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CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

What is spirituality for women bereaved by a partner's suicide: A qualitative study

Austėja Agnietė Čepulienė^{1*} Paulius Skruibis¹

Abstract: Spirituality is often significant for those undergoing suicide bereavement. Our study aimed to explore how women, who are bereaved by their partner's suicide, describe spirituality. 11 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with female participants using reflexive thematic analysis. Six themes were identified: Spirituality as a resource, Spirituality as a relationship; Spirituality is universal; Spirituality is a changing phenomenon; Spirituality requires effort; Spirituality is between knowing, sensation, and feeling. Female participants who experience bereavement following a partner's suicide described their understanding of spirituality as a multidimensional phenomenon. Interpretations and practical guidelines are formed.

Subjects: Religion in Context; Religion & Psychology; Death and Dying; Women; Religion and Spirituality

Keywords: spirituality; suicide bereavement; qualitative research; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

A loved one's death due to suicide is a painful and challenging experience (Jordan, 2001, 2017; Jordan & McGann, 2017) that can affect psychological and spiritual well-being (Castelli Dransart, 2018; Lynn Gall et al., 2015). Spirituality can become an essential resource while coping with different life events (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020), such as physical illnesses (Koenig, 2015), mental health issues (Kao et al., 2020; Koenig, 2009), psychological traumas (Milstein, 2019), grief (Park & Halifax, 2021) and traumatic grief, such as grief after a child's death (Khursheed & Shahnawaz, 2020) or after a loved one's suicide (Krysinska et al., 2017). Despite the significance of spirituality, it is an overlooked phenomenon in the context of suicide bereavement (Čepulienė et al., 2021; Krysinska et al., 2017). This can be attributed to the problematic nature of the concept of spirituality (Colucci & Martin, 2008), which is hard to define and measure, and subsequently, to research (Jastrzębski, 2022). As such, it is necessary to study the primary question of what is spirituality for those experiencing bereavement following a partner's suicide.

The concept of spirituality is complex and challenging. The construct is multidimensional (Pargament & Lomax, 2013), has an unclear relationship with religiosity (Jastrzębski, 2022; Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020), and can be defined differently depending on the specific religious, cultural, and historical points of view (Jastrzębski, 2022). The word "spirituality" has many definitions (Colucci & Martin, 2008), with the original coming from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning the breath of life (Elkins et al., 1988). Historically, spirituality was seen as a form of exceptional religiosity, with asceticism and deep faith being the main components (Koenig, 2008). The meaning of spirituality transformed in the 20th century when its meaning gradually moved away from the religious context (Jastrzębski, 2022). Many people started to see themselves as spiritual but not religious

(Hornborg, 2011), which allowed them to be spiritual in secular ways, but also made the spirituality phenomenon very broad and dependent on personal choice and interpretation.

In psychology research, spirituality is seen from strongly linked with religiosity to an experience that is quite different from religiosity. Authors who see spirituality as a part of religiosity criticize spirituality as a concept and present skeptical interpretations of findings indicating a positive relationship between spirituality and psychological well-being or health (Koenig, 2008; Reinert & Koenig, 2013). Other researchers understand spirituality as a universal and cross-cultural phenomenon and thus argue that taking a broader view towards spirituality in research allows to study spirituality among different cultures, religions, and traditions (Pargament, 2007; Pargament & Lomax, 2013; Piedmont, 1999), as well as in secular Western societies (Morland et al., 2022). From this point of view, religiosity is seen not as a component of spirituality, but as a universal human need, personal experience, and a way to search for the sacred (Pargament, 2007). To search for the sacred means to search for an intimate relationship with the aspects of life, which represent the divinity for the individual (it can be God, a Higher power, the Universe, nature, art, or other people). Spirituality consists of the elements such as transcendent dimension (a belief that it exists); meaning and purpose in life (as a task of life); mission in life (a belief that everyone has a mission); the sacredness of life (a belief that the whole life is holy); material values vs. ontological thirst (conscious acceptance of the conflict between them); altruism (helping others without seeking personal use); idealism (seeking for a better world); awareness of the tragic; fruits of spirituality (spirituality is not only an abstract experience or attitude, it has real effects on the quality of life or relationships; Elkins et al., 1988). To sum up, spirituality can be described as a way of being and experiencing the world through observing the transcendental dimension (Elkins et al., 1988). However, these definitions of spirituality are sometimes criticized as being overly broad and lacking discriminant validity (Schnell, 2012).

