

What's New in Meaning Reconstruction?

Advancing Grief Theory & Practice

Robert A. Neimeyer, PhD, Director
Portland Institute for Loss and Transition



Portland Institute
For Loss and Transition



James Gleeson:
Corrosive Littoral of Habit

Learning Objectives

- Summarize research supporting meaning reconstruction in adaptive grieving
- Identify several measures of meaning making in bereavement
- Describe new research programs on process and outcome of MR approaches to grief therapy



Nous sommes condamnés au sens.

[We are condemned to meaning.]

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Phenomenology of Perception



The Multifaceted Search for Meaning in Loss

- About the death
 - *“Why didn’t I...?”*
- About identity
 - *“Who am I now?”*
- About spirituality
 - *“Why did God do this to me?”*
- About ambiguous losses
 - *“What have I lost?”*
- About purpose
 - *“What is the meaning of my life now?”*
- About emotion
 - *“What do my emotions and bodily feelings tell me about what I need?”*



Edvard Munch, *Aske*

Adaptive Grieving




Acute Grief Processes

- Process “event story” of the death itself, and its implications for our ongoing life
- Access “back story” of relationship to restore attachment security and resolve unfinished business



Integrated Grief

- Finality of death acknowledged
- Bittersweet emotions accessible & changing
- Mental representation of deceased revised
- Coherent narrative of loss formulated
- Life goals redefined



Sense-making predicts better grief adaptation in:

- Palliative care
- Natural death losses
- Violent death losses
- Bereaved:
 - Parents
 - Older Spouses
 - Young people

Processing the Event Story of Loss

*A Trauma-Informed
Approach*



Risk Factors for Complicated Grief: *The Role of Meaning Making in the Wake of Loss*

European Journal of Psychotramatology
Journal of Clinical Psychology
Journal of Counseling Psychology

Risk factors observed in 1st year
of bereavement that predict CG
in 2nd:

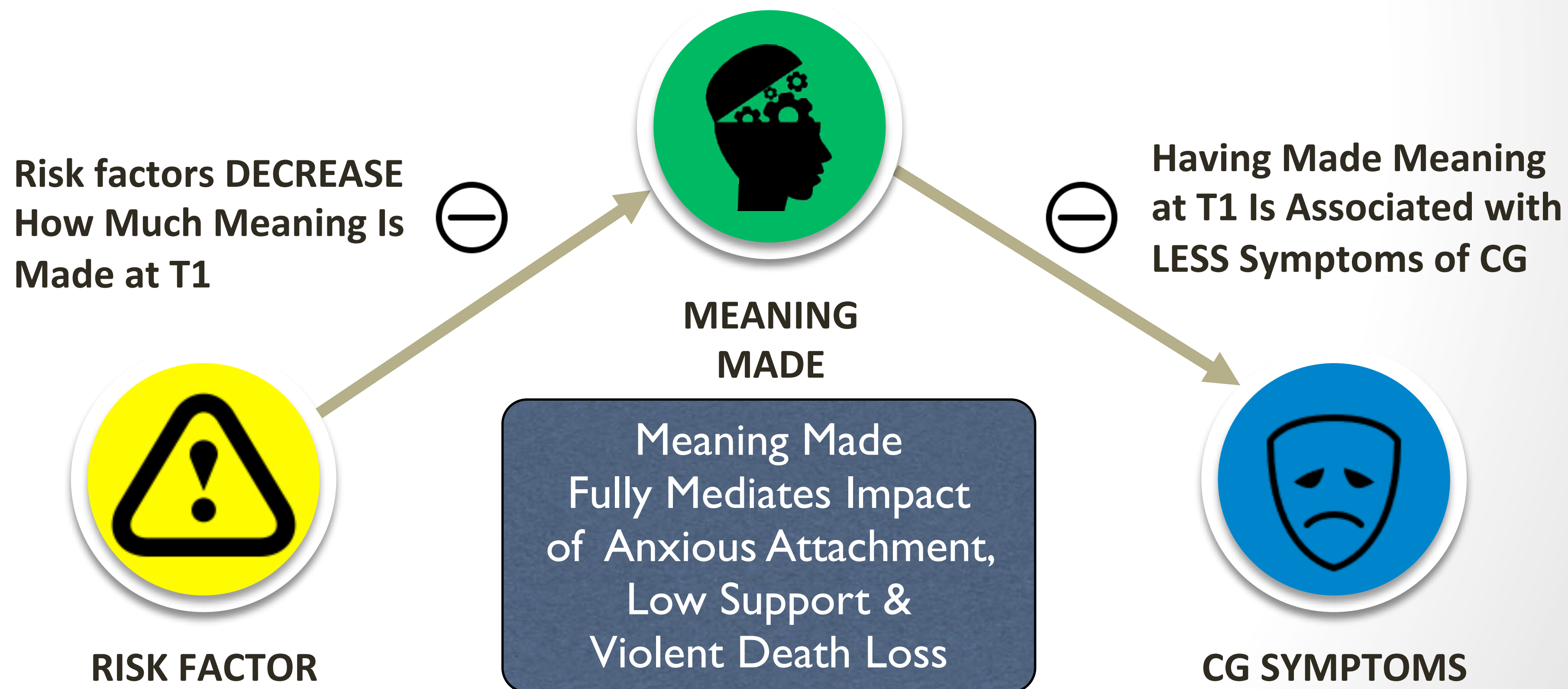
- Violent death loss
- Loss of spouse
- Low social support
- Neuroticism
- Anxious attachment
- Avoidant attachment



Jane Milman, McGill University

Meaning Made Mediates CG

ALL risk factors, including violent death bereavement, increase CG symptoms by hindering meaning making about the loss.

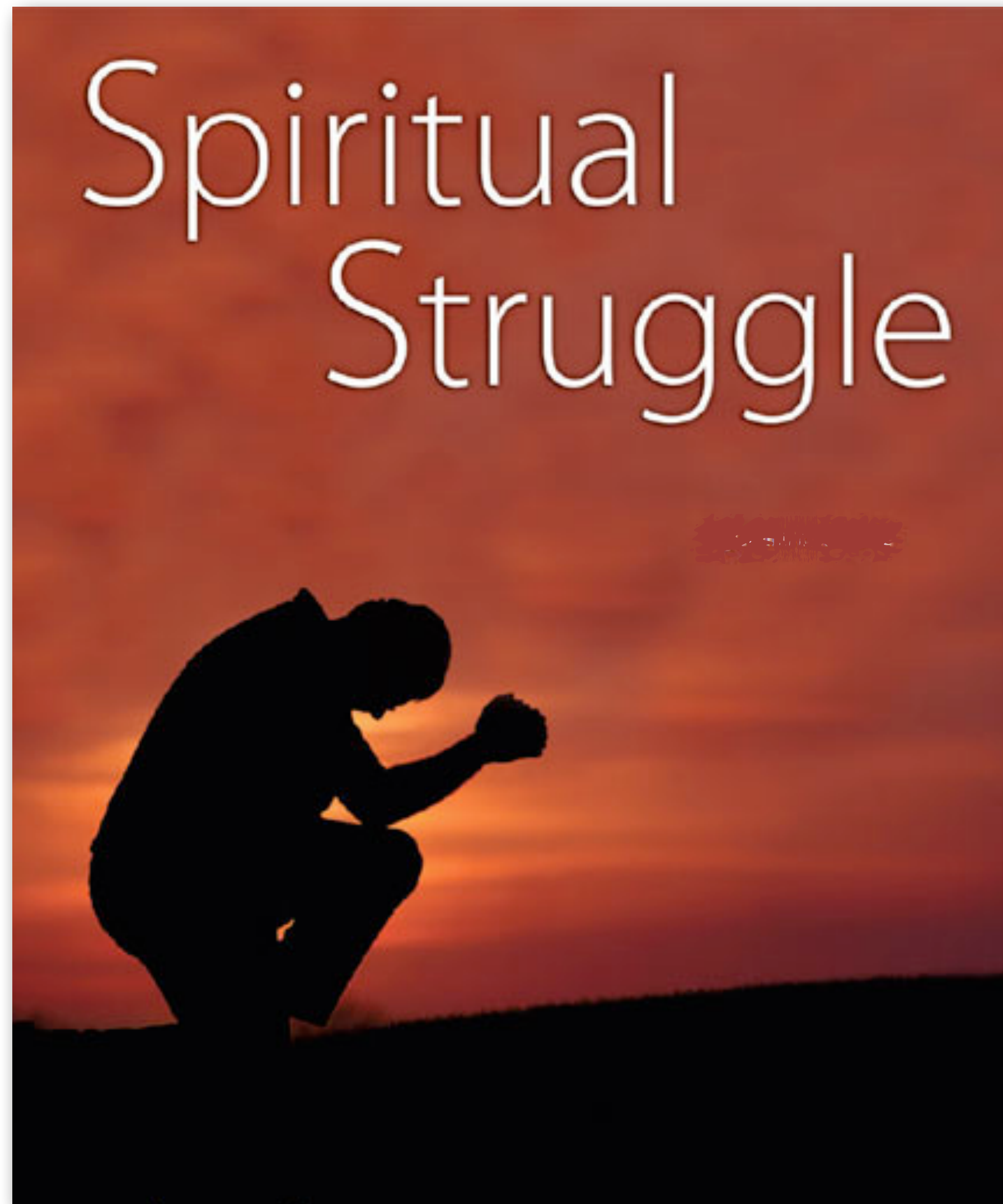


Meaning made accounts for much but not all of impact of spousal loss, neuroticism & avoidant attachment

Rumination moderates this effect, such that preoccupation with meaninglessness of the loss or of life in its aftermath prolongs and intensifies grief

Grief & Spiritual Crisis

Neimeyer & Burke, *Religions*



- Studied 59 religious mourners suffering varied losses
- Violent death characterized by more Negative Religious Coping than natural death
- Spiritual struggle associated with higher depression throughout bereavement



I felt that God had allowed the capriciousness of life to invade our world. I wondered aloud if our entire family and our belief system were merely a cosmic joke. I questioned why God permitted such a painful and horrendous act when he had the power to stop it.

