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IS LOSS A LAUGHING MATTER?: A STUDY OF HUMOR REACTIONS AND BENIGN  
VIOLATION THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF GRIEF.

By

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Organizational Communication, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, 2019

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Is Loss a Laughing Matter?: A Study of Humor Reactions and Benign Violation Theory in the Context of Grief.

Chairperson: Dr. Stephen Yoshimura

Death is not commonly considered a humorous topic; however, bereaved individuals often joke about their loss. The jokes griever tell while grieving have been overlooked within research, resulting in a limited understanding of how this communication impacts those hearing it. This research sought to eliminate that gap by building an understanding of the interpersonal effects of grief-based humor through the lens of Benign Violation Theory. Twenty-two individuals participated in semi-structured interviews that revolved around whether humor could be found in grief and how this humor affected their relationship with the bereaved. The interviews identified that when a bereaved individual uses tenets Benign Violations (such as alternative meanings to a joke's subject matter) humor can be found within jokes about loss. Further, the participants primarily felt closer to the bereaved individual through an increase of trust and value within their relationship and newfound ease of communication surrounding the loss.

Keywords: grief, humor, Benign Violation Theory, interpersonal relationships

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*“The secret source of humor is not joy, but sorrow; there is no humor in heaven.” - Mark Twain*

**Introduction**

People often turn to humor as a coping mechanism when experiencing dark times, and grieving the death of a loved one is one of them. Although it may seem counterintuitive to express sadness with humor, humor is a way for grieving people to express their emotions and communicate about larger issues in a perceivably comfortable and socially acceptable way (Sands, 1984). In turn, humor can help grieving individuals receive greater support or be a means of collective healing. Yet, not everyone will understand or appreciate a grieving person’s use of humor about their loss. Even if others laugh at a message about death-related loss, humor can also create discomfort, uncertainty, confusion, or even sadness in receivers. As such, grieving people can sometimes find themselves facing a paradox; they might perceive something humorous about the loss and want to share it, but risk alienating their support system if and when they do.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of grief-related humor on one’s peers (i.e., friends, family, and other loved ones). According to Benign Violation Theory (McGraw et al., 2012), humor in darker contexts can cause positive reactions when the communication is deemed safe and nonthreatening (i.e., benign). Yet, little is known about how the use of grief-related humor communication affects the receivers of these communicative messages. Previous research has established that humor causes a reaction in the receiver that can either trigger a relationship to grow closer or break apart, depending on how the communication is used (Chovanec & Tsakona, 2018; Meyer, 2000). As will be discussed below, a large gap in the

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knowledge of death, dying, and interpersonal relationships exists. Findings that fill this gap could enhance the understanding of grief communication for scholars and bereaved individuals alike.

### **Literature Review**

Grief can be a taboo subject in Western cultures. People in Western cultures have many rules about who gets to grieve, how long they are allowed to grieve, and in what settings grief is appropriate (Harris, 2010). Consequently, mourners often feel unable to communicate openly about their grief for fear of shame or stigma (Harris, 2010). However, the bereaved can coat their messages in ambiguity and express their feelings indirectly by communicating about grief and their emotions through a joke (Alberts, 2013). Thus, the ambiguity humor provides in grief communication can help the bereaved feel more comfortable or normative in their communication.

Humor, however, also incites a reaction in the receiver of the joke or story. The outcomes of jokes have serious relational implications, including bringing individuals closer or pushing them apart (Meyer, 2000). In other words, the coping strategies one uses during bereavement carry significant consequences (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). For example, a failed humor attempt can lead to social isolation and cause the sender of the communication to lose the interpersonal relationship at hand (Warren & McGraw, 2015). These consequences stem from the idea that humor can violate the other person's views of the world and make them feel deeply uncomfortable (Warren & McGraw, 2010). Nevertheless, the bereaved still use grief-related humor communication.

Presumably, the bereaved still engage in humor communication because it reduces tension, depression, and anxiety after the loss of a loved one, and provides a more comfortable way to express the taboo emotions surrounding their grief (Lefcourt, 2001; Alberts, 2013). Promisingly,



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humor can even strengthen relationships among grieving people, as humor can bring people closer and reinforce interpersonal relationships (Gordon, 2014). However, the effects humor can have on a relationship have not been studied in the context of grief.

Without knowing the scope of grief-related humor's possible effects, the bereaved may be using a coping mechanism that damages their support system in a time where they often need it most (Bath, 2009). The bereaved themselves may feel many benefits from using humor, but they could also inadvertently lose the people around them and suffer another loss if their attempts at humor are perceived as inappropriate. In contrast, if the use of humor also benefits the receiver in some capacity, the bereaved could experience stronger interpersonal relationships. Currently, little is known about the extent to which grief-related humor can affect the receivers of these messages. Research has only revealed that humor, in general, can cause individuals to either want to grow closer or break apart from the person using this communication (Meyer, 2000). In response to this gap in the literature, this study seeks to provide an understanding of what relationships humor use is appropriate within, what happens to the receiver when the bereaved use humor as a coping mechanism, and why this reaction occurs.

### **Defining Grief and Coping**

When one experiences the death of a loved one, they usually endure an emotional reaction that can include feelings of "sadness, longing, sorrow, despair, and anguish," and the culmination of these emotions is what we refer to as *grief* (Granek, 2010, p. 47). Grief is a multifaceted process that is rich in theoretical history, with each academic discipline's conceptualization of the emotion providing a different lens as to how we should grieve, what the grieving process looks like, and what to expect after a loss.

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For the purpose of this research, *grief* can be defined as a culturally-bound, adaptive reaction to the loss of someone or something that is meaningful (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Harris et al., 2016). Narrowing this definition down further, Stroebe and Schut (1999) describe grief as a “waxing and waning, an ongoing flexibility over time” wherein individuals cope with their loss continually (p. 213). When grief occurs, individuals find ways to deal with their emotions and cope with their loss. To provide background on how this happens and what might occur to their support system, particular attention will be paid to the process of *coping*, which is any action one takes to relieve the psychological burden they are enduring (Snyder, 1999). Individuals can cope with the death of a loved one by continuing their relationship with the deceased (Field & Friedrichs, 2004), sharing stories and narratives (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005), and actively working on the stressors that arise after the loss of a loved one (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). In the context of grief, coping encompasses actions that focus directly on the loss (i.e., yearning for the deceased or revisiting the places they loved) and on restoring life after loss (i.e., adjusting to new identities such as a widow or completing the daily tasks the deceased typically did) (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

In many cases, coping with grief can take the form of humor. Humor often acts as a healthy way to provide distance between one’s sense of self and the problem at hand, making it a common coping response to stressful situations (Lefcourt, 2001). Humor is often seen as an emotional coping response within death-related stressful experiences such as end-of-life care or bereavement (Nunes et al., 2018; South et al., 2020). For example, nurses, patients, and family members often use humor as a coping mechanism during end-of-life care as a means to positively communicate with one another about the situation (Nunes et al., 2018; Tremayne, 2014). According to this research, nurses who use humor have fewer negative emotions such as

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sadness or emptiness after losing a patient. Humor also allows them to experience less emotional overload, consequently providing them greater ease fluctuating between their personal and professional lives so that the grief of losing a patient at work does not impact their lives at home (Nunes et al., 2018).

Similarly, patients and their family members may also use humor during end-of-life care as a way to both ease the pains of the situation for themselves or to relieve tension for the other person by providing a break from the seriousness of their circumstances (South et al., 2020). Humor allows individuals to support, bond, and grow closer together, partly because it provides a moment of reprieve from the stress they are experiencing and creates a shared narrative of their situation (South et al., 2020). Overall, using humor has a myriad of positives for not only the person nearing the end of their life, but for those caring for them as well, with both parties reciprocally benefitting from this type of communication. Leading back to the purpose of this study, if both parties benefit from using humor during end-of-life care, similar effects could be seen in grief and bereavement.

### **Laughing through Sadness: Humor and Grief**

Humor can be variously characterized as a behavior, a communicative act, an emotional attitude, an expression, and many other conceptualizations (Sprowl, 1987). Basically, humor is anything one does to make another person laugh, the creation and perception of amusing stimuli, and the emotional response to a humor attempt (Martin & Ford, 2018). Somewhat more specifically, humor “is essentially a way for people to interact in a playful manner” (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 3), and a universal trait that sparks some new attitude or expression within the receiver (Booth-Butterfield, et al. 1991; Martin & Ford, 2018; Sprowl, 1987).

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Humor can be used in a variety of contexts. Individuals have a predisposition and an orientation towards humor that determines how often and in which situation one will use humorous communication (i.e., a sense of humor) (Booth-Butterfield, et al. 1991). The use of humor communication can be pleasant or unpleasant, and it can charm, persuade, defuse conflict, or save the face of the sender (Sprowl, 1987; Gibbs, et al., 2018; Walter et al., 2018). Humor is a phenomenon that comes from play and is most often a relational communication act as it is almost entirely experienced socially (Martin & Ford, 2018). Humor occurs more naturally in interactions than it does in isolation, making it a key component of our relationships (South et al., 2020; Martin & Ford, 2018). Therefore, one will typically use humor when they are in a situation with another person, thus creating the potential for the relationship at hand to experience shifts from the humorous communication.

Even though both death and humor are natural to human life and relationships, death is likely not the first context to come to mind when considering humorous communication. Death is not an inherently funny topic, yet many bereaved individuals joke about it (Booth-Butterfield et al., 2014). Speaking about death and loss is often uncomfortable, and when one jokes about something that makes the receiver uncomfortable, it can hurt the interpersonal relationship (Graham, 1995). Consequently, by joking about death, the bereaved can damage their interpersonal relationships without meaning to. However, humor does not always harm an interpersonal relationship and often it can be used to bring two people closer together instead of forcing them apart (Gordon, 2014). How and why the receivers of grief-related humor will react to this communication is hard to say without empirical evidence leaving much to be understood of the impacts humor has in this setting.