The broad view towards spirituality can result in difficulties when trying to define and operationalize the concept. As such, it is advised to define the word specifically in formal research studies utilizing the construct of spirituality (La Cour et al., 2012) or to study spirituality as a subjective phenomenon by asking specific groups of people about their understanding and experience of what spirituality is (Hall et al., 2008; Jastrzębski, 2022; Neubauer et al., 2019; Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020; Tinley & Kinney, 2007). The specific groups of people involve those who are in need of spiritual help, and therefore, studying their perceptions of spirituality can provide deeper knowledge of how individuals in similar situations can be supported (Earlix et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2008; Torskenæs et al., 2015). Another reason to study spirituality among different groups of people is that such studies provide bottom-up examples of how people understand spirituality (La Cour et al., 2012), which can be useful for comparing the human experience to theoretical statements and contributing to the field of spirituality.

One of the groups of people who might need and/or utilize spiritual support is the group of people bereaved by suicide. A loved one's suicide can cause difficult experiences, which also can affect the bereaved individual's experience of spirituality. A loss due to suicide is usually a traumatic experience (Bellini et al., 2018; Jordan, 2001), which may negatively affect mental health (Andriessen et al., 2019; Bellini et al., 2018), physical health (Spillane et al., 2017) and suicidal behavior (Agerbo, 2005; Maple et al., 2017; Young et al., 2012). The person experiencing bereavement following a loved one's suicide often experiences guilt, questions, and anger (Jordan, 2001; Jordan & McGann, 2017, 2017). People who lost a life partner due to suicide tend to have more anger than other relatives (McIntosh & Wroblewski, 1988). They also have worse health and mental health outcomes due to the experience of loss (Caine, 2017; Erlangsen et al., 2017) and are at a greater risk of suicide than other individuals experiencing bereavement (Agerbo, 2005).

Spiritual crisis, existential questions, and religiosity-related attitudes may shape perceptions towards suicide (e.g., the idea that a loved one's suicide was God's punishment or that the deceased will not go to heaven because suicide is a mortal sin) and fill the bereaved individual

with complicated feelings and thoughts about one's faith, spirituality, connection to God or Higher powers and afterlife (Castelli Dransart, 2018; Čepulienė et al., 2021). A loved one's suicide can be viewed as a moral injury (Jones, 2020) as suicide can be seen as a voluntary choice to abandon the family and friends (Jordan, 2020), which can break one's trust in the relationship with the deceased (Lynn Gall et al., 2015) and shatter beliefs about God's good will (Castelli Dransart, 2018; Vandecreek & Mottram, 2009). To sum up, losing a loved one due to suicide might lead not only the process of grief and traumatic reactions but also a spiritual crisis, consisting of doubts about faith, Higher powers, and spirituality and disappointment in previous beliefs (Čepulienė et al., 2021). Therefore, deeper knowledge on the spirituality and helpful spiritual support in the context of suicide bereavement can be useful during suicide bereavement.

The loved one's suicide can interact with spirituality not only in disturbing but also in unexpected ways. Doubts about previous beliefs (Lynn Gall et al., 2015) can be frustrating, but they allow one to reconsider one's core values, relationships, and spirituality (Cadell, 2012; Čepulienė & Skruibis, 2022). The reconsideration of one's spirituality sometimes results in a so-called posttraumatic growth, defined as an experience occurring alongside the distress of trauma in the form of positive, e.g., seeing new opportunities, relating to others, personal strength, appreciation of life and spiritual change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In one concept analysis of spirituality, a challenging life event such as a loved one's loss was considered to be an antecedent for strengthened spirituality (Weathers et al., 2016). In another study, the trauma of losing a child due to protracted conflict led to increased spirituality, resulting in experiences of self-compassion and, later, post-traumatic growth (Khursheed & Shah Nawaz, 2020). Therefore, spirituality can be a product as well as a resource following the experience of loss caused by suicide, which could provide additional resources for coping with grief.

To our knowledge, there is no specific study about the concept of spirituality described by those who are bereaved by suicide. Examples of the importance of such research can be found in nursing literature. For example, one study researched people of color with severe illness and how they saw spirituality from their perspective (Earlix et al., 2021). They described spirituality as an experience pertaining to relationships with their family, self, and religion. The findings allowed to form concrete guidelines for nursing practitioners on how one might approach the domain of spirituality with patients (Earlix et al., 2021). Another study compared nurses' definitions of spirituality in Malta and Norway; the study concluded that cultural differences can influence the experience of spirituality, and, therefore, ways to help (Torskenæs et al., 2015). Therefore, the current study aimed to explore how women bereaved by their partner's suicide describe spirituality.

