adolescent encounters death, they cope with it using all their developmental strengths and resources. In a technologically driven world early adolescents still find communication with one another play an increasingly important role in their lives to cope with loss (Balk & Corr, 2009). As the study aimed at exploring the strengths after experiencing the suicide of a parent, it became evident during thematic analysis that intrapersonal strengths or strengths of humanity emerged as a main theme. This theme was further divided into love, social intelligence and kindness as strengths.

Strengths of humanity

Most of the participants found that their love for people deepened as they realised how short life is and how unexpected death can be. Balk and Corr (2009) referred to Ladd, (2005), Parker and Gottman (1989) as well as Sullivan (1953), who confirmed that as individuals mature from early adolescence to later adolescence their preoccupation with themselves becomes less, as relationships provide sources of support and understanding and foster empathy and love. Cobb (2010) supports the fact that contact with the family and family closeness seem to be important as was also expressed by the participants in this study. Phetla (2003) state that through the social support from family, friends and/or a significant other, positive strengths can develop and enhance the subjective well-being of the individual. Balk and Corr (2009) state that being well-connected to peers and family is rated the second most important protective factor in times of adversity. Furthermore, they observed that the young person equates the manner in which they are treated after the incident to their perceived worth and to the degree to which they were loved (Balk & Corr, 2009).

Most of the participants stated that they became more compassionate and kind towards others when going through adversity, as they understand the hurt and pain

in their own situation and are then able to relate more fully to others' hurt and pain. This is confirmed in literature as Balk and Corr (2009) mention Valentine (1996), who stated that young and older people not only expressed sadness and longing for their lost loved one, but also reflected on how the experience of losing a loved one had deepened their compassion and kindness for those in similar situations.

All of the participants stated that social support was extremely helpful in managing their grief and bereavement. Literature shows that recently social support has received wider recognition as a factor contributing to improvement in psychological health and well-being as social support develops positive strengths leading to subjective well-being for overall development (Khan & Husain, 2010). Social support particularly refers to the availability of people who make the early adolescents feel that they care about them, love them and value them and without that support the early adolescents are forced to keep the nature of the death secret and to hide their own grief (Balk & Corr, 2009). Studies have consistently found that social support is extremely effective in decreasing distress after traumatic events, including disasters. It was noteworthy that social support has also been found to be a catalyst for the development of other positive psychological strengths, which play an important role in providing energy to control stress and adversity as well as developing positive perceptions to see things in a better perspective (Khan & Husain, 2010).

All the participants agreed that their peer group was of great help. They indicated that they preferred to talk to their peers about what had happened, because they were concerned about the remaining parent and considerate to their own feelings of bereavement. This was confirmed in literature as Balk and Corr (2009) state that concerns are more commonly expressed to care givers or peer group members than a parent and even then only if the confidant is perceived as being willing to listen, is

honest and perceived as trustworthy. Cobb (2010) confirms that the peer group needs support, intimacy and advice from each other, leading to the development of a group identity and the formation of positive self-esteem.

Videon (2005) states that mental health, scholastic competence and capacity to manage daily challenges in children and adolescents is associated with a sense of positive worth affirmed by caring relationships with family and peers. Adolescence is typically thought of as a time when children distance themselves from parents, and peers take on increasing importance, however this does not naturally occur at the expense of attachment to parents (Videon, 2005).

An important external resource that was emphasised by most of the participants was the support from professionals, as this assisted them in making meaning out of what happened. Various authors (Balk & Corr, 2009; Hodas, 2006) confirm that the early adolescent that cannot or does not have the opportunity to talk about what happened in their lives cannot get the necessary help to guide them through their feelings and emotions in a healthy way. Baylis (2004) states that a psychologist with a positive outlook is favoured to support students going through a traumatic time and who have the need to confidentially talk about their trauma.

Strengths of wisdom and knowledge

All of the participants have lost a parent to suicide in the last three years and felt that as they grew older they were able to deal better with the traumatic incident. Strengths that made it easier for them to manage their sadness and hurt, entail cognitive strengths and the attainment and application of knowledge. The subthemes that emerged through this theme were a love of learning, creativity, open-mindedness and gaining perspective. Although many early adolescents in South Africa are exposed to numerous everyday stressors (Brook et al., 2011), traumatic

and detrimental events also allow for growth opportunities (Theron & Dalzell, 2006). Research in positive psychology has shown that focusing on the strengths of the early adolescent is associated with better adjustment and healthier outcomes (Elgar, Arlett & Groves, 2003; Nicholson, Irwin & Dwivedi, 2010). Most of the participants in this study could constructively manage to focus on goal-directed decisions concerning their school work because of their love for learning. This ability to focus helped them to cope with their grief in a way which took the focus off the sad feelings.

Research in positive psychology has confirmed that the early adolescent has the ability to manage a traumatic incident more constructively when focusing on their strengths to achieve goals beneficial to future behaviour and well-being (Reichel & Schanz 2003; Steyn, 2006). Literature confirms that the early adolescents' growing intellectual and cognitive development made it possible for them to find meaning in their situation and understand the crisis that happened to them (Cobb, 2010; Collins, 2007).

With the establishment of creative goals, most of the early adolescents managed to deal with their grief and pain and still function effectively. Literature states that early adolescents acquire certain strengths to deal with a traumatic event before the age of 15 years (for e.g. the suicidal death of a parent); to believe in their ability to deal with a crisis knowing that they have some control and to give deeper meaning to the traumatic event (Hamlett, Pellegrini & Katz, 1992).

It was apparent that the early adolescents in this study presented with certain strengths enabling them to change their perception in order to deal with the crisis. In their opinion it afforded them a sense of control and they could attribute deeper meaning to the traumatic event. All of the participants found various ways of

managing their grief. Many of them referred to keeping the memory of the loved one alive either by sharing their feelings, listening to music or looking at photographs and thereby focusing on good memories. Peterson (2009) states that it is just as important to help adolescents thrive and form positive connections to the larger world through focusing on positive experiences than it is to reduce stress and trauma in their lives, as both are required for them to experience a smooth transition through puberty. Stigma-related deaths, such as parental death due to suicide, can pose unique problems for the young person, since peer acceptance and the wish to be perceived as no different from others are powerful drivers of adolescent behaviour. Therefore, most traumatic grief protocols place emphasis on exploring meaning and perspective while creating trauma narratives or alternative stories (Cohen, Mannarino & Deblinger, 2006 in Balk & Corr, 2009). This is confirmed by Crenshaw (2007) who states that these stigma-related deaths call for special attention to the meaning and attributions made by the young person in order to help them create a coherent, meaningful perspective and narrative, thus reducing the risk of traumatisation. As it is stated by Nicholson, Irwin and Dwivedi (2010:29), there is no way to avoid the pain and hurt: *"We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh No! We've got to go through it!"*

Theme three: Strengths of courage

Emotional strengths refer to psychological or personal strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, and helped with the management of a traumatic situation. The findings in this study showed that all of the participants presented with various strengths of courage such as bravery, persistence authenticity and zest for life.

All of the participants in the study were extremely brave in sharing their story in how they managed to endure the traumatic experience they went through.

