

Retrospective Fatality Analysis: An Update to Psychological Autopsy

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We Want You to Be Able to:

- Describe the use of Retrospective Fatality Analysis (RFA) and its roles in research, prevention, and helping survivors understand the reasons behind a loved one's death.
- Identify risk and protective factors.
- Explain how RFA and talking about a suicide death helps survivors make meaning of a loss by understanding life events, relationships, and the sociocultural context of suicide.
- Describe the impact of meaning-making on the well-being of loss survivors, specifically how RFA helps people reconstruct a loved one's life and engage other people and communities in conversation about suicide and suicide prevention.

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Fatality Review

- Single cases
- Multiple cases
- Plays a role in:
 - Equivocal death investigation
 - Drug overdoses
 - Autoerotic asphyxia
 - Atypical gunshot wounds
 - Single car, single driver motor vehicle accidents
 - “Suicide by cop”
 - Suicide prevention
 - Expert testimony
 - Healing

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2021 United States Suicide Data

- There are 48,183 suicides annually.
 - 132 deaths per day
 - 1 person dies by suicide every 10.9 minutes
- Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death.
- Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for adolescents.
- Firearms are the most lethal suicide method.
- More males die by suicide than females.
- Suicides are 5 % to 25% underreported.

Drapeau, C. W., & McIntosh, J. L. (2023). U.S.A. suicide: 2021 Official final data. Minneapolis, MN: Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE), dated January 12, 2023, downloaded from <https://save.org/about-suicide/suicidestatistics>

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2021 United States Suicide Data

- It is estimated that 135 people are exposed to a single suicide.
 - 6,504,705 in 2021
- Six people experience major life disruption for a single suicide death.
 - 289,098 in 2021
- 40-50 Percent of the population in the United States have been exposed to suicide in their lifetime.

CEREL, J., MCINTOSH, J., NEIMEYER, R., MAPLE, M., & MARSHALL, D. (2014). The continuum of "survivorship": Definitional issues in the aftermath of suicide. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 44, 591–600. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12093>.

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis

- A comprehensive analysis of biopsychosocial and environmental factors preceding an individual's death by suicide or other unnatural deaths
- Purposes
 - Inform suicide prevention efforts
 - Research
 - Expert witness testimony
 - Equivocal death determinations
 - Stop contagion
 - Survivor meaning-making

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis

- The Protocol
 - Created by a multidisciplinary team of experts
 - Not used for post-mortem diagnosis
 - Requires certification for protocol use
 - Provision of structure, oversight, and support
 - Robust and comprehensive protocol
 - Convened panel of experts for review
 - Risk Factors
 - Protective Factors

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis Historical Risk Factors

- Previous suicide attempt
- History of depression/mental illness
- Serious illness/chronic pain
- Criminal/legal problems
- Job/financial problems
- Impulsive/aggressive
- Substance use
- History of adverse childhood experiences
- Hopelessness
- Violence/Bullying
- Family/loved one's history of suicide
- Loss of relationship
- High conflict or violent relationships
- Social isolation
- Lack of access to healthcare
- Suicide cluster in the community
- Stress of acculturation
- Community violence
- Historical trauma
- Discrimination
- Stigma
- Easy access to lethal means
- Unsafe media portrayals of suicide

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis Protective Factors

Effective coping and problem-solving skills

Reasons for living (for example, family, friends, pets, etc.)

Strong sense of cultural identity

Support from partners, friends, and family

Feeling connected to others

Feeling connected to school, community, and other social institutions

Availability of consistent and high-quality physical and behavioral healthcare

Reduced access to lethal means of suicide among people at risk

Cultural, religious, or moral objections to suicide

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Last Reviewed: November 2, 2022

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis

- Examples of Domains

- Demographic Information
- Residential Status and Homelessness
- Education
- Perpetrator Status, Engagement with Law Enforcement, Judicial, and Correctional History
- Physical Health
- Mental Health
- Substance Use
- Military and First Responder Experience
- Social Media Use
- Suicidality

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis

- Contagion
- Coping Mechanisms and Avocational Interests
- The Process
 - Semi-structured interviews
 - Identify interviewees
 - Consent
 - Identify resources for loss survivors
 - Evidence from the site of death (e.g., police reports)
 - Physical autopsy and lab reports
 - Archival documents
 - Medical records

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis

- Mental health records
- School records
- Criminal records
- The Interview
 - Opening questions
 - Closing questions
 - Distress scale
 - Know
 - The facts
 - What to look for
 - What to say and what not to say
 - What to do