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To understand the impacts grief-related humor will have on both a griever and their support system, a comparison can be drawn between humor-use in bereavement and in processing trauma. Benign Violation Theory provides insight into how humor can be utilized in darker contexts and showcases the effects this communication can have on those surrounding the bereaved by explaining the multiple ways humor can be interpreted as appropriate even within seemingly inappropriate settings.

### *Using Humor to Cope with Grief and Trauma*

Humor plays a role in the coping process for both trauma survivors and those in bereavement (Garrick, 2006). For example, humor has been linked to fewer signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, higher resilience levels in trauma survivors, and increased personal growth following a traumatic event (Besser et al., 2015; Boerner et al., 2017; Sliter et al., 2014). The emotions and coping processes experienced in an individual who went through a traumatic event will often be similar to those experienced by the bereaved, and the two frequently occur simultaneously and are not mutually exclusive (Regehr & Sussman, 2004). The coping processes of those who have experienced a loss and those who have experienced a trauma are also quite similar and can include active or passive coping, humor, and social support (Bonanno, 2004). Seeing as both trauma and bereavement have a similar effect on an individual and parallel coping processes, as well as the fact that humor has related benefits across the two contexts, comparisons can be made across both experiences when it comes to the use of humor.

The bereaved and trauma survivors seem to benefit from utilizing humor in similar ways. For instance, widows who use humor after the death of their spouse appear to experience benefits regarding their physical health, psychological health, and adjustment to life without a spouse overall (Lund et al., 2010). This finding mirrors the data on humor and trauma. For example,

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trauma survivors who use humor as a positive coping mechanism also experience fewer trauma-related effects (lessened effects of PTSD, depression, and anxiety) (Besser et al., 2015).

Additionally, the authors found that trauma survivors and their relational partners typically adjust similarly; they found that if one partner experiences fewer effects of PTSD, so too will the other. Not only will the communication by the individual who went through the traumatic event affect their partner, but the communication by the partner who was not traumatized will affect the partner who was (Besser et al., 2015). By communicating through humor, both partners can actively positively impact the other and reduce the effects of PTSD.

Besser et al.'s (2015) findings raise the question of whether or not the benefits of using humor for both the trauma survivor and their partner could occur between griever and members their support system. Seeing as how the effects of humor as a coping mechanism are the same across grief and trauma research, humor's effects on supporters might also be the same and be reflected in both trauma and grief research. The question of whether these effects would be mirrored in grief research showcases the importance of further investigating the impacts humor communication has on the supporters of a bereaved individual. If this mirroring does occur, the use of humor, if it positively affects the individual, will likely positively affect their supporters as well. However, much is unknown about the reactions of the supporters to grief-based humor communication. One way to more accurately predict what the reactions of the supporters will be is to understand the aspect of reactions to humor as a whole.

### ***Receiver Reactions to Humor***

Humor, even if it can elicit both positive and negative reactions, is arguably a healthy coping mechanism for the bereaved that should be welcomed and accepted by their support network (Booth-Butterfield et al., 2014). Of course, humans react differently to various humor

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attempts, particularly in the context of grief. Grief is an unsettling topic to discuss and bringing it up in a humorous nature can feel inherently incorrect to some individuals. Yet the discomfort around death-related topics by itself can inspire a wide variety of reactions to grief-based humor.

If humorous communication benefits the individual who went through a traumatic event, it can also benefit those around them. That is, the use of humor can be a benefit to both the bereaved and their support system. Indeed, positive reactions to humor have a range of wonderful effects. For instance, if an individual decides that their partner used humor well, it can act as a cathartic event for both the sender and the receiver, providing the resources for building resilience and hope (DiCioccio, 2015). However, by using humor one can not only create a positive emotional state but also a negative one, depending on the communicative situation and performance. One example of a negative reaction is that, when done poorly, humor can make the receiver less likely to want to continue the relationship with the other person (Kuiper et al., 2010). Therefore, by using humor, the bereaved can either create a beneficial, cathartic event for themselves and their support system, or they can ultimately lose the interpersonal relationship altogether. Benign Violation Theory (BVT; Warren & McGraw, 2010) helps explain both positive and negative reactions, and why coping with grief with humor can be an either positive or negative experience.

### **Benign Violation Theory**

Benign Violation Theory explains why someone might engage in humor even though they are grieving, and why humor attempts that come from this place of grief can be deemed comical (or not) by the receiver. This theory emerged in response to incongruity theory, which explains that humor communication is amusing because it causes a “discrepancy” from what one expected (Morreall, 1999). According to incongruity theory, four types of incongruity can produce humor:

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surprise, juxtaposition, atypicality, and violation. Surprise is something unexpected, juxtaposition a contrast between two things that typically do not go together, atypicality is a departure from social standards, and a violation is something that departs from one's perceptions of how things should be that is threatening, wrong, or negative (Warren & McGraw, 2015). However, just because something is surprising, juxtaposed, atypical, or a violation does not necessarily mean it will be appraised as funny (Warren & McGraw, 2015).

According to BVT, a situation can be amusing when: (a) it violates one's typical view of the world and its norms (i.e., it counts as a "discrepancy" mentioned in Incongruity Theory), (b) the violation is benign (i.e., not harmful), and (c) both characteristics occur at once (McGraw & Warren, 2010). In contrast to incongruity theory, BVT assumes that incongruity alone is insufficient to create humor, but rather that communication must cause a discrepancy by violating a norm while simultaneously being appraised as benign to be amusing.

A situation is benign or can be made benign if it meets three criteria that help separate the audience from the violation. The first criterion involves how deeply committed the audience is to the subject of a joke. The deeper the commitment an audience has to a topic, the easier severe violations are to make about that subject material. For instance, family members joking about the deceased to one another could be seen as engaging in a harmless violation (and thus humorous communication) because they are all committed to the joke's target. In contrast, an outsider making the same joke to the family could be seen as a harmful violation because they do not share the same level of commitment as others do.

The second criterion is that the speaker brings audiences closer to smaller violations and distances them from those that are more serious. Smaller violations, such as someone falling and remaining uninjured, are deemed funnier when they are close to the audience (i.e., they saw the



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person fall or know the individual personally). Death is a comparatively more serious violation than mere falling and remaining uninjured, Thus, the more time passed since the loss has occurred, the easier it will be for the bereaved to laugh and joke about the deceased as they will have been able to process and heal from their loss.

Third, benign violations occur when the speaker develops multiple meanings of the joke's subject material (Warren & McGraw, 2016). For example, in Pete Davidson's (2020) comedy special *Alive in New York*, Davidson recounts the tragic experience of losing his father to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and how his mother used the government supplement she received afterward to purchase him and his sister a pool as an attempt to alleviate their grief. Davidson (2020) shares that, growing up in an impoverished area, his neighborhood friends all thought he was extraordinarily lucky for having a pool, joking "Thank God Osama bin Laden didn't miss his alarm clock. You know why? I wouldn't have a pool!" At first glance, his statement appears to be insensitive to the 9/11 terror attacks. However, Davidson uses this joke to call attention to the fact that the children in his neighborhood did not understand his grief or where the pool came from while simultaneously poking fun at his grief, thus rendering it somewhat harmless.

When messages meet the above three criteria, a subject that is normally considered "bad" to joke about, such as death, can in fact become amusing. Not only does the theory explain why dark topics can be comical, but it also provides a lens through which one can analyze others' reactions to a bereaved individual's use of humor.

### **Applying BVT to Grief**

One of the ways BVT allows for an analysis of the reactions to grief-related humor pertains to the concept of distance. By looking at how distance affects humor, an understanding of why these darker jokes can be seen as funny emerges. Humor is more comical with a greater amount

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of distance between subject matter and the audience. Distance (how far someone is physically or psychologically from the subject material) can reduce the threat of the violation enough that it can turn tragedy into comedy (Warren & McGraw, 2014). The reverse is true with mildly threatening or aversive situations. For example, stubbing one's toe could be much more humorous when observers are closer to the event (Warren & McGraw, 2014). Thus, to make something funny, the joke-teller can use distance to bring the audience closer to the subject of a joke or separate them from it. However, distance creates an interesting conundrum for death-related humor. On one hand, death is more than a trivial topic akin to a mishap. On the other hand, the receiver is both physically and psychologically close to the joke's subject material. Yet, the receiver may still find the joke funny.

Benign Violation Theory (BVT) explains that humor can simultaneously produce negative and positive emotions (McGraw et al., 2012). An audience may still laugh at a joke that makes them feel uncomfortable or brings up emotions such as disgust or sorrow. For example, when study participants were told that a son snorted his father's ashes, they found the situation to be humorous after learning that the father told the son to do "whatever [the son] wished with his remains" as the situation simultaneously was appraised as right and wrong (Warren & McGraw, 2010). While this example is uncomfortable and socially inappropriate, the son acted within his father's wishes, thus making it a benign violation and producing a comical situation that triggered both positive and negative emotions. The same could be said about jokes regarding bereavement or grief; the receiver will be more comfortable with the humor attempt when the joke simultaneously brings up positive and negative emotions but is ultimately appraised as a benign violation of rules about death-related social rules and norms.

