

The Death-Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF): A Conceptual Model for Understanding Symbolic Loss and Identity Reconstruction Beyond Bereavement

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Abstract - While grief research has traditionally focused on bereavement and physical death, individuals often experience profound psychological distress following non-mortal losses such as academic failure, employee layoffs, business collapse, relationship dissolution, and career derailment. These experiences frequently involve the loss of identity, future aspirations, social status, and self-worth, resulting in reactions that resemble grief processes. Existing frameworks, including the Kübler-Ross model, provide valuable insights but remain limited in explaining adaptation and identity reconstruction following symbolic losses. This paper proposes the Death-Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF), a five-stage conceptual model consisting of Identity Shock, Resistance, Meaning Crisis, Adaptation, and Rebirth. The framework integrates concepts from grief theory, transition theory, identity theory, resilience theory, and post-traumatic growth theory to explain how individuals navigate non-mortal losses and reconstruct their identities. The paper contributes a novel theoretical perspective that extends grief research beyond bereavement and provides a foundation for future empirical investigations in education, organizational studies, psychology, and human-computer interaction.

Index Terms - Symbolic Loss, Symbolic Death, Grief Beyond Bereavement, Identity Disruption, Identity Reconstruction, Meaning Reconstruction, Psychological Adaptation, Resilience, Post-Traumatic Growth.

I. INTRODUCTION

Loss is an inevitable aspect of human existence. Traditionally, scholarly discussions of loss and grief have focused primarily on bereavement, death, and terminal illness, with grief commonly conceptualized as a psychological response to physical death (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). However, growing scholarship recognizes that individuals can experience profound grief-like reactions following a wide range of non-death-related losses, including academic failure, unemployment, divorce, forced

retirement, chronic illness, financial collapse, organizational downsizing, and involuntary displacement (Neimeyer, 2001; Boss, 2006).

The psychological significance of such experiences extends beyond the external event itself. A student who fails a highly valued degree programme may lose not only academic progress but also a deeply held identity as a competent and successful individual and a perceived pathway toward a desired professional future. Similarly, an employee who is unexpectedly laid off may lose more than income; the event may disrupt professional identity, social status, purpose, belonging, routine, and anticipated future possibilities. A divorced individual may mourn not only the loss of a partner but also a shared future, relational role, and vision of family life. These examples demonstrate that significant loss may involve the disruption of valued identities, roles, aspirations, assumptions, and anticipated futures.

Building on this understanding, the present study introduces the concept of symbolic death, defined as the psychological loss of a valued identity, role, aspiration, status, relationship, or life trajectory that fundamentally alters an individual's perception of self and future possibilities. Unlike physical death, symbolic death involves the collapse of a psychologically meaningful aspect of the self or one's anticipated future. It may therefore create a rupture between an individual's former identity and emerging reality. Although existing scholarship acknowledges that loss extends beyond physical death, less attention has been devoted to explaining how the disruption of a valued identity leads to identity uncertainty and, ultimately, the reconstruction of a new sense of self. A significant consequence of symbolic death may be the emergence of an identity void. When an

established identity collapses, the roles, narratives, and assumptions that previously provided stability may no longer adequately explain who the individual is or where they are going. The individual may consequently experience uncertainty, confusion, and psychological disorientation while confronting a gap between a former identity that no longer exists and a future identity that has not yet emerged. For example, academic failure may disrupt a student's identity as a future professional, while involuntary retirement may challenge an individual's sense of worth outside a long-established occupational role. This period of uncertainty represents a critical but underexplored dimension of adaptation following symbolic loss.

Existing theories provide important but fragmented insights into this process. Meaning Reconstruction Theory proposes that significant losses challenge individuals' assumptive worlds and require the reorganization of meaning systems (Neimeyer, 2001). Schlossberg's Transition Theory emphasizes adaptation to significant life changes and altered circumstances (Schlossberg, 1981), while post-traumatic growth theory highlights the possibility of positive psychological transformation following adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that identity is dynamic and can be disrupted and reconstructed in response to major life experiences. However, they do not provide a unified explanation of the complete process through which symbolic loss may initiate identity disruption, psychological uncertainty, meaning reconstruction, and the emergence of a renewed identity.

Meaning reconstruction may serve as a critical bridge within this process. Following significant disruption, individuals may engage in reflection, sense-making, narrative reconstruction, and reassessment of values and future possibilities in an effort to restore coherence and integrate the loss into their broader life narratives (Neimeyer, 2001). Adaptation, therefore, may involve more than emotional recovery or a return to previous functioning. It may require the development of new understandings of the self, the loss, and the future. In this sense, the symbolic death of a former identity may create the conditions for the

emergence of a transformed identity—a process conceptualized in this study as identity rebirth.

Despite the relevance of this process across diverse life domains, existing grief, transition, identity, and post-traumatic growth theories remain fragmented and do not fully explain the identity-centred trajectory from symbolic loss to identity transformation. There is therefore a need for a framework that conceptualizes adaptation as a process involving the disruption of a valued identity, a period of identity uncertainty, the reconstruction of meaning, and the emergence of a renewed sense of self.

To address this theoretical gap, this paper proposes the Death-Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF) as a conceptual model for understanding symbolic loss and identity reconstruction beyond bereavement. DRAF is founded on the proposition that significant life disruptions may function as forms of symbolic death in which a valued identity, role, relationship, aspiration, anticipated future, or worldview ceases to exist in its previous form. From this perspective, individuals do not merely grieve events; they may also grieve the loss of who they were, who they believed themselves to be, and who they expected to become.