Literature from positive psychology focuses on what is right about individuals and found that not all early adolescents experience only negative behavioural patterns following trauma but some of them manage to bounce back from adversity with more strengths and skills than they had before (Hodas, 2006; Berger & Lahad, 2010). Post-traumatic growth (PTG) refers to positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances (Nicholson *et al.*, 2010). There is overwhelming evidence that individuals that faced a variety of very difficult events and trauma in their lives perceive it as highly positive because of the meaning they attached to it (Brazeau, Teatero, Rawana, Brownlee & Blanchette, 2012; Linley & Joseph, 2004). Literature in studies of resiliency focuses on positive adaptation and achievement and stresses the importance of promoting competence through interventions (Brazeau *et al.*, 2012; Kobau *et al.*, 2011). The participants showed through positive adaptation that they were not only negatively affected in what happened to them, but on the contrary became resilient and strong and managed to “bounce back” to deal with their situation.

It seemed that most of the participants managed their grief and bereavement through positively focusing on memories, self-talk and a positive perspective on the future. This was possible because of their perceptions that they can deal with the crisis and find deeper meaning. Literature validated the youths’ efforts and persistence, confirming that progress is sometimes very difficult as the young person moves between confronting and dwelling on the loss and efforts to master or adapt to new realities and that perseverance is sometimes all that gets them through it (Balk & Corr, 2009; Nicholson *et al.*, 2010).

In the psychological context authenticity does not only refer to what is real or forthcoming, but also to speak the truth and present oneself in a genuine way (Park & Peterson, 2006). Some of the participants showed authenticity in expressing how they felt and what they had gone through. They took responsibility for their feelings and actions and made a wilful choice to focus on things such as their school work to improve their marks after an initial drop in their academics. They were genuine in their efforts to help and do their share in the household to support the remaining parent and the rest of their families. Various authors confirmed that the ability of the early adolescents to think about their own thoughts and to put themselves in another person's shoes enhances their ability to be aware of their own individualities as well as what they shared and have in common with others. This developmental milestone on the intellectual front helps them react emotionally in new ways (Balk & Corr, 2009; Cobb, 2010; Keenan & Evens, 2009), contributing immensely to changing their previously limited perspectives.

Many researchers have described how the early adolescent spends considerable amounts of time, energy and thought to protect his/her social status in their peer group in order to protect themselves against social rejection and how this phenomenon adds to their ability to regain their zest for life, excitement and energy (Brinthaupt *et al.*, 2006; Cobb, 2010; Swart, 2009). Most of the participants regained their zest for life because they focused on their immediate tasks at hand which included school work, sport, hobbies and most of all their friends. As they oscillated between grieving and carrying on with their lives, their excitement, energy and feelings of being alive returned which made it easier for them to manage their grief and bereavement.

Theme 4: Strengths of transcendence

Strengths of transcendence refer to strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning and entail appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour and spirituality. The findings in this study showed that all of the participants presented with a variety of these strengths, which included humour, spirituality and hope.

Most of the participants presented with strength of humour that entails seeing the lighter side of a situation and bringing smiles to other people. Not only in their own accounts, but also during observation it became evident that they often alternated between sadness, hurt and pain on the one hand and humour on the other. It was noteworthy how they would fondly remember a song that their parent favoured and recalled a funny association and burst out laughing while reflecting on it and then moments later carry on with what happened with tears in their eyes. Literature confirms that humour as a personal strategy to deal with the effects of stress can offer tremendous benefits and adolescents often respond to death-related encounters by using humour (Balk & Corr, 2009). Balk and Corr (2009) go on to explain the kinds of humour early adolescents find relevant, the benefits of laughter, and the role humour plays in the adolescent social setting. Balk and Corr (2009) mention various studies (Erickson & Feldstein, 2007; Lyons, 2005; Sanford & Eder, 1984) that have explored how early adolescents utilise this strength and how it contributes to their social standing, but they state that the subject of humour in this specific population of teenagers grieving a death has received minimal attention in the professional literature.

All of the participants stated that the traumatic event deepened their spiritual life. Most felt that within this traumatic incident, their religion was a source of comfort for them and they expressed the realisation that they had an increased need to have a

relationship with God that help them manage their grief. Literature confirms that intellectual changes occurring during early adolescence, make it possible for the adolescent to view God, religion and spirituality differently and to question previously held beliefs (Cobb, 2010; Collins, 2007; Gouws, Kruger & Burger, 2000). As early adolescents' maturity levels enhance their spiritual development, they learn to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not (Cobb, 2010). Balk and Corr (2009) state that adolescents accounted religion, spirituality and prayer as a strength in managing their grief.

As early adolescents strive to think for themselves, they grow and develop in the spiritual domain of their lives, which is firstly, according to Hurlock (1980) in Gouws et al., (2000), a spiritual awakening leading to an increased interest in religion. It became clear that religion and religious activities were another cause for strengths to emerge in that all the participants felt that the church and religious activities were of great comfort to them and their families. Some of the participants who only started to actively practice religion since the suicide of their parent, found going to religious activities meaningful and comforting. Some of the participants used the writing of letters (to God and their parent who committed suicide) a way of letting go of their emotions. All of the participants seemed to find great comfort in creating spiritual meaning of the incident and described it as a way to stay connected to their deceased parent. For more than 60% of early adolescents, religion remains very to moderately important in their lives (Cobb, 2010). Recently there has been more research done in spirituality and adolescence but little has been done on the early adolescence phase. Balk and Corr (2009) argue that given the drive during adolescence for meaning making, building relationships and moving beyond the concrete childhood impersonation of religion to reflect on issues and concepts that

are rooted in existential and transcendental realms, the disregard to deal with this might be due to the discomfort that empirical scientists feel toward spirituality and religion.

The strength of hope (optimism, future-mindedness and future orientation) refers to the ability to expect the best in the future and working to achieve it. Most of the participants presented with hope for their future and were positive that they will be able to achieve their goal if they work hard at it. The participants showed, through positive adaptation, that they were not only negatively affected in what happened to them, but became aware of their own strengths. This gave them hope that they can “bounce back” to deal with their situation. Literature highlights factors that impact positively on the resilience of the young person who has experienced the death of a parent and could focus on a hopeful outlook on life and faith in the future (Balk & Corr, 2009; Nicholson et al., 2010). Also, when one feels hopeless, religion can be a source of increasing hope in that religion generally offers the belief that life continues in some form after the event and that the young person and loved one who died will be reunited again (Balk & Corr, 2009). To have the strengths of hope and a belief that they will find new beginnings as they begin to develop a sense of feeling recognised and significant is to have a life worth living with meaning (Nicholson et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Exploration of early adolescents’ strengths utilised during the trauma experienced after the suicide of a parent revealed four main themes which included strengths of humanity, strengths of wisdom and knowledge, strengths of courage and strengths of transcendence. The first main theme identified through the thematic analysis was strengths of humanity that encompassed love, kindness and social intelligence. Most

of the participants indicated the close relations they had with a remaining parent, family and their peer group. All of the participants felt that they presented with strengths of kindness and social intelligence in that they became aware of others' feelings and their own, they were sensitive and considerate and were helpful in doing kind deeds for others. The second theme, strengths of wisdom and knowledge, included strengths like love of learning, creativity, open-mindedness and gaining perspective. Most of the participants indicated that love of learning was a strength in their situation as they were better able to handle the trauma as they grew in cognitive skills and increased their knowledge. Some of the participants felt they came up with creative ideas in helping out with household chores and looking after younger siblings. They were open-minded regarding the incident and reasons behind the suicide and managed to adapt their thinking in order to gain perspective. The third theme was strengths of courage and included emotional strengths like bravery, persistence, authenticity and a zest for life. Most of the participants did not shrink back and bravely dealt with what happened with the suicide of their parent. Most of the participants showed authenticity in their grief and bereavement and their willingness to share what happened. Some of the participants were able to regain their zest for life and approached their schoolwork and sports-life with excitement and energy. The final theme that emerged was strengths of transcendence. This indicated strengths like humour, spirituality and hope. Some of the participants used humour to manage their grief and liked to laugh and tease to bring a positivity back in their lives by seeing the lighter side of things. All of the participants felt that the strength of spirituality was very valuable in dealing with the loss. They held onto spiritual beliefs, such as seeing their loved one again and found solace in practicing religious rituals such as reading their Bible and praying to God. They also expressed

feeling a sense of connectedness with those that shared their beliefs and practices. Some of the participants indicated that they are holding on to the hope that they will find meaning in what happened and still expect something good to arise from the events.