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Jokes that elicit both positive and negative emotions from an audience are emotionally multifaceted. That is, they can cause more than one emotion at a time in those on the receiving end of the messages. Therefore, if a grieving individual makes a joke about their lost loved one, their support system may simultaneously see the humor in the situation and laugh, while also feeling uncomfortable and unsure how to respond. The last component of BVT crucial to understanding reactions to grief-based humor communication is what Warren and McGraw (2016) refer to as alternative explanations. They found that if a humorous situation creates a violation that can be interpreted as both a threat and harmless (i.e., Davidson's comedy special), then the explanations that render it harmless allow the situation to become funny (i.e., Davidson is poking fun at his neighbors and his grief). The researchers relate this idea to play fighting; while evolutionarily fighting should be aggressive and scary, play fighting can still be fun because it lacks a real, violent act. Humor that creates this harmless offense is also seen in shows such as *The Simpsons* or in the use of sarcasm. Both communicate a violation of a social norm, but in a way that tells the audience they are still safe and that the message was not intended to harm anyone (Warren & McGraw, 2016).

Alternative explanations impacting whether a joke is funny become particularly fascinating due to the unpredictable nature of death-related jokes. Death is a permanent event, and no alternative meanings to the subject matter of these jokes exist. However, there could be many different reasons that a person engages in humor, such as using it as a call for help or simply to feel connected to the dead, thus creating multiple meanings behind the joke's intent. As a result, a receiver's reactions may be blurred between concern, humor, and an array of other emotional responses.

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Overall, BVT explains how a joke can elicit a positive reaction and be considered funny, even if it makes someone uncomfortable. Thus grief-related humor can be funny to those hearing the jokes if they consider the violations being made are benign. Yet, little is currently known about what circumstances lead people to perceive that death-related humor messages are benign violations. In fact, most of the work surrounding death-related humor is a bit outdated, being mainly from the 1990s and early 2000s. Further, the work that has been done has never looked at the receiver as an important part of the success in death-related humor messages. Seeing as death is a natural part of life, understanding how one communicates about it and the effects this communication has is critical. This study therefore seeks to investigate the following question:

RQ1: What aspects of grief-related humorous communication lead receivers to perceive the message as a benign violation?

Another issue not directly addressed by the theory is the possibility that humor, and closeness coexist or co-occur. In fact, as individuals become closer, the use of humor increases significantly (Hampes, 1992). Humor can promote closeness in a variety of contexts, from rekindling friendships that have deteriorated (Gordon, 2014), talking about the imminent death of a family member (South et al., 2020), resolving conflict in romantic relationships (Campbell et al., 2008), and communication regarding cancer care (Sherratt & Simmons-Mackie, 2016; Tremayne, 2014). This is because humor provides a set of interpersonal tools that allows one to not only establish but also maintain, social standing and friendships with others (Kumpfer, 1999). Thus, not only does humor allow one to become close with another person, but it also aids in sustaining that bond.

Humor also enables uncertainty reduction in that it allows individuals to uncover aspects of their relational partner's personality (Graham, 1995). Graham's (1995) study indicated that

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humor allows a person to find similarities with others, which encourages a relationship to grow or continue. While humor can strengthen relationships through uncertainty reduction, it also acts as “a double-edged sword,” as it can force them apart as well (Meyer, 2000).

Humor can also accentuate the differences between two people, enabling them to see that they are incompatible and thus halting the process of growing closer together. Take, for instance, sexist and racist jokes; if one person finds these jokes to be funny and the other does not, the interaction may immediately reduce closeness and reroute the relationship (Graham, 1995). In other words, if the humor used by the other person is appraised as a severe violation and not a benign violation, it can be harder to be closer to that person.

In short, death-related humor could potentially produce violations that do not bring the supporter closer to the bereaved at all. However, some studies, such as South et al.’s (2020) work with families during end of life care, have shown that by using humor while grieving, relational partners can experience an increase in closeness. While this experience is not the same context as grief and bereavement as the loss had not yet occurred, similar levels of closeness could occur through post-loss communication as well. To further investigate this issue, the following research question is asked:

RQ2: In what ways does death-related humor increase interpersonal closeness?

### **Method**

Benign Violation Theory has never been applied to the context of grief and bereavement, leaving a gap in our understanding of death-based humor. Because humor can have such an impact on our interpersonal relationships, and because people sometimes opt to use humor to deal with grief, it can be important to know how others will react to the bereaved’s use of humor. Seeing as this research began with Benign Violation Theory in mind, I took an abductive

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methodological approach. Using an abductive approach allowed me to collect and view the data with BVT in mind, while also being open to new discoveries and observations that could expand the current theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). An abductive approach allowed me to not only stay open to new discoveries, but it also allowed me to change my overall hypothesis if new phenomena was found (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In order to collect my data, I performed qualitative interviews to discover the reactions and interpersonal ramifications of using humor during bereavement. I chose interviews because this methodological experience allows a researcher to access subjective experiences and create meaning between participant's experiences and their material world (Perakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2011; Tracy, 2020).

### **Participants**

I recruited participants through volunteer, network, and snowball sampling. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment and interviews occurred online for the safety of both the participants and the researcher. Therefore, I posted calls for engagement on social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram (Appendix A). I also enlisted friends, family, and classmates to share my call for engagement on their social media pages.

My initial goal was to conduct up to 30 interviews or until I reached data saturation. Each interview was with a person who interacted with a bereaved individual who used humor to cope. The interviews encouraged and invited the participants to recount times the bereaved used humor and how it made them react, and, in turn, feel about their relationship with that person. To be eligible to participate, individuals had to be above the age of 18. I did not target any specific demographic such as age, gender, or ethnicity.

At the point of data saturation, where my participants responses to questions echoed each other's, 22 participants had been interviewed. The participants ranged from the age of 21 to 65,

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with an average age of 32.5. Seventeen (77.27%) participants identified themselves as female, four (18.18%) as male, and one (4.55%) as nonbinary.

Participants varied in their experiences with death and bereavement. Nine individuals were also bereaved individuals who had lost the person the jokes were about. Eight individuals had previously lost a loved one and grieved this loss, but did not know the individual the jokes were about. Five individuals had never experienced death and grief previously but had someone in their life who used grief related humor with them. Because many participants explained that their experience with previous loss was the reason, they were able to “understand” and “enjoy” humor surrounding death, it is important to note the participants who did not share in this understanding. These individuals have not undergone the emotions of someone who has grieved and therefore might not understand all that comes with a substantial loss. Due to this, there might be differences in the understanding and appreciation of humor surrounding loss if someone has not yet lost a loved one. The difference that comes from experiencing loss or not may also account for differences in changes within interpersonal relationships (i.e., those who have not experienced loss may pull away while those who have may grow closer to the bereaved). These individuals will be critically important to understanding how bereaved individuals effect those around them as they might be the most susceptible to damage within their relationship to the bereaved.

Two individuals were not included in the final number of participants because they did not meet the study qualifications; one individual spoke only of their own experiences using humor around grief and the other individual spoke about the loss of a friend’s family pet. Grief researchers debate whether the loss of a pet is distinguishable from the loss of a human (Cleary et al., 2021), and some have found that the loss of a pet does not bring the same depressive

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symptoms and grief as the loss of a human (Rajaram et al., 1993). With this debate present as well as my focus on interpersonal relationships, I chose to exclude the loss of pets from my dataset.

Many other individuals reached out wanting to participate in the research with their own experiences using humor. These individuals were encouraged to send the call for participation to their loved ones but were unfortunately not accepted for participation as they did not meet the criteria. Grief is seen as a taboo subject to speak about within Western cultures (Harris, 2010), which could provide an explanation for why so many individuals wanted to speak to their own experiences. Having a platform to share their emotions could be cathartic and helpful during the grieving process. The fact that so many individuals reached out for their own participation shows that this study is highlighting an important subject for many.

### **Procedure**

Following approval from the University of Montana Institutional Review Board, the interviews took place online, using Zoom. The average interview length was 43 minutes with interviews ranging from half an hour to an hour and twenty minutes. Interview times were measured based on the Zoom recordings, which started halfway through the warmup conversation.

Prior to being interviewed, I encouraged participants to find a private, quiet location to log into Zoom for the interview to ensure they were comfortable sharing information. This guaranteed that they did not have the person they were speaking about in the room with them, thus making them comfortable to fully share information. Each interview was logged using Zoom's recording feature, with the participant's consent. The feature allowed both audio and video to be recorded, but if the participant felt uncomfortable being videotaped, they paused their



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video and committed to just audio. The interviews were transcribed shortly after being completed and the participants were assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality.

After a short warm up conversation and participant's verbal consent to be interviewed, I began the interview by explaining my interest in the study as someone who uses humor as a coping mechanism. The reason I explained my stance in this study is that mutual disclosure helps to not only mitigate the power differential between the participant and myself, but also promote affinity and disclosure within the interview (Tracy, 2020). The interview itself then followed a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix B). Semi-structured interviews allow for both content and emotional levels of meaning to emerge in the data and provide the participant with the ability to share what is most important and interesting to themselves, making it a strong choice for this study (Tracy, 2020). As participants answered the questions, I asked follow-ups as necessary, with frequently used probes listed in the interview schedule, and encouraged elaboration if the participant was comfortable sharing further. Once each interview was completed, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant.

### **Researcher Relationship**

Acknowledging my role as the researcher and a person who has experienced loss-based humor is an essential component of qualitative research. At the beginning of each interview, I disclosed my personal loss and my family's use of humor afterward. Within this discussion, I communicated how this use of humor had benefits and drawbacks and mentioned how I understood how uncomfortable others could be upon hearing it. By opening up about myself, I hoped to promote disclosure between myself and the participant (Tracy, 2020). This tactic seemed to have a beneficial effect, as numerous participants thanked me for disclosing my experiences, and many referred to my statements throughout the interview to further elaborate on

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their own stories. By acknowledging that I understood both sides of the humor, I allowed participants to feel comfortable and open whether they enjoyed it or not.