The framework conceptualizes adaptation as a transformative process involving identity shock, resistance, meaning crisis, adaptation, and rebirth. These stages describe a progression from the initial disruption of an established identity, through psychological resistance and existential uncertainty, toward the reconstruction of meaning, functional adjustment, and the emergence of a renewed identity and future orientation. DRAF therefore reframes adaptation following significant loss as more than recovery from distress; it is a potential process of identity dissolution, meaning reconstruction, and identity renewal.

Drawing on grief theory, identity theory, transition theory, meaning reconstruction theory, resilience research, and post-traumatic growth scholarship, DRAF integrates previously fragmented perspectives into a unified conceptual framework for understanding adaptation across diverse forms of symbolic loss. The framework seeks to explain how individuals may

transform significant disruption into renewed identity, meaning, and purpose following experiences such as academic failure, unemployment, organizational downsizing, divorce, forced retirement, chronic illness, financial collapse, and other major life transitions.

By expanding the scope of grief scholarship beyond bereavement and emphasizing the transformative potential of symbolic loss, and the identity-centred nature of adaptation, DRAF offers a novel perspective on human responses to significant loss. Ultimately, the framework proposes that loss may involve not only the ending of circumstances, relationships, or opportunities, but also the symbolic death of a former self. Adaptation may therefore involve a transformative journey through which individuals confront the loss of former identities, reconstruct meaning, and develop new possibilities for who they can become.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on human adaptation to significant life disruptions spans multiple disciplinary traditions, each offering distinct insights into how individuals respond to loss, change, and transformation. Over time, scholars have developed various theoretical perspectives to explain the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural processes associated with adapting to altered life circumstances. The present study draws upon five complementary theoretical perspectives to explain how individuals adapt to significant life disruptions involving the loss of valued identities, roles, aspirations, or life circumstances. While each theory offers a distinct explanation of human adaptation, together they provide a comprehensive understanding of how individuals move from disruption and loss toward recovery, reconstruction, and growth. Specifically, Grief Theory explains emotional responses to loss, Identity Theory explains disruptions to self-concept, Transition Theory describes the psychological process of navigating change, Meaning Reconstruction and Resilience Theories explain adaptation and recovery, and Post-Traumatic Growth Theory illustrates how adversity can lead to transformation and renewed identity.

A. Grief Theory: Emotional Responses to Loss

Grief is commonly defined as the emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and physiological response to the loss of a significant person, relationship, role, or valued aspect of life (Worden, 2018; Neimeyer, 2016). One of the most influential perspectives on grief was developed by Kübler-Ross (1969), who proposed the Five Stages of Grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although originally based on observations of terminally ill patients confronting their own mortality, the model became widely adopted as a framework for understanding emotional reactions to loss.

The theory's enduring contribution lies in its recognition that loss often triggers a range of emotional responses as individuals attempt to adjust to altered circumstances. The experience of grief is not necessarily restricted to bereavement following death. Contemporary scholars have expanded the understanding of grief beyond death-related bereavement, recognizing it as a response to diverse forms of loss (Corr, 2018). Malone et al. (2011), through their framework of disoriented grief, identified non-death losses – including loss of employment, home, community, and identity – as significant sources of grief and psychological disorientation. Similarly, symbolic losses such as unemployment, relationship dissolution, academic failure, chronic illness, and identity disruption have increasingly been recognized as legitimate grief experiences capable of causing profound emotional distress and disrupting identity, social status, and interpersonal relationships (Doka, 2002; Harvey & Miller, 1998; Neimeyer, 2001). Supporting this perspective, Van Eersel et al. (2022) demonstrated that involuntary job loss can evoke grief characterized by intense emotional distress, identity disruption, and difficulties adapting to a changed reality. They further argued that successful adaptation requires individuals to revise and reconstruct their beliefs about themselves, their future, and the world, highlighting identity reconstruction as a central process in responding to symbolic loss. These findings suggest that grief may arise when individuals lose important assumptions, goals, roles, relationships, or aspects of self, even in the absence of physical death. Thus, symbolic loss can generate a profound disruption in an

individual's emotional, social, and identity structures, requiring processes of adaptation, meaning reconstruction, and the reorganization of one's sense of self.

Despite its enduring influence, Grief Theory – particularly the Kübler-Ross stage model – has been subject to substantial criticism. Originally developed from observations of individuals facing terminal illness, the model was not intended as a universal framework for all forms of grief or loss. Consequently, its application to bereavement and other forms of symbolic loss has been questioned. Empirical research indicates that grief is neither a universal nor a sequential process, with emotional responses varying considerably across individuals, cultures, and contexts (Bonanno, 2009). Moreover, although contemporary scholarship has extended the application of grief beyond death-related bereavement to encompass symbolic losses such as job loss, relationship dissolution, chronic illness, and identity disruption, the traditional stage model offers limited insight into how individuals reconstruct identity, create meaning, and adapt to these non-mortal forms of loss. Nevertheless, Grief Theory remains an important foundation for understanding emotional responses to significant loss and has influenced the development of more contemporary models that emphasize adaptation, meaning reconstruction, and identity transformation.

B. Transition Theory: Navigating the In-Between

While Grief Theory explains emotional responses to loss, Transition Theory focuses on the psychological process of adapting to change. Bridges (2004) defines transition as the internal psychological process individuals experience when adjusting to a new reality, distinguishing it from change, which refers to the external event itself such as job loss, divorce, retirement, academic failure, relocation, or the death of a loved one. Bridges and Bridges (2017) argue that successful adaptation depends not only on managing change but also on navigating the psychological transition that accompanies it.

The theory proposes three stages of transition: Ending, the Neutral Zone, and the New Beginning. The Ending stage involves letting go of a previous identity, role, or way of life. During this phase, individuals often

experience uncertainty, resistance, and emotional distress because they must relinquish familiar aspects of themselves. The Neutral Zone represents an intermediate period characterized by ambiguity, confusion, and instability. Although often uncomfortable, this stage provides opportunities for reflection, experimentation, and personal development. Finally, the New Beginning involves embracing new identities, goals, and commitments that align with the individual's changed circumstances. Transition Theory is particularly relevant for understanding symbolic losses because it highlights the psychological journey between who individuals were and who they may become. However, while the theory explains the process of navigating change, it provides limited insight into how identities are reconstructed or how meaning is restored following disruption.

