

## Article

# Spirituality-Related Experiences of Continuing Bonds after a Life Partner's Suicide

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**Abstract:** Background: Bereavement after a life partner's suicide can be a complex experience marked by a grieving process and post-traumatic reactions. Transforming the continuing bond after such a loss is a difficult but important task. Little is known about how spirituality can function in the context of continuing bonds during suicide bereavement. This study aimed to reveal how women bereaved by their life partners' suicide experience a spirituality-related continuing bond with the deceased. Methods: The sample consisted of 11 women who lost their life partners due to suicide 2–5 years ago. Participants attended semi-structured interviews. Results were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Results: Five themes were generated: Feelings towards the deceased—a tribute to his life; Spirituality provides methods to continue the bond; Continuing bonds in the context of the afterlife; Continuing bonds through spiritual experiences; Spirituality as a way to not continue the bond. Conclusions: The findings reveal the complex nature of spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds after a life partner's suicide. Spirituality, if important for the bereaved, influences how the continuing bonds are perceived and maintained. The postvention strategies should consider spirituality's role in the process of grief and continuing bonds.

**Keywords:** spirituality; continuing bonds; suicide bereavement; postvention



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## 1. Introduction

Grieving after a life partner's (spouse's or romantic partner's) suicide is a lengthy, painful, and complex process. Individuals who have experienced a partner's suicide feel fear for other family members, guilt for not having noticed the signs of suicide risk in their loved one's behavior, anger towards the deceased, mood fluctuations, suicidal thoughts, disbelief, constant self-questioning about why their loved one acted that way, abandonment by the deceased, a crisis of values, shame, blaming others, and fear of trusting others in new relationships (Agerbo 2005; Clark and Goldney 1995; Jordan 2001, 2020). When a loved one dies by suicide, the grief process seems to be complicated by the fact that the loved one chose to die and, therefore, chose to leave the bereaved one or the bereaved one did not do enough to prevent the suicide (Jordan 2001, 2020). This affects the important aspect of the bereavement process, called the "continuing bonds", which refers to maintaining and transforming the continuing psychological connection with the deceased (Silverman and Nickman 1996; Stein et al. 2018).

Mourners continue to hold the memory of the deceased for a long time, so maintaining the internal image of the deceased and the connection with this image is a normal and common part of grief rather than an unusual response to loss (Silverman and Nickman 1996). Connection with the deceased is formed through dreams, memories, internal conversations with the deceased, and objects that remind of the deceased (Silverman and Nickman 1996). The continuing bond with the deceased can be manifested through maintaining memories of the deceased by looking at photographs, sharing stories, or engaging in other rituals of remembrance (Currier et al. 2015). The bond with the deceased can reveal itself through

visiting their grave, visualizing the deceased, and preserving the important belongings of the deceased (Florczyk and Lockie 2019). The continuing bond with the deceased can help find meaning in the loss and positive aspects of the grief experience (Klass and Seffen 2018). After losing a life partner, such as a spouse, difficulties arise in creating one's identity without the loved one, and often, the loss of a husband is described as a loss of a part of oneself (Bennett 2010). Therefore, a continuing bond with the deceased is maintained in various ways. For example, after the loss, widows can still seek the approval of their deceased spouse, remembering him when facing challenges and considering how he would behave in those situations (Bennett 2010).

When a loved one dies by suicide, the continuing bond with the deceased might be experienced as not always positive because, as mentioned before, the deceased's death might be perceived as an abandonment, or the feelings of guilt might complicate the bond (Jordan 2020; Levi-Belz 2017). In a recent systematic review of the studies regarding continuing bonds during suicide bereavement, Goodall et al. (2022) argue that, in general, the continuing bonds after a loved one's suicide are experienced as positive, although there are contradicting findings that after a loved one suicide, compared with other causes of death, there might be less maintenance of the continuing bonds (Levi-Belz 2017). Mourners, after a loved one's suicide, sometimes express regret that they cannot maintain any sustained connection with the deceased, indicating a complete sense of loss of the deceased (Sands and Tennant 2010). This reflects a total emotional withdrawal from the deceased after their suicide, which can be linked to experienced guilt and anger. Sands and Tennant (2010) also note that the inability to establish a sustained connection with the deceased is reflected in the difficulty of engaging in new relationships with others. However, reconstructing the act of suicide and viewing it from the deceased's perspective helps rebuild the sustained connection with the deceased by emphasizing its positive aspects (Sands and Tennant 2010). A close and positive continuing bond with the deceased is related to stronger post-traumatic growth among those grieving after a loved one's suicide (Levi-Belz 2017). Altogether, the continuing bonds during suicide bereavement can be an important part of the bereavement process, and more knowledge about how the bond is formed and transformed and when those bonds can be helpful for the bereaved is needed.

Spirituality is considered a potentially important aspect of a person's life during suicide bereavement, as well as in the process of continuing bonds (Čepulienė et al. 2021). In this study, spirituality is defined as a search for the sacred (Pargament 2011). The search refers to the process of seeking the connection with what subjectively is considered sacred (e.g., God, nature, values, the universe). The search can consist of using religious methods to connect with the sacred or finding other, non-secular ways, which are subjectively found as useful spiritual means (Pargament 2011). One of the ways the continuing bond with the deceased manifests is through spirituality-related experiences, such as spirituality-related dreams, a sense of the presence of the deceased, and profound coincidences (Goodall et al. 2022; Jahn and Spencer-Thomas 2018; Kryszynska et al. 2014; Lynn Gall et al. 2015; Vandecreek and Mottram 2009). Rituals and religious or spiritual beliefs might help to maintain and transform the bond (Goodall et al. 2022). Those grieving after a loved one's suicide express hope that they will be able to reunite with the deceased in the afterlife (Hunt et al. 2019).