All the above mentioned strengths can be correlated to the character strengths identified by Park and Peterson (2006) in the Values in Action Inventory for Youth (VIA). It is believed that the identification of the strengths, which the participants utilised during their handling of these traumatic events, could afford the professional as well as familial support provider a foundation from which the fears, insecurities and questions of these early adolescents can be addressed. Identifying the strength-set commonly utilised by these early adolescents through the in-depth interviews, has provided a departure point for further strengths based intervention and research.

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Author biographies

Lizane Wilson, PhD, has been a teaching academic and research supervisor in Social work and play therapy since 2004. She is currently the programme head of the Play Therapy Programme at the Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies, North-West University. She is a registered social worker, with a Masters Degree in Play Therapy and recently obtained her PhD at Stellenbosch University in Education

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Suzette Weideman is a clinical psychologist in private practice where she utilizes her experience in the academia and campus context to offer therapeutic services to a variety of clients. She has a special interest in Animal Assisted Therapy and works with her 5 horses as co-therapists to provide individual and family Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy.

Joey Pienaar is a postgraduate student with the Centre for Child, Youth and Family studies. Her research for her MA degree in Psychology commenced in 2010 and she completed this research in 2013. The title of her study was “Exploring the early adolescents strengths after the suicide of a parent”.

SECTION C

SUMMARY, EVALUATION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

This section will provide a summary of the research, a review of the research findings and a critical evaluation of the research. A recommendation for future research will also be outlined.

2. LITERATURE SUMMARY

The study of literature has revealed that the early adolescent phase is a challenging time of adjustment. This phase is characterised by changes to the body in puberty, rapid cognitive development, social and spiritual development. When a traumatic incident such as the suicide of a parent occurs, it upsets psychological equilibrium, and even more so in the adolescent phase, when the developmental challenges have already disrupted the delicate balance. These adolescents are extremely vulnerable to develop behavioural and or emotional problems, if they do not have the opportunity to deal with this trauma appropriately.

The relatively new field in psychology referred to as positive psychology stresses that one should look further than the negative impact that such a traumatic event can have on the homeostasis of the adolescent. Looking at the character strengths expressed in the handling of such an incident, would be an example of utilising the event to ensure growth. Character strengths have been identified by Park and Peterson (2006) as individual characteristics and differences that exist in degrees and are manifested in a range of thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Character strengths are psychological processes that define the qualities that youth exhibit that help them manage in difficult situations. Park and Peterson (2006) developed the Value In Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth), which is a self-report inventory for children and youth (ages 10-17) that measures 24 different strengths of character to identify “signature strengths”. Although most of the literature focused on the negative impact after a complex traumatic incident, a positive psychology perspective brought to light that the incident does not only illicit a negative reaction. In this study it became evident that certain processes are at play in these early adolescents that could be seen as positive and healthy and that could contribute to their well-being. This study focused on exploring the strengths that the adolescents presented with to be able to manage the trauma and their grief and bereavement after their parent committed suicide. The findings of this study were positively correlated to the constructs that comprise the VIA-Youth list.

3. RESEARCH SUMMARY

A phenomological exploration of early adolescents’ strengths utilised during the trauma experienced after the suicide of a parent, revealed four main themes which included strengths of humanity; strengths of wisdom and knowledge; strengths of courage; and strengths of transcendence. Although the aim of this study was to identify and describe possible strengths present in early adolescents after the suicide of a parent, the current researcher has gained knowledge about how strengths are utilised during such traumatic events which could be applied by other professionals assisting early adolescents with trauma. The interpretivistic approach and method of in-depth interviewing with open-ended questions, allowed for such rich data that allowed the researcher to understand the experiences of the early adolescent

participants and gain insight into how their approach and actions during the traumatic time could be linked to the character strengths identified by Seligman (2003).

The findings of this research confirmed that early adolescents do have the ability to draw on strengths in order to help them bounce back after the traumatic experience of having a parent committed suicide. Some of the participants had a positive personal growth experience because of the meaning they made out of what happened in their world. The main themes that emerged from the data as important strengths were of an intra-personal nature and indicated that the early adolescents drew on intra-personal strengths to help them manage the traumatic incident and the developmental phase they are in. Strengths of humanity that were identified were love, kindness and social intelligence. Interpersonal relations made it easier for them to manage the hurt and pain of grief. Strengths of wisdom and knowledge included love of learning, creativity, open-mindedness and perspective. Most of the participants creatively adapted their perspectives and regained control after feeling helpless and managed to balance their academic, social and personal life. Strengths of courage included bravery, persistence, authenticity and zest for life. Most of the participants presented with strengths of courage through being brave, genuine in their grief and a zest for life that helped them to manage their life after the traumatic experience of a parent that committed suicide. Strengths of transcendence included humour, spirituality, and hope. Most of the early adolescents included humour in the way they cope with the grieving process. All of the early adolescents in this study felt that spirituality was a strength for them in that they drew closer to God and found meaning in talking to Him, reading their Bibles or listening to music. They also felt the religious activities they attended strengthened their personal growth as they

could talk to their peers and felt understood. They had positive feedback from their peers and pastoral counsellors.

4. GENERAL SUMMARY OF EXPERIENCE OF THE RESEARCHER

The researcher found the research challenging in that she has lost a father in a vehicle accident three years before round about the same time many of the participants lost a parent to suicide. Although she could relate to their hurt, pain and sadness, she managed to bracket her own feelings and stay with the narratives of the participants. She also had no preconceived thoughts or ideas as to what direction the research would follow and what it would uncover. The researcher struggled to find literature about early adolescents who had to deal with the pubertal phase and a parent who committed suicide at the same time. The interactions the researcher had with the early adolescent girls were enjoyable and meaningful. The researcher found the participants extremely brave in talking about their experiences and how they managed their life in this time of bereavement. She observed many of the strengths like hope, humour, bravery, insight, kindness etc. the early adolescents ascribed to themselves as evident in their narratives about their lives.

5. LIMITATIONS

Although the study provided useful evidence that all the participants felt that they had grown as a result of the trauma and had unique experiences that showed to have a positive impact on their situation, it does have its limitations, of which the current researcher has identified the following:

- The sample size of six participants was limited and not big enough for generalisation to the broader South African population.