C. Identity Theory: The Loss and Reconstruction of Self

Identity Theory provides a framework for understanding why the loss of particular roles or life circumstances can be psychologically destabilizing. Identity refers to the meanings individuals attach to themselves within social roles, relationships, and social structures (Stryker, 1980; Burke & Stets, 2009). These identities provide continuity, purpose, and a sense of belonging. Consequently, when individuals lose a valued role, they may also experience the loss of a vital component of self-definition.

Identity disruption occurs when individuals can no longer maintain identities that were previously central to their self-concept. Examples include students who experience academic failure, employees who lose their jobs, entrepreneurs whose businesses collapse, or individuals whose relationships dissolve. Such events may challenge assumptions about competence, worth, status, and future possibilities. According to Burke and Stets (2009), psychological distress often emerges when individuals are unable to maintain consistency between their perceived identity and their lived reality. Research on role exit further suggests that leaving a significant role often requires individuals to disengage from old identities before constructing new ones (Ebaugh, 1988). Self-concept reconstruction therefore becomes a critical component of adaptation. Ibarra

(1999) argues that individuals frequently experiment with provisional selves as they explore alternative identities and future possibilities. Identity Theory thus provides important insight into the symbolic nature of loss by demonstrating that many life disruptions involve the collapse of previously meaningful self-definitions.

D. Resilience Theory and Meaning Reconstruction Theory

Resilience Theory and Meaning Reconstruction Theory provide complementary perspectives for understanding how individuals adapt to adversity and rebuild their lives following significant disruption. Resilience is commonly defined as the process of positive adaptation despite significant adversity, trauma, or stress (Masten, 2014; Southwick et al., 2014). Contemporary resilience research emphasizes that resilience is not a fixed personality trait but a dynamic process involving coping, adjustment, and recovery. Individuals demonstrate resilience by drawing upon psychological, social, and environmental resources to maintain or regain functioning following challenging experiences.

Complementing this perspective, Meaning Reconstruction Theory, developed by Neimeyer (2001, 2016, 2019), argues that adaptation following significant loss requires the reconstruction of meaning. Major disruptions can challenge an individual's fundamental assumptions about self, relationships, and the world. Consequently, individuals engage in sense-making processes to understand what has happened and to integrate the experience into their broader life narratives.

This emphasis on active adaptation and reconstruction is also reflected in contemporary scholarship on adjustment to loss. Rather than conceptualizing adaptation solely as the reduction of emotional distress, Maciejewski et al. (2022) describe it as a process of psychosocial reconstruction in which individuals move from disrupted social worlds, identities, and patterns of behaviour toward a more cohesive social life. Their perspective supports the proposition that significant loss can disrupt established identity structures and require individuals to

renegotiate and reconstruct their sense of self within a changed social reality.

Meaning reconstruction involves several interconnected processes. Sense-making refers to efforts to interpret and understand the loss, while benefit-finding involves identifying personal growth, lessons, or opportunities emerging from adversity. Narrative reconstruction enables individuals to integrate disruptive experiences into coherent life stories, whereas identity re-authoring involves revising self-concepts in response to new realities (Neimeyer, 2019). Together, these processes can facilitate adaptation by restoring coherence, purpose, and psychological continuity.

Taken together, these theories are particularly valuable because they move beyond a focus on emotional reactions to loss and emphasize the active processes through which individuals cope with adversity, reconstruct meaning, reorganize their identities, and adapt to changed circumstances. They suggest that adaptation involves not only surviving adversity or recovering previous functioning but also developing new understandings of the self and life. This theoretical perspective provides an important foundation for the present study's conceptualization of adaptation as a process involving disruption, reconstruction, and the development of a renewed sense of identity and purpose.

E. Post-Traumatic Growth Theory

Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) Theory extends the adaptation process by proposing that adversity can produce positive psychological transformation. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004) define post-traumatic growth as positive psychological change that results from the struggle to cope with highly challenging life circumstances. Unlike resilience, which focuses on maintaining or restoring functioning, PTG emphasizes growth that exceeds pre-adversity levels of functioning.

According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), traumatic or highly disruptive experiences often challenge core assumptions about life, leading individuals to engage in profound reflection and cognitive restructuring. Through this process, individuals may develop greater

self-awareness, stronger resilience, and deeper appreciation for life. The theory identifies several dimensions of growth, including personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved relationships, spiritual or existential development, and increased appreciation of life.

Of particular relevance to the present study is the notion of identity transformation. Following adversity, individuals may emerge with revised beliefs, priorities, and self-concepts that differ significantly from those they held before the disruption. Recent research continues to support the association between adversity, meaning-making, and personal growth across diverse populations and life challenges (Tedeschi et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2019). This process closely aligns with the concept of identity rebirth,

whereby individuals develop renewed identities after the symbolic death of former roles, aspirations, or self-definitions.

Although scholars have questioned whether all reported growth reflects genuine transformation (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006), PTG Theory remains valuable because it shifts attention from suffering alone to the possibility of transformation. It shows that adversity can become a turning point through which individuals develop stronger self-awareness, increased resilience, personal growth, and a renewed sense of identity.

F. Summary of Theoretical Contributions and Identified Gaps

Table 1: Summary of Theoretical Contributions and Identified Gaps based on the reviewed literature.