—69 y.o. woman grieving the homicide of an 18 y.o. man

I thought I could rely on my church community, but they grew tired of trying to console me and took advantage of my vulnerability. They said they would be there for me, but I didn't know there would be a time limit.

--59 y.o. woman grieving her husband's death by cancer



Inventory of Complicated Spiritual Grief 2.0

Burke, Crunk, Neimeyer & Bai, *Death Studies*

Developed multifactorial scale for spiritual distress in bereavement with 440 Christian adults

Found clear factor structure and high reliability

Highly associated with Divine, Demonic, Interpersonal, Moral struggles, Doubt and questions of Ultimate Meaning

Correlated with a profound crisis of meaning on the ISLES

Predicted more complicated grief even after controlling for general negative religious coping



Insecurity with God



José Kuri Breña

- *I'm confused as to why God would let this happen.*
- *I feel angry at God.*

Estrangement from Spiritual Community

- *People in my spiritual community don't want me to express my grief much or at all.*
- *My spiritual community might reject me because of the way my loss has reshaped my religious beliefs.*

Paveló Mies van der Rohe,
Barcelona

Disruption in Religious Practices

- *I find that spiritual/religious activities (e.g. prayer, worship, Bible reading) are no longer fulfilling.*
- *I have walked away from my faith.*



Heloise Crista

Inner Pain

*Posttraumatic
Growth
(PTG)*

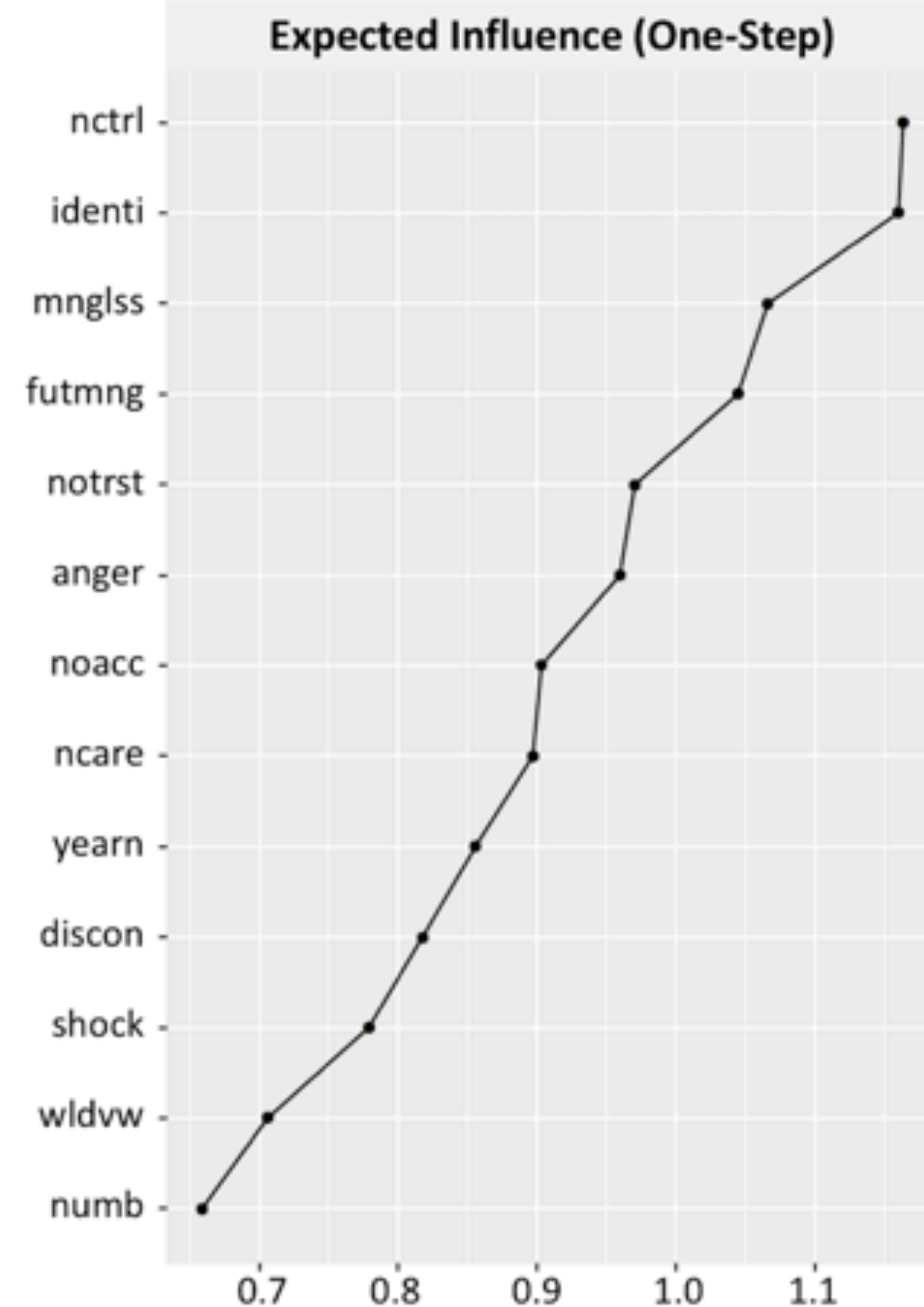
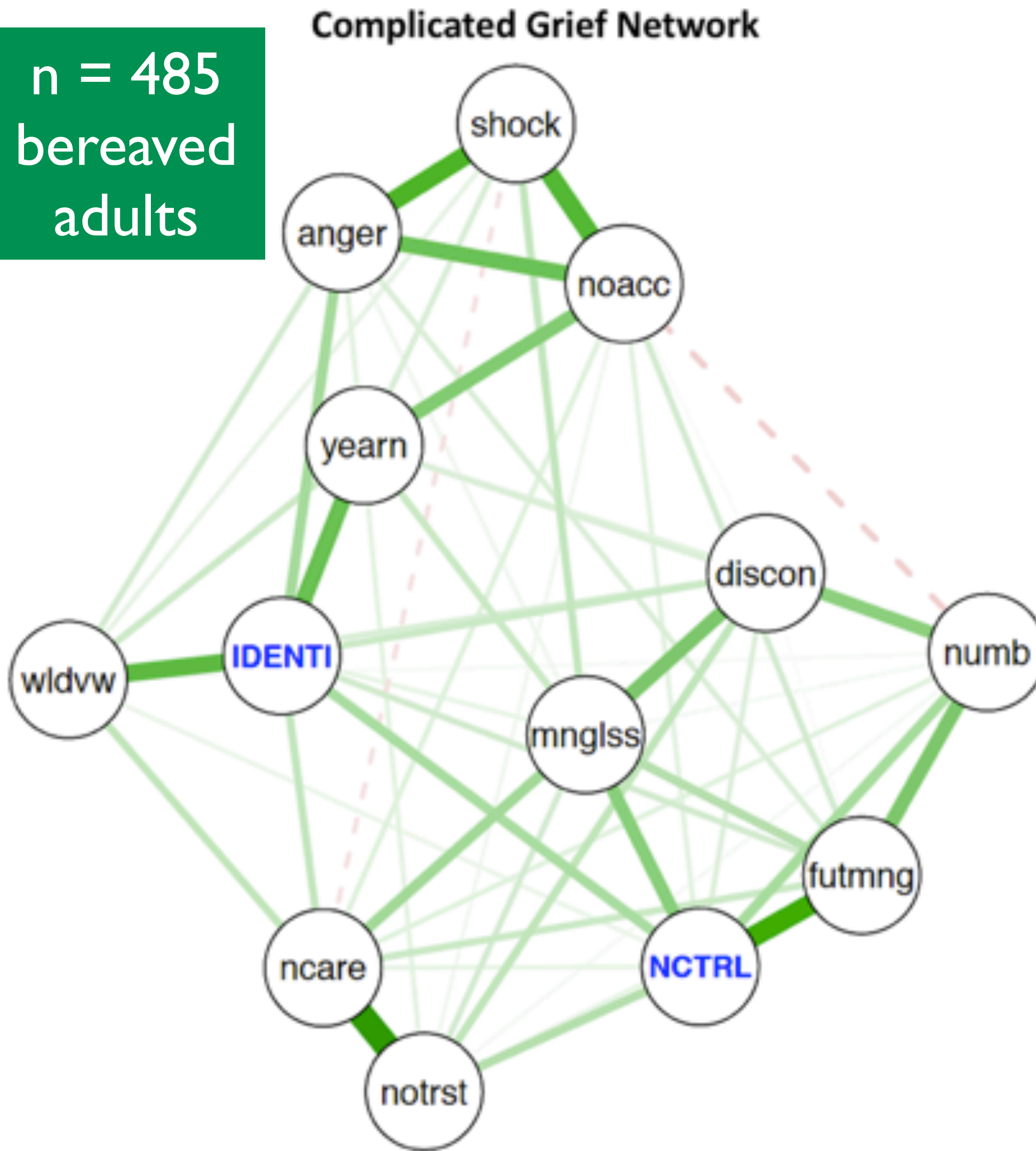