### **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were completed, I took an idiographic approach and analyzed the data through the qualitative steps of primary-cycle coding and axial coding. Through primary-cycle coding, also known as open coding, I found first-level codes that are descriptive, frequent, and answer the research questions. For instance, if participants described feeling uncomfortable because of the humor attempts, I listed a code as “discomfort.” While finding these codes, I also engaged in the constant comparative method, wherein I compared new information to my codes to see if the information fits. If the information did not fit, I modified my codes to fit the data at hand. An example of this in my coding is that I found that participants felt uncomfortable, but they also enjoyed the humor attempts, I listed the code as “benign violations.” The constant comparative method allows the researcher to be “circular, iterative, and reflexive” and avoids data drifting from the research questions (Tracy, 2020, p. 220).

Once I completed primary-cycling coding, I began to complete axial coding. Axial coding is a function of second-level coding where codes are grouped together and redefined to create themes within the data (Tracy, 2020). For instance, in axial coding categories for jokes such as “too far,” “inappropriate,” “uncomfortable,” and “not okay” were turned into an axial code of “violations”. This process allowed me to also connect back to research on humor and relationships, grief, and Benign Violation Theory to guide my data. I was also able to solidify examples to ensure that they were the best fit for my research questions.

After coding was completed, I reached out to participants to see if they would be willing to engage in member validation. Member validation allows interviewees to be “re-interviewed”

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as a form of “self-correcting” the data (Kvale, 2007). During these checks, interviewees can comment and elaborate on any of the findings to ensure that the researcher is pursuing accurate interpretations (Kvale, 2007). Six individuals completed the member check. From these checks, one code was omitted, as participants did not agree with it. All other codes were accepted, with at least five of the six individuals agreeing with them.

### **Results**

The research questions that guided this study’s focus pertained to the ways violations are made during grief-related humor and how this impacts the joke's ability to be humorous (RQ1) and how interpersonal relationships grow closer or farther apart due to humor use (RQ2). Specific themes were found through interviews that show the nuances of the use of humor during bereavement and the fascinating ways relationships grow during this communication. After an analysis of my participants’ responses, I discovered that when jokes are made in a way that allows the receiver to be comfortable, they will find humor in death-related messages and experience an increase in communication and trust. By using humor, bereaved individuals connect to their relational partners in a new way that often opens doors to a closer level of their relationship.

#### **Aspects that make bereavement communication humorous (RQ1)**

Four main themes emerged from the data surrounding Research Question 1. The themes pertained to: (1) whether there was love and honor within the jokes; (2) the level of commitment present; (3) societal views on grief; and (4) whether qualities of a benign violation were present. These themes revealed under which conditions the communication will be found benign and therefore humorous, even if there is discomfort from a violation.

#### ***When the Humor Shows Love and Honor Towards the Deceased***

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One of the conditions under which bereavement communication becomes humorous is when the griever's jokes honor or show love towards the deceased. When a bereaved individual shows that their relationship with the deceased was one filled with love and happiness, many violations made from the humor attempt seemingly become benign and therefore, by the standards of BVT, humorous. Take, for example, Wendy, whose widow neighbor frequently jokes about her husband's death. The jokes made Wendy uncomfortable until she realized the love behind them. Wendy's neighbor and her family use humor alongside the retelling of fond memories about the deceased. As these jokes are coupled with happy memories, Wendy could tell they are a beloved coping mechanism meant to keep the deceased's memory alive rather than cause any harm. Wendy went on to say, "Even though they are dark jokes, you can tell they are made with love and in a way to honor [the deceased]."

Once Wendy discovered the love behind the jokes and the way they were being used to honor the deceased, she found them humorous. The fact that her neighbor showed love within her jokes took any violation that was made in the humorous communication and made them benign, thus allowing Wendy to find humor in this context. She confirmed this by saying, "Now that I realized that it was coming from a place of love and coping, I don't have a problem laughing."

Wendy shows the impact that the concept of love has on humor in the setting of bereavement. By showing love through humor, the bereaved can joke about their loss while still honoring and respecting the deceased. However, violations cannot be made benign if an individual makes a joke that does not show love. For instance, Alice suggested that her aunt's jokes about the loss of Alice's mother, even when well-intended, did not depict love, because Alice's aunt poked fun at her mother harshly. Alice's aunt joked about her mother's behavior in

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high school in a way that belittled the person she later became. Alice described the discomfort that came from these jokes by disclosing, “When a joke went too far, I was like ‘why are you telling me this? Don’t downplay my mom’... I was sad and I couldn’t participate in that [joke]... it just sort of felt like putting my mom in a light that I didn’t appreciate.” By downplaying Alice’s mother, her aunt was not seen as honoring the deceased. Through the lack of love and honor, the jokes became harsh, and Alice was unable to enjoy them.

Another way that individuals can use humor to honor their lost loved one is through using humorous communication that the deceased would appreciate. Many participants felt that if the deceased was known to communicate humorously with others, mimicking their humor after the loss was a way to honor them. For instance, Brian spoke of how his father frequently made jokes after the passing of his uncle, which prompted the jokes Brian’s brother made after the loss of their father. Brian said, “My sense of humor is from my dad. This whole thing [referring to his and his brother’s humor around the loss of their father] is from our dad... He would find this hilarious.” Another participant, Finley, said that the jokes Finley and their family made after their mother’s death mimicked those their mother used to tell. Finley saw this mimicry as a way for their family to honor their mother, and even stated the jokes made it “feel like Mom is there, like she is laughing with [them].” Both participants spoke of how their family members would be “laughing with them” thus making any violations or darker jokes easier to laugh at and enjoy. These jokes and the appreciation of them also brought both participants closer to their families as well as their deceased loved ones.

This theme also emerged among people who did not know the deceased person. For example, Wendy was not able to meet her neighbor’s deceased husband, but she found family members’ jokes about him humorous when she learned his humor preferences. By learning more

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about the deceased, Wendy came to understand that he himself would laugh at her neighbor's jokes. She recalled, "I have heard [the neighbor's family] say things like 'oh he would have found that really funny' and then they all laugh."

Humor is purely a violation when a happy, loving relationship is not presented in jokes about the deceased. For example, Nicole described her family's humor surrounding the loss of her cousin. She claimed that the humor was to honor him, and that "he would laugh [at the jokes] ... it was a way to keep him alive" as the humor was similar to the humor he used within his life. However, Nicole also described jokes a friend made about her deceased father that did not present a loving relationship between the two. Nicole's friend only talked about her father when she made darker jokes about his absence from her life or his cause of death. Because she only mentioned her father in these darker ways, Nicole did not see the jokes as honoring her friend's father instead saying that they depicted "a bitterness or resentment towards [her father]." She went on to say that the jokes were not funny because of this apparent bitterness, and that "her dad's passing was really sad and there was a lot of tragedy involved." By using humor in a way that showed resentment towards her father, Nicole's friend did not depict a loving relationship and did not honor her father or the tragedy surrounding his death. The resentment coming from these jokes made Nicole feel uncomfortable and caused malicious violations leaving her unable to find them humorous.

### ***When the Jokes Show Commitment to the Subject***

Another way for communication to become humorous in the context of death and bereavement is when the receiver has some form of commitment to the joke's subject matter. Commitment, according to BVT, can impact how large of a violation is made when a joke is told (Warren & McGraw, 2014). Avoiding severe violations is easier when the audience and the joke

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teller have a similar level of commitment. Commitment, within the context of this study, was observed in one of three ways: the person can have experienced a loss before, had known the deceased themselves, or had a close-knit relationship with the bereaved.

**Commitment Through Previously Experiencing Loss.** Commitment to the other person and the subject matter of the joke can exist in the common experience of losing a loved one. Participants who had experienced the loss of a loved one previously felt a deeper commitment to the other person and their use of humor. For example, Eleanor and her friend joked over the mutual loss of their parents. Eleanor spoke to their ability to find humor together by saying, “I think that it is easier to talk to somebody that knows what you are going through. No one does a dead parent joke like someone with a dead parent.” Another participant, Rosie, claimed that having lost someone helps one find humor in the communication. She stated, “Unless you, like, lost a really serious loved one, you don't really understand why the humor is necessary.” Charlotte also viewed jokes in this light. She said, “There are people who get death and who don't.” Having mutual experience allows the receiver to understand the position the bereaved is in and appreciate it through the lens of their own experiences.

**Commitment Through Mutual Loss.** The mutual loss of a shared loved one is a second way by which commitment to the subject can exist. Numerous participants had lost a family member and spoke of their experiences hearing others within their family joke about this afterward. Those who lost the same person are often bonded together through their shared experience. The bond that comes from this experience is often what makes the humor “okay” as both parties are mutually committed to the subject of the joke. For instance, Rosie and her sister lost their sister, and they joked through this experience to overcome their emotions of grief. Rosie claimed that this mutual loss is what allowed her to find humor in her sister's jokes. She

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disclosed, “I really get [her sister’s use of humor] because it is her loss, but it is also my loss. I think if I were not their sister, I would view the jokes differently.” Outside of this relationship, Rosie might have felt uncomfortable, but seeing as she was connected to the jokes through their mutual loss, she was able to understand the mindset of her sister and find humor together through their grief.

**Commitment Through Closeness with the Bereaved.** Even participants who did not share the loss were still able to find humor in the bereaved’s communication through the relationship they had built together. Participants often spoke of how the closeness between them and the bereaved made it easier to find humor. For instance, as Ivy became closer to her friend, Trish, the jokes Trish made about the death of her mother caused Ivy less concern and became funny. She said, “The first time I ever heard her make a joke, we were all like ‘are we allowed to laugh?... [As we got closer] I felt like I was in her inner circle, and I am happy she can make those jokes around me.”

Yet, humor could only be found if the correct person is making the jokes. For example, Finley said, “The jokes that haven’t made me laugh have been from folks who obviously [didn’t know their mom]. It makes sense if it’s my aunt or uncle, it is genuine... She was my mom, she was their sibling, but if somebody else outside of the family told the jokes they were telling... I would be really upset because they didn’t know mom and didn’t get mom.”