Theory				
Grief Theory (Freud, 1917; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Worden, 2018)	Emotional responses to loss	Explains how individuals experience and process emotional reactions such as denial, anger, sadness, and acceptance following significant loss.	Primarily focuses on emotional adjustment; originally developed in the context of bereavement and terminal illness.	Does not adequately explain how individuals reconstruct identity after the loss of a valued role, aspiration, or self-concept.
Transition Theory (Bridges, 2004; Bridges & Bridges, 2017)	Psychological adaptation to change	Explains how individuals navigate endings, periods of uncertainty, and new beginnings.	Focuses on the transition process rather than the underlying identity transformation.	Does not fully explain what is being lost, how meaning is reconstructed, or how new identities emerge.
Identity Theory (Stryker, 1980; Burke & Stets, 2009)	Self-concept and social roles	Explains how identities are formed, maintained, disrupted, and reconstructed through social roles and interactions.	Focuses primarily on identity processes and provides limited explanation of emotional adaptation and growth.	Does not comprehensively explain the emotional, cognitive, and transformational journey following identity loss.
Resilience Theory (Masten, 2014; Southwick et al., 2014)	Adaptation and recovery	Explains how individuals cope with adversity and maintain or regain functioning following disruption.	Emphasizes recovery and adaptation rather than identity transformation.	Does not explicitly address the loss and reconstruction of identity following symbolic death.

Meaning Reconstruction Theory (Neimeyer, 2001, 2019)	Meaning-making after loss	Explains sense-making, benefit-finding, narrative reconstruction, and identity re-authoring following disruption.	Focuses primarily on meaning-making processes.	Does not fully conceptualize the broader developmental journey from identity collapse to identity rebirth.
Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 2018)	Positive transformation following adversity	Explains how adversity can lead to personal growth, greater self-awareness, resilience, and new possibilities.	Emphasizes positive outcomes without fully explaining the preceding stages of identity dissolution and reconstruction.	Does not explicitly describe how symbolic loss initiates identity transformation and rebirth.

G. Theoretical Gap

Collectively, the reviewed theories explain important aspects of adaptation following loss and disruption. Grief Theory explains emotional responses to loss, Transition Theory describes the psychological process of navigating change, Identity Theory explains disruptions to self-concept and role identity, Resilience and Meaning Reconstruction Theories explain coping, adaptation, and the restoration of meaning, while Post-Traumatic Growth Theory demonstrates how adversity can result in personal growth and transformation.

Despite these contributions, no single theory provides a comprehensive explanation of how symbolic losses precipitate the death of a previously valued identity, create a period of identity void and uncertainty, and ultimately culminate in identity rebirth. Existing theories tend to focus on specific dimensions of the adaptation process rather than explaining the complete developmental journey. Grief Theory emphasizes emotional responses but provides limited insight into identity reconstruction. Transition Theory explains movement through change but does not adequately account for the transformation of self. Identity Theory explains role loss and self-concept disruption but offers less guidance regarding recovery and growth. Meaning Reconstruction and Resilience Theories explain adaptation and coping but do not explicitly conceptualize the symbolic death of identity. Similarly, Post-Traumatic Growth Theory explains positive transformation but provides limited explanation of how individuals progress from identity collapse to identity renewal.

This theoretical gap is particularly evident in situations involving symbolic loss, such as academic failure, unemployment, divorce, entrepreneurial failure, forced retirement, chronic illness, or other major life disruptions. In such contexts, individuals often experience the loss of identities, aspirations, and anticipated futures rather than the loss of life itself. While existing theories provide valuable insights into particular aspects of these experiences, they do not fully explain the integrated process through which individuals lose a previously valued identity, navigate a period of uncertainty and reconstruction, and emerge with a renewed sense of self.

To address this gap, the present study proposes the Death-Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF), which conceptualizes adaptation as a developmental process consisting of symbolic death, identity void, meaning reconstruction, and identity rebirth. By integrating insights from Grief Theory, Transition Theory, Identity Theory, Resilience Theory, Meaning Reconstruction Theory, and Post-Traumatic Growth Theory, DRAF provides a more comprehensive explanation of how individuals transform significant life disruptions into opportunities for renewed identity, meaning, and personal growth.

H. The Death–Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF)

Building upon the theoretical foundations discussed in preceding sections, this paper advances the Death–Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF) as an integrative model for understanding psychological adaptation following significant symbolic loss. The framework conceptualizes adaptation as a dynamic

process through which individuals experience the symbolic death of a valued identity, navigate psychological disruption and existential uncertainty, and ultimately reconstruct identity through rebirth.

Drawing upon insights from grief theory, identity theory, transition theory, resilience theory, and post-traumatic growth literature, the DRAF argues that psychologically significant disruptions often involve the symbolic death of a previously valued self-concept rather than physical death. In this regard, adaptation is understood not merely as emotional recovery from adverse experiences but as a process of identity disruption, meaning reconstruction, and psychological transformation. Symbolic death may emerge from experiences such as academic failure, organizational layoffs, divorce, business collapse, occupational displacement, career stagnation, or other disruptions that fundamentally alter an individual's perceived identity and anticipated future.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the DRAF proposes that adaptation unfolds through five interconnected stages: Identity Shock, Resistance, Meaning Crisis, Adaptation, and Rebirth. The process is initiated by symbolic death/loss, defined as the psychological loss of a valued identity, role, aspiration, status, or anticipated life trajectory. Although represented sequentially, the framework recognizes adaptation as dynamic and nonlinear, with individuals potentially revisiting earlier stages before progressing toward identity reconstruction and renewed purpose.

The following subsections explain each stage of the framework and its role in facilitating psychological adaptation following symbolic loss.

a. Symbolic Death: The Foundational Construct

A central theoretical contribution of the DRAF is the concept of symbolic death, defined as:

The psychological loss of a valued identity, role, aspiration, status, or life trajectory that fundamentally alters an individual's perception of self and future possibilities.