- The sample was also homogenous in nature as all of the participants were from a middle socio-economic status and all of them received formal, structured support. The researcher believes that the results would have reflected quite differently, had the group consisted of children from a lower socio-economic class that might have different support networks, perceptions and experiences.
- Furthermore, the sample comprised only females from twelve to sixteen years of age and it would have been interesting to see if boys might have added a different perspective on the topic.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of this study, certain recommendations can be made to professionals, parents, and other formal or informal support systems. These recommendations are:

- For future research studies the researcher would recommend that a larger sample size consisting of a more heterogeneous group of adolescents be used that could ensure transferability of the data to the greater South-African population.
- There are certain character strengths that develop in early adolescents that need to be drawn on in helping the bereaved individual to manage life and even more so, trauma, effectively. Both intra- and interpersonal strengths were highlighted in this study. The researcher recommends that these strengths be identified during formal interventions with early adolescents experiencing trauma in order to activate and utilise them as a valuable

resource and opportunity for further emotional development and personal growth.

- The researcher would like to emphasise the need for communal, professional and parental interventions aimed at minimising the high emotional distress exhibited by the present South African suicide statistics. The great impact the received intervention had on the outcome for the participants has shown that this may assist in the prevention of psychological disorders and could help the early adolescent bounce back to a former level of functionality and even possibly surpass it in the attainment of post-traumatic growth.

7. CONTRIBUTION OF STUDY

Early adolescent bereavement has received limited attention within the South African context and this study aimed to contribute to the literature presently available. Although all of the participants had experienced a devastating loss, reflecting on the unique psychological strengths that the early adolescents displayed while managing their grief, it need not be seen only as a negative outcome on their life. This study is of importance because awareness could be created in the parents as to what strengths to nurture or activate that could be of help to their child during trauma and to better inform professionals working with bereaved South African adolescents, by emphasising the importance of intra-personal strengths and interpersonal support. The findings from the present study, reflecting the psychological experience of grief for South African early adolescents, could be considered for future intervention programmes implemented within the South African context.

SECTION D: ADDENDA

ADDENDUM 1: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION WITH THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis took place by colour coding the themes that emerged within the collected data from the participants.

Strengths of humanity:

Love	Red
Kindness	Yellow
Social intelligence	Green

Strengths of wisdom and knowledge:

Love of learning	Blue
Creativity	Grey
Open-mindedness	Light-blue
Perspective	Orange

Strengths of courage:

Bravery	Brown
Persistence	Beige
Authenticity	Black
Zest	Pink

Strengths of transcendence:

Humour	Dark grey
Spirituality	Purple
Hope	Lavender

RESEARCHER: My name is Joey Pienaar. I'm a registered counsellor, registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa, and I'm doing research for a master's degree in psychology. I'm also working here at the Counselling Centre with a team of helpers to help anyone who feels the need to talk to us about what is troubling them, by taking part in this study. We will sit down one-to-one in an interview setting where you can tell me about your experiences, your feelings, thoughts and ways of coping after your mom committed suicide. Do you agree with that?

RESPONDENT: Yes.

RESEARCHER: Thanks. Let's start off, just generally ...[inaudible] says its not very easy to be an early adolescent, growing up into adulthood. Do you agree with that? How do you think and feel about that?

RESPONDENT: Yes, because it's very hard growing up knowing that you're not going to grow up with your mom and that you don't have that specific person to depend on anymore.

RESEARCHER: Growing up, how did you experience adolescence when you went into puberty? Was your mom still around then?

RESPONDENT: I was only 12.

RESEARCHER: And how was it for you being 12?

RESPONDENT: It was hard because I didn't really know the situation, because ...

RESEARCHER: Can you explain a little bit about the situation?

RESPONDENT: I woke up and then my dad was running around the house ... so I went to him and I asked him what was wrong, and he said, he can't find my mom. So I went to my room and then I was trying to phone her, but then he said his gun was gone. So ... but we all knew that she tried it before by overdosing and then when he said his gun was gone, my brother and I both knew that she'd already done it. It was early in the morning.

RESEARCHER: So, what went through your mind?

RESPONDENT: I was just ... I kept on running up and down the hallway, thinking, is she alive or has she done it already.

RESEARCHER: Ja. Can you tell me a little bit more about what went on that time?

RESPONDENT: After my dad found out his gun was gone, he got in his car and he went to go and look for her. Then my brother phoned him and said he must go and look at [REDACTED]. So he went there and he found her ... that she already done it, and it was about 6 o'clock in the morning, and then he came home at half passed eleven and he said to my grandparents that she had already done it, and they came through and told my brother and I. Then ... everyone, like my uncle and my grandparents were there and my dad had to leave again, and then the pastor came with the police and everything.

RESEARCHER: And how was that for you?

RESPONDENT: It was hard because knowing that all this is going on and she's not here.

RESEARCHER: Did you cry?

RESPONDENT: As soon as I found out that my dad's gun was gone I knew she had already done it. I just burst into tears. I was crying all morning.

RESEARCHER: Is it? I see you get all teary now. Are you ok talking about it?

RESPONDENT: Ja, I'm fine.

RESEARCHER: Ok. How did you cope that morning and that day?

RESPONDENT: Well, it was hard when I first found out. But then, as the people started to leave it got a bit easier and then the pastor and the police came. Then the pastor was talking to my brother and I. But it was still hard because ...

RESEARCHER: Could you make sense out of what he was explaining to you?

RESPONDENT: He was just saying that ... he was explaining the whole situation to us and saying that we mustn't like overreact about it, and mustn't let it get to us, and ...

RESEARCHER: What do you mean by “letting it get to you”?

RESPONDENT: Because most people ... like he said, it mustn't get to us because ... we'll let it get to us and it will let everything else stop for us, and we'll just be thinking about one specific thing.

RESEARCHER: Like what?

RESPONDENT: My mom.

RESEARCHER: Is it?

RESPONDENT: And he said that she's not here, but she's always here, and we must not forget her, but move on. That's all.

RESEARCHER: Ok. Did it help having the pastor there that day?

RESPONDENT: It did, ja, very much.

RESEARCHER: Could he help make meaning out of what happened?

RESPONDENT: Not really, because it didn't really sink in yet.

RESEARCHER: Ok, and you were 12. And, if you think about it now, could you have found some meaning somewhere that made it easier?

RESPONDENT: Just being with my dad and my brother, it would have made it easier, but my dad was obviously running around and trying to sort stuff out and my brother was trying to sort stuff out with my grandparents, and I was sitting there thinking ...

RESEARCHER: It seems like you're saying, if on that day it was just your dad and your brother and you, it could have been easier?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Now, there's all these people ...

RESPONDENT: Ja, and that all made it so hard.

RESEARCHER: Ok. Because now you must like control how you feel ... and how did you feel?

RESPONDENT: Ja ... I just felt like breaking down and crying.

RESEARCHER: Your grandparents, did it make it easier when they came?

RESPONDENT: It was only my gran that was there. My grandfather was with my dad. It did sort of make it easier, but my gran was like ... she was just trying to get my brother and I to go to sleep, but obviously we couldn't because ... we just found out that our mom ... and then she was just trying to put us to sleep the whole time ... ja.

RESEARCHER: I suppose her way of coping ...

RESPONDENT: Ja ...

RESEARCHER: And your brother?

RESPONDENT: My brother went outside, and he was just ... he started hitting stuff.

RESEARCHER: Is it? Are you and your brother close?

RESPONDENT: Ja, very.