Simply put, participants felt that there had to be a level of closeness, either to the bereaved or the deceased, before humor was okay to attempt. Outside of being close with the bereaved or the deceased, the communication can be seen as a malicious violation.



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### *When Societal Beliefs Around Grief and Loss Allow Humorous Attempts*

Even people who have not experienced loss before can still find humor in bereaved people's communication. However, people who have not lost someone before appear to experience shock and negative emotions surrounding the jokes at first, mainly because of some societal norms and rules about grief and bereavement, such as wanting to comfort the bereaved. According to participants, they would have a negative reaction because they wanted to "help," "be there," and "support" the other person, but the humor often left them unsure what to do. Sam described the feeling he had after hearing his roommate make jokes about her mother's death: "Jokes make me extremely uncomfortable; I want to help first and foremost, so I don't know how to react." Societally, the norms surrounding grief and bereavement are not to laugh and poke fun at the loss. These norms left participants, such as Sam, unsure how to behave when humor was used.

However, more important than the societal belief to not laugh at a loss was the participant's belief that people should experience and communicate grief in any way they see fit. As the participants felt that this societal norm of allowing someone to grieve however they need was the most important, they were able to be okay with the use of humor. Under that condition, participants wanted the bereaved to do what is needed to cope and heal from their loss. For instance, after speaking about the extreme discomfort she felt and how inappropriate she thought the jokes her friend made about her father's passing, Nicole noted that, she would never want to "shove someone down in their grieving." Nicole wanted her friend to grieve how she needed to, even if it was uncomfortable in the moment. The participants' discomfort seemed to continuously come in second place to the care for and needs of the bereaved and respect for social rules about not interfering with people's expressions of grief. Similarly, Rosie said, "If

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you use humor to grieve, great. I am not going to choose to be offended by your coping mechanism.” Ivy echoed her statements by saying that the jokes were “for [her friend] not for [Ivy],” reflecting the respect Rosie had for norms of appropriateness in reacting to others' grief expressions.

Humor was seen as a valid way to cope, and one that should be supported, by nearly all the participants. In general, they do not want to stop this coping process and instead prioritized making the bereaved feel supported even if a violation is made and the receiver felt uncomfortable.

### *When Qualities of a Benign Violation are Present*

Benign Violation Theory explains that how committed one is to the joke's subject matter, how big the violation is, and a joke's multiple meanings deeply affect the extent to which a violation is perceived as benign, thus making the communication humorous (Warren & McGraw, 2014). The responses to the interviews indicated that grief-related humor becomes a benign violation when there is a level of shock involved or when an alternative meaning can be found.

**When The Humor is Shocking.** In this study, participants found that shock often allowed them to initially find communication humorous. Benign Violation Theory assumes that a joke does not necessarily need to be shocking in order to be humorous (Warren & McGraw, 2015). However, shock appeared to precede future perceptions that death-related communication was humorous. For example, Violet found that the more her friend's jokes shocked her, the more those around her would laugh. She said, “It is very classic of her... She will just say something like really shocking... then they won't know how to react.” The moments where Violet and others did not know “how to react” are what typically caused them to laugh. The shock and absurdity of the jokes made them break down their usual view of what a bereaved person should

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look like and left room for humor to be found. Alice described this phenomenon by saying, “You don’t find that kind of grief on a Hallmark card, it’s more organic.”

Such organic, often shocking humor seems to offer a moment of reprieve from the tension surrounding grief. For example, Violet remembered the first time she laughed at a joke her friend made. Her friend, unprompted, informed their entire house that the chair one of them was sitting on was the chair in which her father died. Violet remembered finding this joke humorous, saying, “A lot of the times what makes something funny is when it is like not what you expect or it's like something that's really surprising, and I think that was like definitely a surprising thing to say.” By breaking down what was expected in that conversation, Violet’s friend allowed for an often uncomfortable subject to be amusing.

**When the Humorous Messages Have Alternative Meanings.** The second way that an individual can find humor within grief, especially if it typically makes them uncomfortable, is if they can find an alternative meaning to the joke’s subject matter. According to BVT, humor is often found when a joke has multiple meanings. These meanings can range from harmless to threatening, but the meanings that render it as harmless allow the situation to become funny (Warren & McGraw, 2016). Gwen, for example, found humor during a darker moment of her father’s death through the humor of her grandson. While picking out a coffin for her father, Gwen’s grandson joked about her father “not being able to fit inside that small of a box.” Gwen found humor in this comment because it not only had the meaning related to her father’s passing, but an alternative meaning, that was less of a violation, which related to his height and size.

Another participant, Sam, stated his first reaction to humor in the context of bereavement was discomfort. However, he found the jokes he could relate to more humorous. One of these jokes came when he and his roommate were playing video games. The roommate accidentally

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discharged a weapon in the game resulting in her character's death, to which she joked "shotgun, just like mom would do" referencing her mother's death via a gun. Sam typically would find this joke uncomfortable but said in the context of the video game it became relatable. He remarked, "It was relevant to me, but it was also about her mom. Being able to relate to what the joke was about...it was about two things; I was able to relate to one of those things and that is why it was able to make me laugh." By being able to see a relatable aspect of the joke and the joke being centered around their video game, Sam was able to find an alternative meaning to the otherwise dark communication. Once he was able to find this alternative meaning, his discomfort surrounding the joke went away; the joke became benign due to it being in a video game, and Sam found the communication humorous.

Another participant, Rosie, remarked upon the alternative meanings she found within humorous communication. Rosie's eldest sister had a pair of skis set aside for their deceased sister and offered them to Rosie, saying, "I have a pair of skis, I was going to give them to Aurora, but that bitch doesn't ski anymore." Rosie remembered finding this joke humorous for a simple reason: while the joke's true meaning relates to her sister's passing, it was humorous because of the claim that she wasn't skiing anymore. By removing the death and acting as though the only reason Aurora couldn't take the skis was a break from the sport, Rosie's sister provided a break from the usual emotions surrounding their loss, allowing the joke to become humorous.

### **How death-related humor affects interpersonal closeness (RQ2)**

Two main themes emerged to reflect the ways in which death-related humor affects closeness: trust and ease. Regarding trust, humorous communication increased closeness when it allowed the participants to feel they were a trusted and valued individual in the bereaved life.

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Pertaining to ease in communication, humor increased closeness when it opened an avenue for the participants to communicate with the bereaved about their loss. Humor brought individuals together in 17 of the 22 interviews. The remaining five participants reported either that the relationship stayed at the same level of closeness or lost a degree of closeness. This loss of closeness was only seen in two of the interviews, both of which when the subject of the death-related jokes died by suicide. Taboo deaths, such as death by suicide, may not often produce a positive reaction when joked about. However, the majority of participants in this study who experienced hearing humor pertaining to death and grief felt closer to the bereaved afterward. The increase in closeness comes from a new level of trust and value being put into the relationship. Overall, when humor is employed to promote trust and ease in communication it can have a lasting positive effect on interpersonal closeness.

### ***Humor Increases Trust***

When they were the receivers of death-related humor, participants felt that they were trusted by the bereaved thus leading them to feel closer. Participants also assumed that the bereaved would not joke about their loss with just anyone making them feel like a valued person in the bereaved's life further the increase in trust they felt. Take Violet, who claimed her friend, Trish, "doesn't bring this up around people who don't know her," leaving Violet to feel like a close and trusted person within Trish's life. While this cannot be confirmed without interviewing the bereaved themselves, the participants of this study that had experienced grief and loss echoed that they only use these jokes with those they love and trust. For example, Eleanor spoke of the closeness she felt towards her friend during humorous communication. She explained that "Hearing the jokes is a privilege. It is an honor that I have a friend who wants to share that side of things with me." By showing a humorous side and being open about their grief, Eleanor's

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friend allowed her to feel like she was a trusted and close individual within that person's life. These feelings, and the fact that they could now share darker subjects like grief through humor, led Eleanor to feel an increase in closeness with her friend. Similarly, Finley described how being able to joke with their uncle after the loss of their mother created a newfound closeness with him. Finley said, "This brought me and him closer than we were before."

The increase in trust and value allows for the participants to feel like they were "in on the joke" and a part of the humor. Wendy described this phenomenon through her relationship with her neighbor and their family. By growing closer to the neighbor's family, Wendy felt trusted with information not only about the bereaved and her life, but about the deceased and who they were. It was through this ability to understand the person that inspired the jokes and the joker themselves that Wendy became "a part of the joke." She divulged, "The jokes made him human to me... [at first] I wasn't really in on it, but once I was more comfortable with them, I was more comfortable laughing." Learning about the deceased and growing with the bereaved created an avenue for Wendy to have a deeper knowledge of the situation, thus allowing her to finally be a part of the joke.

### ***Humor Increases Ease in Communication***

Participants felt that their friends' and loved ones' death-related humor appeared to open a door for more conversations surrounding their grief. Specifically, humor seemed to encourage open and honest communication, thus allowing for an increase in closeness between the bereaved and their loved ones.

For example, Wendy said that humor prompts conversations: "We have started there with jokes and then it hits them and then someone breaks the silence." Similarly, Ivy spoke about how her friend's humor about a loss allowed them to safely announce they had experienced loss. She

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stated, "It is a way to bring them up and talk about them... I think for her she wants people to know but doesn't want it to be dwelled upon. When she jokes about it casually... the conversation can keep going... it is a safe way to announce yourself."