The positive and negative spiritual/religious coping models might be used during suicide bereavement (Pargament et al. 2011) and in the context of the continuing bonds. Positive coping refers to using spiritual methods, for example, such as forgiveness (Pargament et al. 2011), which can help to repair the continuing bond with the deceased. Negative religious coping has a negative relationship with adjustment after difficult events (Pargament et al. 2011) and, in the context of continuing bonds, might manifest, for example, as fear for the deceased's soul's state because suicide might be considered a sin.

There are not many studies that examine the experiences of the continuing bond related to spirituality in grieving after a loved one's suicide. Jahn and Spencer-Thomas (2014) found that most individuals grieving after a loved one's suicide undergo spiritual experiences

related to the deceased. These experiences occur through dreams, where the deceased is dreamt of, their presence sensed and significant coincidences are encountered. Continuing bond experiences related to spirituality are described as positive, and individuals often share these experiences with others (Jahn and Spencer-Thomas 2014). Women who have lost a loved one to suicide more often experience a spirituality-related continuing bond with the deceased (Jahn and Spencer-Thomas 2014). Spiritual experiences involving a connection with the deceased evoke various emotions. Grievers describe these experiences as providing peace, comfort, and acceptance of the loss (Jahn and Spencer-Thomas 2018; Lynn Gall et al. 2015; Vandecreek and Mottram 2009). However, Jahn and Spencer-Thomas (2018) also found experiences of sadness, anger, and fear caused by the experiences of the continuing bond with the deceased. Sometimes, these experiences create internal confusion or are perceived as signs that the deceased's soul cannot find peace (Jahn and Spencer-Thomas 2018). In a systematic review of qualitative studies about spirituality during suicide bereavement, the experience of the deceased as a further existing figure was mentioned as one of the repeating topics among different studies (Čepulienė et al. 2021). However, the experiences vary from encouraging to disturbing, and it is still a topic that needs deeper exploration.

To our knowledge, there is only one qualitative study focused on continuing bonds and spirituality during suicide bereavement (Jahn and Spencer-Thomas 2018) and a couple more studies focusing on spirituality during suicide bereavement in general (e.g., Castelli Dransart 2018; Lynn Gall et al. 2015; Vandecreek and Mottram 2009), which mention some aspects of continuing bonds. These studies are conducted on nonhomogeneous samples of different family members and friends who lost a loved one due to suicide. Therefore, we argue that there is a need to explore the topic deeper in a homogenous sample of women bereaved by their life partner's suicide because, as aforementioned, losing a partner due to suicide is considered an especially challenging event, potentially affecting the psychological well-being even more badly than when one loses other kind of family member due to suicide (e.g., Agerbo 2005). Furthermore, we didn't find any studies that would use interviews for the exploration of spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds during suicide bereavement, although in-depth interviews are considered a necessary method to explore the under-researched topics surrounding subjective experience (Braun and Clarke 2022). Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds in a sample of women who lost their life partners due to suicide.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The data presented within this article stems from a broader exploratory study delving into the role of spirituality amidst suicide bereavement. Initially, the spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds were not the primary focal point of the initial investigation. Nevertheless, in the context of qualitatively designed research driven by inductive methods, it is not uncommon for novel and unexpected significant themes to emerge from the data (Braun and Clarke 2022). During the interviews, each participant in the study shared experiences regarding the spirituality-related continuing bonds with the deceased. The topic sometimes spontaneously emerged during the conversations or was touched upon by the interviewer. Consequently, we decided to conduct a separate data analysis to explore spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds.

### 2.1. Materials

We opted to gather data through semi-structured, in-person interviews. These interviews revolved around three central questions: "Could you please share your experience of loss with me?"; "How has spirituality played a part in your grieving process following the suicide?"; and "In what ways has spirituality influenced your connections with others (religious community, others, and the deceased)?". Following the interviews, participants were also queried about their primary demographic details.

## 2.2. Participants

We conducted interviews with eleven women whose ages ranged from 28 to 62. Ten of the interviewees were Lithuanian, and one was Lithuanian-Russian. Among them, nine had experienced the loss of their husbands; one had lost her fiancé, and another her romantic partner, all due to suicide. The time that had passed since the suicides varied between 2 and 5 years. The duration of the relationships with the deceased men spanned from 1.5 to 39 years, with an average of 17.7 years. All the women were living with the deceased men at the time of their passing. Eight of the participants had one or more children with the deceased. Nine women possessed higher education, while two had professional education. Among them, eight were residing in urban areas, two in towns, and one in rural settings. Regarding religious affiliation, five identified as Catholic, one as Eastern Orthodox, one expressed her affiliation as “Catholic, but with a question mark”, one participant considered herself Catholic but non-practicing, two participants had no religious affiliation, and one described herself as having no specific affiliation or being associated with all religions. Out of the deceased men, nine died by hanging, one by a combination of overdose and hanging, and one by cutting his veins. The average age of the deceased individuals was 41, ranging from 30 to 57.

## 2.3. Procedure

We employed purposeful and snowball sampling strategies to identify participants aligned with our research objectives. To engage potential participants, we extended invitations via emails and social media posts to members of the Lithuanian Psychologists alliance, practicing psychologists, social media followers, and acquaintances. Additionally, we employed educational articles published in online and print newspapers, as well as a radio talk, to solicit interest. Furthermore, we proactively sought participants by reaching out to individuals who had previously agreed to be contacted for other research studies conducted by the Center for Suicidology at Vilnius University. Participants were encouraged to contact the first author through email or phone or complete a brief questionnaire for subsequent contact.

Eight individuals completed the questionnaire, of whom six eventually participated. We proactively contacted fourteen people, and five of them expressed willingness to participate. The interviews were conducted between January 2021 and November 2021. Considering the prevailing COVID-19 circumstances and nationwide lockdown, participants were offered the choice of conducting interviews via video call using the “Zoom” platform or in-person settings. While we acknowledged potential disparities between in-person and video call interviews regarding participant interaction and privacy concerns, existing research indicates that these distinctions might not significantly impact factors such as interview duration, coding, or analysis (Gray et al. 2020; Krouwel et al. 2019), including the sharing of deeply personal experiences (Jenner and Myers 2019). The interview format comprised seven video call sessions and four in-person sessions held within the first author’s consulting room. The interviews generally lasted between 1 to 2.5 hours. The first author administered seven interviews; three were conducted by the second author, and one was conducted by a master’s degree student. The second author and the master’s degree student received training from the first author to ensure consistency.

