

# Death, Grief, & Bereavement

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# Older persons are no strangers to death and bereavement

Older people

- Experience more deaths of persons close to them.
- Go to more funerals.
- Talk and think more about death.
- Probably have more brushes with death.

# Lifelong Interactions

- Family ties continue over the lifetime and may persist beyond death.
- Bereavement can have a considerable impact
  - on individuals
  - on families
  - within and across generations

# Impact of death on the family

- Emotional shock waves can affect:
  - individuals
  - each generation
  - the whole family system

# The death of a family member represents

- Loss of a family's link with the past.
- Loss of future interactions.
- A sense of presence, that even after death may persist and remain meaningful for survivors.

# Impact

- A determining factor for a family's response to a death is the age of the person who has died.
  - "How old was your relative?" is an often asked question.
  - The older the family member, less of an impact it is perceived to have.

# Anticipation

- The person's decreased physical and mental functioning can trigger bereavement for incremental losses well before the death.
- This is often referred to as "partial grief."

# We often anticipate

- Even in the absence of chronic illness, the person's family may begin
  - Spending more time with the dying person.
  - Discussing funeral plans.
  - Discussing feelings.
  - Helping relatives plan for the future life without the dying family member.

## **...but we don't talk about it**

- Family members don't openly discuss the "final career" of dying with each other.
- This may have more of an impact on the ability to grieve in a healthy manner.

# **We think about it, we just don't talk about it**

One survey revealed:

- 30% of the next-of-kin knew but talk about it.
- 41% say they don't talk about it at all.
- Of those that did talk, 75% said always dying person who brought it up.
- 86% think about these things a lot.

# Disfranchisement

- “Pecking order”
- Less socially disruptive
- Fewer funeral rituals
- US society frowns on expressions of grief and bereavement
- Encourage denial and self-control
- If the lives and deaths of older adults have reduced social value, then even the grief of the survivors is devalued.

# Bereaved family members

- Experience fewer physical symptoms.
- Experience lower levels of bereavement.
- are the least depressed.
- are least preoccupied with the deceased.
- experience the lowest proportion of somatic complaints

Though, of course, the death is not insignificant.

# Normative life course transition

- As people enter middle-age
  - 25% have experienced this kind of death
- As people leave middle-age
  - 75% have experienced this kind of death
- Middle-age is about a 15-year span from the late 40s to the mid 60s.

# Impact of parent death on middle-aged children

- Typical emotional responses include
  - Being upset.
  - Crying.
  - Having painful memories.
  - Experiencing loneliness.
  - Being preoccupied with thoughts of the parent.

# Impact

- Depression as a primary outcome measure
  - Though depression is not to be confused with grief.
- Change in sense of “self”
  - Women (daughters)
  - Loss of natural buffer

# Impact on Family

- No real major shift in family relationships
- Adult child's marital relationship does take a hit
  - Up to 30 months after
  - Especially true if the deceased person had a central family role
    - Head of clan, kinkeeper, etc.

# Background characteristics associated with the impact

- Poorer adaptation happens for
  - Younger adults
  - Unmarried adults
  - Those experiencing the death of a mother
  - Those experiencing the death of the first parent
  - Those with higher incomes & education
  - Daughters initially by the death of their fathers

# Quality of parent-child relationship

- Conflicting evidence
  - Some suggest that closer relationships produce greater levels of depression and poorer adaptation when the parent dies.
  - Others suggest a close parent-child relationship is associated with resolution of the death and acceptance of the loss.

# Context of the death

- Heavy caregiving
- Nursing home
- Distant
- Light caregiving
  - significantly more grief
  - less acceptance
  - more thoughts of future reunion than those with parents in nursing homes

# “Selfish Grief”

- The adult child controls their expression of deep sadness because it would be selfish to wish their parent to continue to live and suffer .

# For Caregivers

- Perceived caregiving as more difficult than losing the person – they believed the strain of bereavement was greater.
- Well-being improves in the year following the death for caregivers, though.