2. Materials and methods

Data presented in this article is from a bigger explorative study on the role of spirituality during suicide bereavement. The description of spirituality was not the main focus of the initial study. However, in inductively designed qualitative research, it is common that new and unexpected important topics are identified from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019, 2021). During the interviews, each research participant expressed something about the complexity of spirituality and the multiple meanings behind this experience. The impetus behind this study is, therefore, to conduct data analysis with a higher emphasis on the way spirituality is defined, understood, and experienced by people undergoing bereavement.

3. Participants

Research participants were 10 Lithuanian and 1 Russian-Lithuanian women aged 28 to 62, who lost their husband, fiancé, or romantic partner due to suicide from 2 to 5 years ago. Research suggests that the timeline of 2–5 years since the loved one's suicide is optimal to talk about the experience with less acute grief difficulties while maintaining a clear retrospective discussion of the experiences and events (Feigelman et al., 2009). Pseudonyms of the participants and more details can be seen in the Table 1.

Table 1. The characteristics of research participants

Pseudonym	Age	Deceased was her	Time elapsed after suicide	Education	Religious affiliation	Place of living	How was the interview conducted?	Interview duration
Rasa	41	Husband	2 years and 2 months	Higher	Catholic	Rural area	Videocall	1 hour and 49 minutes
Nida	35	Husband	4 years and 9 months	Higher	Not affiliated	City	Videocall	1 hour and 58 minutes
Liepa	49	Husband	5 years	Professional	Catholic with a question mark	Town	Videocall	1 hour and 36 minutes
Laima	28	Fiancé	4 years and 5 months	Higher	Catholic	City	In person	1 hour and 58 minutes
Karolina	46	Husband	2 years	Higher	Catholic	City	Videocall	1 hour and 1 minute
Eglė	31	Romantic partner	2 years and 4 months	Professional	No affiliation	City	In person	1 hour and 43 minutes
Elena	34	Husband	2 years and 4 months	Higher	No affiliation or all religions	City	In person	1 hour and 13 minutes
Jurga	49	Husband	2 years and 1 month	Higher	Not practicing catholic	City	In person	1 hour and 35 minutes
Agnė	36	Husband	5 years	Higher	Catholic	Town	Videocall	1 hour and 28 minutes
Dalia	62	Husband	5 years	Higher	Catholic	City	Videocall	2 hours and 3 minutes
Asta	36	Husband	4 years	Higher	Eastern orthodox	City	Videocall	2 hours and 9 minutes
M	40,64							1 hour and 41 minutes
SD	9,98							

4. Interviews

For data collection, semi-structured face-to-face interviews about the role of spirituality during suicide bereavement (the focus of the bigger study) were conducted. Before the interviews, participants were informed that the researchers are interested in their subjective experience of spirituality as they understood it. During each interview, the topic of the description of spirituality occurred and was explored together with the participant.

Interviews consisted of three main questions focusing on the partner's death, the role of spirituality during bereavement, and the impact of spirituality on relationships. An additional follow-up question was presented about the definition of spirituality. The interviewer held on to the strategy to follow the participant's thoughts and feelings, as is common to semi-structured interviews. The interviews generally lasted for 1.5 hours.

5. Procedure

Participants were invited to complete the participant questionnaire or contact the researcher directly. The invitation to the study was shared via social media posts and emails to psychologists and therapists in Lithuania who might know people who are experiencing bereavement following a loved one's suicide. Potential participants from previous studies, who agreed to be invited for further studies in the project, were also invited. In the invitation, spirituality was described as "spirituality in a broader sense, which could be related to religiosity or not related to religiosity at all" with a goal to reach participants who would not necessarily be (but could be) religious. It is estimated that phenomenological studies reach data saturation with around 10 participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), therefore, after 11 interviews, the decision to end the gathering of the data was made.

The interviews took place between January 2021 and November 2021. Participants had the option to have a face-to-face interview or a video call (see, Table 1). All interviews were conducted in the Lithuanian language (quotes from participants for this study were translated into English by the authors).

All participants were provided with a printed or scanned informed consent form with their identification code, which they had to sign. In addition, participants received an info sheet with information about psychological and emotional support contacts.

6. Data analysis

Authors audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded all the interviews. Data with personal identifiers were removed and anonymized in the transcripts. To ensure the credibility of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000), during data collection and analysis, the main author kept a research diary in which they recorded her thoughts, interpretations, and potential sources of influence on the data analysis. The first author's reflection on her interviews and thoughts during the study was published separately as an autoethnography (Čepulienė, 2022).

The authors approached the study and interviews from a phenomenological perspective: they prioritized research of lived experience and sought to seek a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (i.e., spirituality; Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology as a methodological approach argues that truth and understanding of life emerge from people's life experiences. Therefore, to search for the truth means to study the phenomenon by asking people about their experiences. While collecting and analyzing the data, the researcher must bracket previous knowledge of the topic by separating the researcher's knowledge, opinion, and expectations from the lived experience of the research participants (Byrne, 2001; Giorgi, 1992). To analyze the data, authors used reflexive thematic inductive data-driven analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019, 2021). Since thematic analysis allows for identifying idiosyncratic patterns in the data, it was deemed appropriate for the research question in this study.