By utilizing humor, Ivy felt that her friend can announce to the world that she has lost a loved one and is grieving, but it did not appear as though it was the center of her world. Ivy felt that this allowed her friend to have open conversations about the loss of her family in a safe way. This idea was echoed by Violet, who saw her friend use humor to break the tensions of having a dead father. Violet saw these jokes as a sign that her friend wanted to communicate about the loss and was in a position where she was finally able to disclose her past to Violet in more depth. She claimed, "[The jokes] made me more comfortable asking her questions about it because her being at the point where she could joke about it made me feel like it wasn't this taboo subject"

Overall, by using humor, the bereaved provide opportunities for more communication to occur. It is then, through this communication, that they can be open about their loss and grow closer with the receiver. Humor and closeness thus become intertwined in the context of bereavement. The closer we are to someone, the more we can joke with them and the more we can joke with a person, the closer we become. This closeness also allows for an ease in how we communicate regarding loss.

### **Discussion**

While humor is an important coping mechanism for the bereaved, this study revealed that humor is also important to the closeness of the griever's relationships. Humor can break down some of the metaphorical walls surrounding the emotions and experience of loss. As these walls come down, the bereaved's supporters can understand the experience with more clarity, making humor a valuable coping mechanism. Not only can humor increase understanding, but it often

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brings relational partners closer. However, humor is not a one-size-fits-all form of communication, and it can violate the receiver's social norms. These violations are often easy to overcome through the need and want to support the bereaved, but, in rare cases, can damage the relationship.

Although humor is not a universal reaction to jokes about loss, it is possible to find humor when the bereaved shows love for the deceased, uses shock, or provides multiple meanings to the subject of the joke. It is through these methods that the bereaved make benign violations and create humor with their relational partners. According to BVT, humor can be found when we provide alternative meanings to a joke's subject, but the relevance of shock and love are not currently addressed in this theory. This study found that the bereaved provide space for humor to be found and laughs to be shared when they use shock and love to create benign violations. What is not considered within BVT that has been found in this study, is the great benefits these laughs and jokes can have to an interpersonal relationship.

### **What aspects of grief-related communication increase humor?**

According to Benign Violation Theory, people find a subject humorous when it violates their typical views of the world in a safe, non-threatening way (McGraw et al., 2012). Within this dataset, grief-related communication led to humor when the bereaved showed love and honored the deceased, when receivers were committed in some way to the subject of the joke or its sender, and when societal beliefs surrounding grief were not challenged. Each of the conditions created a benign violation that allowed for the receiver to be comfortable.

For example, by showing love and honoring the deceased, the bereaved indicates that there is no malicious intent behind the humorous communication and makes the receiver comfortable with the humor, as the societal norm of not speaking ill of the dead is met. By being



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committed to some aspect of the joke, either its subject matter or the bereaved themselves, the receivers can feel more comfortable as they understand the context of the humor and the intent behind it. Lastly, because societal norms promote supporting the bereaved, receivers may feel comfortable when they perceive that the jokes are there to help the grieving person cope and heal, rather than existing merely to violate a norm.

Making receivers feel comfort underlies the benign violation. Making a joke benign does not just have involve making the person feel safe, but also making them feel comfortable within the setting of the joke. An example of the idea of comfort creating a benign violation can be seen through the participants who identified their religious background. Many of the participants mentioned either being raised within an Irish Catholic or Catholic family or were currently practicing this religion. Having a religious background gave the participants a way to feel comfortable joking about grief. For instance, one Catholic participant claimed that jokes did not make her sad or uncomfortable because her faith allowed her to believe “[the deceased is] receiving eternal life in Heaven.” By believing that there is a life after death, Catholic participants were more comfortable with humor use. Further, the participants who claimed to be Irish Catholic grew up in a culture where the joking about darker topics was accepted and comfortable. Many of these participants claimed “that is just how an Irish Catholic funeral goes” or that it was unsurprising to hear dark humor as it was embedded in their upbringing, thus allowing them to be comfortable and find this communication humorous.

The idea of comfort is also supported by the participants who did not find comfort when exposed to a griever’s jokes. The participants who never found humor within the context of grief and bereavement may have felt safe enough, but they were not comfortable joking about this subject matter. All of my participants were located in predominately white areas of the United

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States which could mean that the individuals who were not comfortable with humor are impacted by the Western idea that it is taboo to express grief (Harris, 2010). Not every person the bereaved encounters will be comfortable with the topic of death and dying. Ensuring that the other person is comfortable with jokes about death and grief can help provide an opportunity for the joke to become humorous.

Interestingly, even if the receivers who were uncomfortable did not find the grievers' jokes funny, they still perceived the jokes as benign and “okay” to make because they were in the context of grieving and coping. Seeing as these jokes are “okay” violations, they can be considered a benign violation even if they are not deemed humorous. These jokes are often not humorous because they become benign due to the receiver wanting to support the bereaved, not because they feel the joke was safe or nonthreatening. In fact, the jokes often did threaten the receiver’s worldview and, outside of the context of bereavement, would not be okay. However, each participant of the study found jokes to be “okay” because they were used as a form of healing and coping with bereavement. Unfortunately, BVT does not consider the idea of healing and coping that is so important within bereavement. BVT does not account for the humor that is used in bereavement as it is fundamentally different than standard everyday humor. Death-based humor is not just used for comedy, bonding, or communication. Rather, death-based humor is used to overcome the challenges that come from loss. As death-based humor can be used to overcome grief, the receiver’s desire to support the coping of the bereaved supersedes the violations felt from the humor thus making jokes benign, even if they are not humorous.

### **How grief-related humor affects relational closeness**

This study shows that relationships grow to a new place of closeness when the receiver is comfortable with the jokes and the jokes are humorous to them. Relationships grew closer with

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humor because it breaks down metaphorical walls and opens a new level of trust and ease of communication between the two individuals.

In fact, humor has been found to create closeness across a myriad of studies. For example, humor and closeness are correlated such that as one increases, so does the other (Hampes, 1992). Additionally, the more we use humor the closer we feel to our partner, and humor even provides the tools to stay close with others (Treger et al., 2013; Kumpfer, 1999). In essence, by using humor with their relational partners, the bereaved can do more than cope with their loss – they can actually become closer with their relational partners as well. This closeness not only comes from the humor, but also from the ability to now trust one another on a new level and share more with them. In fact, closeness with someone creates the ability to self-disclose, the opportunity to express emotions, and incites the feelings of supportiveness and trust (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Consistent with these studies, the participants in this inquiry reported that the bereaved individual's use of humor opened new avenues to communicate about their loss, promoted disclosure between the two, and allowed the receiver to feel trusted and valued.

These feelings of trust and increased disclosure are not only signs of increased closeness but are also signs of relational satisfaction. Disclosure is an incredibly valuable component of a satisfactory relationship, with the most satisfied relational partners routinely disclosing information to each other as a part of their relationship (Farreel et al., 2014). Further, disclosure not only increases relationship satisfaction, but also positively affects relational trust (Petronio, 2002). So, by disclosing information through jokes the bereaved increases levels of trust with the receiver. Trust, on its own, is also a predictor for relationship satisfaction (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Moreover, use of humor promotes relational satisfaction in addition to disclosure and trust. Humor and relational satisfaction are positively correlated, and the two are

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closely associated with one another in relationships (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008). Therefore, not only are the bereaved and their supporters able to share laughs and grow closer, but they are also building the foundation for a more satisfied relationship.

Of course, the use of humor can either bring relationships together or force them apart (Meyer, 2000). By understanding that humor can increase relationship satisfaction through the promotion of trust and disclosure, the interpersonal relationships of a bereaved person can truly deepen and evolve when they use humor. By using this humor, they are not only supporting themselves and their coping, but paving the way for better relationships. As bereavement is a time where a support system is so vital, it is important to understand the effects one can have on their relationships. Knowing that humor, even if it is darker, death-related humor, can build a deeper relationship, can help the bereaved know who to turn to and lean on during their time of need.

### **Practical Implications**

Ultimately, this study has shown that, through the use of death-related humor, grievors can open the door for closer, more satisfying relationships with those entrusted with their jokes. By communicating in a humorous way, the bereaved show a side of grief that is more accessible and comfortable to those who are not experiencing it alongside them, provide an avenue for mutual disclosure and coping for those who also lost the individual, and explain the nuanced ways grief is felt to those that have never experienced it before. That is, some aspects of grief-related humor can make grievors seem more easily approachable and supportable. Grief is so often seen as sorrow, sadness, and other dark emotions that, by depicting it through humor, the bereaved can express the full array of emotions they might feel, while helping others feel comfortable about the griever's experience.

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As Alice put it, humor is not “the type of grief you see on a Hallmark card.” Clearly, many participants understood that grief is not always a “Hallmark card” emotion, and echoed that they would not want to “shove down,” “stop,” or “get in the way of” a person grieving. Therefore, bereaved individuals could reasonably be encouraged to use humor if this is the coping mechanism best suited to them. To do this, the bereaved should integrate the components of benign violation humor laid out in the answers to RQ 1, which describe how a joke can become humorous. Making sure love is shown, a level of commitment is present, and using components of humor such as shock and alternative meanings allow the bereaved to freely express grief without alienating the receiver. The bereaved can also see the benefits of humor when they understand their audience and pick the people most comfortable with darker humor.

This coping mechanism is not without its drawbacks, and the bereaved should consider sharing jokes that are not malicious and that bring the receiver closer to the subject matter if they would like to maintain interpersonal relationships. If jokes are hurtful or the receiver is unable to relate to them, the interpersonal relationship may suffer.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Theoretically speaking, this study expands the work done on Benign Violation Theory; it not only supports the theory but also provides avenues for its growth. This study highlighted how a violation and can become benign, thus making a joke become humorous, supporting the main tenants of BVT. However, the theory lacks an understanding of humor within the context of bereavement. For instance, grief alone can make a violation benign, as seen through this study, but it cannot make the communication humorous, which goes against BVT’s claim that a joke that is simultaneously a violation and benign is funny. The ways that a humor-based violation can become benign, but not humorous due to the context it is situated within, such as coping

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through bereavement, is a hole in BVT's logic. Expanding on the definition of benign and how this idea truly impacts the humor level of a joke is crucial to understanding humor through the lens of BVT. Further, the concept of shock and its importance to making a death-related joke humorous within grief and bereavement does not support BVT's claim that the tenants of Incongruity Theory are unnecessary in humor (Warren & McGraw, 2015). This study found that, within the context of grief and bereavement, the more surprising or shocking a joke was, the more humorous it became, which raises questions about the value of Incongruity Theory. According to the current findings, Incongruity Theory might also have merit in explaining humor, in addition to BVT.

