



Health and Behavioral Sciences

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **DENVER**

The Lived Experience of Suicide-Bereaved Mothers



Monday, November 14, 2022 | 10am-12pm MT Zoom

<https://ucdenver.zoom.us/j/4406521061>

Judith Ouellet

Health and Behavioral Sciences PhD Candidate
Dissertation Defense

Co-Advisors: Karen Lutfey Spencer & Jean Scandlyn, Health and Behavioral Sciences, CU Denver

Suicide-bereaved mothers face an increased risk of long-term significant negative grief and trauma reactions. Suicide is not yet well understood. In fact, commonly understood risk factors and warning signs of suicide do not reliably predict suicidal behavior. The death of a child from any cause is widely considered to be one of the most difficult losses, due to the unique attachment between mother and child. Mothers' experience of losing a child to suicide and grieving this loss, is further complicated due to implicit cultural expectations of mothers, and public misperceptions about suicide and suicide prevention.

This interpretive phenomenological analysis study explored the lived experience of suicide-bereaved mothers, with a focus on understanding how mothers felt the cause of their child's death impacted their experience of loss and bereavement, how they came to understand their child's death, and what challenges they faced. When an adolescent or young adult child dies by suicide, a woman's motherhood suffers an irreparable rupture. The death was not preceded by expected behavior, either due to their child's prior suicidal thoughts and behaviors creating behavioral expectations, or an inability to differentiate between what was perceived to be within the realm of expected behavior for their child's age range, and warning signs of suicide, or both. Newly suicide-bereaved mothers started their own investigations as they sought to understand their child's death. Mothers incorporated any information they learned as they reflected on their role in their child's life and death. Ultimately, the way in which suicide-bereaved mothers made sense of their loss because there were no certain answers available, was by settling on an acceptable narrative.

Study findings build on our understanding of suicide-bereavement in mothers, through the addition of critical and previously unknown experiential details. Suicide-bereaved mothers

felt that suicide as a cause of death intensely complicated their experience of loss and bereavement, being separated from their child at the scene of death added to their trauma, and the guilt, partially related to the perceived preventability of suicide, could be overwhelming. Temporality was identified as an important component within suicide-bereaved mothers' bereavement experience, which was perceived to naturally last significantly longer than existing clinical literature specifies.