Mary Hobson, *In Memory*

Network Analysis of Complicated Grief

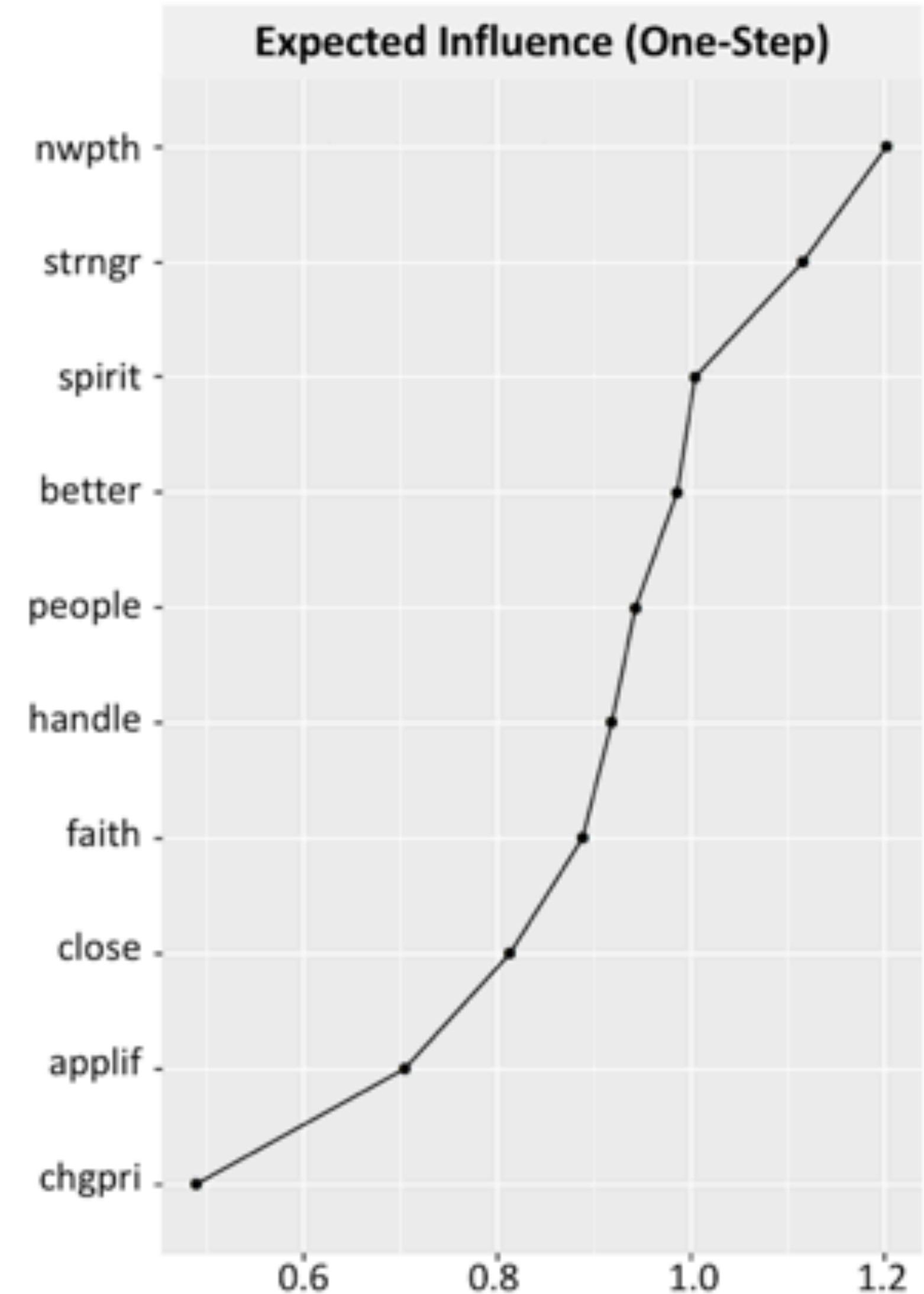
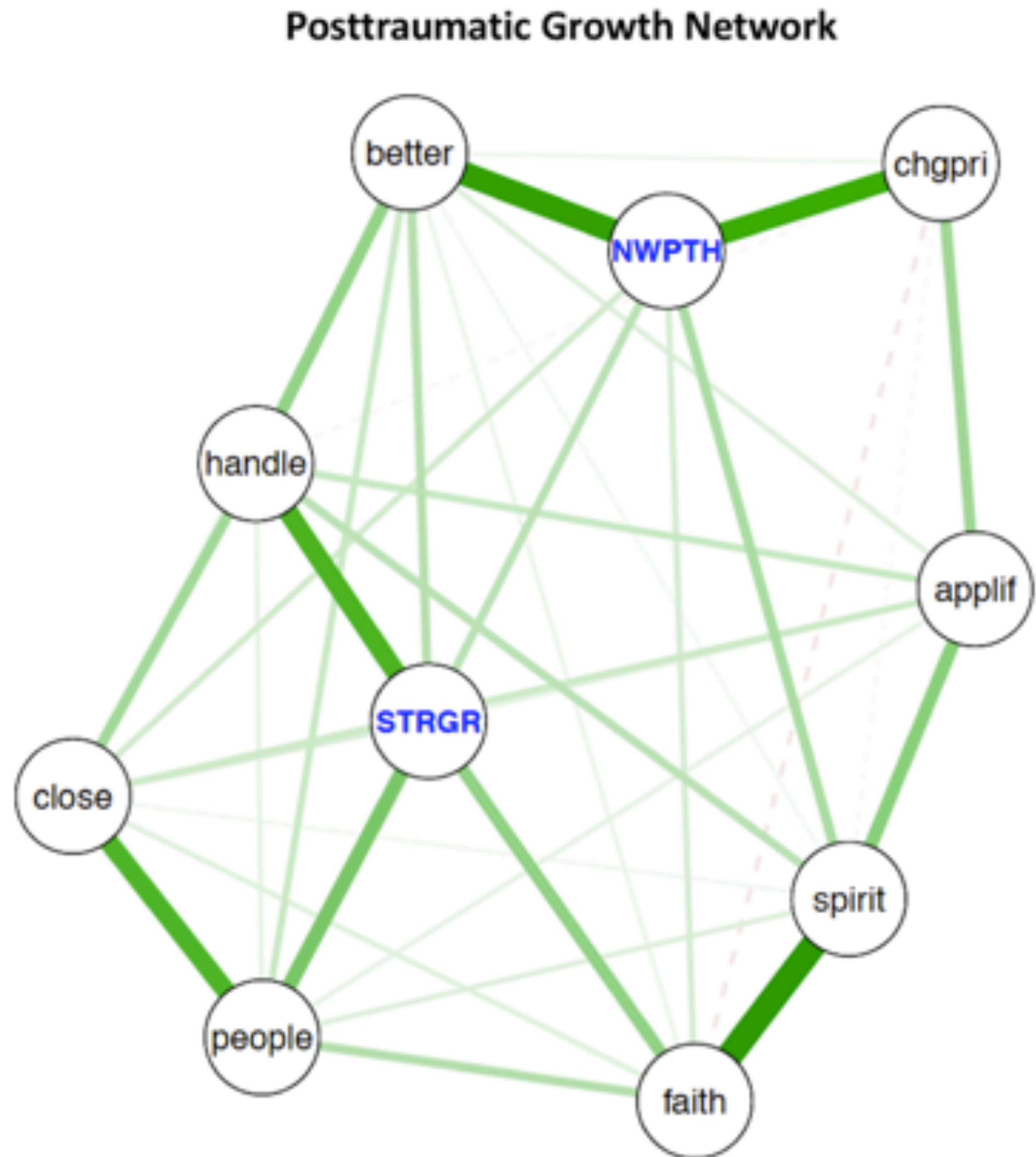
Bellet, Jones, Neimeyer & McNally, *Clinical Psychological Science*

n = 485
bereaved
adults



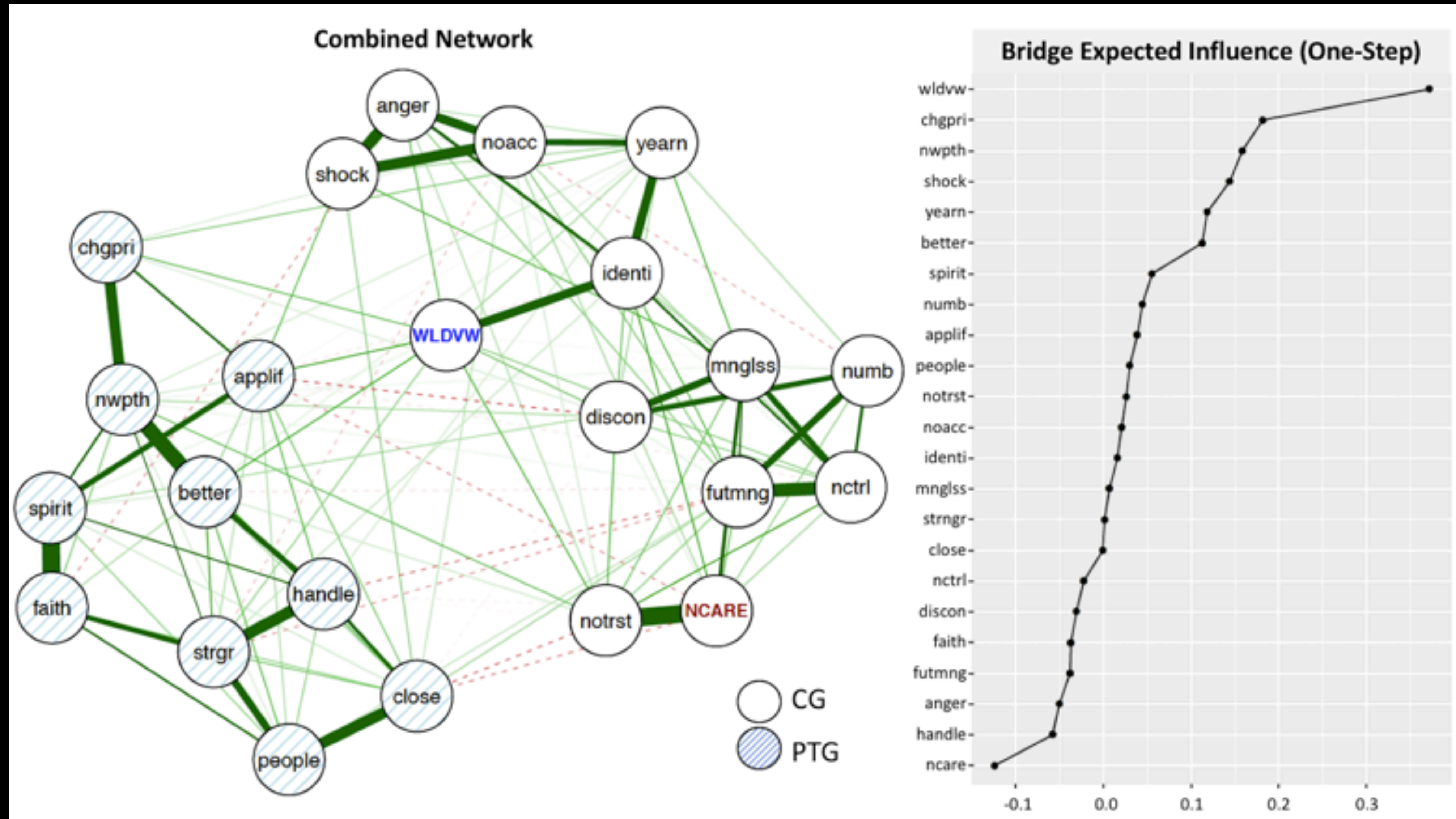
Network Analysis of Posttraumatic Growth