As Braun and Clarke (2019) state, there is no exact rule on how much data is enough for the research; therefore, the authors of the study must decide when to stop data gathering. We considered that 11 research participants were enough when we started to notice that some topics during interviews started to repeat and look somewhat similar between different stories of participants.

Before each interview, all participants provided written or scanned informed consent. An individual identification code was assigned to each participant, affording them the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point, even after the interview, and ensuring their anonymity. Post-interview, participants were provided with written information regarding

emotional and psychological support resources, as well as the contact details of researchers should they wish to discuss their emotions and thoughts following the interviews.

#### 2.4. Data Analysis

We recorded audio, transcribed, and subsequently coded each interview. During the transcription process, we Anonymized the transcriptions and changed the names of the research participants. To assess the potential influence of researchers on the data analysis process, we maintained a research diary from the initiation of interview collection until the formulation of the final themes. Within this diary, we documented our emotions, thoughts, insights, memories, and interpretations of the data. A comprehensive account of the first author's personal involvement has been detailed in a separate article (Čepulienė 2022).

For data analysis, we opted for the phenomenological approach, which underscores that exploring a chosen phenomenon from the perspective of the research participants' lived experiences allows researchers to navigate within the realm of their subjective reality. This approach acknowledges our inherent human limitations in capturing the entirety of objective reality, if indeed it exists, and emphasizes the pursuit of proximity to the subjective realities of others. Qualitative methodologies, such as reflexive thematic analysis, converge these subjective realities and identify coherent patterns within the experiences. To uncover the principal themes within the data, we employed a reflexive thematic analysis. This method, characterized by an inductive, data-driven approach (Braun and Clarke 2022), was deemed well suited for the present study's inquiry, which delved into previously unexplored terrain: spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds during the aftermath of suicide bereavement.

Conforming to the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), the coders familiarized themselves with the data by listening to the interviews and reading the transcripts. The initial coding process encompassed six interviews, with codes subsequently reviewed by master's and bachelor's degree students affiliated with the research project. These team members coded five additional interviews, which were then reviewed by the first author. Subsequently, the first author organized the codes into potential themes and sub-themes. The preliminary thematic map underwent scrutiny by the second author, with any discrepancies being resolved through discussion. Following this, the final thematic map was devised.

#### 2.5. Ethical Approval

The Psychology Research Ethics Committee of Vilnius University approved the study (22 January 2021, Number 56) (The Psychology Research Ethics Committee of Anonymized University 2019).

### 3. Results

We generated five themes regarding spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds during suicide bereavement. The themes are separate but related to one another, as they should be, according to Braun and Clarke (2022). Each theme will be described and illustrated with citations from the interviews in the following sections.

#### 3.1. Feelings towards the Deceased—A Tribute to His Life

The first theme was called "Feelings towards the deceased—a tribute to his life". According to research participants, although one must separate one's personality from the deceased and accept the deceased's act of suicide, the feelings of anger, yearning, and love towards the deceased might stay for a long time and might be perceived in a spiritual way as a tribute to the deceased's life.

*"Others say "so you loved him and still love him?". YES, I loved him and I will love him, because he was a part of my life <...> important person in my life, and he will be important, I cannot run from it." (Nida)*

The participants of the study shared their desire to preserve the memory of the deceased. After the loss, there is a fear that no one will remember the deceased:

*"It seems strange to me, but you don't want them to be forgotten, because, well, we don't have children, we didn't have, he was an only child, so there's a bit of 'who will remember after that?'" (Nida)*

Difficulties arise in letting go of items that remind them of the deceased; they wish to preserve their creations:

*"Then my spouse had a hobby, he used to engage in photography, so there are probably more than twelve thousand photos, the house is filled with things, oh, those photo books, and so on. And from experience, I know from friends that when a person passes away, two, three, four, ten items should remain, but not twelve thousand; in that sense, it will be very difficult for others after us to deal with all that, somewhere to put it or destroy it, but you can't destroy it." (Dalia)*

Participants expressed that the meaningfulness of the deceased's life comes through preserving his memory, collecting information about his achievements, and spreading it:

*"My goal is to preserve the memory, the memory of him. To be honest, how to do that, I don't know, so sometimes when I have some emotional strength, I arrange photos, make descriptions of the photos, capture some events, provide information to local historians, you know, because he was a [famous man in a field] too, he has < . . > awards, and < . . > well, but probably this brings meaning." (Nida)*

### 3.2. Spirituality Provides Methods to Continue the Bond

The second theme was called "Spirituality provides methods to continue the bond". Spirituality provides methods and rituals to continue the bond, and it also provides wisdom on how to perceive experiences and events as related to the continuing bond.

Various farewell rituals after the loss of a husband or partner are highlighted in the narratives of the study participants. Considerable attention is given to the funeral process. Funerals are often organized according to the wishes of the deceased:

*"We buried him on Tuesday, I think, on Thursday, I believe, we buried him. And it . . . hhh, there weren't any specific rituals. And we held a mass. In the morning, there was a mass before the funeral. . . . Yes, yes. We did it. I think we did everything that needed to be done. One thing we did was what he wanted before he died so that it would be. He also told me more than once that Metallica should be played for him before he died because he was a metalhead. So Metallica was played for him, two songs. So, we performed this ritual." (Jurga)*

The time before the funeral (the laying out of the corpse) was experienced as an opportunity to spend more time with the deceased:

*"Well, since here in our village, the laying out is done at the community center. There's no such pressure as in private burying facilities. No one rushed us. < . . >. So, in a way, it was much more comprehensive for me in that sense that, well, those friends could come there, and I could socialize, and, you know, it's like, it's like I could spend more time with him (the deceased), he's there." (Rasa)*

