

EXPLORING COPING STRATEGIES USED BY PARENTS TO COPE WITH THE DEATH OF THEIR CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This study is aimed at exploring and understanding coping mechanisms of parents who have lost a child. Losing a child is one of the worst and most painful events that an individual may experience (Rando, 1986). It is a life changing event that impacts parents throughout their entire lives. The presented study was conducted in Albania. Twenty-two parents were interviewed for the purposes of this study, fifteen of them females and seven males. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings of the study. Interviews were first transcribed and then coded. After this process, codes were organized into themes and further explored by the researcher. Several themes were identified that describe coping mechanisms in parents after the loss of the child including *coping through religion, working as a coping mechanism, relationship with children and nephews*. Many of the parents used religion to deal with the death of their child. Believing in God was helpful for some of the interviewed parents because it facilitated the acceptance of the death of their child, gave them hope of joining their children in the afterlife, and helped them during the process of giving meaning to the loss. The relationships with the surviving children or nephews/ nieces helped parents cope because they feel the responsibility to care for them and as a result parents involved themselves in acts of care and kindness toward their children. Another coping strategy used by parents in coping with the pain of grief was through focusing on their work. The study supports the theory of the dual process model that describes grief as an oscillatory process where bereaved individuals move from focusing on the elements of loss to the restoration process (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

Keywords: Coping mechanisms, grief, bereaved parents.

INTRODUCTION

The death of a child is one of the most devastating events that an individual may experience throughout life (Rando, 1986). Different theories have emerged in order to build a frame and understand how parents cope with the death of their children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most important theories is the dual process theory (Stroebe & Schut 2010). The dual process model tries to understand coping processes and how these processes help in the adaptation or non adaptation of the bereaved person. This theory goes against the psychodynamic theories and other theories focused entirely on the loss processes. According to Stroebe and Schut, grief is a more complex process that oscillates from coping with the loss to dealing with the restoration processes (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The loss processes are mostly related to processing the pain of grief and it is reflected in dwelling on the pain and the remembrance of the death of the loved ones, searching and yearning for the bereaved person, ruminating about the process of death, thinking and crying about the bereaved person etc (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

On the other hand, restoration oriented processes are related to the adjustment processes without the deceased (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Restoration oriented processes means experiencing and dealing with stressors of everyday life like work or other responsibilities as well as death.

Dual process model differs fundamentally from what are called “grief work theories” by Stroebe and Schut. These theories originated from psychoanalysis and usually refers to the process of confronting grief and being immersed in the painful feelings that grief causes until the bereaved person becomes detached. This theoretical framework implies that avoidance is a pathologic reaction to bereavement. Unlike grief work, hypotheses that consider avoidance as an unhealthy reaction to bereavement in the light of the dual process model, avoidance is just a tool to deal with the pain of grief. Confronting and avoiding seems to be a crucial part of the dynamic process of grief (Stroebe and Schut, 2010). In the original research of Stroebe and Schut (2010), they discuss ‘a dosage’ of grief that would be suitable in order for this process to be adaptive. Unlike other theories, avoidance is not perceived as something that indicates complicated bereavement if it is not too excessive. On the contrary, avoidance of grief reflects a natural tendency of the people to deal with the pain that grief causes.

Also, the dual process model suggests that when it comes to parental bereavement the research should focus not only on the personal aspects of grief but also on the interpersonal elements which are equally important (Stroebe, Finkenauer, Schut, 2013).

Different authors have been focused on understanding coping mechanisms that parents may use to cope with the death of their child. Still, there is little research on what experience for parents may be helpful and what is not helpful (Stevenson et al, 2016).

When we speak about coping and grief we should have in mind many specific issues related to this including: number of survived children, time after the death of the child, perceived responsibility of the parent in the child’s death, social context and social support, employment status, etc.

New theories suggest that coping with grief is an oscillatory process (Stroebe & Schut, 2010) and is influenced by meaning making processes (Neimeyer, 2006).

When it comes to grief as an oscillatory process, parents often move from processing intense emotions to returning to their usual life routines (Stevenson, Achile, Liben, 2016).

On the other hand, when we speak of grief as an oscillatory process, we are not talking only about the intensity of grief, which changes in different parts of the process, but also about the need that parents have to distract themselves from grief, to turn back to their normal life for a short period of time, and to focus on the everyday stressors of life.