Bellet, Jones, Neimeyer & McNally, *Clinical Psychological Science*



Combined Network Analysis of CG & PTG

Bellet, Jones, Neimeyer & McNally, *Clinical Psychological Science*



Social Validation in Grief:

The Social Meaning In Life Events Scale

Bellet, Holland & Neimeyer, *Death Studies*

- Social invalidation of the mourner's meaning making (disenfranchised grief) predicts complicated grief
- Social validation predicts posttraumatic growth



*Ben Bellet,
Harvard University*

Social Invalidation and Shame in Perinatal Loss: A Chinese Cultural Perspective

Ng Heng Chong





The Construction of Shame

- Administered SMILES, PCBI and Internalized Shame Scale to 42 Malaysian Chinese women suffering miscarriage, stillbirth or perinatal loss
- Social Invalidation (SI) strongly associated with both Shame (.83) and CG (.70)
- Mediation analysis suggested that SI --> Shame--> CG



Qualitative Interviews

- *“I am fearful of what others will think of me after the loss. I do not feel as adequate as before. In a sense, there is shame.”*
- *“I started to compare with others of the same age and asked myself why I cannot give birth. Am I so worthless?”*
- *“My mother-in-law asked me, “What went wrong?” I said I don’t really know. I felt ashamed and then I said, “I am sorry that I disappointed you.”*

New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care



Robert Chodo Campbell

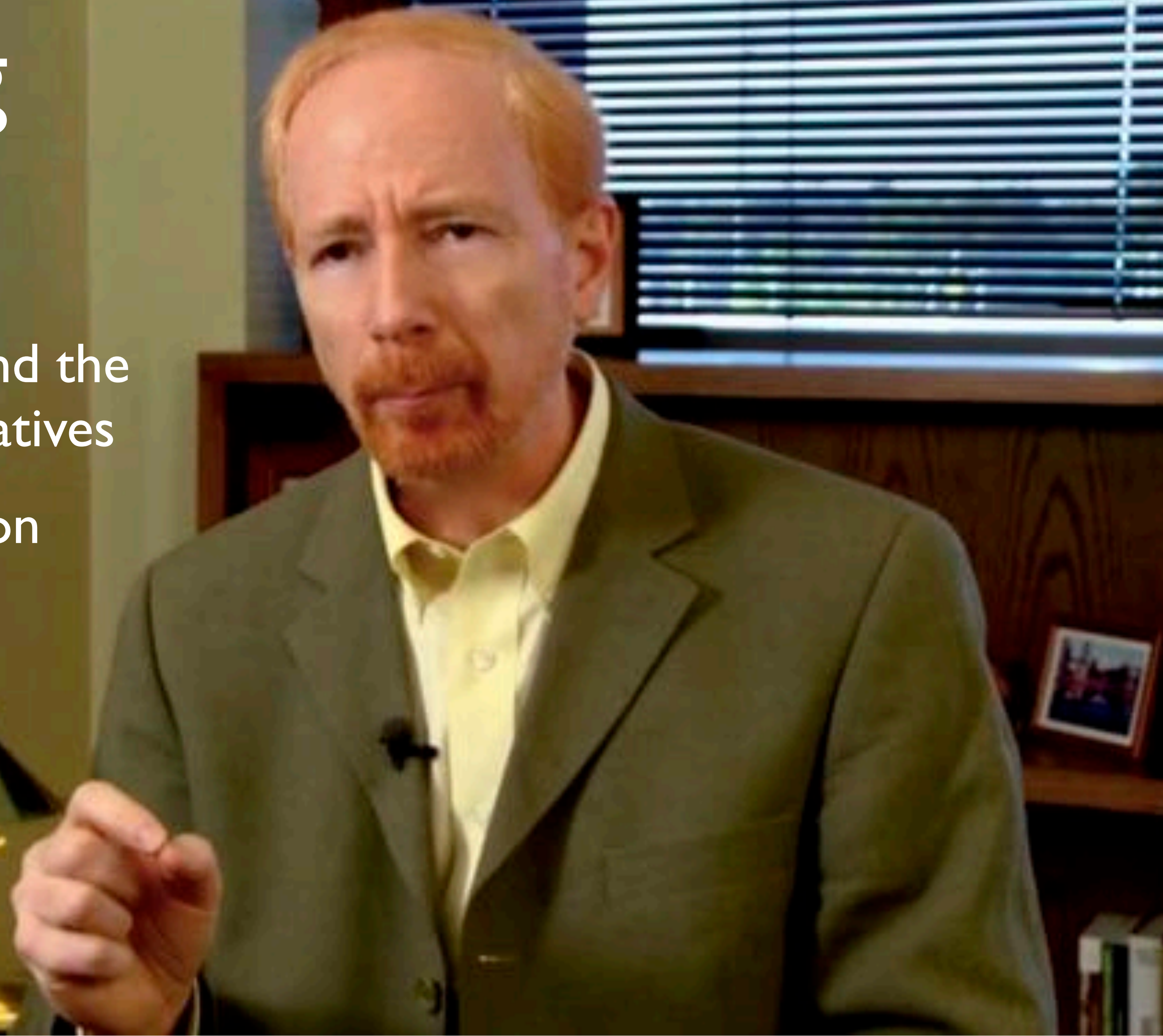


Mustard Seed Project

- Weekend workshop format
- Brief meditation
- Secular Buddhist dharma lessons
 - *Dukkha: Universality of Suffering*
 - *Anicca: Impermanence*
 - *Anatta: Transcendence of Ego*
- Deep listening
- Expressive arts methods

Intervening in Meaning

- Unwelcome change and the shattering of self narratives
- Meaning reconstruction
- Poetry readings
- Virtual dreams



Dyadic Sharing

- *Event stories of loss*
- *Telling partner's story to the group*
- *Sharing and processing Virtual Dream Stories*

Evocative Poetry: *Harvesting the imagery*

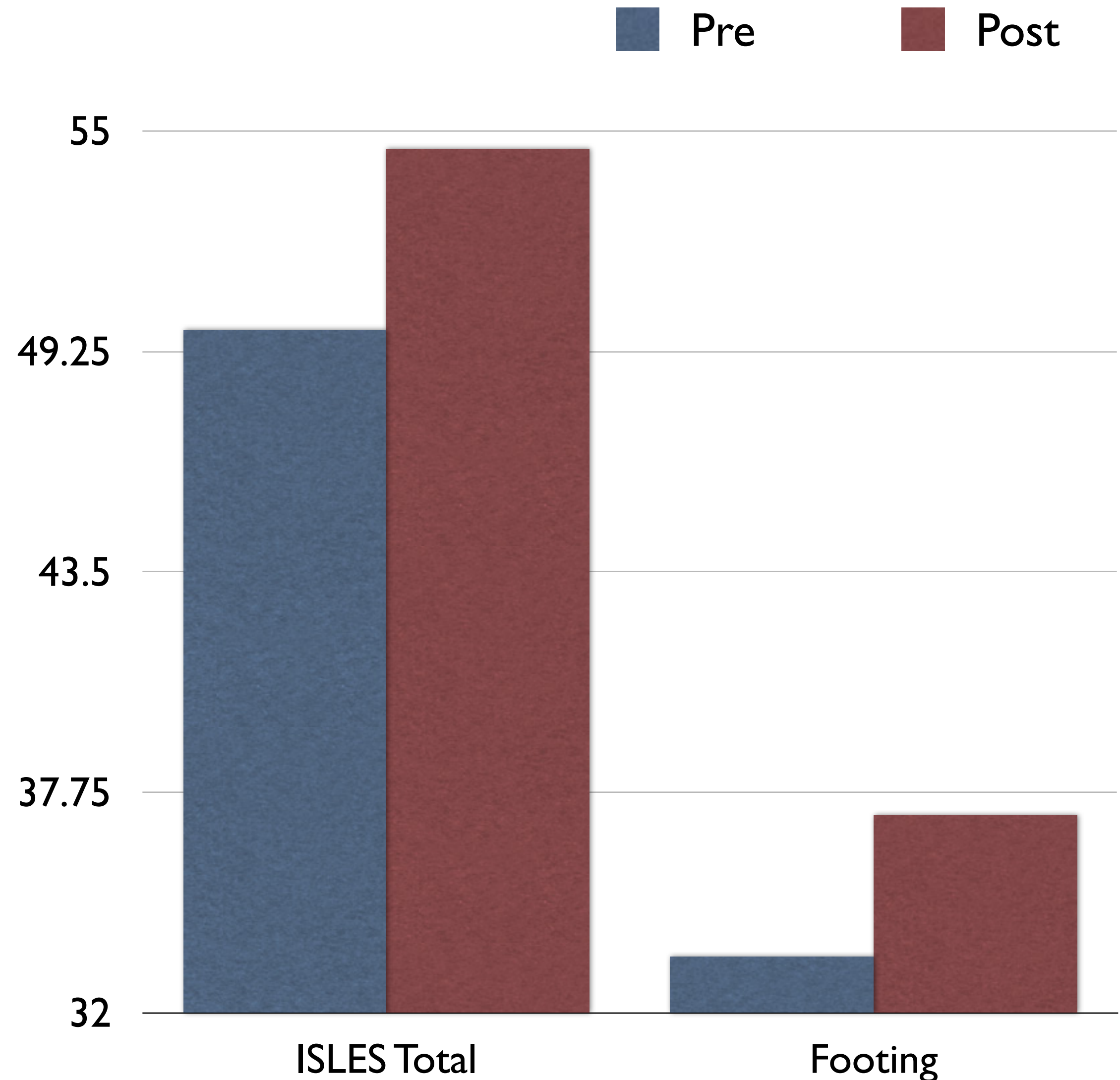


Virtual Dream Stories

- Brief, improvisational stories written in 8 minutes
- Prompted by selected elements or phrases
- Processed with partners or therapist