In the participants' narratives, it emerged that caring for the deceased's grave can become a way to maintain a connection with the deceased. One participant expressed that the grave's location is important and should reflect the personality of the deceased:

*"And the only thing I took care of was that his grave's location would be very dear to him and to me. There's a place called [place], and there are old graves there, I couldn't imagine him in those big state cemeteries, well, in the sense that it's completely inconsistent with his personality. So, there are village graves, a little church, fields, forests, and nothing more there, so I also had to take care of that place, because it's not our place of residence, but everything was arranged and and and everything, so that was my only concern*

*during the funeral process. . . And his grave, in that sense, I didn't want any standard, just he was a wild man to me, so I made the grave like that, planted some perennial plants that can take care of themselves, as they want and grow there. With minimal care." (Agnè)*

In the narrative of one participant, visiting the cemetery is described as a way to maintain or at least hope for a connection with the afterlife:

*"So you can't recover in time and again, and the cemetery, well, like where you go—to the cemetery, what will you do today—we'll go to the cemetery, so it's just, well, it's understood, it's there next to you, < . . . > everyone maintains that connection with the beyond, but you don't have it, it's like (laughs) it's just a wish." (Dalia)*

Another aspect of the connection with the deceased that appears in the narratives of the bereaved is the relationship with the deceased through personal rituals. One participant expressed the desire to create her own farewell ritual, during which she would burn the deceased's belongings and say goodbye:

*"And he wanted me to create a big bonfire because he really liked to go there on tours and. . . Somehow, you know, just on an ordinary day, in the car or wherever, going somewhere, he mentioned something about a big bonfire, and it stuck with me. . . (2) I was ready to invite all the friends, all those with whom we played, drove around, at that bonfire. To remember him and. . . And because his belongings that were left all really annoyed me, I needed to burn them, I wanted to. . ." (Eglè)*

In the narrative of another participant, the experience of connection with her husband was revealed through caring for a plant they both planted:

*"A grape tree was planted < . . . > we planted it in the first year, second year, third, and so on, and that spring in that year (when the husband killed himself), it was planted, and then what happened, happened. < . . . > I felt that moment when I was angry with him for leaving me, hurting me, not taking me along, well, in a word, I neither covered the tree, nor did anything to it, but it took root, and now in spring, when I go there to tend and tie that grape tree, I have such an impression—this is our connection, where we feel each other." (Dalia)*

### 3.3. Continuing Bonds in the Context of the Afterlife

The third theme was called "Continuing bonds in the context of the afterlife". The bereaved women believed in the further existence of the deceased's soul or energy; they cared for the state of the deceased's soul in the afterlife and tried to help them through prayers. In one case, the work was done when, after years of prayers, the deceased was perceived as an angel:

*"He is my angel, and when I pray now, I pray always that he would protect me and my daughter." (Laima)*

The participants revealed their beliefs about the deceased's continued existence in the afterlife. They expressed a belief in the ongoing existence of the deceased's soul. This belief can be related to the Christian idea that after death, the soul travels to heaven or hell:

*"Well, as far as I remember, mm, they used to say, that is the last day when the soul roams freely on Earth, then later it either goes to purgatory or hell or heaven." (Dalia)*

The participants associate the afterlife with joy and return home to God:

*"We know that he travels to the kingdom of heaven and we will meet him there. And in eternity, there is a lot of joy prepared for us, but I am happy here on Earth too, I want to be here, but I don't cling to this earth, because it is temporary, because life will continue there. And much better." (Agnè)*

Belief in an afterlife gives hope to see the deceased again, to be together with them. It is expressed that this hope helps in the grieving process. Additionally, the participants' narratives reveal a desire to believe in the continued existence of the deceased:

*“I say, at the very beginning, that’s what I hold on to the most, that if there really is an afterlife, it’s the only hope that we will meet him and be able to embrace and continue to be together. I really wanted to believe in that.” (Rasa)*

The sense of connection with the deceased in the afterlife is described as special, of a different quality than communicating with the deceased while they were alive:

*“And whether there will be an opportunity to meet with him after death, I would like that, and I really hope that after death we will meet, and that connection, communication will continue, but in a completely different quality, we will know what was, how it was, we will know the truth, about his situation, about my situation, in God’s presence, what that truth is, what really happened there.” (Agnè)*

One participant explained the deceased’s existence as human energy that persists even after the body’s death, which helped her to believe that death is not the end:

*“Well, how can I put it. . . I am a supporter of the view of energy and energetic bodies. I’m not sorry when a person dies, and I usually don’t cry, because I know that around our physical body, there is still. . . Well, I can feel other bodies myself, and that consciousness is not in the body, it is all. . . well, you can expand your consciousness to infinity. And that we are all very interconnected.” (Eglè)*

Death is referred to as a transition of energy to where there is more freedom. The deceased in the afterlife is seen as potentially being able to help the bereaved from beyond:

*“So. . . About the movement of energy. . . It seems to me that this energy has moved somewhere further, where there is more energy and more freedom. And sometimes I just think, maybe he really has that ability now to help us more somehow, from somewhere further than here.” (Eglè)*

In the participants’ narratives, concerns about the state of the deceased’s soul in the afterlife became evident. This was often related to the prevailing attitude in religious communities that suicide is a sin that condemns the soul to suffer in hell:

*“May God forgive. And I did that. Because somehow I was very afraid, as everyone says now, you know, as it’s usual with us, that the souls of those who committed suicide travel to hell.” (Asta)*

Some participants feared that the state of the deceased’s soul was restless. The soul of the deceased after suicide is portrayed as wandering for a long time, not bringing peace to others:

*“So, well, the spirit still departs, it does so willingly, that is very difficult afterward. When independently, well, a person dies by their own death, it’s a different matter. But when they raise their hand against themselves, then it’s cruel. The soul then flies, I don’t know, for a hundred years. . . when a person leaves willingly, they don’t leave in this way. They linger somewhere all the time. They don’t bring peace to anyone.” (Jurga)*