The analysis followed the steps written by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved listening and re-reading the interviews and transcripts, coding, reviewing the codes between authors, organizing codes into subthemes and themes, and reviewing and discussing the findings between the authors. The reflexive part of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021) was followed by writing a researcher's diary, reflecting on the researcher's influence on the process of identifying the themes from the data, reconsidering the grouping of the codes, naming subthemes and themes. For coding, the authors used ATLAS.ti (2022).

7. Ethical approval

The Psychology Research Ethics Committee of Vilnius University approved the wider project of which the current study is a part of (2021-01-22, Number 56).

8. Results

The authors identified six main themes that reveal how women experienced bereavement and spirituality following a partner's suicide: spirituality as a resource, spirituality as a relationship; spirituality is universal; spirituality is a changing phenomenon; spirituality requires effort; spirituality is between knowing, sensation, and feeling.

9. Spirituality as a resource

Participants described spirituality as a resource during bereavement following a suicide. The resourcefulness of spirituality consists of support felt from the sphere of spirituality:

"I strongly believe in the protection < ... > it is an unseeable support and I need it" (Laima);

Strength, connected to spirituality and helping to recover from difficult life situations:

"I think that spiritual strength can be described by how much strength you can find to straighten yourself after being knocked down. It can last long." (Liepa)

Moreover, spirituality has been described as a source of peacefulness, which helps to calm down, ease existential fears, and allows one to accept life as it is, for example:

"Somehow, you start to evaluate the husband's suicide differently ... There is this joke ... where the robot gets artificial intelligence and emotions and ... existential stuff that has no meaning ... Nevertheless, humans live with that every day ... Everybody who comprehends this, they ... must find peace with that ... People kill themselves because there is no meaning in life, but for me, it helps to be ... I don't expect from myself too much. I do not search for something. I do not blame anybody. Moreover, I am not afraid." (Nida)

10. Spirituality as a relationship

Several participants described spirituality through relationships with a higher power, others, and oneself. For example, Agnė, who became an active member of a charismatic Catholic movement after the loss, thought that holding onto a relationship with a higher power is an everyday task. During bereavement, it was Agnė's way to live day by day focusing on her relationship with God and not the one with grief:

"In the spiritual life, you wake up today, and there is a zero ... Moreover, you must search for the face of God. You have to search for the relationship with Him again, to cry for His spirit, that He would complete you, lead you, give you ... to understand His will, decisions, what to do, how to do it and be ready for adventures ... " (Agnė).

Spirituality as a relationship with others includes the ability to participate in quality relationships, listen to others better and hold on to the virtue of compassion even in situations with strangers. For example, Elena, who saw spirituality as one's capacity to hold on to one's virtues, found that

after the loss staying kind to other people (which is an important virtue for her) helped her to strengthen her sense of spirituality. Spirituality directed her in difficult situations after her husband's suicide and helped to manage her anger, which was easily triggered during bereavement:

“We went to the emergency reception in the hospital, for example, with my daughter ... All the nurses scream on the child, on me, that we will get Covid, with no reason ... I think you do not know our story, why we are here, why should you assault us. It triggered me inside, but I think maybe she has a hard day, and when I talk to her nicely, I ask for forgiveness that we distracted her, but my daughter needed help ... She screams further. It is ok, I think if you scream, scream. However, she leads us to a doctor, and I say thank you ... And after the doctor, we wished her a good day ... I hope that she felt more positivity after that, at least a bit ... Instead of screaming back”. (Elena)

Many participants described spirituality as a deep relationship with oneself, a journey to better self-knowledge and self-acceptance. For Liepa, deepening the relationship with oneself was triggered by the loss:

“It is like a journey to the forest when it gets darker and darker, it is a real journey for me, to the spirituality, to myself, to see the world differently, to my sensations, to find it once again ... And together the curiosity evolves to explore it consciously, where is me, what is happening in me, raising questions for myself.” (Liepa)

11. Spirituality is universal

Many participants saw spirituality as a universal phenomenon independent of their religious affiliation. Asta, who was disappointed in the Russian Orthodox church after the loss and received more support from the Catholic priest and non-religious friends, argued that spirituality is not the same as religiosity:

“But these old religious women will not come and help you. She will go by the drunk person and will not call the ambulance. However, another person who is not attending church will stop, help, and call the ambulance ... Where do you see more spirituality? In the person who goes to church every day, prays but does not help or in another who does not pray ... I see more spirituality and soul in the helping person ... ” (Asta);

Dalia, who leaned on Catholic traditions after the loss, but also searched for ways to regain trust in good humanity, thought that spirituality is for everybody because it is related to our nature:

“It does not matter if he is a Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox ... I believe that there is a uniting consciousness, goodness, love, and so on because ... I believe deeply that a person is not created only for these political conflicts, but for love, growing flowers, children, happiness.” (Dalia)

Spirituality was also viewed as an individual, subjective phenomenon, with basic general rules of humanity as kindness to each other. Jurga, who explored spirituality after the loss in personally meaningful Catholic rituals, esotericism, numerology, yoga, and the connection with the spirits of her ancestors, said:

“Someone believes in God ... I believe in something else ... However, everybody needs to believe in something. Another does not believe in anything. Maybe it is also good. I think that there is a need to live in the right way. Not hurting other people, living in peace with oneself and others. One should be good, empathetic, and helpful. Humane.” (Jurga)

12. Spirituality is a changing phenomenon

Research participants saw spirituality as a changing phenomenon. According to Karolina, who interpreted spirituality as peacefulness manifesting in relationships, which helped after her

husband's suicide, spirituality can also become dangerous fanaticism, which can be seen as her fear to lose oneself in a religious movement:

"Spirituality cannot hurt unless it goes from a search of something to an extreme ... We know many cases ... when people start with small steps ... ascetic life or something ... And then they deviate somewhere ... To manic stuff." (Karolina)

Participants noticed that different life events influence spiritual changes during their lifespan. Laima, who coped with her grief using many different spiritual methods, noticed that her spirituality first changed after the loss, then later, after having a child:

"I always believed, but I did not pray every evening or participate in mass ... However, I would go to the church and light a candle. For five minutes, I would have this silence during the day, be in peace ... The relationship [with spirituality] changes ... Now it is again something else. Now I pray every evening for my child" (Laima)

13. Spirituality requires effort

Spirituality, according to the participants, requires conscious personal effort. Spirituality can be searched for in different fields, such as religion, traveling, and relationships, as well as music, art, and literature. Nida, who was disappointed in the Catholic church after her loss, described the search for spirituality in different fields:

"If you see spirituality as a religious thing, then before the loss, one might say I had a loose relationship with religion, but I tolerate the beliefs of other people ... If it does not go against my beliefs ... My family is not religious. We search for spirituality in other stuff, culture, art, literature." (Nida)

Spirituality requires active involvement, such as reading, reflecting, praying, or attending mass. This involvement, according to Dalia, was rewarded by the relief about her husband's soul, provided by higher powers:

"It was a real grief, every Sunday we went to church ... we prayed, and she (the friend) helped me to remain, and the first year went by, and it was a relief ... as if I helped him (the husband) to obtain the keys from St. Peter." (Dalia)

Spirituality by many participants was described as an action, including such spiritual practices as rituals, prayers, yoga, meditation, writing, and serving others. For example, Liepa practiced yoga and meditation to search for peacefulness during bereavement:

"You can use Christianity. I practiced yoga, meditated ... meditation is concentrating and getting peaceful with oneself, in here and now." (Liepa)

Several participants saw spirituality as the soundness of one's virtues, which was helpful to maintain a sense of life's direction after the loss:

"For me, spirituality and faith and religiosity are ... People interpret differently ... in my childhood, my mother had a friend who was a priest ... I talked to him about what is God, and he constantly communicated that it is faith ... It is the pot of virtues, which you have ... And faith is to be faithful to your virtues." (Elena)

Participants also spoke of spirituality as an attitude towards life, which can be related to a person's responsibility and involvement in the world, holding onto gratitude and respect for one's life and/or accepting one's boundaries and temporality, which had a positive effect on accepting the death of a loved one:

“Spirituality for me, I would say, is to myself, personal. To myself, relationship with the world, others, what I am, what I do in this world ... Reviewing the past events and making sense for things.” (Liepa)

Independent of participants’ religious affiliation, they usually saw religiosity as a part of spirituality if religiosity is conscious, active, and taken in by the person. Moreover, when it is taken in, God is seen as providing support during painful moments of life, such as intense grief after a husband’s suicide:

“At first, it brought me on hands ... Grief and loss were the starting point of my spiritual journey ... Community, reading the Bible, and relationship with God helped ease the pain to the minimum, I felt that after a week, the pain lessened ... I could breathe and see my children, the grief did not go away, but it was bearable. It was not above my powers.” (Agnė)