RESEARCHER: And then afterwards, when you had to go back to school, how did that feel?

RESPONDENT: It was, by then, it was sinking in more and more. **But as I got to school all my friends came up to me and they started hugging me** ...I got very emotional, because it just reminded me of ... it went back to that day ...

RESEARCHER: Did you tell them what happened?

RESPONDENT: My friends?

RESEARCHER: Yes.

RESPONDENT: No-one knew what happened, but I couldn't talk about it because it was too soon.

RESEARCHER: Ja ... it may be also that stigma that there is to suicide, could have an impact on the difficulty talking to them?

RESPONDENT: Yes, because you don't really want to talk about it. You just want to try and forget about it.

RESEARCHER: If you think ... if it was that your mom had cancer and died, or a car accident, would that have been different?

RESPONDENT: It would have been a lot different.

RESEARCHER: Would you have been able to tell your friends about that easier?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: So when did you eventually tell them?

RESPONDENT: I only went to school two weeks after ... and then about two months after that I was only able to talk about it.

RESEARCHER: Was it hard keeping it all to yourself?

RESPONDENT: It was very hard, but I used to sit down with my brother and we would talk.

RESEARCHER: What were you talking about?

RESPONDENT: Just ... we spoke about the memories ...

RESEARCHER: What memories? Can you tell me a little bit about it?

RESPONDENT: Like when ... my brother and I always used to be with my mom, like we'd go out with her and do stuff with her, and then we were just talking about like when we went to Gold Reef City and stuff like that. My brother was like trying to cheer me up.

RESEARCHER: Ja. How much older is your brother?

RESPONDENT: He's two years older than me.

RESEARCHER: Is it nice to have a sibling?

RESPONDENT: Ja. It helps a lot.

RESEARCHER: What changed after this happened?

RESPONDENT: Just like ... family members drifted apart.

RESEARCHER: Is it?

RESPONDENT: Like my uncle and my aunt. They just drifted apart and my dad found a new girlfriend, and everything changed.

RESEARCHER: The change ... was it better for you or not? Or was it more difficult?

RESPONDENT: It was more difficult, because losing family members and seeing my dad with someone else wasn't easy.

RESEARCHER: You weren't ready for that?

RESPONDENT: No.

RESEARCHER: Tell me a little bit about that?

RESPONDENT: It was eight months after my mom had died that my dad found a girlfriend, and she doesn't really like kids. So, whenever he would go and see her, like my brother and I would have to stay at home alone, and we just don't like it, because he'd always think about her and not us.

RESEARCHER: And the family that you lost, was it your mom's family?

RESPONDENT: No, it was my dad's.

RESEARCHER: So it's like another loss.

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Tell me a little bit about that loss.

RESPONDENT: It was my aunt and my uncle ... like we would always go there for a braai, or they would always come to us, and every New Year's we would be with my aunt, but then after my mom died, everything just changed. We didn't see them until the beginning of this year.

RESEARCHER: Really?

RESPONDENT: We saw them this New Year's but before that we haven't seen them since my mom died.

RESEARCHER: Did you have times of feeling down, feeling depressed, sad?

RESPONDENT: Yes.

RESEARCHER: How did you cope with that?

RESPONDENT: I just ... I went outside and just stood there, and got some fresh air, but then I go inside and I'd talk to someone like my dad or my brother, or I'd just lay there and cry.

RESEARCHER: Is it? If you think of a support system, who do you feel was really there for you around that time?

RESPONDENT: My brother.

RESEARCHER: So, it really helps to have a brother around.

RESPONDENT: Yes.

RESEARCHER: And then, when you did feel all these emotions and feelings, what did you do with it?

RESPONDENT: I couldn't really let it out, because it would make my dad and my brother upset, so I'd speak to a friend or someone, or there's a school counsellor that I used to go and speak to.

RESEARCHER: Did that help speaking to the school counsellor?

RESPONDENT: Yes.

RESEARCHER: What made it helpful?

RESPONDENT: Just that I could talk about it and know that no-one else is going to hear what I have to say.

RESEARCHER: Did you trust her at the school?

RESPONDENT: Yes.

RESEARCHER: What did she do that made you feel it's a safe space to confide?

RESPONDENT: Its just that she wouldn't ... she said its confidential and she wouldn't tell anyone and everything. So I was able to speak ...

RESEARCHER: Ok. These feelings that you dealt with, its like using the external ... the people around you to make it better. What did you do inside you to try and make it better?

RESPONDENT: I tried to keep it in.

RESEARCHER: In control.

RESPONDENT: Ja. Keep everything calm and ... ja.

RESEARCHER: I can relate a little to that when my dad died. Trying to keep it in and being in control ... do you think it's a good way?

RESPONDENT: I think its easier than just bursting out into tears or being angry.

RESEARCHER: Ja. And the school ... did the people treat you differently after they found out?

RESPONDENT: Yes, they did. They thought that it would be better if everyone gave me a lot of sympathy.

RESEARCHER: Is it? And what did sympathy do to you?

RESPONDENT: I didn't like it, because it was people that weren't my friends before they found out that came and then they were like all friendly and stuff, that if they didn't know, they wouldn't have spoken to me. So I didn't really like it.

RESEARCHER: Is it? What else changed?

RESPONDENT: Just ... it was hard going to school and knowing that you're going to go home and not see her ... and know that it's going to be hard growing up because she's not there.

RESEARCHER: What do you miss the most?

RESPONDENT: That we used to spend every day together.

RESEARCHER: What sort of stuff did you talk about?

RESPONDENT: We wouldn't really talk ... like, if she would go to the shop, I would go with her, or if she would go somewhere, I'd always go with her.

RESEARCHER: The just being togetherness?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Ok. And your subjects ... your school work ... did it go for a dive or did it actually improve?

RESPONDENT: It stayed the same, because I didn't let it bother me at school. I wouldn't let it get my marks down, but it was hard knowing that I still have to study and keep my marks the same or higher at least, because it was ... like it would get to me every day, and it would be hard to work at this time.

RESEARCHER: What motivated you to carry on?

RESPONDENT: The teachers.

RESEARCHER: Were they a great help for you?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: How did they ...?

RESPONDENT: The one teacher told me to go and speak to the counsellor if I really needed it. Then just in class, they didn't change, they wouldn't give me sympathy, they would treat me the same as everyone else. I knew that it wasn't going to change, so ...

RESEARCHER: In the early adolescent years the teenagers, they grow up to become like their own person, hey? How did you aspire to be?

RESPONDENT: I just knew that I had to move on, grow up to be what I want to be.

RESEARCHER: What is that?

RESPONDENT: I want to be a photographer.

RESEARCHER: Is that a hobby of yours at this time?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: There are some beautiful things you can do with Kodak.

RESPONDENT: Ja, a nature photographer.

RESEARCHER: Ja. Tell me a little bit about your mom. What sort of person was she?

RESPONDENT: She was a very kind person. She would always do everything for everyone. Like, she wouldn't let anyone down. She was always there for you when you needed her. She was just that kind of person that, if you wanted someone to talk to, she was there, or if you needed something, she was there.

RESEARCHER: Do you feel like you've lost like a role model?

RESPONDENT: Yes.

RESEARCHER: Like, we see ourselves in our mothers, and then when we're teenagers, we hate that, but later on it's like you become proud of who your mom is and was.

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Do you still have memories of her where you feel ...?