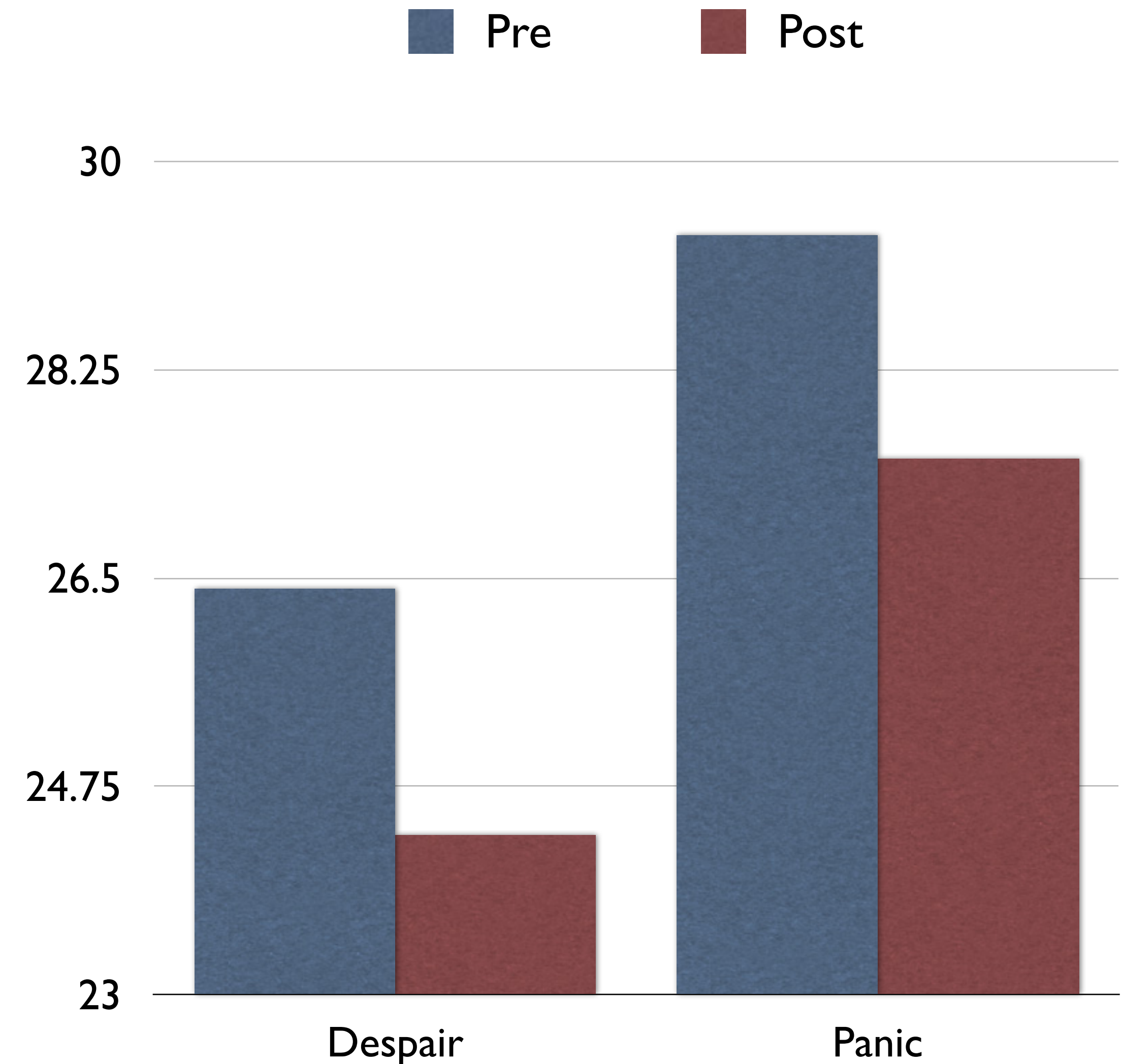
Increase in Meaning

Significant increase
in Total Meaning
Made and Footing in
the World on
Integration of
Stressful Life
Experiences Scale
(ISLES)



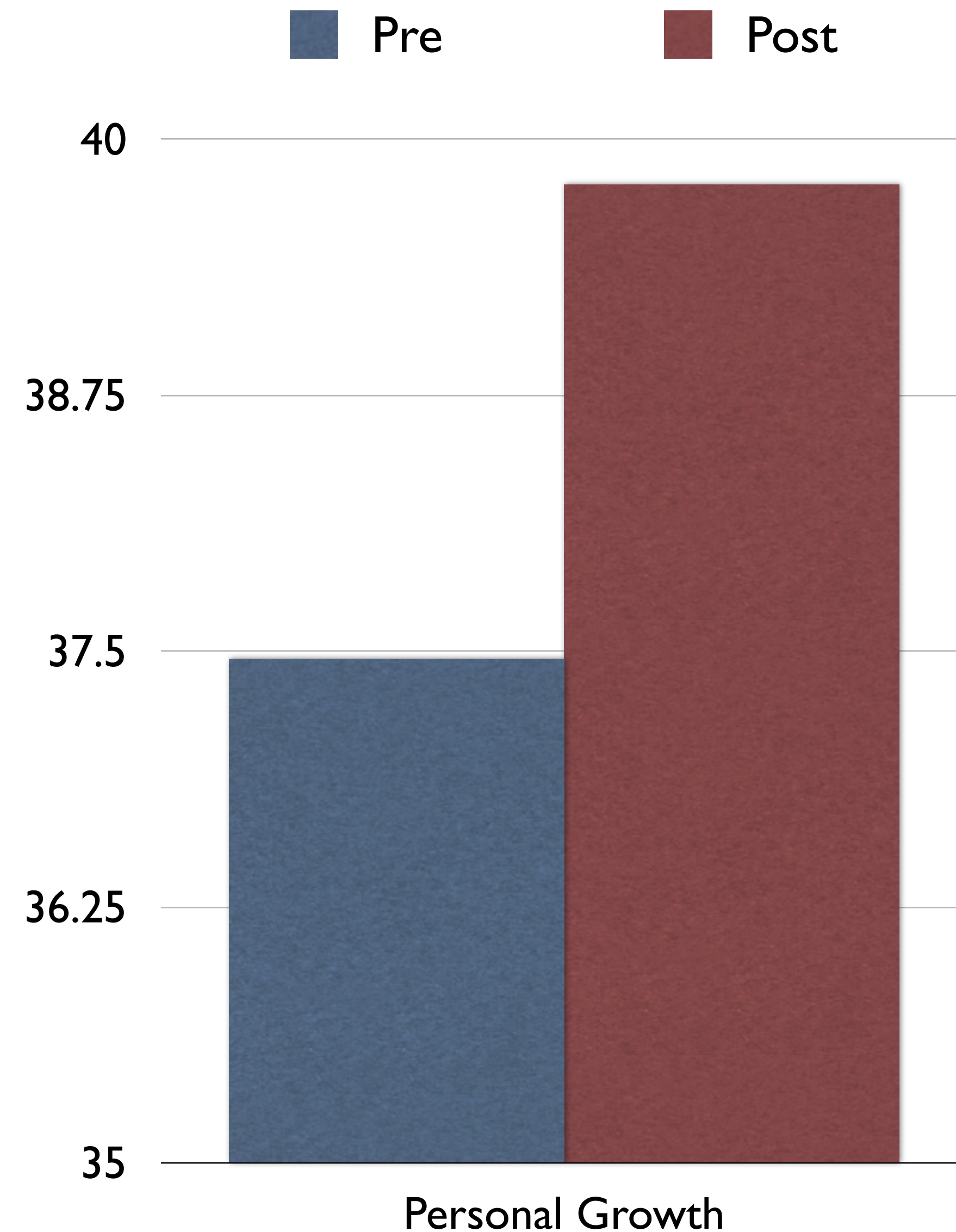
Reduction in Suffering

Significant reduction
in Despair and Panic
Behavior on Hogan
Grief Reaction
Checklist (HGRC)



Increase in Personal Growth

Significant increase
in Personal Growth
factor of Hogan
Grief Reactions
Checklist (HGRC)





Accessing the Back Story
of Relationship:

*An Attachment-Informed
Approach*

Heloise Crista, *Through a Glass Darkly*



Transitions Team

*Jamison Bottomley, Melissa
Smigelsky & Bob Neimeyer*

*Investigating Risk for
Grief Severity:
Attachment and
Relationship Quality*

*Smigelsky, Bottomley & Neimeyer
Death Studies*



A photograph of two women sitting on a light-colored sofa in a bright, modern living room. The woman on the left has dark hair and is wearing a light blue cardigan over a grey top. The woman on the right has short grey hair and is wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt. Both women have their heads bowed and appear to be in a state of grief or sadness. In the background, there is a wooden shelving unit with various decorative items and a potted plant.