Pertaining to closeness, this study supports the work done by Meyer (2000) that claims humor will either bring a relationship together or push it apart. Humor brought individuals closer together when the bereaved followed the components described in the answer to RQ1 (showing love, honoring the deceased, commitment, and social beliefs). However, if the bereaved did not follow the ideas found in response to RQ1, the relationship seemed to grow apart such as in the case of Nicole and her friend. It is therefore important for the bereaved to understand how to make jokes and with whom to make them. If the bereaved are making jokes that do not follow the conditions under which death-related messages are humorous, especially with people who show discomfort towards their humor, then the relationship will subsequently grow apart. Humor can be an uncomfortable act, so it has to be done with individuals who understand that it shows no malicious intent, if it is to bring people closer together.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While this study yields some interesting implications and ideas about grief and humor, several limitations and avenues for future research are worth noting. The limitations deal with

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study design, participants, and my position as a researcher. First, qualitative studies do not allow for broader discussion and generalization. In other words, while the participants yielded interesting observations that contribute to our understanding of grief, humor, and relationships, the findings cannot represent how the broader population engages with these phenomena. Therefore, future studies could find ways to support and validate this information and apply it to a broader population than the one at hand. Further, while I did interview 22 individuals, more people and a diversified sample would have benefited the study. As it stands, the individuals I studied were white and predominantly female, making the data biased because it focuses on the experiences of these populations predominately and not the experiences of, for instance, men or people of color. Future studies could gather a larger group of individuals who vary in race and gender to encapsulate how this phenomenon effects the greater population.

Second, most of my participants were individuals who had previously lost someone themselves. This means that the majority of the sample had a preexisting understanding of grief, and many were humor users themselves. As many participants had previously experienced grief, it could be the case that there are more damaging effects of using humor in bereavement, but my sample would not account for this. The participants who had not experienced grief within my study were often the ones who felt uncomfortable or unsure how to respond within this context. As these individuals felt more uncomfortable, they could be more prone to experiencing a decrease in their relationship to the bereaved unknown to my study.

Further, many of my participants had lost the same person as the bereaved individual using humor. My study did not account for the ways in which a mutual loss could have impacted the data. Two of the individuals who experienced either a negative change or no change to their relationship did know the deceased, but the participants who knew the deceased primarily felt

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closer to their relational partner after joking occurred. Seeing as they were experiencing humor over someone they knew the relational changes could be different from those who had never met the bereaved. Additionally, many of the individuals who knew the deceased and experienced a positive change in their relationship were related to both the deceased and the bereaved. Taking a closer look at family dynamics and how this impacted the data could yield rich findings. Overall to fully understand the effects of humor in grief-related settings, it could benefit future researchers to target populations that have not experienced loss before to understand their opinions toward this type of humor. Additionally, a future study could look just at family relationships to see how these findings change in this setting.

Lastly, it is important to recognize the ways I, as the researcher, and my personal bias may have affected the data. Not only could my age, race, and class all impact the ways data was interpreted and presented, but the fact that I am a griever as well could have implications. As an individual who has lost a loved one and has used humor within this setting, I may have swayed individuals to be more positive in their views on grief-based humor than they would have been with a different person. Efforts were taken to avoid personal biases from impacting the data and results, but nonetheless, the ways results and discussion were presented and determined come from the researcher, thus allowing for my voice, opinions, and personal experiences to still be shown.

Looking toward the future, this topic could be expanded in many different ways that could extend the scope of my findings. One that would highly benefit the data is a study that took into account the bereaved themselves. The data in this study all comes from the thoughts of the receiver, so knowing how the bereaved interpreted their own humor use and the reactions of the



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receivers, as well as how using humor impacted their side of the relationship, could yield rich data for future researchers.

### **Conclusion**

Grief is not the Hallmark card sorrow and longing that society so often thinks it is. Instead, grief is an ever-evolving array of emotions that take a range of coping mechanisms and caring loved ones to get through. Humor is often a way to bring individuals together and can positively impact even the darkest of times. As seen in this study, humor is an incredible tool to not only help someone cope with their grief, but can also bring that person closer to others by building trust and inviting further conversations. Allowing the bereaved to experience and reflect their emotions however they see fit is a truly valuable gift their supporters can give them, and, in turn, that can lead to a greater relationship between the two. Plus, laughter and sharing humor together brings us together. As many of the participants of this study reflected, “if we are not laughing we are crying, and we’d all rather laugh.”

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**APPENDICES**

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**Appendix A****Calls for Engagement**

## Personal

“Hello! I am currently working on my thesis at the University of Montana. I am conducting interviews about reacting to someone using humor regarding death and grief. These interviews are completely confidential and take roughly one hour. If you would like to participate, feel free to email me at [miranda.bishop@umconnect.umt.edu](mailto:miranda.bishop@umconnect.umt.edu). Thank you so much!”

## Friends, family, and classmates

“Hello! My friend is currently working on her thesis at the University of Montana. She is conducting interviews about reacting to someone using humor regarding death and grief. These interviews are completely confidential and take roughly one hour. If you would like to participate, feel free to email her at [miranda.bishop@umconnect.umt.edu](mailto:miranda.bishop@umconnect.umt.edu). Thank you so much!”

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**Appendix B****Interview Schedule**

Hello! My name is Miranda Henrich, and I am a master's student in Communication Studies at the University of Montana. If you have any questions now or after this interview is over you can contact me at 406-559-0362 or [miranda.bishop@umontana.edu](mailto:miranda.bishop@umontana.edu) and my adviser is Stephen Yoshimura, he can be contacted at [stephen.yoshimura@mso.umt.edu](mailto:stephen.yoshimura@mso.umt.edu). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the UM Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (406) 243-6672. I am going to start this interview out today by discussing an informed consent form with you.

*Introduction*

First, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to interview with me today. The intent of this research is to explore how individuals react to the use of humor in the context of grief and bereavement. Specifically, I am interested in hearing about how you reacted to hearing someone you interacted with used humor after they lost someone and the effects this had on your relationships with them. The interview session will last for around 60 minutes and answering the questions may cause you to think about feelings that make you sad or upset. Do you consent to being interviewed?

\*Wait for consent from participant\*

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Is it okay if I record this Zoom meeting today?

\*Wait for consent from participant then start recording\*

Your records will be kept confidential and will not be released without your consent except as required by law. I will not use any real names in my transcription, so if the results of this study are written in a journal or presented at a meeting, your name will not be used. The audio-recording will be transcribed without any information that could identify you, then the recording will then be erased. Some of this information could be used in future studies, but if that does happen it will be completely stripped of all identifying information. While you will not directly benefit from participating in this study, the information shared here today will contribute to the academic work surrounding humor and bereavement.

I do want to give you some background on why I am interested in this topic. I lost a loved one that I was very close to when I was 16 and my family primarily coped with this death through humor. However, as much as this helped my family, I did see that this could be an odd or taboo way to grieve. Our jokes also were quite funny to some people and were not to others and that sparked my interest in the subject matter. That is why I am here studying the reactions to grief-based humor.

Do you have any questions thus far?

\*Pause and answer questions\*

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Great. I encourage you to answer the questions I ask today to your comfort level. You may also feel free to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. Your participation is completely voluntary.

I am going to read you the following statement and ask for your consent to begin the interview:

I have been read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be answered by a member of the research team. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Do you consent to participate in this research study?

\*Wait for consent\*

Great! Well then would you like to get started?

1. Who is the person in your life who uses humor while grieving?
  - How old are they?
  - What gender do they identify as?
  - Describe them to me
2. Can you describe your relationship with them?
3. Could you describe how you two typically joke around together in your day-to-day life?
4. Who did [Name] lose?
  - Did you know the deceased person?
    - If so, what was your relationship to them?

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- What was [Name's] relationship to [Deceased Person's Name]?
  - How old was [Deceased's Name] when they died?
  - Could you describe how close the two were?
  - Are there any other details you care to share about [Deceased and Name] with me?
5. How does [Name] typically joke about their loss?
6. Why do you think they joke about their loss?
7. How do these jokes make you feel?
8. Can you remember any jokes that made you feel uncomfortable?
- What about these jokes made you uncomfortable?
    - Even though you felt uncomfortable, were the jokes humorous?
      - Why?
  - How do you feel about [Name] when they make these jokes?
9. Can you remember a particular moment where you felt that a joke went too far?
- What made that joke stand out to you in a way that seemed to go too far?
  - How did that joke make you feel about [Name]?
  - Even though the joke went too far, did you find it humorous?
    - Why? Why not?
    - What made the joke funny?
      - How did you feel when you found it funny?
10. Were there any jokes that felt “okay” to you? Jokes that seemed appropriate to make?
- What about these jokes made them appropriate?
  - Were these jokes humorous?

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- Why? Why not?
    - What made the joke funny?
      - How did this joke make you feel when you found it funny?
    - How did they make you feel about [Name]?
11. Were there any jokes that seemed appropriate, but made you uncomfortable, nonetheless?
- Were these jokes humorous to you?
    - Why?
    - What made the joke funny?
    - How did the joke make you feel?
  - How did you feel about [Name]?
12. How has [Name's] use of humor affected your friendship?
- Can you remember a particular moment where you felt like your friendship changed because of [Name's] use of humor?
    - How did it change?
    - How has your relationship changed since before the loss overall?
13. Does [Name's] use of grief related humor impact how you view your relationship with them?
14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
15. Finally, I just have some demographic questions for you.
- How old are you?
  - How would you describe your ethnicity?
  - What is your gender identity?