14. Spirituality is between knowing, sensation, and feeling

Many participants described spirituality as something experienced somewhere between knowing, sensation and feeling. Spirituality for many was related to bodily sensations, for example, outer and inner silence, intuition, felt in the body, and changing the outwards of the body by travelling or going to nature or spiritual spaces. Spiritual experiences helped to release emotions of grief:

“I need to be in the church alone ... And these organs ... these benches ... I searched for therapy to release my pain. I went to my garden to take care of the flowers ... The flowers tore the skin on my hands, and I felt that I want the flowers to hurt me, that I want to feel pain ... It changes the focus from the pain in the heart ... And in the church ... I wanted to kneel ... and cry ... It would provoke me, the organs, when they start to play ... The sermons of the priest seemed to be about him and me and our family.” (Rasa)

Spiritual experiences were described by participants as extremely strong, borderline, feeling transformational, grounding, experienced as lightness in the head, miracle, or deep love:

“I am the happiest if I experience the nearness of the spirit during my prayers and I live it out physically, it can be the lightness in the head, you feel as if you are drunken with young wine, or perhaps it is a soft pushing feeling in the spirit, and you might feel that you do not want to say anything ... just to be in the spirit and feel that God talks to you.” (Agnė)

Trying to understand spiritual experiences was difficult for many participants because it was seen as an experience between knowing and feeling. For example, Asta felt that something unexplainable brought her to the body of her husband:

“It seemed, maybe it is stupid, but ... It seemed that something was bringing me (to the body of the husband). I do not know, maybe it was my husband, maybe somebody else.” (Asta).

Spirituality for many participants was related to faith in something that can be grasped only by having faith in the first place. This included a belief in the afterlife, the good nature of humanity, holding onto hope, intuition, God, spirits of ancestry, and its involvement in personal life or vibrations of the “soul” and “energy levels”. Faith for many participants was helpful to maintain hope of further connection with the deceased or, in Eglė’s case, to trust in one’s ability to improve one’s well-being:

“My understanding of spirituality helps ... I believe that everything is energy and that emotions have lower and higher vibrations, and ... it causes your well-being. There is stuff that represses, lessens, and on the opposite, raises these vibrations”. (Eglė)

15. Discussion

The current study aimed to explore how women who are bereaved by a partner's suicide describe spirituality. The findings revealed that women who lost their partners due to suicide see spirituality as a resource and a form of relationship. They understand spirituality as a universal, changing phenomenon, which is experienced as a phenomenon between knowing, sensation, and feeling, and which requires continuous effort.

The findings, in general, are in line with other research studies exploring the concept of spirituality in the field of mental health (Kao et al., 2020; Koenig, 2009). Spirituality provides strength through self-compassion (Khursheed & Shahnawaz, 2020), hope (Chiu et al., 2004), and felt support from a higher power (Castelli Dransart, 2018). Additionally, the current study suggests that it is also seen as a source of peacefulness, which is needed during suicide bereavement. Calming the thoughts, feelings, and doubts is essential for the bereavement process and can be a part of the dual bereavement process model, where the person can take a break from focusing on the loss and grief (Stroebe et al., 2010). Spirituality might provide many methods and tools to reach peacefulness, including prayer (Boelens et al., 2012), meditation (Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2022), and listening to music (Nyashanu et al., 2021) or talking with other people about spiritual matters (Ramezani et al., 2019). Therefore, spirituality can have significant psychological benefits for coping with trauma-induced distress and anxiety, as was found in the review on spiritual resilience after experiencing a disaster (Milstein, 2019). This resonates with common interventions (e. g. Harris et al., 2021) on helping with traumatic experiences and post-traumatic stress.

Data on spirituality as a relationship with a higher power, others, and oneself shows similar findings from other research fields on spirituality (Chiu et al., 2004). In the case of suicide bereavement, our findings indicate that spirituality can be a way to trust in a higher power, which can help individuals to “make meaning” of their loss (Neimeyer & Burke, 2014) and contemplate questions about guilt and responsibility (Jordan, 2001; Jordan & McGann, 2017). Spirituality as a phenomenon leading to quality relationships can be understood by compassion, which can be considered a component of spirituality (Withers et al., 2017). Compassion is the ability to recognize, understand, feel, and tolerate universal human suffering, as well as act to alleviate the suffering of oneself and others (Strauss et al., 2016). Therefore, it helps to accept one's own as well as others' challenging feelings, which can improve the quality of relationships.