Concern for the deceased’s soul in the afterlife leads to various attempts to alleviate it. In the narratives of the mourners, a desire to help the deceased soul obtain forgiveness for the sin committed through suicide emerged. One of the ways in which the participants sought to ease the state of the deceased’s soul was through prayer, asking for forgiveness for the departed soul:

*“I used to pray for his forgiveness, well, my prayer was somehow related to making it easier for him to pass. I didn’t pray to help me endure all this. Well, because I know that I will survive, as I’m already doing things to survive, and it seemed to me, well, I really believe in the whole soul and the afterlife and karma, so I somehow asked for it to be easier for him, for him to be forgiven, because I know that he truly repented, that he went to the priest and prayed.” (Laima)*

In one participant’s account, who belonged to the Russian Orthodox church, a confrontation with the stigmatizing view of the religious community emerged, stating that



prayers at home cannot be offered for a suicide victim, and the encouragement from a clergyman to pray at home for the deceased:

*“At first, although they said, well, about the issue with other priests, as it turns out. It’s not allowed, it seems. It’s a big sin. But my priest (a Catholic priest) said: why do you want to pray for him in the church, just pray for him at home. . . May God forgive.”* (Asta)

Prayer for the deceased’s soul is referred to as an intercession, in which God is asked to forgive the departed just as the mourner forgave the deceased:

*“Why can’t I pray for a person who died by suicide, what bad thing will happen if I do? Well, if God decides that he still needs to go to hell, he will send him there anyway, what bad thing will happen if I intercede for my beloved person, for example, that I forgave him and that he would have mercy on him too.”* (Asta)

Participants mentioned that prayers for the deceased’s soul had an impact on the soul and helped to reach the kingdom of God:

*“So well, such things that you didn’t expect, as my friend’s neighbor said, how can I put it, we held a real wake for him, every Sunday we were at the church, every Sunday we talked about this. . . and all that time she helped me to endure, and it ended like that after a year, and that lightened, that feeling that I helped him unlock the gate of Saint Peter. Because I remember my granny used to say that the greatest sin is to take one’s own life.”* (Dalia)

Another participant associated the alleviation of the deceased’s soul not only with prayers but also with her grieving:

*“Well, I felt relieved, time passed, and he felt relieved because of that, too. . . we that’s our family prayed a lot, well, in my opinion, I often ordered Mass in various churches, <. . .> so that only nuns would pray for him, well, it’s like that, I don’t know, for me, it was very important that he also felt better, I lit those candles so that he would travel somewhere easier than it was for him here.”* (Laima)

In the narratives of mourners following their husband’s or partner’s suicide, an encounter with the opinion that grieving characteristics could hinder the state of the deceased’s soul emerged. In one participant’s account, a confrontation with the representative of the religious community’s view arose that mourners’ tears keep the deceased’s soul on earth and prevent it from departing:

*“When the priest tells a suffering mother who lost her son that her tears weigh down his state in the afterlife, I simply don’t have anything to say. . . Well, yeah, so, yeah, I started not to believe in religion and especially in Christianity.”* (Nida)

Such a view hurt the participant and deterred her from Christianity. The belief that mourners’ tears keep the deceased’s soul on earth and prevent it from departing also emerged in another participant’s account of a ritual performed by a yoga teacher at the deceased’s grave:

*“In that sense, he [Yoga teacher] was very close to me, he helped me a lot, especially with the soul, with his soul. He even went alone to [husband’s name] grave to lighten his soul’s departure, he performed a ritual there. . . karma and. . . purely for him so that his departure would be easier, and he told me not to cry, not because he’s drowning, but because tears keep him, so well, I remembered, it reminded me, I had completely forgotten this part of yoga.”* (Laima)

The deceased is perceived as assisting in various situations from beyond:

*“And sometimes I just think, maybe he really has the ability to help us somehow, from somewhere further than here.”* (Eglè)

In one participant’s account, the perception of the deceased as an angel who provides support from beyond was highlighted:

*“Even my imagination depicts him as an angel, a bright angel, and he’s looking, he sees, he hears, he’s proud of me, he supports me, well, to me, somehow, like that, differently, it’s just not working.” (Laima)*

#### 3.4. Continuing Bonds through Spiritual Experiences

The fourth theme was called “Continuing bonds through spiritual experiences”. The continuing bonds were experienced as inner conversations with the deceased’s soul, as a sense of the presence of the deceased, which was perceived in a spiritual matter (the sense of the presence of the deceased as a real presence of his soul), and as dreams, which were perceived as bringing a spiritual message.

In the narratives of the participants, it becomes evident that the continuous connection with the deceased manifests through conversations with the departed. The conversations usually appear spontaneously and are experienced as real communication with the deceased, although the participants did reflect that these experiences also might be their psyche’s way of dealing with the loss. During these conversations, the participants talk to the deceased about decisions they’ve made and feel the presence of the deceased beside them:

*“Well, somehow I can talk to him, so I started talking to him, but at first, he might have been there, not, well, unclear, not healthy, not normal, in the sense that I would just do it casually, I would talk to him. . . Yeah, so that he’s there, I would talk, I would drive as if he’s sitting in the back of the car, you know, < . . >. So, I would talk all the time, for example, if I made some dumb decisions or something, I would tell him, and then (laughs) I would ask him not to get mad, for example.” (Laima)*

In dialogues with the deceased, there’s a desire to understand the deceased’s choice to die by suicide and anger about the circumstances of the suicide:

*“Well, why in front of the door? Why in a visible place? Why couldn’t you go somewhere so it wouldn’t hurt me like this? So I wouldn’t see it, so such a situation wouldn’t be created. . . ” (Eglė)*

In one participant’s account, anger towards the deceased is expressed even through physical actions, such as scattering soil on his grave:

*“I even went and scattered soil on his grave. I allowed myself everything. There are no taboos for me, what’s acceptable and what’s not. I didn’t limit myself. When I felt anger coming on, I would go and scatter soil on the grave, then I would go and tidy it up afterward. (laughs)” (Agnė)*

