

Regular Article

Effects of loss from suicide, accidents, acute illness and chronic illness on bereaved spouses and parents in Japan: their general health, depressive mood, and grief reaction

SACHIE MIYABAYASHI, PhD, RN¹ AND JIN YASUDA, MA²

¹Miyagi University, School of Nursing, Miyagi, Japan and ²Private Practice, Sendai, Japan

Abstract

To evaluate how the suddenness and unnaturalness of death affect general health, depression, and grief, a total of 215 responses to a questionnaire from the bereaved were analyzed. The respondents were divided into five groups: bereaved by suicide, accident, acute illness (<1 day from onset), shorter illness (<1 year from onset), and longer illness. Every sudden-death group indicated averages higher than the clinical threshold on general health scale and depression scale. After statistically controlling for respondents' age, the deceased's age at death, and the months spent with the deceased, differences among groups appeared on all but the subscales of somatic symptoms and of anxiety and insomnia. The difference seemed more apparent on emotional reaction than on physical distress. On pairwise tests suicide was found to be the most distinctive bereavement.

Key words

accident, bereavement, depressive state, general health, grief, sudden death, suicide.

INTRODUCTION

It is a very common phenomenon that family members suffer grief in bereavement. Grief is considered to be a healthy emotional experience or an active psychological response by which an individual adapts to changes caused by bereavement. It is regarded as pathological, however, when its intensity, onset, duration or manner is inappropriate. Grief is also thought to be a risk factor in poor health because intense and prolonged grief may lead to mental or physical deterioration. Some regard it as identical with a health hazard. It is almost impossible to discriminate between normal and pathological grief symptomatically because both of them are seemingly the same,¹ and the criteria for the discrimination differ among cultures.² Besides grief, many researchers have noted that bereavement itself may result in poor mental or physical health.^{1,3–5} Although it

is still not clear whether grief is an emotional experience or a symptom,^{1,2,5} the characteristic reaction to bereavement is referred to as 'bereavement reaction'.

The cause of death has been frequently examined as a factor affecting bereavement reaction. While there is much evidence that unanticipated or unnatural death leads to a severer reaction, it is still unclear how far the impact on survivors differs in a comparison between suicidal loss, accidental loss, loss from endogenous sudden death, loss from chronic illness, and loss from more prolonged illness. The present study, using the action research approach, attained a relatively large sample size that allowed us to examine the effect of death causes on bereavement reaction. The aim of the present study was to explore the differences among death causes by classification in terms of both suddenness and unnaturalness, considering general health, depressive mood, and grief reaction as outcome variables; the former two variables concern physical and mental health, while the latter concerns psychological experiences after bereavement regardless of whether normal or pathological. The detailed aspects of general health and grief reaction are also considered by comparing the scores of each subscale.

Correspondence address: Sachie Miyabayashi, PhD, RN, Miyagi University, School of Nursing, 1, Gakuen, Taiwa, Kurokawa, Miyagi 981-3298, Japan. Email: sachiem@myu.ac.jp

Received 5 October 2006; revised 25 May 2007; accepted 17 June 2007.