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Meaning-Making

- To accept that death was a suicide
- To answer the question “Why?”
- To decrease blame, guilt, denial, anger, and other feelings resulting from a loved one’s suicide
- To help survivors gain new perspectives
- To help prevent the next suicide
- To help alleviate a survivor’s isolation

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Why It is Important to Serve Families Bereaved by Suicide

- Exposure to suicide increases vulnerability to suicide.¹
- Suicidal risk is significantly higher than those unexposed.¹
- Loss survivors found suicide more thinkable and more doable.²
- Retrospective Fatality Analysis:
 - Opens the door for families bereaved to tell their stories in a non-clinical and therapeutic manner.

¹Maple, M., Cerel, J., Sanford, R., Pearce, T., & Jordan, J. (2017). Is exposure to suicide beyond kin associated with suicidal behavior? A review of the evidence. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 47(4), 461–474.

²Van Orden, K. A., Witte, T. K., Cukrowicz, K. C., Braithwaite, S. R., Selby, E. A., & Joiner, T. E., Jr. (2010). The interpersonal theory of suicide. *Psychological Review*, 117(2), 575–600.

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Why It Is Important to Serve Families Bereaved by Suicide

- Helps families begin to engage in recovery and find the anger felt after a suicide less heightened.
- Facilitate(s) a sense of purpose...participation would help others.
- Is an effective tool for suicide prevention.
- Helps families begin to engage in recovery and find the anger felt after a suicide less heightened.
- Families bereaved by suicide will feel:
 - Heard and can talk about their loved one in a positive manner.
 - Empowered by telling their story.

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Why It is Important to Serve Families Bereaved by Suicide

- Part of a process that will create change in a system in preventing suicide.
- Helpful by contributing to research, and suicide prevention strategies.
- That they are experiencing the loss constructively.
- Many informants valued discussing the circumstances with a professional who has insight into the process around suicides. Thus, the interview facilitated emotional and cognitive grief tasks and reorientation through meaning-making.²
- **Complicated Grief**
- The inability to reconstruct a meaningful personal reality, an outcome to which individuals with insecure working models of self and relationships are especially vulnerable.¹

¹Neimeyer, R., Prigerson, H., Davies, B., (2002). Mourning and Meaning, American Behavioral Scientist, 46, 2.

²Dyregrov, K., Dieserud, G., Rasmussen, M., Straiton, M., Hjelmeland, H., Knizek, B. (2011). Meaning making through psychological autopsy interviews. The value of participating in qualitative research for those bereaved by suicide. Death Studies. 685-710.

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The Power of Storytelling

- Allows loss survivors to remember loved ones for who they were, not how they died.
- Families and individuals can begin to recover knowing:
 - There is no blame.
 - They are not alone in this journey.
 - Their thoughts are normal reactions to suicide bereavement.
- Stories are told in the teller's own words.
- Meaning is embedded in our stories. "[W]e live in stories, not statistics."¹

¹Gillies, J., & Neimeyer, R. A. (2006). Loss, grief, and the search for significance: Toward a model of meaning reconstruction in bereavement. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 19(1), 31–65.

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The Power of Storytelling

- Stories help us understand our past and prepare us for the future by organizing our experiences.
- We understand our stress more realistically and concretely.
- Sharing stories with trained listeners deepen our conversation and reflection.
- It reduces social isolation and fosters feelings of connectedness.
- We can understand our stories as real.

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Janet's Personal Impact

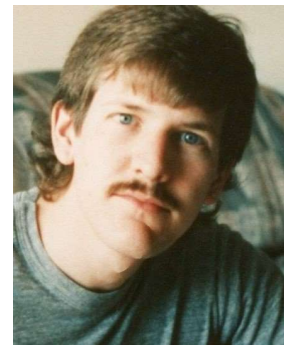
- Sharing my story helped me:
 - Tell the story of my brother's life and my loss
 - Answer the "why" questions
 - Be the voice for suicide prevention
 - Be the voice for loss survivors
 - Begin to break the stigma
- Because of my story
 - I became a non-traditional social work student and now have an MSW, LCSW
 - I became a Retrospective Fatality Analysts Consultant
 - I am now a public speaker
 - I can help loss survivors
 - I can help those with suicide ideation

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Janet's Personal Impact

- I have gained
 - Self-confidence
 - Passion for awareness
 - Increased self-esteem



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