The narratives of the participants reveal not only their anger towards the deceased for their suicide but also that the appearance of the deceased brings about unpleasant experiences. In a conversation with the deceased, one participant requests that the deceased appear in a way that brings joy or not appear at all:

*“When I see him in a dream, I don’t feel joy (teary-eyed). So, I told him, if you come into my dream, come in a way that would make me happy to see you. Until he can do that, it’s better not to (teary-eyed).” (Jurga)*

Often, conversations with the deceased arose spontaneously. One participant mentioned that communication with her husband began after a dream in which she felt the deceased’s invitation:

*“Conversations with him are like this, on the second night after his funeral, I was sleeping in the bedroom at his parents’ place, where we used to sleep all the time, well, here, of course, here too, maybe those. . . I don’t know how to put it, visions, hallucinations of some kind, I don’t know what it was, but I saw a flash of light and I heard, him and [participant’s name], well, he [participant’s name], and I hear it from very, very far away, [participant’s name] is calling me, and I wake up, and then I understood that, well, we*

*can somehow talk then, well, from somewhere he's trying to contact me, well, somehow I can talk to him, so I started talking to him."* (Laima)

Additionally, in one participant's narrative, a conversation with the deceased is revealed during the funeral, next to the deceased's body. During the conversation, the woman asked her husband probing questions about the reasons for the suicide:

*"I remember during the funeral, I said, 'Everyone, go away, give me half an hour alone with him.' I shooed everyone away. So I laid down... well, I lay down on that coffin and just talked. I just talked with him. Why did you do that? Why did you do it like that?"* (Asta)

Conversations with the deceased also occur when visiting the grave. During these conversations, apologies are made to the deceased for not being able to let go and express feelings to the deceased, assuring that the mourner forgives the deceased for their suicide:

*"I would often go alone to his grave, so I would say, and I would say, you just leave, so it's easy for you, so it's just... I apologize here for those cries, but I say, I don't want to, no, because he talked to me, that he's drowning here, if he's drowning, then you forgive me, but I say, I send you with love, and I don't hold a grudge against you, and I understood him."* (Laima)

Another aspect of the continuous connection with the deceased, revealed by the participants, is the sensation of the deceased's presence nearby. Often, in the interviews, it's mentioned that the energy or soul of the deceased can still be felt after death:

*"Well, it's not that simple like the body would just lie there for a month without being buried, uncremated, and whatever would happen with it, it would kind of merge into nature in that corner, everything, turns into dust, like here in Christianity, so somehow like that, and where do the people stay with us, they stay in memory, right? In the heart. Mmm, somehow it stays like that, some kind of energy is still with us, you can feel him next time."* (Liepa)

The sensation of the deceased's presence nearby is not necessarily linked to religious beliefs about an afterlife:

*"And, and, and I buried him. But, but I say, there was a very, very heavy feeling inside, and it seemed to me that he hadn't gone anywhere, but, but, I didn't understand that feeling, you know. Neither here nor there. I'm not like, wow, believing in something like that. I'm not. But, well, things like that were really there."* (Asta)

The sensation of the deceased's presence nearby is experienced through various sensations. One participant described her husband's presence nearby as a visible shifting of air layers, which can be seen:

*"I put everything into this, that I feel him, that he wakes me up, telling me to get up and go to work, and I just get the feeling, I apologize, in that place, the air is denser, well, how to put it, I just feel that substance <...> Well, so, so, so, I say, it's like, you would illuminate it like that, to see it, that he's going there in those layers, like how a ray of light goes, one way—one way, another way—another way, and how you catch some ray like that and with a spotlight, from one angle it's transparent, from another, it's all those layers, well, so here, this feeling, so is this an experience, I'm saying, or is it really like that, well, I want to believe that it really is."* (Dalia)

The deceased's presence is also experienced through a felt touch or holding of hands immediately after the funeral:

*"Well, I say, with those things, like there was one thing, I don't know if it was a trick on me or what. We just buried him, came home, I put the child to bed, sat down on a bean bag next to it, I woke up from pain, and it seemed to me that someone was shaking me by the hand. <...> But when I woke up, I didn't see anything in the room. But there wasn't any fear, but just like, purely, I felt like someone took me by the hand."* (Asta)

The participants' narratives also highlight that the deceased is sometimes seen after their passing. The experience of encountering the deceased was described by one participant's child:

*"And my child scared me, because... there, just: 'Mom, I saw him. He's looking at something, and I'm thinking: what? I don't even believe it myself, well... It's really hard to believe when you don't have such abilities yourself.'" (Eglè)*

In one participant's narrative, the presence of the deceased is experienced through assistance in finding the body after suicide. The participant felt that the deceased's soul was leading her to his body:

*"I don't know, maybe it will sound foolish, but it seemed to me, when I looked at that bottle and how I felt that... that it's leading me into that room or not, it seemed to me that my husband was there, that he was leading me." (Asta)*

The appearance of the deceased sometimes brings sadness and suffering. Then, efforts are made to distance oneself from thoughts and memories of the deceased:

*"Honestly, I try very hard not to let those thoughts obsess me for long. They come in some episodes like that, but I wave them aside because I don't want to give in to these things. Well, it's still very sad. It ruins the mood completely. There are no cheerful thoughts. So, I try to push it aside, because well, for whom, I don't think it's worth tormenting myself with that." (Jurga)*

### 3.5. Spirituality as a Way to Not Continue the Bond

The fifth theme was called "Spirituality as a way to not continue the bond". In some cases, spirituality provided ways and wisdom not to continue the bond because it seemed unhealthy or uncomfortable.