385 Bereaved adults completed:

- **Quality of Relationships Inventory**
 - ***Closeness & Conflict with Deceased***
- **Experiences in Close Relationships Structures**
 - ***Attachment Anxiety & Avoidance***

Attachment Style Interacts with Relationship Quality to Predict Grief

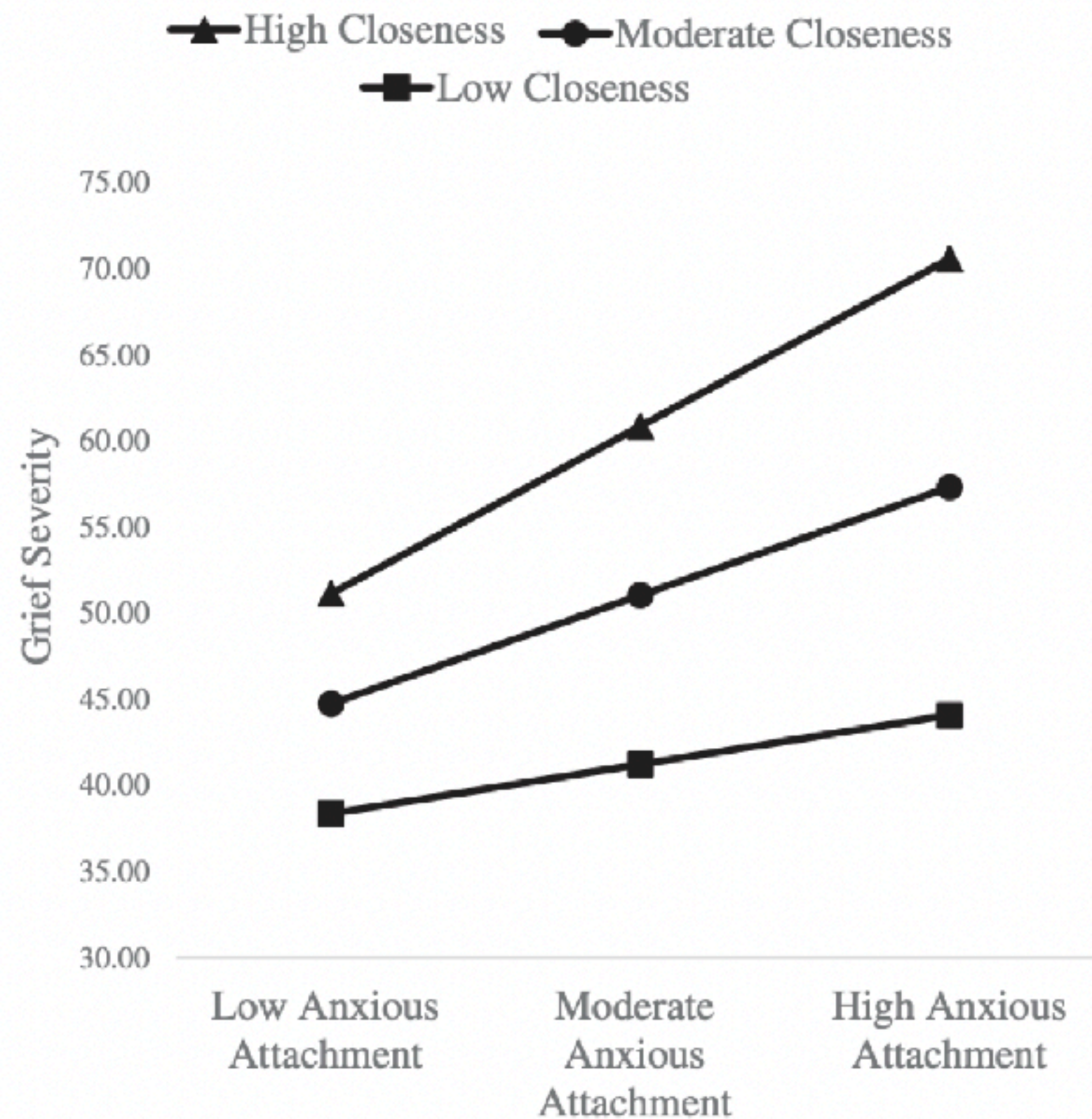


Figure 1. Simple slopes of anxious attachment predicting grief severity for 1 SD above the mean, the mean, and 1 SD below the mean of interpersonal closeness.

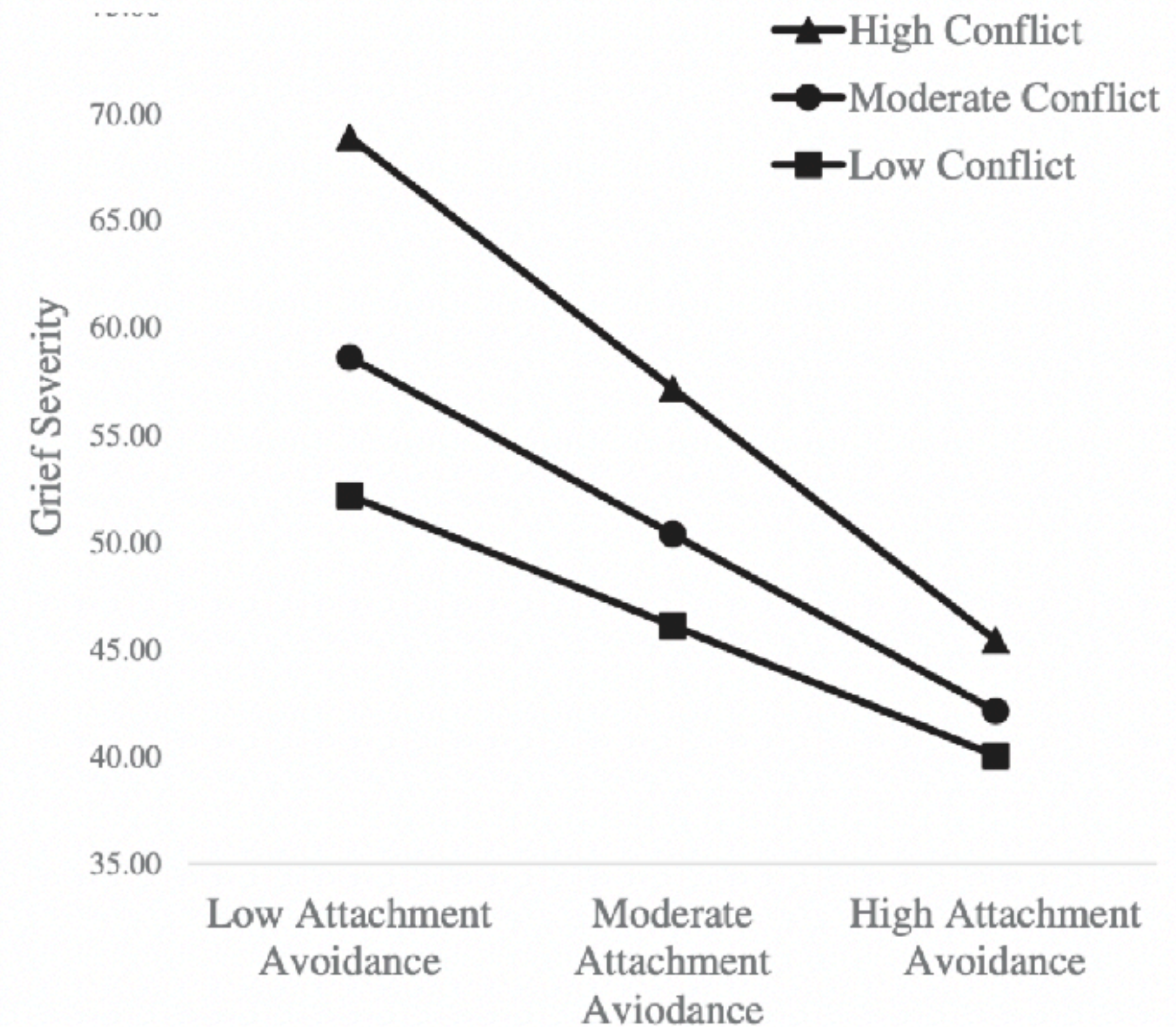


Figure 2. Simple slopes of attachment avoidance predicting grief severity for High Conflict (1 SD above the mean), Moderate Conflict (mean), and Low Conflict (1 SD below the mean).

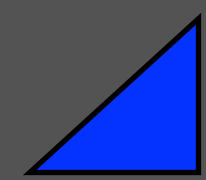


Unfinished Business

Holland, Plant, Klingspon & Neimeyer
Death Studies

Studied unresolved relational issues in 229 bereaved adults and found that:

- 42% reported **regret** about actions taken or not taken before death
- 38% reported **UB** over unresolved conflicts with deceased
- Distress about regret and UB predicted intensity of complicated grief symptomatology





*Parental
Regrets in
the Cancer
Death of a
Child*

Parental Regrets in the Death of a Child

Lichtenthal et al., *Palliative Medicine*

118 parents who lost child to cancer:

- 73% expressed regret, especially about treatment decisions
- 33% expressed unfinished business
- Both factors associated with guilt during caregiving and intensity of subsequent grief
- 60% of those with UB sought mental health treatment



Unfinished Business in Bereavement Scale

Holland, Klingspon, Lichtenthal & Neimeyer
Death Studies

2 Factors:

- Unfulfilled wishes: Unspoken affirmations and missed opportunities
- Unresolved Conflict: Unaddressed disputes or indiscretions
- With meaning made of loss predicted 50-60% of PGD