This concept extends conventional understandings of grief by recognizing that individuals may grieve not only tangible losses, such as the death of another

person, but also the collapse of psychologically meaningful identities and anticipated futures. Symbolic death occurs when a significant event disrupts a core self-definition, creating a rupture between an individual's former identity and their emerging reality.

For example, academic failure may precipitate the symbolic death of a student identity, particularly among individuals whose self-worth is strongly tied to academic success. Similarly, layoffs may disrupt professional identity; divorce may destabilize relational identity; business collapse may threaten entrepreneurial identity; while technological disruption and artificial intelligence (AI) displacement may undermine occupational identity. Although the specific circumstances differ, these experiences share a common feature: they can undermine an identity or life structure that previously provided individuals with meaning, continuity, social position, and a sense of future direction.

The consequences of such losses may extend beyond the immediate loss event itself. The disruption of an important relationship or social role can alter an individual's social world, identity, patterns of behaviour, and interactions with others, thereby creating a need to renegotiate and reformulate the self within a changed social reality (Maciejewski et al., 2022). From this perspective, symbolic death represents the disruption of a previously established identity structure, while subsequent adaptation requires the individual to navigate the resulting discontinuity between the former self and the changed reality.

The DRAF further posits that the psychological intensity of symbolic death depends largely on identity centrality, defined as the extent to which the lost identity was integrated into an individual's self-concept. Consequently, losses involving highly central identities are expected to produce greater emotional disruption and potentially more prolonged adaptation processes. The more central an identity is to an individual's sense of self, the more disruptive its loss is likely to be, because the individual must reconstruct not only what they do but also who they understand

themselves to be and what they believe remains possible for their future.

b. Stage One: Identity Shock

The first stage of the DRAF is Identity Shock, characterized by immediate psychological disruption following a significant symbolic loss. During this stage, individuals may experience disbelief, emotional numbness, confusion, disorientation, and difficulty reconciling the changed reality with their prior expectations and self-understanding.

Identity shock emerges when symbolic loss destabilizes previously held assumptions about competence, stability, achievement, belonging, or future direction. The loss creates a discrepancy between an individual's former self-definition and present reality, thereby producing psychological disequilibrium. In this sense, the individual is confronted with a reality that no longer aligns with the identity through which they previously understood themselves.

For example, students who experience academic failure may struggle to reconcile deficient performance with previously held beliefs about their intelligence or academic competence. Similarly, individuals facing sudden layoffs may experience confusion and distress when attempting to understand their personal value and identity outside their professional roles. In both cases, the immediate psychological disruption arises from the sudden conflict between the individual's established self-concept and the changed reality produced by the loss.

Possible indicators of Identity Shock include:

- Emotional numbness
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Cognitive disorientation
- Difficulty accepting the changed reality
- Identity instability

c. Stage Two: Resistance

Following identity shock, individuals may enter a phase of Resistance, characterized by emotional and cognitive opposition to the reality and implications of the loss. Drawing on established grief literature, this

stage may involve reactions such as denial, anger, frustration, blame, bargaining, avoidance, and emotional withdrawal.

However, unlike traditional stage-based grief models that may interpret these reactions primarily as emotional responses to loss, the DRAF conceptualizes Resistance as an attempt to defend and preserve threatened identity structures. When a symbolic loss challenges an individual's established self-concept, the individual may struggle to relinquish previous self-definitions and may seek explanations, alternatives, or external causes that protect the threatened identity from perceived failure, rejection, or invalidation. Resistance therefore represents not simply an unwillingness to accept the loss, but an attempt to preserve psychological continuity between the individual's former identity and the reality they are struggling to accept.

For instance, students experiencing academic failure may externalize blame toward institutional systems, instructors, or external conditions in an effort to protect their self-esteem and preserve their identity as capable or intelligent individuals. Similarly, workers affected by layoffs may reject organizational decisions, attribute the loss to external factors, or resist the psychological shift away from a professional role that has been central to their identity.

Within the DRAF, Resistance is therefore understood as a transitional process between the initial disruption of Identity Shock and the deeper existential questioning associated with the subsequent Meaning Crisis. As attempts to preserve the former identity become increasingly difficult to sustain, individuals may be compelled to confront questions concerning who they are, what their loss means, and what future remains possible.

Potential indicators of Resistance include:

- Denial or minimization of the loss
- Anger and frustration
- Defensive rationalization
- Blame attribution
- Attempts to externalize responsibility
- Emotional withdrawal

- Rejection of alternative identities or future possibilities

d. Stage Three: Meaning Crisis as the Central Mechanism

The Meaning Crisis constitutes a central theoretical innovation of the DRAF and represents one of the framework's most significant departures from traditional grief models. Whereas many conventional grief frameworks emphasize emotional progression toward acceptance, the DRAF proposes that adaptation following symbolic death also depends fundamentally on the individual's ability to reconstruct meaning, identity, and future possibilities within a changed reality.

Meaning crisis refers to a period of profound existential questioning in which individuals confront uncertainty regarding who they are, what their lives mean, and what possibilities remain available to them. Following symbolic death, previously stable assumptions about identity, purpose, and the future may become destabilized, creating a rupture in the individual's sense of continuity and potentially producing an identity void.

Individuals experiencing a meaning crisis may confront questions such as:

- Who am I now?
- What is my purpose?
- Was my effort wasted?
- What future is available to me?

The specific form of these questions may vary according to the nature of the symbolic loss. For example, academic failure may lead a student to question, "If I failed, am I still intelligent?" Similarly, a worker who has been laid off may experience profound identity uncertainty and ask, "Who am I without my profession?" These questions illustrate how symbolic loss can challenge not only emotional well-being but also the fundamental beliefs through which individuals understand themselves and their futures.