Religious coping mechanisms are one of the ways that parents deal with grief. These transpire through praying, sending supplications, and religious attendance (Hussin, Guardia – Olmos, Aho, 2018). On the other hand, religion has different functions, including faith and religion as a meaning making process, religion as a supporting mechanism for preventing psychological dysfunctions and emotional distress related to grief, a source for inner strength and religion as a way to continue the bonds with the deceased child (Hussin, Guardia – Olmos, Aho, 2018; Kokou-Kpolou, Tremblay, Moukouta). However, there are a lot of discussions on whether religion always plays a positive role in coping with grief.

Losing an only child is particularly difficult and this is specifically relevant in cultural contexts where being childless is considered to be culturally unacceptable (Chen, Song, You, 2019; Zhou et. al, 2018). Finding meaning in bereavement is difficult for many parents who lose their only child (Chen, Song, Yiu, 2019).

Other themes emerging from research related to coping are fate and destiny, participation in social activities and developing new friendships, grand parenting etc (Chen, Song, Yiu, 2019). Parents also may tend to avoid loss and grief as a way to avoid the intense emotional pain, and when avoidance is excessive, it prevents their progress on dealing with grief.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in the period between June 2020 – December 2020. Twenty-two parents participated in this study, fifteen of the interviewed were females and seven were males. The parents interviewed have lost their children starting from 2 to 15 years ago. A convenient sample was used for participants to take part in the study.

Twenty-two in depth interviews were conducted. Deaths occurred due to different causes such as car accidents, terminal illnesses, heart attacks etc. Among the accidental deaths, two of them came as a result of drowning (one of the bodies was never found) and two of the deceased died in car accidents. The others died due to illnesses related to cancer or other illnesses and complications of poliomyelitis.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings coming from the interviews. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher. This process helped the researcher to initiate the interpretation process from the moment when interviews were transcribed. During the second phase of data processing, all interviews were coded by the researcher. Codes were grouped into categories and then combined into themes and sub-themes. Thematic analysis implies that the researcher can go back and forth between data and themes and this process allows the researcher to remove certain themes or to re-categorize them into sub-themes.

RESULTS

After analyzing and re-organizing these themes, three main themes and several sub-themes emerged in the study.

1. Coping through religion

Many of the interviewed parents turned to religion to find peace and strength. Sometimes, religion was the only way to deal with the pain of the grief.

1.1 Maintaining mental integrity and accepting death as a fatality

In some cases, believing in God was a protective factor that helped parents cope with severe distress that came as a result of the death of the child.

‘Believing in God helped me a lot. Everything I did, I did it with the help of God. He gives us the pain but also gives us the strength to endure the pain’.

Many of the interviewed parents attempted or thought seriously of committing suicide. Religion was often something that compelled them to not commit suicide.

Believing in God not only seems to help some of the parents deal with extreme distress experienced after the tragedy but also facilitate the process of accepting the death of their child.

Referring to the death of her daughter one of the parents says:

‘God gave me her (referring to her deceased daughter), He raised her, He made her 34 years old, He sent the disease that took her from me’.

In this case, death is experienced as a predestination, as a fatalism, as something ‘written above’. Something that you cannot do anything to change it, other than accepting it as part of the unavoidable fate.

1.2 Religion and the hope for the afterlife

Some of the parents believe that they will rejoin their deceased children in the afterlife. This offers them hope and death is perceived only as a temporary phenomenon.

One of the parents says:

“I have this hope that I will join him (referring to the deceased son) in the other life. Me and my wife have made ready the grave for us... I hope that the words that Christ says - that there is life in the other world – are true and I will join my son in the afterlife”.

Another parent says:

“I am a Muslim believer... It depends on where we will be in the afterlife. Only God knows if we are going to meet each other or not... However in one part of Quran it says that children that die before their parents can mediate in ensuring that parents go to heaven...”

The idea of the afterlife keeps parents

Sometime the belief in the afterlife is the only thing that keep the parent alive:

“I was thinking of committing suicide, but religious people say that you cannot meet your loved ones in the afterlife if you commit suicide.”

1.3 Making meaning of the death through religion.

Different interviews suggest that believing in God is also a way to find meaning. Faced with the absurdity of the death of their child, they turn to God as a way to reconstruct the meaning. Often this meaning comes by surrendering to the helpless feelings and viewing believing in God as the only way to give meaning to the event. In this regard, one of the parents says:

“I read many books and I read the Quran. Many things that are hidden for us, are not such for God... Thus the man cannot understand this, even what hurts me, that makes me cry and suffer (referring to the death of her child), I believe that God decided to put it there in my benefit and in my child benefit”.