RESPONDENT: Ja, I do ... because when I see someone that reminds me of her, or when I see my aunt, she reminds me of my mom.

RESEARCHER: Are they very similar?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Is she your mom's sister?

RESPONDENT: No, she's my dad's sister, but they were very much alike.

RESEARCHER: How do you experience suicide? What do you think about it? At the time, and now ... does it differ?

RESPONDENT: No, it's the same feeling and thoughts.

RESEARCHER: And it's now how long?

RESPONDENT: In March it will be three years.

RESEARCHER: So, how do you think about suicide?

RESPONDENT: I think about it as it wasn't cowardly of her to do it, because anyone that can do that must be brave to do it, and it couldn't have been easy for her to actually do it to herself. Just that ... everyone says that she did it because she was a coward.

RESEARCHER: Did they say that?

RESPONDENT: My grandparents say it to my aunt.

RESEARCHER: Hmm.

RESPONDENT: But I always think that she couldn't have been cowardly to do it. Like, I wouldn't have the guts to do it.

RESEARCHER: Ja. Do you have any fears for the future?

RESPONDENT: No, because I know that I'm determined to get to where I want to be.

RESEARCHER: You know that there was this woman, Kübler-Ross is her surname, that said if you hear that someone died, or have got an incurable disease, you go through these stages of grief. Like, the first one is denial, and then you get angry about it, and then you try to bargain with God, and then you go into depression and eventually you're in acceptance of what happened. If you think of those phases, where would you place yourself?

RESPONDENT: I would place myself in the first stage, in denial.

RESEARCHER: Do you still go like, I can't believe it happened?

RESPONDENT: Ja, I still wake up and think, was it all a dream or is it real.

RESEARCHER: Really? And then what happens when you wake up and you've got all these thoughts?

RESPONDENT: Then I just think that she is there but she's in a better place. That she can't be here with me, that she's still always sitting there by me.

RESEARCHER: Does it make you feel better?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Do you have anyone that you can more or less put in her place?

RESPONDENT: Well, my aunt I would, because she is just like my mom, so ...

RESEARCHER: Can you be more specific ... in what way?

RESPONDENT: They would always ... they have the same personality. They were best friends when they were younger. So, they grew up and they sort of got like each other. Like their lives were the same and ... my aunt is just like my mom as being there for people and ...

RESEARCHER: Ja. And if you think back, when it happened, all those intense feelings and you think of where you are today, are the feelings still that intense?

RESPONDENT: It gets easier over the years, but it still gets to me when I think about it, or when I go and visit her grave it gets very intense, like you just want to scream or cry, or ...

RESEARCHER: And what do you do then?

RESPONDENT: I like keep it in and when I get home I just go and sit in my room.

RESEARCHER: Ja. Did you ever feel so sad that you feel you can't understand why someone could take that way out?

RESPONDENT: Yes. I wouldn't ever think of doing it to myself. But there are feelings when you can relate to that person, as why they did it.

RESEARCHER: What stops you from going there?

RESPONDENT: My family.

RESEARCHER: You think of your brother and your dad?

RESPONDENT: Yes.

RESEARCHER: Ok. What would you like to say to teachers, or people who work with children? How must they be with ... work with the children that this happened to, to make it easier for them?

RESPONDENT: Well, I would say that no-one likes sympathy, but a child that's been through this, they need a lot of help that not everyone can give ...

RESEARCHER: Why do you think they need help?

RESPONDENT: They need to speak to someone or someone must be there for them, but not everyone can be there for them.

RESEARCHER: Do you feel it must be like the same person over a period of time?

RESPONDENT: Yes. Like if that child has been through it, they must say to the child that they must see their school counsellor, or if they want they can go and talk to that specific teacher that they know will be there for them, and just not change anything, because it's hard ...

RESEARCHER: How do you mean not change anything?

RESPONDENT: Like give them special attention, because it's harder to know that they're giving you special attention because you're going through such a hard stage.

RESEARCHER: Ok. And you don't like that feeling sorry for me?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Ok. And ... in your peer group, how is that a help or [inaudible]?

RESPONDENT: It's a lot of help, because there's one friend that's always been there for me.

RESEARCHER: What does she do that makes it better?

RESPONDENT: She's always there, and she always talks about my mom as a good person, and she came to my mom's funeral and it was just easier with her than anyone else.

RESEARCHER: Ok. On a spiritual level, how would you say you have changed over the last three years? Did you become closer to God, or not?

RESPONDENT: Yes, I did.

RESEARCHER: You didn't feel like blaming God for something?

RESPONDENT: No, because my mom chose to take her own life. No-one told her to do it, and no-one forced her to do it. I just thought the one day that God needed another angel.

RESEARCHER: Is it? Did you ever have feelings of anger towards mom because of what she did?

RESPONDENT: I did a lot.

RESEARCHER: Tell me a little bit about that.

RESPONDENT: I just thought to myself that she was brave enough to leave her kids and her family just like that and she just left and didn't want us anymore.

RESEARCHER: That's a feeling of being abandoned ... hey?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Is that how it felt for you?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Tell me a little bit about that?

RESPONDENT: Is just that you feel like she left because of you ... or she didn't want you ... or she didn't want to be here anymore because of ... she's going through so much stress and she doesn't want to deal with it with her kids and her family, so, she chose her own way out.

RESEARCHER: What made you change your mind about being angry at her?

RESPONDENT: Because I couldn't really be angry at her because it was her choice at the end of the day and she never left because of anyone. She chose her own way out and no-one could stop her.

RESEARCHER: Do you sometimes have that feeling of what if?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: And what do you think?

RESPONDENT: I think that what if she didn't do it, where would she be now, or where would we all be now. Would the family have drifted apart, or would my dad have changed like he has.

RESEARCHER: How has he changed?

RESPONDENT: Because of his new girlfriend, she is his number one priority, and his kids are like ... we're distant from him, because of that.

RESEARCHER: Is it? How do you cope with that? How do you handle it?

RESPONDENT: I just ... I ignore it and whenever he's at her place I'll go to my friend, or I'll make a plan to see someone instead of sitting at home.

RESEARCHER: And your brother?

RESPONDENT: My brother works, and when he's not working and my dad goes out, he'll also go to a friend.

RESEARCHER: How do you think God thinks about what happened about the suicide?

RESPONDENT: I think that He's trying to make it easy for us, but still He knows that it's going to be hard.

RESEARCHER: What's going to be hard?

RESPONDENT: Letting her go.

RESEARCHER: So, you still feel you haven't really let go?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: What do you think need to happen for that ... to let go?

RESPONDENT: You just have to give it time and that something happens in your life where you will appreciate it and ...

RESEARCHER: Appreciate what?

RESPONDENT: Like, if you get something you want, or you turn out to be what you want, then you'll appreciate it because you know that someone's out there making it happen for you.

RESEARCHER: What is there that if you speak to your mom now, what is there that you would like her to know about you and where you are now?

RESPONDENT: That I'm strong now, and I live every day knowing that she's by my side still.

RESEARCHER: Do you feel that you're different from other teenagers your age?

RESPONDENT: Yes, because they ... well not all of them, but all of my friends still, they have both their parents, but I'm not different because their parents are divorced, or their parents live in a different country. So, it's like not the same situation, but it's the same feelings because my friend's mom lives in New Zealand, so it feels like she doesn't have a mom, and the parents that are divorced, is hard for the one child and ... and ... **I'm not that different from anyone.**

RESEARCHER: And also because of what you went through and learning how to cope with it, do you feel that you might be stronger than your friends that didn't have to go through this? Or not?