The Meaning Crisis therefore provides a direct theoretical bridge between grief theory and identity theory. It emphasizes that adaptation following

significant loss involves more than emotional recovery; it also requires the reconstruction of meaning systems, self-definition, and future orientation. The DRAF consequently proposes that adaptation cannot be adequately explained by emotional acceptance alone but must also account for how individuals navigate existential uncertainty and reconstruct a coherent sense of self and possibility following symbolic death.

Potential indicators of a meaning crisis include:

- Existential questioning
- Identity uncertainty
- Loss of direction
- Future ambiguity
- Disruption of previously held beliefs
- Psychological distress related to purpose and meaning

e. Stage Four: Adaptation

The adaptation stage involves the gradual development of coping strategies and behavioural responses aimed at psychological stabilization and future adjustment. At this stage, individuals begin to process the loss more constructively, reassess priorities, explore alternatives, and take deliberate steps toward adapting to their changed circumstances. Adaptation following significant loss may therefore involve more than emotional adjustment. It can also require the reconstruction of meaning, identity, social roles, and purpose. Social relationships may provide important opportunities through which individuals re-establish aspects of their identity and develop new meanings within their altered circumstances (Maciejewski et al., 2022). Accordingly, adaptation may involve emotional regulation, utilization of social support, cognitive reframing, skill acquisition, strategic planning, or career and educational redirection.

Importantly, adaptation does not necessarily imply a restoration of the individual's prior identity or return to pre-loss circumstances. Rather, it represents movement toward functional adjustment within a changed reality. In this sense, adaptation may involve the development of new coping strategies, goals, skills, roles, or perspectives that enable the individual

to function and pursue future possibilities despite the loss.

Examples include students developing academic improvement strategies following failure, individuals retraining after employment loss, entrepreneurs restructuring their activities following business collapse, or individuals developing new patterns of emotional and social functioning following relational disruption.

Possible indicators of adaptation include:

- Coping behaviours
- Goal reassessment
- Skill acquisition
- Utilization of social support
- Cognitive reframing
- Strategic planning
- Psychological adjustment

f. Stage Five: Rebirth

A second major theoretical contribution of the DRAF is the concept of Rebirth, defined as:

The process through which individuals reconstruct their identity, meaning systems, and future orientation following symbolic loss.

While the Adaptation stage focuses primarily on the development of coping strategies and functional adjustment to a changed reality, Rebirth represents a deeper process of transformation. It marks the emergence of a renewed sense of self, meaning, and future possibility following the disruption of a previous identity structure.

The DRAF distinguishes Rebirth from recovery in important ways. Recovery generally implies a return toward a previous state of functioning or identity, whereas Rebirth reflects transformation into a new version of oneself. Individuals undergoing Rebirth do not simply regain what was lost; rather, they construct alternative identities, meanings, goals, and future orientations that incorporate lessons, resilience, and altered perspectives resulting from the experience of symbolic loss.

For example, a student who experiences repeated academic setbacks may ultimately redefine success

and pursue a different career trajectory aligned with newly recognized strengths and interests. Similarly, a laid-off worker may pursue entrepreneurship, acquire new professional competencies, or transition into a different field, thereby developing a reconstructed occupational identity. In both cases, adaptation extends beyond the restoration of previous functioning and involves the development of new possibilities for identity and purpose.

Rebirth therefore shares important conceptual similarities with the literature on post-traumatic growth, particularly in its emphasis on positive psychological transformation following significant adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). However, the DRAF conceptualizes Rebirth more broadly as the reconstruction of identity, meaning, and future orientation following symbolic loss, whether or not the experience results in conventional post-traumatic growth. Rebirth is consequently not an automatic outcome of loss but a potential developmental process that may emerge through successful meaning reconstruction and identity reorganization.

Potential indicators of Rebirth include:

- Renewed sense of purpose
- Identity reconstruction
- Development of new goals or aspirations
- Positive future orientation
- Perceived personal growth
- Increased psychological resilience
- Acceptance of a transformed self-concept

g. Moderating Factors in the DRAF

The DRAF recognizes that adaptation trajectories vary considerably across individuals. Accordingly, several moderating variables are proposed to influence movement through the framework.

Social support may facilitate progression from meaning crisis to adaptation by providing emotional reassurance and practical assistance. Psychological resilience may enhance coping effectiveness and improve the likelihood of successful rebirth outcomes. Coping styles, personality traits, organizational support systems, and spirituality or religious beliefs may further shape adaptation pathways.

These moderators explain why individuals experiencing similar symbolic losses often demonstrate markedly different psychological outcomes.

h. Conceptual Propositions of the DRAF

To facilitate future empirical testing, the DRAF advances the following theoretical propositions:

Proposition 1: The magnitude of symbolic loss positively predicts the intensity of identity shock.

Proposition 2: Perceived identity centrality positively predicts resistance behaviours following symbolic death.

Proposition 3: Meaning crisis mediates the relationship between symbolic loss and psychological adaptation.

Proposition 4: Social support positively moderates movement from meaning crisis to adaptation.

Proposition 5: Psychological resilience positively predicts successful rebirth outcomes.

Proposition 6: Individuals who achieve rebirth demonstrate greater post-traumatic growth than individuals who remain in adaptation.

These propositions provide a basis for future hypothesis development and empirical validation of the framework.

i. Measurement Dimensions for Future Empirical Research

To facilitate operationalization, the DRAF proposes measurable dimensions corresponding to each adaptation stage. These dimensions may later be translated into psychometric instruments for survey-based validation and quantitative testing.

Table 2: Measurement Dimensions corresponding to each stage of DRAF.