When discussing the connection with the deceased, sometimes the efforts of the grieving individuals to sever ties with the deceased become evident. In one highly religious participant's narrative, the perspective that the connection with the deceased is witchcraft emerges, leading to a conscious decision to discontinue it:

*"When I started walking the path of faith, I came to understand more that any connection, or relationship with the deceased is superstition and sorcery. I would like to see him in the Kingdom of Heaven, but I have consciously severed the connection and relationship because I do not want to have any connection with the afterlife or any summoning of spirits or his soul or his psyche there." (Agnè)*

One participant expressed encountering a priest's encouragement not to allow the deceased to interfere in the grieving individual's life:

*"I said, for example, well, I felt bad, he says, when you dream again, say go away from here, from your world, you choose your own path. And don't let him interfere in your new life. So, he teaches me not to let him spoil my life. He chose a path and now let him suffer the consequences of his determination and action." (Asta)*

The participants' efforts to ensure that the deceased does not disrupt their lives also become evident:

*"But after that, well, after that, I said to myself, I said, I will be strong, I will go everywhere with my head held high. And you did that, willingly. You now be in heaven and don't disturb me in my life. I will live my life." (Jurga)*

## 4. Discussion

The aim of the conducted study was to explore the spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds in the sample of women who lost their life partners due to suicide. The findings reveal that the feelings towards the deceased in a spiritual sense might be comprehended as a tribute to the deceased's life. Spirituality might provide methods, such as rituals, to continue the bond. Continuing bonds manifest in the context of the afterlife,

which is related to the belief system and experiences of the grieving individual. Continuing bonds are sometimes experienced through spiritual encounters, such as a sense of presence, dreams, and conversations with the deceased. Lastly, spirituality might be a way not to continue the bond, suggesting that the bond should not be continued or providing a means to disconnect from the deceased's soul or remembrance.

To feel something for the deceased and to hold on to the memories and objects related to the relationship can be perceived as a meaningful tribute to the deceased's life. The creation of meaning, as described by [Neimeyer et al. \(2006\)](#), is recognized as a factor that facilitates grief and is associated with better outcomes in grieving. Since spirituality encompasses values ([Pargament 2011](#)), for some grieving individuals, maintaining the memory of the deceased emerges as a significant and meaningful value. Our study's results reveal that spirituality-related values contribute to the process of meaning-making and can help to find meaning not only in the loss but also in the deceased's life, as well as in the pain of grief. Holding and using one's values after a difficult life event is a part of positive spiritual coping ([Pargament et al. 2011](#)), which allows one to better adjust to the changed life.

Examining the experiences of maintaining a continuous relationship with the deceased in the context of spirituality highlights the importance of methods to continue the bond that provides spirituality. These methods are usually institutionalized or personal rituals and are a part of positive spiritual/religious coping ([Pargament et al. 2011](#)). This is similar to the findings of [Castelli Dransart \(2018\)](#), who found that in the narratives of people bereaved by suicide, the importance of rituals is evident. The traditional or religious-based farewell rituals provide an important opportunity to say goodbye and to accept that the physical relationship with the deceased has ended ([Castelli Dransart 2018](#)). Previous studies have also revealed personal rituals aimed at remembering the deceased and maintaining a connection with them ([Lynn Gall et al. 2015](#); [Castelli Dransart 2018](#)). Rituals for remembering the deceased emerge, such as burning incense, listening to music, lighting candles, writing to the deceased, engaging in pagan rituals ([Lynn Gall et al. 2015](#)), planting flowers or plants, preserving the deceased's belongings ([Castelli Dransart 2018](#)). Our study expands on previous findings by uncovering that the grieving individual perceives personal rituals as an opportunity to feel a connection with the deceased, which could indicate their reconciliation with the loss and the creation of an inner connection with the deceased.

The experience of maintaining a connection with the deceased is related to the belief in the continued existence of the deceased after death. Together with other studies (e.g., [Čepulienė et al. 2021](#)), our study reveals that grieving individuals can have faith in the ongoing existence of the soul. At times, this belief is linked to a Christian perspective where the soul travels to either heaven or hell after death. The hope of reuniting with the deceased can be a factor aiding in coping with the pain of loss.

However, the Christian belief in an afterlife, characteristic of Christianity, is also associated with a stigmatizing perspective that views suicide as a grave sin resulting in eternal damnation for the soul. While modern Christianity has a more flexible view on suicide, our study still uncovers stigmatizing attitudes from the surroundings, portraying suicide as divine punishment for the grieving individual and asserting that the soul of the deceased who committed suicide will burn in hell. Confronting such a stigmatizing view within a religious context is described in previous studies ([Castelli Dransart 2018](#); [Lynn Gall et al. 2015](#); [Vandecreek and Mottram 2009](#)). Such encounters lead to anger and a desire to distance oneself from Christianity, which can be seen as a negative spiritual/religious coping strategy after a difficult life event ([Pargament et al. 2011](#)). Such a strategy might cause a more difficult adjustment after a loved one's suicide.

The study also reveals the participants' convictions that the soul of the deceased who died by suicide does not find peace and continues to wander. There is an outlook that the state of the deceased's soul is unclear and unknown. When worrying about the state of the soul of the deceased spouse or partner in the afterlife, individuals turn to clergy members. Conversations with clergy members, in which they comfort the grieving individual by

asserting that suicide is God's will, provide encouragement and hope that the deceased is not condemned to eternal suffering. Vandecreek and Mottram's (2009) study also reveals the importance of the clergy's reassurance that the deceased's soul will not go to hell.

Grieving individuals strive to alleviate the state of the deceased's soul in the afterlife through various means. Study participants expressed that they pray for forgiveness for the deceased soul. Castelli Dransart's (2018) study highlights the connection between praying to God for self-forgiveness and forgiveness for the deceased in relation to the experienced guilt after a loved one's suicide. Hence, it can be anticipated that praying for the deceased's soul reduces the experiences of guilt felt by the grieving individual.

