Memorial Tattoos: Inking the Bond

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Background and Research Questions

People are often rendered mute by grief. Tattoos “allow access to expression without need of words” (Warnick & Toye, 2016, p.134).

A memorial tattoo is defined as one that memorializes a person who has died.

This overarching aim of this research was to investigate the experience and meaning of memorial tattoos. Photos and the narratives of the tattoos were collected.

Study Sample

To date: 32 people; 29 interviews
3 coupled interviewed together
1 person interviewed twice
6 men, 25 women and 1 non-binary person

Deaths have included suicide, cancer, stillbirth, accident, overdose.

Relationship to the person who died: included partners, parents of young and older children, children, grandchildren, sibling and friend.

Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth interviews with open-ended questions are being audio recorded and transcribed. Data collection is ongoing. Data analysis is underway using the constant comparative method.

Results

People put a lot of thought into the symbolic connection the design will have to their loved one, including the placement on the body for the tattoo.

Places on the body that are more visible are chosen in part to encourage conversation about the person who died, both their life and death. This conversation helps to keep the memory alive.

People often touch or caress their tattoos as they tell their stories.

Husband

This husband said of his wife who died of cancer: “She’s on my shoulder, she’s right there beside me. Because to me, that’s her... I wanted it to hurt more, because it doesn’t matter how much it hurts, it’s nothing compared to what she was going through. I welcomed it, like hurt me, go ahead. When I think about the tattoo, my grief, I don’t really think of it that way. I think of it more as she’s with me... I had said to her before she died, I told her I need to know, I need to know you’re close, all the time.” This is his second memorial tattoo. The dragonfly symbolizes transformation in grief as he believes that they bring angels on their wings. The dragonfly is holding a halo; the date is of his wife’s death.

Daughter

This daughter’s mother was on life support before she died, I told her I need to know, I need to know you’re close, all the time.” This is his second memorial tattoo. The dragonfly symbolizes transformation in grief as he believes that they bring angels on their wings. The dragonfly is holding a halo; the date is of his wife’s death.

Daughter

Of her father’s death, this daughter said the tattoo “allows [me] to make this really huge, completely un-understandable thing into something a bit more tangible, which I think is important. And something that you can then carry with you, and it allows you to change this whole experience that is way bigger than anything you’ve ever experienced, into just one image.”

Mother

These two tattoos are on the mother’s shoulders. They are visible to engage conversation about her daughter Reilly. She said: “I don’t want people to forget her, so if I can have some visual way of constantly making people remember... they can look at it and always remember her as well, so that’s important to me.” The infinity symbol indicates that Reilly is always loved and will never be forgotten. The cherry blossoms bloom briefly but meaningfully: a metaphor for her daughter’s short but meaningful life.

Sister

This participant has a sister who died by suicide. She has two tattoos. The one on her shoulder features her sister’s name. The one on her hip both memorializes her sister and reminds her to “keep goin” with her own struggles with depression. Of her tattoos and her sister, she says: “I feel like she is closer to me and that I never lose her, because I have it on me. She won’t fade away, because she’s still there.”

Discussion and Implications

The act of choosing and getting a memorial tattoo can be therapeutic in that it is a connection to the person who died.

Tattoos make people feel more connected to the person who died: participants express the feeling that the deceased person is with them.

These people are no longer rendered mute: in telling the stories of their connection to the person they have memorialized, they give their grief words. The tattoos provide the picture.

By asking people to tell their stories about their tattoos, health and social care practitioners can learn important information about them and their relationships, both to others and to the person who died.

Reference