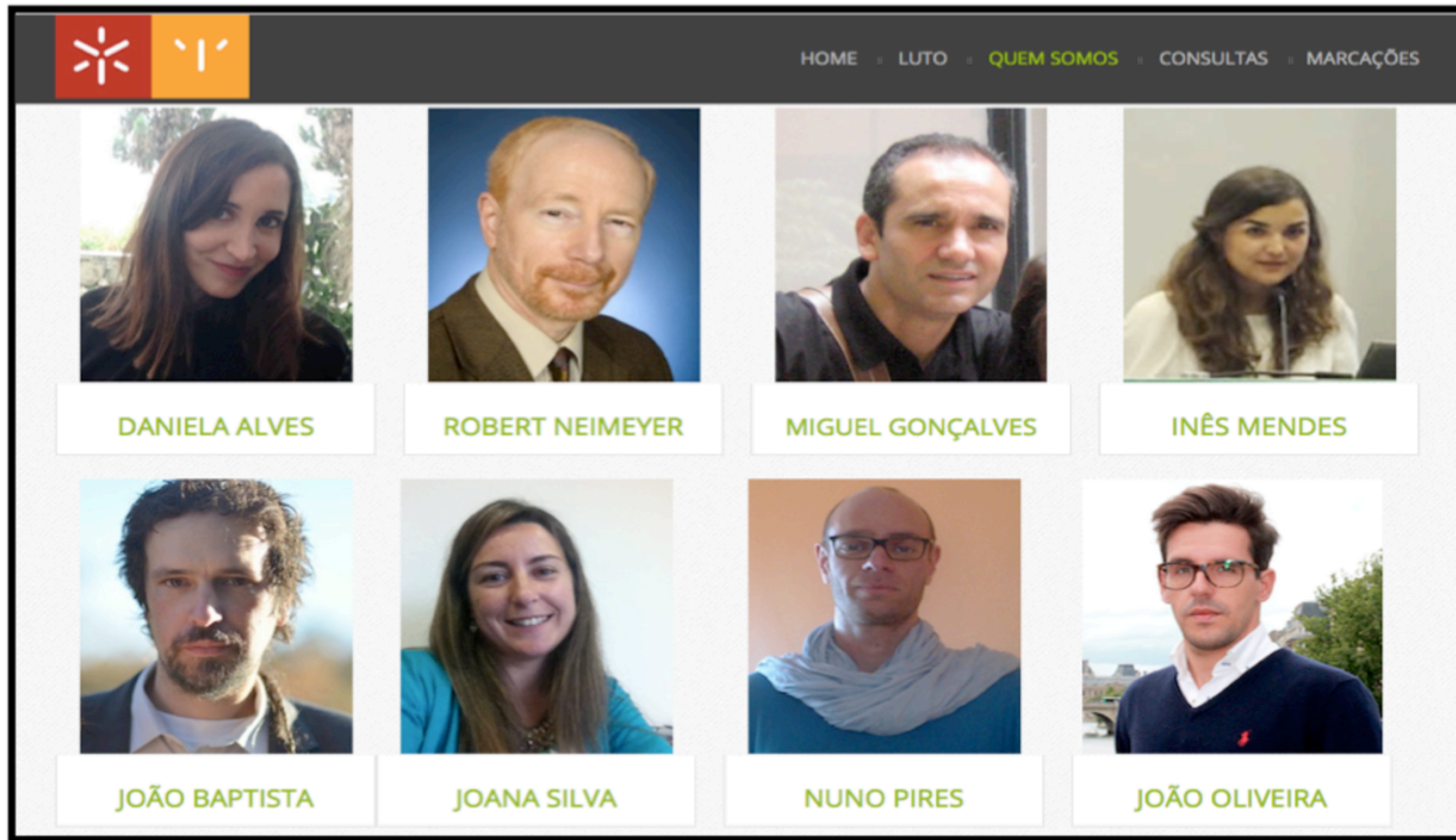
28 items rated on 5-point scales of distress over past month, e.g.:

- *I wish I had told ____ how much s/he meant to me.*
- *I wish I could have attended to ____'s needs more closely in his/her final days.*
- *I should have been there when ____ died.*
- *I held onto a secret that I wish I had told ____.*
- *I wish I had had the chance to tell ____ that I forgive him/her.*
- *I never got to resolve a breach in our relationship.*

Meaning in Loss Telehealth Protocol for CG

- RCT comparison with WLC
- Open enrollment for Portuguese speakers in any country
- Online video platform with email homework

Portuguese Team



Meaning in Loss Protocol

Session	Phase	Focus
1	Reopening the Story	Group introduction, norms
2		Introducing the Loved One
3	Processing the Event Story	Loss Time Line
4		Meaning Reconstruction Interview
5	Exploring Sources of Meaning 1	DPM, Assumptive World
6	Accessing the Back Story	Hello Again Letter
7		Letter from Loved One
8		Life Imprint
9	Exploring Sources of Meaning 2	Spirituality, Creativity & Dreams
10	Consolidation	Virtual Dream Stories
11	Termination	Lessons Learned, Plan Ritual
12		Ritual Performance & Farewell

Meaning in Loss Protocol

Session	Phase	Focus
I	Reopening the Story	Group introduction, norms
2		Introducing the Loved One
3	Processing the Event Story	Loss Time Line
4		Meaning Reconstruction Interview
5	Exploring Sources of Meaning I	DPM, Assumptive World
6	Accessing the Back Story	Hello Again Letter
7		Response Letter from Loved One
8		Life Imprint
9	Exploring Sources of Meaning 2	Spirituality, Creativity & Dreams
10	Consolidation	Virtual Dream Stories
11	Termination	Lessons Learned, Plan Ritual
12		Ritual Performance & Farewell

Meaning in Loss Protocol

Session	Phase	Focus
I	Reopening the Story	Group introduction, norms
2		Introducing the Loved One
3	Processing the Event Story	Loss Time Line
4		Meaning Reconstruction Interview
5	Exploring Sources of Meaning I	DPM, Assumptive World
6	Accessing the Back Story	Hello Again Letter
7		Response Letter from Loved One
8		Life Imprint
9	Exploring Sources of Meaning 2	Spirituality, Creativity & Dreams
10	Consolidation	Virtual Dream Stories
11	Termination	Lessons Learned, Plan Ritual
12		Ritual Performance & Farewell

Clinician's Toolbox

Introducing the Deceased





Remembering Conversations

- *How and when do you feel close to____?*
- *What were _____moments of greatness in life?*
- *What advice would _____have for you about how to handle this?*
- *What would _____hope for you now and in the future?*
- *Who can help you keep _____'s stories alive?*

A man with a red beard and hair is sitting in a wooden chair, writing in a small notebook with an orange pen. He is wearing a grey button-down shirt. The background is a stone wall with a decorative carved stone element. The text 'Correspondence with the Deceased' is overlaid in the top right corner.

Correspondence with the Deceased

- *Say “Hello again”*
- *Write from the heart*
- *Prompt for the unspoken*
- *Consider response from the deceased*

Hello Again Letters

What I have always wanted to tell you is....

What you never understood was....

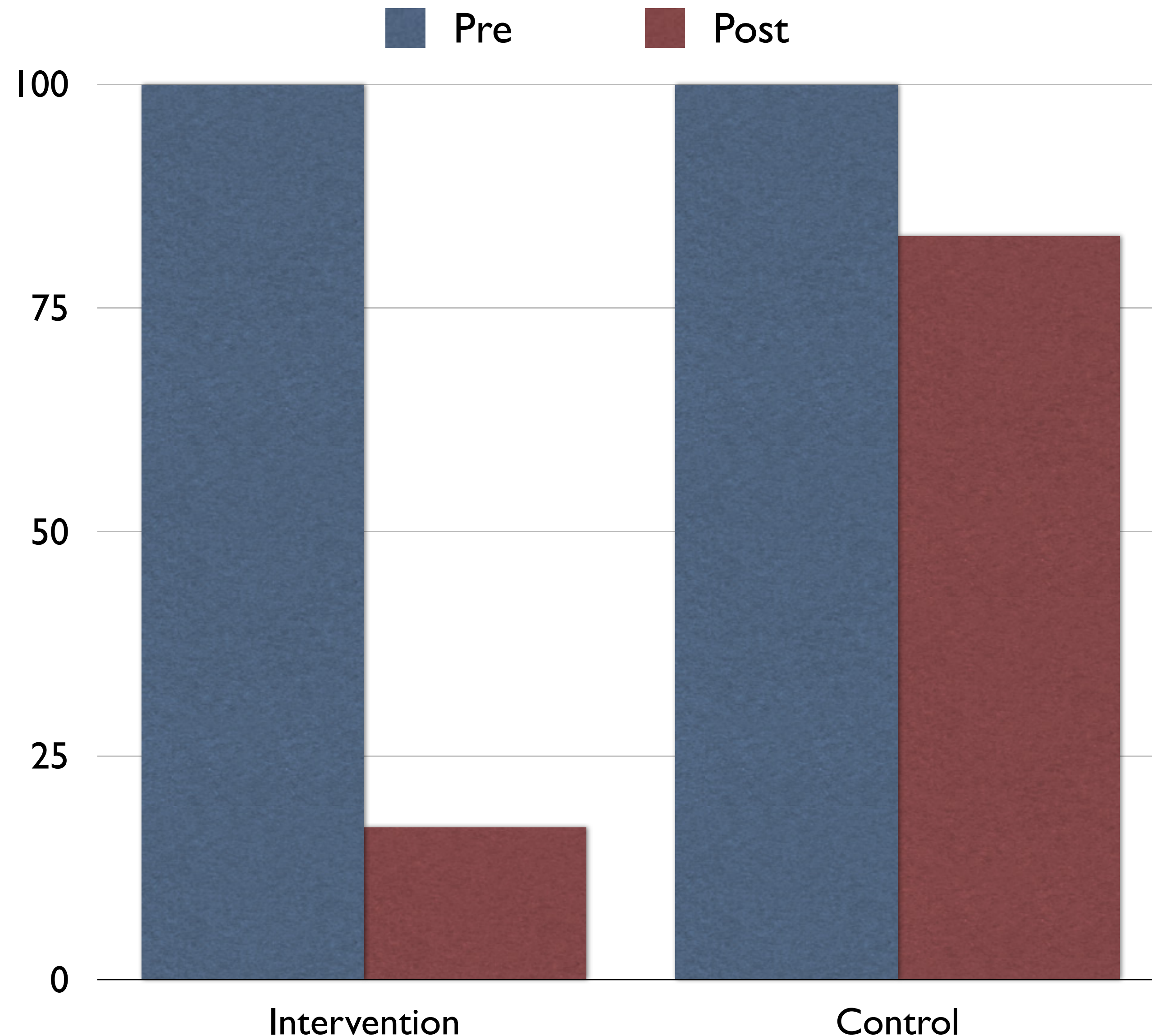
What I want you to know about me is....