The study brings to light not only the act of praying for the deceased's soul but also praying to the deceased. During the grieving process, the deceased often becomes a source of support from beyond. Support from the deceased is experienced through physical sensations of the deceased's presence and through dreams. Bennett's (2010) study also revealed the experiences of widows who seek advice from the deceased and seek his affirmation when making significant decisions. Similar to this study, Castelli Dransart's (2018) research also discloses a connection with the deceased in a spiritual context, where the deceased becomes an internal figure for whom prayers are offered. In our study, one grieving individual even describes the deceased as an angel, asking for help for herself and her loved ones. Castelli Dransart (2018) links the shift from praying to God to praying to the deceased with a crisis of faith after suicide. What our study reveals is that the continuing bond with the deceased can take many different trajectories. Spirituality, at least according to our study, can form and transform the continuing bond. We argue that the less the person is engaged with the institutionalized religion and religious dogma, the more the trajectories of the continuing bond are specific and subjective. And if the grieving person is strongly religious, the religious provided explanations and ways to continue the bond are chosen.

The study participants revealed many spiritual experiences, which were manifestations of the continuing bond with the deceased. For example, spontaneous conversations with the deceased or communicating with the deceased in the dreams. While such experiences might be considered unconventional in society, the practice of conversing with the deceased is also highlighted in previous research (Maple et al. 2013; Shuchter and Zisook 1988; Conant 1996). Our study, like the one by Maple et al. (2013), reveals conversations with the deceased involving recounting events and discussing decisions made. During these conversations, there is also a desire to answer questions about the reasons behind the suicide. Anger is directed toward the deceased, and there is a demand for the deceased to refrain from evoking negative emotions in the grieving individual. Dialogue with the deceased also occurs during rituals such as farewell rituals and visiting the grave. According to Kwilecki (2011), post-death conversations with the deceased offer a sense of relief from the pain of loss, suggesting that it is an essential part of the grieving process. Maintaining an ongoing connection with the deceased through conversation holds therapeutic potential. Engaging in post-death conversations with the deceased has proven to be an effective therapeutic technique to aid those dealing with grief (Hannah et al. 2013).

The experiences of a continuous spiritual connection with the deceased through a sensed presence were also revealed in our study. Interestingly, the perceived presence of the deceased does not necessarily relate to religious beliefs. Sometimes, even the grieving individuals themselves find it difficult to believe in the tangible presence of the deceased. Based on the results of Jahn and Spencer-Thomas's (2014) research, it is evident that the sensation of the deceased's presence nearby is experienced by over half of the grieving individuals, implying that it is a fairly common aspect of the grieving process. Conant's (1996) study revealed that the sensation of the deceased's presence nearby provides a feeling of safety. While Jahn and Spencer-Thomas (2018) discovered various feelings linked to the perceived presence of the deceased nearby, such as comfort, anger, sadness, and confusion. In our study, the sensed presence of the deceased nearby also elicited diversity. It is possible to speculate that some grieving individuals, after suicide, display ambivalent and intense

emotions towards the deceased, preventing the experience of the deceased's presence nearby from being perceived as comforting and consoling.

Although the study revealed various spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds with the deceased, it became apparent that sometimes spirituality might prevent the continuing bonds with the deceased. The connection with the deceased is discontinued for various reasons. Sometimes, continued connection with the deceased is perceived as superstition, and the role of the deceased in the grieving individual's life is taken over by God, to whom the struggles of life are entrusted. In other cases, the clergy can give religion-based advice to sever the connection with the deceased, or the grieving person experiences discomfoting interactions with the deceased, which provokes wishes and efforts to end the continuing bond. Our study reveals that in the context of helping individuals who lost a loved one due to suicide, it is necessary to consider the subjective experiences and beliefs regarding continuing bonds with the deceased. Although from theory, we might know that continuing the bond might be healthy and important (e.g., [Silverman and Nickman 1996](#)), death by suicide might indicate that the bond is too difficult to transform and be experienced as comfortable, or that much more time and patience is needed for this process ([Jordan 2020](#)). It is also important to understand the bereaved person's belief system, and if the beliefs are not congruent with the idea of continuing the bond, this must be considered while helping the bereaved.

Some limitations of the current study warrant discussion. While the research participants were relatively homogeneous, they solely represent the viewpoint of women coping with the loss of a life partner to suicide. These women displayed variations in age, education, and the nature and duration of their relationships with the deceased men. Consequently, it is possible that the research findings could have been influenced by these disparities among the participants.

It is important to note that the participants were volunteers who actively wished to share their spiritual experiences during bereavement by suicide. This self-selection bias could have skewed the results towards a more positive perspective, as those who had more positive experiences may have been more inclined to participate.

However, despite these limitations, this study offers a distinctive viewpoint on spirituality-related experiences of continuing bonds with the deceased through the eyes of women undergoing bereavement following their partner's suicide. It contributes significantly to the field of psychology by enhancing our comprehension of how spirituality and continuing bonds might be experienced among individuals experiencing bereavement.

Future research should consider exploring the topic among different groups of people bereaved by suicide while considering which loved one (family member or friend) died and how this relationship might be related to the aspects of the continuing bond. Research could also focus on the idea that continuing the bond might not always be a way to navigate the grieving process for some individuals (because of their religious beliefs or negative spiritual experiences) and study how this could influence the grief outcomes and what postvention or therapeutic strategies could be helpful in these cases.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, various aspects of spirituality-related continuing bonds with the deceased emerged in this study. The results suggest that the emotional connection with the departed on a spiritual level can be seen as a form of homage to the deceased's life. Spirituality can offer avenues, like rituals, to maintain this connection. The continuation of these emotional bonds often occurs within the context of the afterlife, which is intertwined with the belief system and personal experiences of the grieving individual. Sometimes, these enduring connections are felt through spiritual encounters, such as sensing the deceased's presence, experiencing dreams involving them, or engaging in conversations with the departed. Lastly, spirituality can also serve as a means to not perpetuate this bond, either by suggesting that it shouldn't continue or by offering ways to detach from the departed soul. Spirituality-related continuing bonds during suicide bereavement should

be considered in postvention strategies for the bereaved, practical helping, and in research because they can strongly influence the bereavement process and emotional well-being of the bereaved.

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