In these cases, believing God has the right answers is the only way that this parent can make sense of the loss. Being confronted with the challenges related to meaning making are unavoidable when we have to deal with the death of a child.

2. Children and other people.

Another theme that emerges in the interviews is the relationship with children, nephews or other important people. These relationships seem to be of great help to parents coping with their grief. Many of the parents have this coping belief that ‘My child is dead but at least my other children are doing well’. Likewise, sometimes having another child to take care of is the only reason why parents push themselves to continue living.

2.1 Parental responsibility

One of the important sub themes that emerged from the interviews of the parents is the responsibility that they have to take care of their surviving children. One of the parents says:

“My son kept me alive... He used to see me and asked me ‘Daddy are you still crying’?... Because of him, I had to find the strength to continue”.

Another parent says:

“I was tired and unmotivated, I didn’t want to do anything. Everything I did, I did it because of my daughters. I didn’t feel any satisfaction in the things that I was doing, I had no plans or intentions for my life... Only the compassion and for my daughters kept me going and trying”

In the case of this parent, there are two present feelings that contradict each other. On the one hand there is a deep desolation related to the death of his child and on the other is the need to protect his daughters from his desperation and the grief. These contradicting feelings are present in many of the parents who are grieving: on the one hand there is this need to dive into the pain and desperation of the loss but on the other hand parents have also to care, soothe and comfort their survived children, and this is something that motivate them in continuing doing the things that were doing before their child's death.

Other times, having to care for the other children is the only reason that keeps parents alive
“The first six months were very difficult, I wanted to die, I was depressed, I didn’t want life at all... Even now I don’t want my life, I live only for my other children, to help them grow up...

2.2 Enjoying relationships with children and nephews or nieces

Not only is having children related to parental responsibility, but also enjoying relationships with their children, nephews and nieces, which are all important factors that help in dealing with grief.

One of the interviewers says:

“I feel the nephews in my heart, my niece is six years old, she gets me by her hand and says to me ‘come because we are going there (make a sign with her hand)... Other times she turns on the TV and starts dancing... I distract myself with my little nephews and nieces... They help me a lot, if I would not have them, I would go crazy...

This bereaved parent shows how children and nephews can bring some satisfaction in the life of the parent and how in certain moments can serve as temporary distractions from the pain that grief brings.

Another parent says

“My son helped me a lot and my daughter too. They gave me moments of joy and happiness.”
This bereaved parent was suffering from severe depression and seriously considering suicide and the only reason that was keeping here alive where here children.

3. Work as a distraction from grief

A coping strategy that parents find very useful is focusing on the work.

In some cases working serves as a distraction from the pain of grief. When asking parents what helped them cope with the pain of grief, one of them says:

“ Starting working helped me a lot to be sincere. When I was working I got distracted for the moment from the pain and got focused on the things that I was doing”.

Another parent says:

“I did not interrupt my work at any moment... I continued working starting the next day after I buried my child. It helped me keep distracted. When I was working, I was not thinking of anything else”.

By getting engaged in their jobs, bereaved parents distract themselves from the pain of grief. They find a delicate equilibrium between focusing on the loss and continuing their life as it was before the tragedy. It gives them some space from the painful memories and thoughts related to the death of their child as well as keep their mind busy.

In two cases of complicated bereavement, working was one of the strategies and coping methods that helped parents see some light at the end of the tunnel. One of them says:

“Starting work again in September helped me a lot... I love my work as a teacher, I get along very well with my students but I am also very strict... The work pulled me out of my house and kept me motivated. I recommend everybody starting working again after a similar tragedy”.

In this case, this parent starting work again is something that motivated her to focus on other important things in life rather than the loss.

The same happened in a case of another parent who was facing a difficult mourning process. Compared to her initial reaction, she mentioned that working was something that helped her deal with the pain of grief.

“Two years after Tea’s (fictional name) death, I started working. Now, I am even more involved in my work. It’s not that I don’t think about Tea, I think about her every single day and I miss her terribly, but the mere fact that I am busy most of the time, helps the day go by faster.”

DISCUSSION

This study explored how parents cope with grief after the death of their child. After thematic analysis several themes emerged.

As expressed in the dual process model, coping with grief is an oscillatory process where bereaved individuals move from parents having the need to cope with the pain that grief brings. This is reflected also during the interview process where many of them shift from crying in the interview and being in touch with painful emotions to laughing with positive memories of the deceased or to other emotionally neutral topics during the interview.