What I now realize is....

The one question I have wanted to ask is....

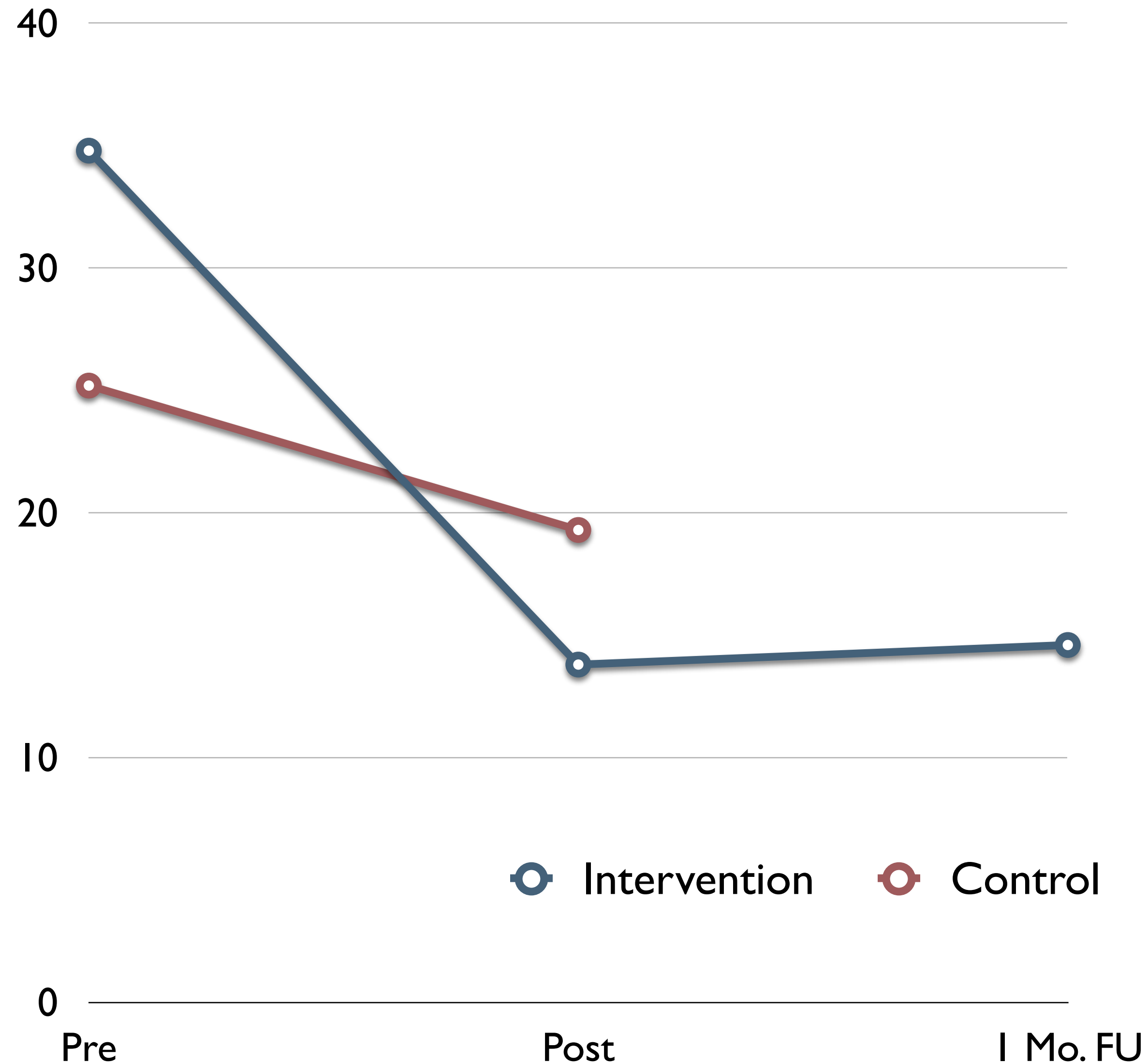
I want to keep you in my life by....

Percent meeting PG-I 3 criteria for CG



- Preliminary data suggest good acceptability (88% completion)
- Dramatic decrease in incidence of CG in intervention vs control groups

BDI-II Mean Scores



- Sharp drop in depression for intervention relative to controls
- Clinical gains maintained at follow-up
- Exit interviews suggest strong satisfaction with model

Guidelines for Working with Bereavement

- *Speak their names:* Encourage conversations about loved ones
- *Keep a journal:* Shift between expression and reflection
- *Share grief:* Connect with others in family or online group
- *Review photos:* Celebrate high points, acknowledge low points
- *Reconstruct legacy:* Keep the loved one's stories alive; Digital storytelling
- *Review resilience:* Explore strengths and success over adversity
- *Live in the now:* Slow down into the present moment
- *Conduct rituals:* Symbolically honor loved one as well as personal change
- *Make meaning:* Explore what has significance now

Presented by
PORTLAND INSTITUTE FOR LOSS AND TRANSITION



Portland Institute
For Loss and Transition

Living in A Shattered World:

Claiming Our Losses and Re-anchoring Our Lost Footing

July 17, 2020 (Fri)
9-11am, PDT

OR

July 20, 2020 (Mon)
9-11am, SGT

Carolyn Ng, PsyD, FT

Associate Director

Portland Institute for Loss and Transition

Fellow in Thanatology

Association for Death Education and Counseling

For enquiries, please email: carolyn@portlandinstitute.org.

Presented by
PORTLAND INSTITUTE FOR LOSS AND TRANSITION



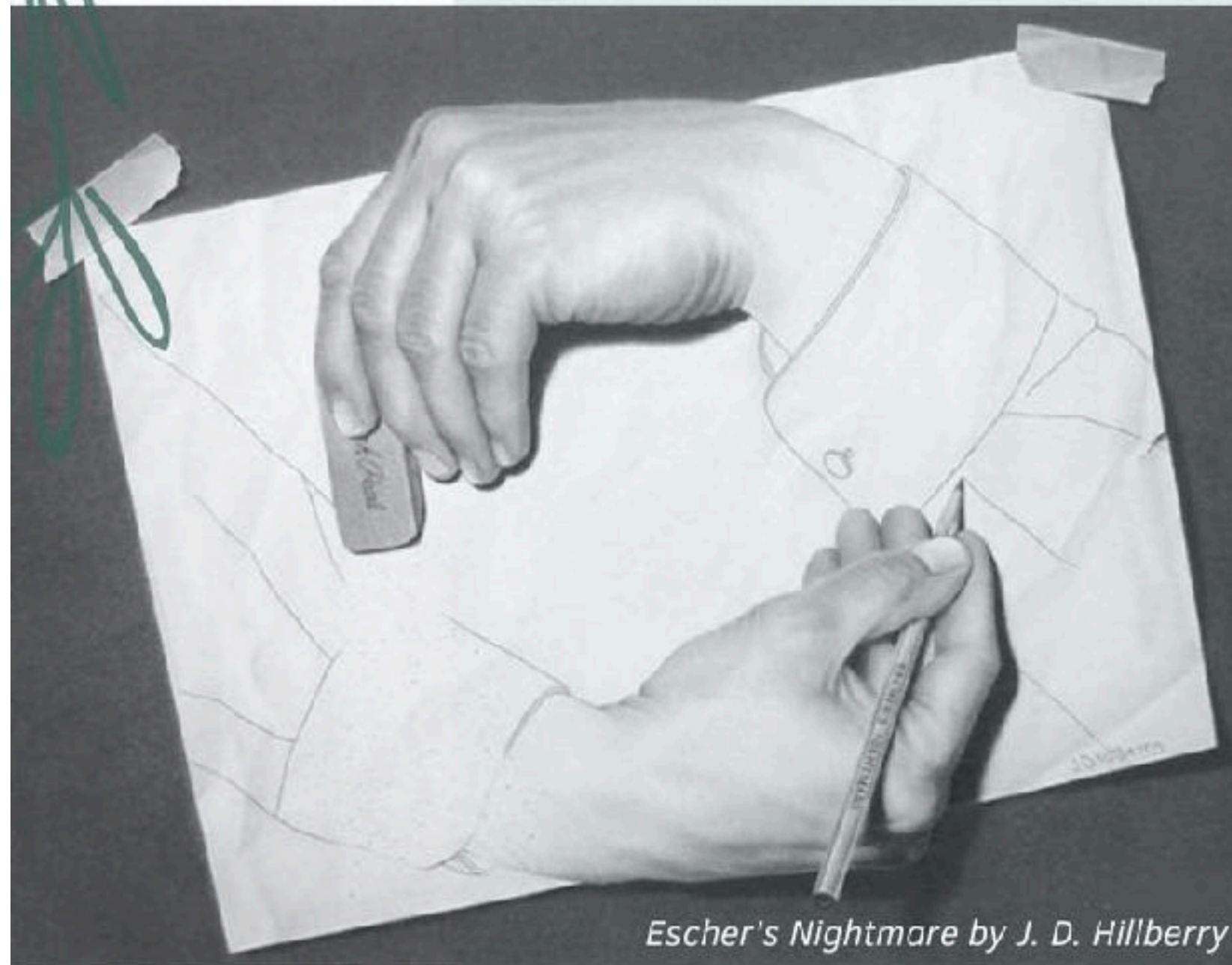
Portland Institute
For Loss and Transition

*New
Online
Training*

Writing through Bereavement:

Reconstructing Meaning in Loss

July 24, 2020 *or* **July 27, 2020**
9-11am, PDT **9-11am, SGT**



Escher's Nightmare by J. D. Hillberry

Robert A. Neimeyer

Director

Portland Institute for Loss and Transition

Professor Emeritus

Department of Psychology, University of Memphis

For enquiries, please email: carolyn@portlandinstitute.org



Portland Institute

For Loss and Transition

www.portlandinstitute.org