S/N	Stage	Possible Indicators
1	Identity Shock	disbelief, confusion, emotional numbness
2	Resistance	denial, blame, anger
3	Meaning Crisis	existential questioning, uncertainty, identity instability
4	Adaptation	planning, coping, skill acquisition
5	Rebirth	renewed purpose, identity reconstruction

j. Conceptual Representation of the DRAF

The DRAF conceptualizes adaptation as a sequential yet dynamic process beginning with symbolic loss, progressing through identity shock, resistance, meaning crisis, adaptation, and culminating in rebirth. The DRAF acknowledges that adaptation is often nonlinear, with individuals potentially revisiting earlier stages before achieving meaningful identity reconstruction.

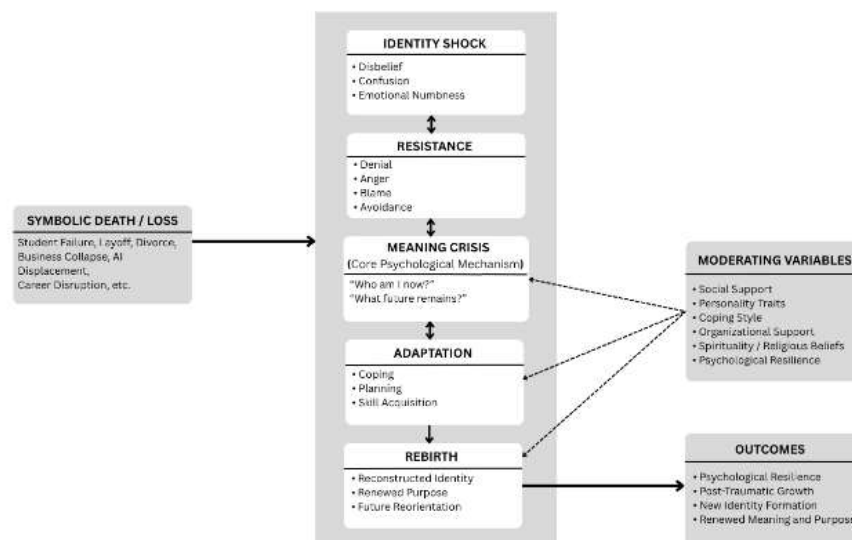


Figure 1: Conceptual Representation of the Death–Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF)

III. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DEATH–REBIRTH ADAPTATION FRAMEWORK (DRAF)

The Death–Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF) contributes to existing literature by extending contemporary understandings of grief, adaptation, identity disruption, and post-adversity transformation. Although several theoretical traditions have explored responses to loss and disruption, existing models remain fragmented in their treatment of symbolic loss, identity destabilization, meaning reconstruction, and transformation. The DRAF advances scholarship by integrating these domains into a unified explanatory model while introducing novel theoretical constructs that extend current conceptual boundaries.

A. Extending Grief Theory Beyond Physical Death

The first major contribution of the DRAF lies in its expansion of grief theory beyond bereavement and mortality-centred interpretations of loss. Traditional grief theories, particularly those informed by stage-based perspectives, have historically focused on emotional responses to physical death and interpersonal loss. Although contemporary scholarship recognizes non-death losses, existing models generally lack a systematic explanation of how identity-related disruptions generate grief-like psychological responses.

The DRAF extends grief theory by arguing that psychologically significant disruptions frequently involve the symbolic death of identity, aspirations, status, or anticipated life trajectories. This shift broadens the applicability of grief theory to contexts such as student failure, layoffs, divorce, career disruption, organizational restructuring, entrepreneurial collapse, and technological displacement.

By introducing symbolic death as a foundational construct, the framework establishes a theoretical basis for understanding why individuals often experience grief responses in the absence of physical bereavement. Consequently, the DRAF repositions grief as a broader psychological reaction to identity-threatening disruptions rather than merely responses to death-related loss.

B. Introducing Symbolic Death as a Distinct Theoretical Construct

A second contribution of the DRAF is the formal conceptualization of symbolic death, defined as the psychological loss of a valued identity, role, aspiration, status, or life trajectory that fundamentally alters an individual's perception of self and future possibilities.

While identity disruption has been discussed across multiple disciplines, existing theories frequently treat identity loss as a secondary consequence of adverse events rather than a primary explanatory mechanism. The DRAF elevates symbolic death to the status of a core theoretical construct and positions it as the initiating force within the adaptation process.

This contribution is particularly important because it explains why similar adverse events produce different psychological outcomes across individuals. The framework argues that the severity of psychological disruption depends on the centrality of the lost identity, thereby offering a nuanced explanation for individual differences in adaptation.

The introduction of symbolic death therefore provides a unifying construct capable of explaining diverse forms of psychological disruption under a common theoretical mechanism.

C. Reframing Adaptation Through Meaning Crisis

Perhaps the most important contribution of the DRAF is the introduction of Meaning Crisis as the central psychological mechanism linking symbolic loss to adaptation.

Existing grief models, including stage-based approaches, often emphasize emotional progression toward acceptance. However, these approaches provide limited explanation regarding how individuals reconstruct identity and meaning after major disruptions. Similarly, identity theories explain identity destabilization but often underemphasize the existential uncertainty that follows identity collapse. The DRAF bridges this gap by positioning meaning crisis as the core transition point in adaptation. Rather than viewing adjustment as merely emotional recovery, the framework conceptualizes adaptation as

a struggle to reconstruct meaning systems following symbolic death.

Meaning crisis captures existential questioning related to identity, purpose, competence, and future possibilities. It explains why individuals confronting symbolic loss often ask questions such as Who am I now?, What purpose remains?, and What future is available to me?

This contribution integrates grief theory with identity theory and meaning-making scholarship, thereby offering a deeper explanation of post-loss psychological adaptation.