Talking about the loss is an important way for parents to deal with the pain caused by the death of their child. In this research, parents had different perspectives on this. Parents noticed talking about their deceased children was helpful, but on the other side this was only if the relationships were supportive and perceived as a ‘safe space’ (Stevenson et. al, 2016). However, the same study showed that in some cases it is difficult to open up, to find the words or to discuss the painful experience of grief.

Working was an important activity that helped many of the bereaved parents deal with the pain of grieving. Work and other life activities were essential for bereaved parents to focus on other things rather than grief. Keeping themselves distracted and keeping their minds busy is one of the coping strategies mentioned in different studies (Stevenson et. al, 2016).

Parents have to move between focusing on grief as well as de-focusing from grief and focusing themselves on other ‘distractions’. Working is one of the main strategies that helped parents cope with bereavement. In the interviews conducted, the main function of work was the distraction from the pain of grief. Working allows parents to focus on something else beyond the death of their child. It was a kind of a break from memories and thoughts related to the loss. This conclusion goes in line with the dual process model theory of coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The oscillation between loss orientation and restoration process is an important part of the process of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Focusing on the work is a typical restoration process that focuses parents on the elements of their life that were important to them previous to the death of their child.

In two cases of complicated bereavement, turning back at their current job or starting a new job was considered as a breaking point in terms of starting their recovery. Even in this case, the dual process model suggests that focusing on other important elements other than loss processes facilitates the process of grief.

An important theme that emerges in the interviews is how religion and the belief in God has influenced the process of coping with grief. Many of the respondents claimed that believing in God was a source of strength for them. The role of religion has been a source of discussions in the grief literature for many years. Several studies report the positive benefits that religion has on the coping process.

In this study, religion and faith in God was mentioned as a way to cope with the pain of grief. God was mentioned as a tool to keep mental integrity and in some cases even as a reason for why parents keep themselves from committing suicide. However, there were parents who thought that God and belief in the afterlife was not relevant, as well other parents who were challenged in their belief in God after their child was dead.

Meaning making processes seems to be facilitated by believing in God. Losing a child poses enormous dilemmas related to the meaning of life. It goes against the natural order in life where parents should die before their children do. Where humans do not arrive with their logic, the Omnipotent God can arrive with His mystery. Some of the parents interviewed for this study surrender to the idea that they cannot understand and make meaning of the death of their child and they turn to the belief in God and religion to accept this event and find the necessary peace that allows them to continue their life. Another sub theme related to God and religion is the hope of rejoining the dead child in the afterlife. This serves as a consolation for parents. Believing in the afterlife serves also as a meaning making process. In this case, it is difficult to make sense of the death of the child, but if parents and children would still be rejoined in the afterlife, then all of this would make sense. Believing in God as a meaning making function in grief emerges in different studies (Pargament 1997, Park 1993). Believing in God gives parents consolation, relief and answer to the existential question related to death and life (Park, 1993). On the other hand, even other studies emphasize that in some cases the death of their children challenge the religious systems and beliefs of the bereaved parents (Hussin, Guardia – Olmos, Aho, 2018).

Limitations of the study

The study presents several limitations. Both the size of the sample and the intentional method of selecting the participants, do not make it possible to generalize the findings for wider populations. Quantitative studies with larger samples may help in validating the findings of this research as well as generalize the results to the wider population in Albania.

Another consideration is related to the fact that coping mechanisms are strongly related to the cultural contexts where individuals live. So, in order to better understand coping mechanisms in grief we should keep in mind the cultural context.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the ways parents cope with the death of their children. Twenty-two parents were interviewed for this study.

The findings suggested that parents cope with the death of their child using different strategies. Coping through religion was one of the strategies that helped parents cope with the death of their child. Religion served parents to maintain mental integrity and facilitate the acceptance of the death of their child, to increase the hope of rejoining their children in the afterlife and to make meaning of the death.

Another theme identified in the interviews was coping through focusing on the relationship with children or nephews/ nieces. Parental responsibility was one of the subthemes present in the interviews. Parents felt the need to focus on the responsibility to take care of the survived children or nephews/ nieces and this made them to shift the focus temporarily from the loss. Furthermore, the relationship with the survived children help parents experience moments of joy and pleasure opposed to the difficult feelings related to the loss.

Immersing themselves in work was also one of the ways how parents dealt with the loss of their child. This helped distract for a moment from the pain of grief and focus on other things important to them.

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