RESPONDENT: Ja, I think **that I learned how to be stronger and learned how to deal with hard things in life. Because that was the hardest thing to deal with.** It got easier, but it's still not that easy, but it's that when something goes wrong you know how to deal with it because you're strong.

RESEARCHER: And how do you deal with it?

RESPONDENT: I just ... if something goes wrong, I'll sort it out by myself. I won't depend on other people to sort it out for me. I'll do it myself, because no-one can make it perfect or no-one can help you make it perfect.

RESEARCHER: So, you haven't lost hope all together?

RESPONDENT: No.

RESEARCHER: If you think of your friends in similar situations, are there some who cope differently?

RESPONDENT: Yes, because some of them are emotionally scarred.

RESEARCHER: What do you mean by emotionally scarred?

RESPONDENT: My one friend, she is always crying or if something happens, she'll cry, and it's hard for her to make it like to fix it, because she can't do it by herself. Because she's just, she's always crying, she's always got something wrong, she's always upset. So, she's sort of like emotionally scarred that whatever when something happens, she always gets upset about it.

RESEARCHER: Does she need someone to lean on all the time?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: And what about using substances to feel better, doing things to feel better?

RESPONDENT: I don't think that works.

RESEARCHER: Do you know of friends who do things like that?

RESPONDENT: My brother does it.

RESEARCHER: What does he do?

RESPONDENT: He smokes and he used to smoke weed, but he stopped that now because it doesn't help. He said that some of his tension goes out on smoking, so it's easier for him.

RESEARCHER: So, it's also about making choices?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: What helps you making good choices for your life?

RESPONDENT: Just speaking to someone just helps me, because if I don't know what to do, then I'll speak to someone and if they agree with what I agree on, then I'll do it.

RESEARCHER: Ok. Is there anything else that you would like to add to trying to understand what you went through?

RESPONDENT: No, not really.

RESEARCHER: Ok. Can I ask you to maybe draw me a picture of your feelings and how you are now and how does it look like. Ok, take your time and just think about it what you would like to portray in a drawing or something to show how you are.

RESPONDENT: It doesn't have to perfect?

RESEARCHER: It doesn't have to be perfect. It can be just anything.

RESPONDENT: [making a drawing]

RESEARCHER: Can you tell me a little bit about your picture?

RESPONDENT: The meaning of the picture is there's a dark tunnel, but there's always a bright side on the other side, but you've got to get through the hard stuff to get to the easy stuff.

RESEARCHER: Ok. So, is that how you make meaning for yourself then, when there are days that are not so good?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: I'll try and remember that for myself, because yes, there are days that I'll wake up and I'll also think, [inaudible], where are you?

RESPONDENT: [... nodding of head]

RESEARCHER: Do you often think of the future?

RESPONDENT: Yes.

RESEARCHER: What lies in the future that you think of?

RESPONDENT: That we're all going to grow up, but I think that I grew up with my grandparents ... my grandmother, but my children aren't gonna know their grandmother, and no-one from my future will ever be able to know her like I did.

RESEARCHER: And if you have children one day?

RESPONDENT: I'll just think that ... I have a grandmother, but they won't know their grandmother, like my mom, because she is not there, they can't meet her and come to the house or play with them and stuff like that.

RESEARCHER: Ja. You will have to be all for them.

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: So, do you think there's always gonna be like little hurdles to overcome in the future?

RESPONDENT: Yes.

RESEARCHER: ... where you would have liked your mom to be with ...?

RESPONDENT: Ja. I would have liked her to be here, just growing up with us.

RESEARCHER: Growing old ...

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Thanks so much for talking to me, ok.

RESPONDENT: Ok.

RESEARCHER: I'm just gonna ask you to complete this as well for me, and then we'll be finished. Are you ok?

RESPONDENT: Ja.

RESEARCHER: I didn't stir up any emotions that you feel you need to talk to someone afterwards?

RESPONDENT: No.

RESEARCHER: Ok. But you will tell us and we will be available if you want to talk, ok. We've got some other counsellors as well that if you want to talk to someone neutral, someone new, we can arrange that. You're never alone, and if it helps for you to talk to someone, just call us, ok.

[END OF AUDIO]

ADDENDUM 2: GUIDELINES FOR JOURNAL:

The aim of the *JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT RESEARCH* is to publish lively, creative, and informative articles on development during adolescence (ages 10-18) and emerging adulthood (ages 18-25). The journal encourages papers that use qualitative, ethnographic, or other methods that present the voices of adolescents. Few strictly quantitative, questionnaire-based articles are published in the journal, unless they break new ground in a previously understudied area. However, papers that combine qualitative and quantitative data are especially welcome.

In order to be considered for review, papers must meet at least one of the following criteria:

1. Combine quantitative and qualitative data.
2. Take a systematic qualitative or ethnographic approach.
3. Use an original and creative methodological approach.
4. Address an important, but rarely studied topic (this could include papers with strictly quantitative data).
5. Present new theoretical or conceptual ideas.

In addition, all articles must show an awareness of the cultural context of the research questions asked, the population studied, and the results of the study. **Each paper submitted MUST include a cover letter indicating how the paper meets at least one of these criteria and the cultural requirement.**

For more on the standards for publication in the *JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT RESEARCH*, please see:

Arnett, J. J. (2005). [The Vitality Criterion: A new standard of publication for Journal of Adolescent Research. Journal of Adolescent Research, 20, 3-7.](#)

In addition to journal articles, the *JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT RESEARCH* publishes **Editorial Essays**, which are short pieces (3,000 words or less) in which an author presents challenging new ideas. There will be few or (preferably) no citations, and authors of the essays will be encouraged to draw upon opinions, insights, and even personal experience. Scholars may present new ideas that may have limited empirical support, but inspire new thinking and research. Some essays may provide a thoughtful critique of a research area while making constructive suggestions for new ways of approaching it. Other essays could analyze a recent event, commenting on the developmental context when adolescents or emerging adults are in the news for involvement in something widely discussed. Policy discussions and advocacy also are welcome in the essays. Scholars interested in writing and submitting an Editorial Essay should query the editor first to confirm the appropriateness of the proposed topic.

The journal accepts **ELECTRONIC SUBMISSIONS ONLY**. Manuscripts should be submitted online at <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/jar>. The editor (or associate editor) will review all manuscripts within 1 month and then inform the lead author whether or not the paper has met the *JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT RESEARCH* criteria. The manuscript then will be sent out for peer review.

Submission of a manuscript implies commitment to publish in the journal. Authors submitting manuscripts to the journal should not simultaneously submit them to

another journal, nor should manuscripts have been published elsewhere in substantially similar form or with substantially similar content. Authors in doubt about what constitutes prior publication should consult the editor.

In general, manuscripts should not exceed 30 typed, double-spaced pages, including references, tables, and figures. Figures and tables should be included as part of the manuscript, not as separate files. Five to six keywords, to be used in archival retrieval systems, should be indicated on the title page. The title page should also include contact information for the lead author, including affiliation, mailing address, e-mail address, and phone and fax numbers. Manuscripts should include three- to four-sentence biographical paragraphs of each author at the bottom of the title page. Following the title page, an abstract of no more than 120 words should be included. Text and references must conform to American Psychological Association style, as stated in the ***Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (Fifth Edition)***. Permission for use of the copyrighted material is the responsibility of the author. All artwork must be camera ready.