Spirituality as a deep relationship with oneself reflects the idea that the self is somehow spiritual, and the relationship with the self can be worked on through spirituality. It might involve self-compassion (Khursheed & Shahnawaz, 2020), self-reflecting, accepting oneself, or, from the analytical psychology's perspective, communicating with the unconscious aspects of one's psyche (Johnson, 1986). This idea goes hand in hand with the universality of spirituality, belonging to everybody, and having an individual task. Spirituality, as a universal phenomenon, encourages a sense of inner power (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020). However, it can be criticized as unrelated to transcendence (Hornborg, 2011) because not everyone believes in the idea of transcendence. Despite this critique, our findings suggest that spirituality by those experiencing bereavement following a loved one's suicide is seen as universal and partially connected to the relationship with oneself and experienced as positive and helpful. It eases guilt and responsibility, normalizes, and helps to accept the challenging and dynamic feelings following a partner's loss.

Our findings reveal that those experiencing bereavement followed by suicide see spirituality as requiring active effort, commitment, and search. In this theme, authors included religiosity as spirituality because many participants described religiosity as an active effort to connect with God. This perspective provides a solution to the problem of the conceptual distinction between spirituality and religiosity because here, religiosity revealed itself as a way of searching for spirituality, as is defined by Pargament (2007). Since religion can be seen as a search for the sacred that occurs within the context of institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality (Pargament et al., 2017), religiosity can be defined as belonging to an institution of religion and following its guidance

with the goal to facilitate personal spirituality. Both religion and spirituality are connected by having an interest in the sacred phenomena, but religion and religiosity is a narrower approach towards the search for the sacred in terms of its institutionally based context (Pargament et al., 2017). Our findings are somewhat in line with this approach towards religion and spirituality because they reveal that, in subjective experience, religiosity and religion provide guidance that might be understood as a spiritual effort to connect with the sacred phenomena.

The effort to maintain spirituality gives a sense of control when bereavement is considered. A loved one's loss due to suicide might be experienced as a totally uncontrollable situation, which may present itself as a form of intense helplessness. However, when it is seen as requiring effort, spirituality can be a field to focus on during painful grief (Čepulienė & Skruibis, 2022). The efforts can vary from participating in mass to fighting for one's virtues, depending on the experience of loss and grief. This aspect of spirituality provides hope that spirituality is not simply "given" and that personal choices can influence it, potentially impacting its resourcefulness.

Participants also notice that spirituality is a changing phenomenon, partly depending on one's effort and that it can develop during life. In adverse scenarios, it can become a form of fanaticism and destroy a person's relationships. Therefore, the effort to look after one's spirituality is based on being able to reflect on one's spirituality. Since spirituality does not consist of only positive traits, efforts are needed also for contemplation of the "shadow" side of spirituality and spiritual questions (De Souza, 2012). This side of spirituality is connected to the component of spirituality called "awareness of the tragic" (Elkins et al., 1988) and can be experienced as disconnectedness from a higher power or others, fragmentation, guilt, anxiety, and disappointment in one's beliefs (De Souza, 2012). These are similar aspects to a spiritual crisis, which can be caused by a loved one's suicide (Čepulienė et al., 2021). For each of the mentioned experiences and questions, spiritual efforts are needed to search for ways to solve the spiritual crisis and integrate the "shadow" side of spirituality (De Souza, 2012). During suicide bereavement, solving the spiritual crisis might become a part of the bereavement process.

Lastly, spirituality during bereavement following a loved one's suicide is described as an experience positioned between knowing, sensation, and feeling. Spirituality can be seen as related to the body and bodily experiences (Farley, 2007; Turner, 2017). Therefore, it could also link with the trauma of a loved one's suicide, which also has a part in the body, with its own spiritual metaphors, helping heal the trauma (Farley, 2007; Turner, 2017). The borderline nature of spirituality in the people experiencing bereavement can be perceived as a form of support from a higher power or a sense of the deceased person's presence as proof of the afterlife (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2018) as well as a reminder of the terrifying experience of the nearness of death. A loved one's suicide can provoke powerful and sometimes dangerous psychological mechanisms. From the analytical psychology's point of view, grief weakens the borders that filtrate the unconscious content (Kast, 1993). Therefore, the time after the loss is delicate and complex, and as such, providing healing resources for grief and traumatic experience, and avoiding their strengthening in the personality, is essential (Čepulienė et al., 2021).