D. Reconceptualizing Recovery as Rebirth

Another important theoretical contribution concerns the distinction between recovery and rebirth. Most adaptation frameworks implicitly assume that successful adjustment involves returning to a prior psychological state. However, this assumption inadequately reflects the reality of many life disruptions in which restoration of a previous identity is impossible or undesirable.

The DRAF therefore introduces rebirth as a transformative process through which individuals reconstruct identity, meaning systems, and future orientation following symbolic loss.

Unlike recovery, rebirth does not imply restoration. Instead, it reflects identity transformation and emergence into a psychologically reconstructed self. This conceptual distinction aligns the DRAF with post-traumatic growth literature while offering a more dynamic understanding of long-term adaptation.

This contribution is particularly relevant in contexts where individuals permanently lose valued roles or aspirations, such as educational failure, occupational displacement by artificial intelligence, forced career transitions, or organizational restructuring.

E. Integrating Fragmented Theoretical Traditions

A further contribution of the DRAF lies in its integrative nature. Existing theories often explain isolated dimensions of post-loss experiences:

- Grief theory explains emotional responses to loss.

- Identity theory explains self-concept disruption.
- Transition theory explains adjustment during change.
- Resilience theory explains coping capacity.
- Post-traumatic growth theory explains positive transformation.

However, these theories are rarely integrated into a single coherent explanatory framework.

The DRAF synthesizes these fragmented perspectives into a unified process model that explains how symbolic loss initiates emotional disruption, identity destabilization, existential questioning, adaptation, and eventual identity reconstruction.

This integration strengthens theoretical coherence and provides a broader explanatory lens for understanding adaptation across diverse domains.

F. Advancing a Testable Conceptual Framework

Unlike purely descriptive theoretical models, the DRAF advances a testable conceptual structure capable of empirical validation.

The framework proposes measurable dimensions across all adaptation stages, including identity shock, resistance, meaning crisis, adaptation, and rebirth. Additionally, it advances formal propositions concerning relationships among symbolic loss, identity centrality, resilience, social support, and adaptation outcomes.

As a result, the DRAF establishes a foundation for future quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research.

Researchers may operationalize the framework through psychometric scales, longitudinal studies, interviews, structural equation modelling, or comparative adaptation studies across multiple forms of symbolic loss.

G. Contribution to Cross-Disciplinary Research

Finally, the DRAF contributes a flexible conceptual model applicable across multiple disciplines. Because symbolic loss occurs in diverse life contexts, the framework has potential applications in:

- Education (student failure and academic setbacks)
- Organizational studies (layoffs and occupational displacement)
- Human Computer Interaction (HCI)
- Entrepreneurship (business collapse and failure)
- Mental health and counselling
- Career transition research
- Technology and workforce displacement
- Sociology of identity transformation

This interdisciplinary relevance enhances the framework's theoretical utility and increases its potential contribution to both scholarly research and practical intervention design.

IV. GET PEER REVIEWED

Prior to submission, the manuscript was subjected to independent expert review by doctoral-level scholars from interdisciplinary backgrounds. Their independent reviews provided interdisciplinary perspectives on the clarity, coherence, structure, and broader applicability of the proposed Death-Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF), and the manuscript was revised based on the feedback received.

V. CONCLUSION

Experiences of loss extend far beyond bereavement and physical death, yet existing theoretical frameworks often provide fragmented explanations of how individuals psychologically adapt to disruptions that fundamentally alter identity, purpose, and future orientation. This paper addressed this limitation by proposing the Death-Rebirth Adaptation Framework (DRAF) as an integrative theoretical model for understanding adaptation following symbolic loss. Drawing insights from grief theory, identity theory, transition theory, resilience theory, and post-traumatic growth literature, the framework advances a broader conceptualization of adaptation that recognizes the profound psychological consequences of identity-threatening life disruptions.

Central to the DRAF is the proposition that many significant adverse experiences involve the symbolic death of a previously valued self-concept rather than physical death. Academic failure, layoffs, divorce,

entrepreneurial collapse, occupational displacement, and similar disruptions may destabilize deeply valued identities, thereby creating emotional, cognitive, and existential disturbances. By conceptualizing such experiences as forms of symbolic death, the framework broadens traditional understandings of grief and positions identity disruption as a central mechanism of psychological adaptation.

The DRAF further contributes to theory by conceptualizing adaptation as a dynamic process consisting of Identity Shock, Resistance, Meaning Crisis, Adaptation, and Rebirth. Among these stages, Meaning Crisis is positioned as the framework's core psychological mechanism, emphasizing that successful adaptation depends not only on emotional adjustment but also on an individual's ability to reconstruct meaning, purpose, and self-definition following symbolic disruption. In doing so, the framework bridges grief scholarship with identity and meaning-making perspectives, providing a more comprehensive account of post-loss adaptation.

Importantly, the DRAF distinguishes rebirth from conventional notions of recovery. Rather than returning individuals to a prior state, rebirth reflects identity reconstruction and psychological transformation through the development of renewed purpose, altered self-concepts, and future reorientation. This distinction provides a more realistic explanation of adaptation in contexts where restoration of previous identities may be impossible or undesirable.

Beyond its conceptual contributions, the framework provides a foundation for future empirical inquiry through measurable dimensions, theoretical propositions, and identifiable moderating variables. Its interdisciplinary applicability also positions the DRAF as a potentially useful lens for understanding adaptation across education, organizational studies, mental health, career transitions, entrepreneurship, and technological displacement.

In conclusion, the Death-Rebirth Adaptation Framework advances a novel perspective on psychological adaptation by extending grief beyond mortality, introducing symbolic death as a

foundational construct, and emphasizing meaning reconstruction as the pathway toward identity rebirth. By integrating previously fragmented theoretical traditions, the DRAF offers a comprehensive foundation for future research into how individuals navigate profound symbolic disruptions and emerge with reconstructed identities and renewed meaning.

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