Authors who want to refine the use of English in their manuscripts might consider utilizing the services of SPi, a non-affiliated company that offers Professional Editing Services to authors of journal articles in the areas of science, technology, medicine or the social sciences. SPi specializes in editing and correcting English-language manuscripts written by authors with a primary language other than English. Visit <http://www.prof-editing.com> for more information about SPi's Professional Editing Services, pricing, and turn-around times, or to obtain a free quote or submit a manuscript for language polishing.

Please be aware that SAGE has no affiliation with SPi and makes no endorsement of the company. An author's use of SPi's services in no way guarantees that his or her submission will ultimately be accepted. Any arrangement an author enters into will be exclusively between the author and SPi, and any costs incurred are the sole responsibility of the author.

ADDENDUM 3: INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS

Participation in research study:

Exploring the early adolescents' strengths after the suicide of a parent.

My name is Joey Pienaar, I am a registered counsellor, registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and I am doing research for a Master's degree in Psychology.

Thank you for the opportunity to approach you regarding your early adolescent's participation in this research study. You were approached because your early adolescent meets the specific criteria needed for participation in this study. The criteria are:

- The participant is in the age group from twelve to sixteen years.
- The participant has lost a parent to suicide in the last three years.
- The participant speaks either Afrikaans or English.
- The participant has had counselling after the suicide of the parent.

The purpose of this study

This research is aimed at exploring the presence of possible strengths the early adolescent possesses in coping with grief and bereavement after the suicide of a parent. The researcher will attempt to gain insight into the early adolescents' understanding of what they find helpful and not helpful during the course of the bereavement process. The researcher will explore possible strengths emerging in the participant. The study is done to gain insight as to what guidelines can be made available to the remaining parent, professional counsellors and support systems of those working especially with youth and trauma to better understand what strengths to draw on in helping the early adolescent going through the grief and bereavement process. This insight may lead to strengthening the early adolescent to work through their experiences and by so doing bring about a reduction of the high rate of psychopathological symptoms that may develop and help to close the "gateway" to psychological disorders.

Interviews

Information for this study will be collected through individual interviews where your child (the early adolescent) will be interviewed about his/her experience of the suicide of a parent. Voice recordings will not be made public and only made available to the research team. One interview of about 90-120 minutes will be conducted to hear the early adolescent's story (ways of coping, experiences), where data will be collected through the asking of open-ended questions and further probing questions relating to the traumatic incident. Observation notes and field notes will be made by the researcher to better understand what the early adolescent find helpful and what not in managing the traumatic experience after a parent committed suicide.

Risks

A possible risk of participation in this study is that of being confronted with sensitive issues during the interviewing process. The researcher will attempt to make the early adolescent feel secure at all times during the interview and will aim to minimise any distress. The researcher will ask the early adolescent an open-ended question, as well as probing questions about his/her situation, personal history and relationships. Some of the questions may be personal but the researcher will not ask him/her anything that is not relevant to the topic being researched. Should you or the early adolescent however, during the process, feel the need to withdraw from the study, it is within your rights to do so at any time.

Costs and financial risks

There are no financial costs associated with participation in this research project.

Benefits and compensation

There is no compensation for your early adolescent's participation in the interview process and no one will gain financially. The study aims to describe an integrated experience of the early adolescents' strengths after the suicidal death of a parent and it is not guaranteed that you or the early adolescent will benefit directly from participating in this study.

Confidentiality

All information remains confidential to protect you and the early adolescent's identity. Pseudonyms will be used. Exceptions to confidentiality are limited to legal requirements.

Additional information

You will be required to complete and sign a consent form for permission to allow your early adolescent to participate in this study at a time and place convenient to all parties. After the session there will be a time of mutual reflection on the interview. Psychological services will be available for debriefing if needed afterwards.

Feedback

You will receive feedback on the study in a general summarised report as part of a debriefing evening with all participants involved for those who are interested in learning to know more about what possible strengths came to the fore from the research study.

Participant rights

You are welcome to contact the researcher Joey Pienaar at the counselling centre at 011 972 6535 should you have any questions about the research study. Alternatively you can contact the research study leader, dr Lizane Wilson, at 021 864 3593 should you need any more information.

Conclusion

By signing below, you are indicating that you have read and understood the consent form and that you agree to participate in this research study.

Parent signature

Date

ADDENDUM 4: INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Title of research: Exploring the early adolescents' strengths after the suicide of a parent.

The purpose of this study is to collect data about your experience regarding the suicide of your parent in order to find out what you find helpful and what not, as an early adolescent, in the time after the traumatic incident happened.

My name is Joey Pienaar, I am a registered counsellor, registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and I am doing research for a Master's degree in Psychology. I am also working here at the counselling centre with a team of helpers to help anyone who feels a need to talk to us about what is troubling them.

By taking part in this study we will sit down one-on-one in an interview setting where you can tell me about your experience, feelings, thoughts and ways of managing your life after your mother/father committed suicide.

We can make use of various methods (talking/drawings) to help you explain your experience and what you felt and thought about what happened. We can also talk about what you found helpful and not helpful during the time of your grieving as well as what you did to manage your daily life after the suicide of your parent.

Whatever is discussed is completely confidential and your name will not be made available in the study so you will be anonymous. If you do not want to take part in this study or you feel uncomfortable for any reason during the interview you are free to leave anytime. If you feel sad, angry or upset after the interview is finished and you would like to talk to someone about how you feel, there will be a counselling psychologist or a registered counsellor available to talk to if you want to.

Reply to consent:

Have you read the information provided above? YES/NO

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study? YES/NO

Have you received satisfactory answers to your questions? YES/NO

Have you received enough information about the study? YES/NO

Do you understand you are free to withdraw from the study at anytime
without having to provide a reason? YES/NO

Do you agree to take part in this study? YES/NO

Name of participant _____ Signature _____

Name of guardian _____ Signature _____

Date _____

ADDENDUM 5: THE VIA INVENTORY OF STRENGTHS FOR YOUTH

The VIA inventory of Strengths for Youth is notable for several reasons:

Table 2.5: Classification of character strengths

1. Wisdom and knowledge	Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity 	Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity 	Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love of learning 	Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-mindedness 	Thinking things through and examining them from all sides
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perspective 	Being able to provide wise counsel to others
2. Courage	Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity 	Speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bravery 	Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistence 	Finishing what one starts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zest 	Approaching life with excitement and energy
3. Humanity	Interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindness 	Doing favours and good deeds for others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love 	Valuing close relations with others

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social intelligence 	Being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others
4. Justice	Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairness 	Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership 	Organising group activities and seeing that they happen
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork 	Working well as member of a group or team
5. Temperance	Strengths that protect against excess
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *Forgiveness 	Forgiving those who have done wrong
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modesty 	Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prudence 	Being careful about one's choices; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-regulation 	Regulating what one feels and does
6. Transcendence	Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation of beauty and excellence 	Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gratitude 	Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hope 	Expecting the best and working to achieve it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humour 	Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religiousness 	Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose of life

Park and Peterson (2006:891-909)

ADDENDUM 6: PERMISSION TO DO RESEARCH