To conclude, spirituality, described by women experiencing bereavement following a partner's suicide, is consistent with the broader description of spirituality, such as the ones proposed by Pargament (2007) and Elkins et al. (1988). Spirituality as a resource can be helpful for people who are specifically experiencing bereavement following a close person's suicide by providing comfort, peace, and support after the trauma (Harris et al., 2021; Jordan, 2001). If a loved one's suicide is experienced as a moral injury (Jones, 2020), it can cause a spiritual crisis (Čepulienė et al., 2021). The universal and changing concept of spirituality means that it is possible to contemplate and adjust one's beliefs and practices and to try and the quests emerging from the "shadow" side of spirituality (De Souza, 2012), but active efforts might be needed for these tasks. Since death by suicide can damage the relationship with the deceased individual (Jordan, 2020), spirituality as a form of relationship might also be affected and the means to recover and transform the

relationship with a higher power, others and oneself might be needed. Spirituality, experienced as a phenomenon between knowing, sensation, and feeling, shows that it is difficult to understand this experience with a rational mind. Therefore, spiritual experiences, which are often experienced by people experiencing bereavement following a suicide (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2018), should be looked at with respect by practitioners, who can help understand the psychological and spiritual meanings of these experiences.

16. Limitations and further research

Some limitations of the current study must be discussed. The research participants, although homogenous, represent only the perspective of women who are experiencing bereavement following a life partner's suicide. The women differed in age, education, and the nature and duration of their relationships with the deceased men. Therefore, the findings might be affected by the differences in the research participants.

The initial study (the wider project of which this study is a part of) did not focus on the description of spirituality, which might have narrowed data about the current research topic. In addition, participants were volunteers who wanted to tell their stories about spirituality during suicide bereavement, which also could have narrowed the findings to only hearing from participants who may have had a more positive experience and therefore wanted to share their stories with the researchers. This could have affected the data by providing a "one-sided" description of spirituality.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a unique perspective on spirituality from the lens of women undergoing bereavement following their partner's suicide. It contributes to the field of psychology by providing a deeper understanding of spirituality for those experiencing bereavement. Further studies on the concept of spirituality should focus on the description of spirituality and involve different groups of research participants experiencing bereavement to further develop this topic. It would also be helpful to research the perspective of practitioners who provide psychological and spiritual help for individuals experiencing bereavement.

17. Practical implications

Our findings have practical implications for those who meet people who are experiencing bereavement following a loved one's suicide in their psychological or spiritual practices. Spirituality should be used only when the bereaving individual openly expresses that spirituality is a significant part of their life and the bereavement process. Depending on the situation and context, together with other authors (for example, Kopacz et al., 2014), authors suggest that practitioners could proactively ask about the topic without concrete expectations.

Acknowledging spirituality as a resource for strength, peacefulness, and support from something "bigger" (e.g., God, universe, higher power) might be helpful in situations where the person struggles with hopelessness and helplessness. In case of anxiety, the practitioner could encourage spirituality as a form to reach peacefulness.

The relationship aspects of spirituality might be a form of motivation for the individuals to work on their relationships, trust in others, and higher power (if there is a belief in it), which might be affected negatively by the loss (Castelli Dransart, 2018). Spirituality as a relationship with oneself might function as an important factor for enrolling in therapy or other forms of help. The spiritual methods to connect with oneself could be discussed and encouraged when the practitioner sees the need for more help than is provided in traditional settings, such as psychotherapy.

Spirituality as an activity that requires effort can be used to help the individuals experiencing bereavement to focus on a task during particularly difficult times. Practitioners could encourage rituals, practices, reflections, and contemplations about one's beliefs and virtues. It could help regain a sense of control. The detailed view of the exceptionally strengthened spirituality and

spiritual activities should help prevent the bereaved from joining (or joining it with more consciousness) radical and dangerous movements related to spirituality.

Spirituality should be regarded as an essential experience for those undergoing bereavement. The sense of the deceased's presence and the capacity to reflect on a relationship that has physically ended with a practitioner can improve the integration process of the loss (Stroebe et al., 2010). Reflecting with a psychology specialist on negative experiences could help one understand what is happening and find ways to calm oneself down. Some spiritual experiences could provoke the need to understand their spiritual meaning. In that case, the guidance of spiritual leaders might be necessary.

18. Conclusion

Women undergoing bereavement following a partner's suicide describe spirituality as a multidimensional phenomenon and provide various meanings of spirituality that capture its resourcefulness, universality, and changeability. Spirituality was described as a form of relationship with a higher power, others, and oneself, experienced as a phenomenon between knowing, sensation, and feeling, and requiring a continuous effort. Spirituality might provide peacefulness and support to those experiencing bereavement following a loved one's suicide, but in case of a spiritual crisis, conscious efforts are needed to solve difficult spiritual issues. Spirituality can be important during suicide bereavement; therefore, practitioners and spiritual leaders might provide more specific support alongside more traditional modes of help, such as psychotherapy.

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Data Availability Statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

Ethical approval

The Psychology Research Ethics Committee of Vilnius University approved the wider project, of which the current study is a part of (2021-01-22, Number 56).

Informed consent from the participants

All the participants signed the informed consent.

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