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### *Closing*

Thank you so much for taking the time to be interviewed today, I really appreciate it. Do you have any questions for me before we wrap up? If you have any questions later feel free to contact me.

Your information today will provide great insight for my study and it was really interesting hearing your stories. Thank you again. If I have any further questions, would I be okay contacting you again? Also, would you like me to reach out when my study is complete? You are welcome to read my work when I complete it.



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## Appendix C

Table of Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Religious Background	Relationship to Deceased	Experience of a previous loss	Relational Outcomes from Humor
Alice	26	Female	Unknown	Daughter	Yes	Closer
Brian	24	Male	Unknown	Son	Yes	Closer
Charlotte	43	Female	Irish Catholic	Daughter	Yes	Closer
Deana	38	Female	Unknown	Acquaintance	Yes	Closer
Eleanor	33	Female	Unknown		Yes	Closer
Finley	25	Nonbinary	Irish Catholic	Child	Yes	Closer
Gwen	73	Female	Catholic	Neighbor and daughter	Yes	No change in relationship
Holly	27	Female	Irish Catholic	Granddaughter and niece (did not know either deceased relative)	No	Closer
Ivy	24	Female	Unknown	Did not know deceased	No	Closer
Jessica	21	Female	Irish Catholic	Sister	Yes	Closer
Judith	64	Female	Irish Catholic	Wife	Yes	Closer
Louise	24	Female	Unknown	Granddaughter (did not know deceased)	No	Closer
Millie	25	Female	Irish Catholic	Did not know deceased	Yes	No change in relationship
Nicole	21	Female	Unknown	Did not know deceased	Yes	Grew apart
Olivia	26	Female	Unknown	Friend of the deceased's daughter	No	Grew apart
Penelope	23	Female	Catholic	Cousin	Yes	Closer
Rosie	34	Female		Sister	Yes	Closer
Sam	25	Male	Catholic	Did not know deceased	No	Closer
Ted	32	Male	Unknown	Son	Yes	Closer
Violet	25	Female	Unknown	Did not know deceased	Yes	Closer

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Wendy	45	Female	Unknown	Did not know deceased	Yes	Closer
Xavier	39	Male	Catholic	Cousin	Yes	No change in relationship

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## Appendix D

### Summary of Codes

RQ1: What aspects of grief-related humorous communication lead receivers to perceive the message as a benign violation?

Name of Code	Description of Code	Example	Amount of Participants	Percentage
Commitment Personal relationship	The level of commitment one has to the subject of the joke, whether it be because they are close to the deceased or the bereaved or they lost a loved one themselves, impacts whether they view humor as a benign or severe violation.	<p>Relational commitment: “The jokes that haven’t made me laugh have been from folks who obviously don’t cope in that way. It makes sense if it’s my aunt or uncle, it is genuine... She was my mom, she was their sibling, but if somebody else outside of the family told the jokes he was telling... I would be really upset because they didn’t know mom and didn’t get mom”</p> <p>“I really get it [her sister’s use of humor] because it is her loss, but it is also my loss, I think if I were not their sister, I would view the jokes differently”</p> <p>Commitment due to prior loss: “If I did not have my own experience with grief it would not necessarily be inappropriate, but I would not be able to join in with authenticity”</p>	15	68.18%

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Violation towards Deceased Personal relationships	Violations are not made if a joke comes from a place of love towards the deceased.	When a joke about her mom went too far “I was like ‘why are you telling me this, don’t downplay my mom... I was sad and I couldn’t participate in that [joke]... it just sort of felt like putting my mom in a light that I didn’t appreciate”	13	59.09%
		“It feels like part of them are in these jokes... it is nostalgia, love, a warm feeling”		
		“If she didn’t have a loving relationship with her mother and it was a mean joke then maybe [I would be uncomfortable]”		
		“Even though they are dark jokes, you can tell they are made with love and in a way to honor [the deceased]”		
Personality of the deceased Personal relationship	The personality of the deceased, especially if they would enjoy the humor use, makes violations benign and therefor humorous.	“I would like to think that he is in on it”	14	63.63%
		“It feels like Nana and Mom are there, like they are laughing with us”		
		“My sense of humor is from my dad. This whole thing [referring to his and his brother’s humor around the loss of their father] is from our dad... He would find this hilarious”		

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Context of grief makes humor benign Grief changes norms	Receivers of the humor often want the individual to grieve however they need, and this makes the jokes benign and harmless. Even if the violations being made are benign due to this context, the humor attempt may not be funny to the receiver depending on their personal background.	“This humor that we all use was definitely inspired by the humor she would have used herself”	14	63.63%
Experience of a loss changes world norms Grief changes norms	Participants who had experienced a loss before did find jokes as benign violations because it fit into their norm of how grieving looks	Referring to the inappropriate, yet funny, jokes her father makes - “his jokes are like onions I am like wow that was really good, but I can't let it go and I burp it up all day”  After speaking about how uncomfortable the jokes made her and how inappropriate she found them one participant spoke about why she is simultaneously okay with the humor – “I wouldn't want to shove someone down in their grieving”  “If you use humor to grieve, great. I am not going to choose to be offended by your coping mechanism”  “Unless you like lost a really serious loved one you don't really understand why the humor is necessary”  “There are people who get death and people who don't”  After speaking about both herself and her friend having lost	15	68.18%

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		parents “I think that it is easier to talk to somebody that knows what you are going through”		
Cause of death – delete out when you make this normal again	How the person died impacts whether violations are made	Referring to the jokes surrounding a loss of a child by suicide “it felt like something a weirdo on criminal minds would do”  “She can make jokes about [suicide] but I would feel uncomfortable because I wouldn’t want to go too far”	7	31.81%
Alternative meanings  Humor qualities	Alternative meanings to a joke can either make the violation severe or benign. This could be because it is relatable or there is relational meaning.	Referencing jokes about their job and video games “it was relevant to me, but it was also about her mom. Being able to relate to what the joke was about. It was about two things; I was able to relate to one of those things and that is why it was able to make me laugh”  Referring to jokes that reference a movie quote that says “the wrong kid died” “You laugh at the words at face value and then you take a little bit more introspective look afterwards and it is like I don’t agree with that”  “I have a pair of skis, I was going to give them to [Name], but that	14	63.63%

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		bitch doesn't ski anymore"		
Shock Value	How shocking and unexpected jokes about death are often what makes them humorous.	"It is very classic of her... She will just say something like really shocking... then they won't know how to react"	9	40.91%
Humor qualities		"You don't find that kind of grief on a Hallmark card"		
		"Jarring is a good word [to describe the humor]"		
		"A lot of the times what makes something funny is when it is like not what you expect or it's like something that's really surprising, and I think that was like definitely a surprising thing to say"		

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RQ2: In what ways does death-related humor improve interpersonal closeness?

Name of Code	Description of Code	Example	Amount of Participants	Percentage
Interpersonal closeness due to humor	Humor often brings the receiver closer to the bereaved	<p>“[Hearing the jokes is] a privilege, it is an honor that I have a friend who wants to share that side of things with me”</p> <p>“This brought me and him closer than we were before”</p> <p>Speaking about how both of them have lost parents and joke about it “it feels very much like this is a bond that we have that no one else does”</p>	17	77.27%
Closeness theme				
Closeness breeds humor	As said by Hampes (1992) individuals use more humor as they become closer.	Referring to when her friend started making jokes about the loss of her mother and sister	16	72.72%
Closeness theme	This concept is true even in the setting of grief and as individuals become closer the use of humor or the ability to find humor about the loss increases.	<p>“well I felt like I was part of her circle... I am sure she doesn’t make these jokes around everyone, and it felt like maybe if she was comfortable making these jokes around me, she was comfortable sharing more about her trauma with me”</p> <p>Referring to how she wanted to laugh at the jokes but didn’t feel comfortable until she was closer “now that I</p>		



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		have gotten to know her and her personality and her sense of humor it is not an issue [and I can laugh]”		
Humor as an alternative to grief	Both to bereaved individuals and the receivers of humor attempts, humor is an easier emotion to deal with than sadness even if it brings discomfort.	“I think some of it is if we don’t laugh, we cry and I was just tired of crying”	18	81.82%
Communication theme		“You don’t want the relationship [with the deceased] to dissolve into just sadness and just cry... it is nice to be like ‘oh no this relationship is still fun and happy she is just not here anymore”		
		“It is easier to deal with somebody who grieves through humor, if he started crying I would be less receptive and wouldn’t want to go over there. He was using humor and it made me want to go over there”		
Being “in on the joke”	When the receiver (especially those who did not also lose the deceased) feels comfortable laughing at the jokes, they feel like they are at a new level of their	“[Jokes] humanize him and make him feel less like this huge rock I have to carry around with me all the time” “It made him human to me”	8	36.36%
Closeness theme		“I wasn’t really in on it... but once I was more comfortable with them... I was more comfortable laughing”		

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	relationship. This comes from feeling like they are now “in on the joke” from knowing more about the deceased.			
Open communication	Humor allows for relational partners to have open, more comfortable communication about the loss	“It is a way to bring them up and talk about them... I think for her she wants people to know but doesn’t want it to be dwelled upon”	11	50%
Put in communication theme		“When she jokes about it casually... the conversation can keep going... it is a safe way to announce yourself”		
		“We have started there with jokes and then it hits them and then someone breaks the silence”		
		“[The jokes] made me more comfortable asking her questions about it because her being at the point where she could joke about it made me feel like it wasn’t this taboo subject”		

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