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The Role of Gender on Holistic Grief Effects Experienced by College Students

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This study examined the grief effects college students experience when losing a loved one and whether grief effects vary based on gender. Grief effects were outlined by the Holistic Impact of Bereavement and included emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioral, interpersonal, and spiritual effects. The researchers hypothesized that college students would experience all six grief effects, primarily emotional and cognitive effects. The researchers also hypothesized that female students would experience statistically significantly greater grief effects than male students, specifically emotional and cognitive effects. Results indicated a statistically significant difference in the emotional, physical, cognitive, and behavioral grief effects experienced between female and male students with female students experiencing greater effects than male students. Implications for these findings are addressed. Future research recommendations are also provided.

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Losing a loved one is an experience that everyone encounters. For college students, approximately 35 to 45% on any given campus have experienced a loss within the previous two years (Cousins, Servaty-Seib, & Lockman, 2017; Varga & Varga, 2019). College students are affected by grief in various ways. Grief effects can include those that are emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioral, interpersonal, or spiritual. Emotional grief effects, such as depression, sadness, anger, shock, disbelief, fear, and denial, have been consistently reported by bereaved college students (Balk, 1997; Balk & Varga, 2018; LaGrand, 1985; & Walker, Hathcoat, & Noppe, 2012). These are the most prominent grief effects that college students experience.

The current study utilized the Holistic Impact of Bereavement to examine grief effects college students experience (Balk, 2011). This framework outlines the multidimensional grief effects that can occur for college students, which include cognitively, physically, emotionally, behaviorally, interpersonally, and spiritually. Female college students are specifically more likely to experience emotional effects, such as feelings of emptiness, when compared to men (LaGrand, 1985). Students can experience cognitive effects with academics. Studies have shown that loss experiences can result

in changes in academics, including decreased grade point averages and decreased motivation and concentration (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Walker et al., 2012). These effects can have significant impacts on academic success. Physical effects can include crying, headaches, insomnia, weight loss, and poor appearance (Hardison, Neimeyer, & Lichstein, 2005; LaGrand, 1985; Vickio, Cavanaugh, & Attig, 1990). Behavioral effects include increased alcohol consumption, drug, or tobacco use, risky sexual behavior, and disordered eating (Balk, 2011; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2004). Female college students are more likely to experience headaches, insomnia, and be at a higher risk for disordered eating (Beam, Servaty-Seib, & Mathews, 2004; LaGrand, 1985).

Students can also feel interpersonal or worldly grief effects. Interpersonal effects can include feelings of isolation and loneliness, as well as changes in relationships (Balk, Tyson-Rawson, & Colletti-Wetzel, 1993). Grieving students report increases in the closeness of relationships, as well as decreasing closeness and relationship strain (Vickio et al., 1990). Spiritual or world assumption grief effects are reported by college students. These include changes in religious, spiritual, and world assumption beliefs. Students can shift their belief in how they view their beliefs and the world, which can affect

their coping. Grieving college students can believe in a less meaningful world than non-grieving peers (Balk, 2008 & Balk, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to examine the holistic grief effects college students experience when losing a loved one and whether grief effects vary based on gender. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What holistic grief effects do college students experience a death loss?
2. What is the relationship between holistic grief effects and gender?

The researchers hypothesized that college students would experience all six holistic grief effects (cognitive, physical, emotional, behavioral, interpersonal, and spiritual) with students identifying as female students experiencing more holistic grief effects than male students.

Methods

This survey research study was conducted at a regional university in the Southeast United States. The Institutional Review Board approved the study. The Dean of Students supported the study, and the university counseling center was also consulted. The Office of Information Technology provided email addresses for students who provided permission for their email addresses to be used for research purposes. Approximately 12,000 students were emailed an invitation to participate in the study.

The email students received outlined the purpose of the study, and a link to the survey via Qualtrics, the university-supported survey platform. The beginning of the survey contained an informed consent statement. The contact information for a university counseling services and a local 24-hour mental health provider was listed at the beginning and end of the survey for students who may have experienced uncomfortable feelings due to the sensitive topic of grief and loss. Complete data were downloaded into SPSS for analysis.

Instrumentation

The survey contained demographic questions and questions regarding grief experiences connected to the loss of a loved one. Loss was defined as a “death-related loss” or the death loss of a person or pet (Corr, Corr, & Doka, 2019, p. 215). College students who did not experience the loss of a person or pet were routed to the end of the survey. College students who did experience a loss were asked specific questions about the loved one they lost. If they experienced more than one loss, students were asked to answer questions about their most difficult loss.

College students were asked to report the various Holistic Impact of Bereavement grief effects they experienced, including emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioral, interpersonal, spiritual (Balk, 2011).

The grief effects and examples for each one was provided (see Table 1). Students were asked to rate each grief effect on a scale of

1 (“Not affected at all”) to 5 (“Significantly affected”), or they could prefer not to respond.

Table 1. *Holistic Grief Effects Options*

Grief Effects	Example
Emotional	Feeling sad, angry, guilty, regret, etc.
Cognitive	Having a hard time concentrating, studying, paying attention in class, etc.
Physical	Feeling fatigue, illness, headaches, insomnia, etc.
Behavioral	Crying, smoking, drinking, changes in sexual activity, irrational outbursts, etc.
Interpersonal	Changes in relationships, feelings of isolation, etc.
Spiritual/World Assumptions	Changes in thoughts regarding religion or spirituality, meaning of life, etc.

Sample

The sample consisted of 508 college students. The majority of college students identified as female ($n = 270$, 66%) while 14% ($n = 56$) identified as male. A large number of college students ($n = 412$, 81%) reported experiencing a loss. The most common loss was the death of a grandparent due to illness. Specific loss experiences are displayed in Table 2.

Results

Grief Effects

The first research question examined the grief effects college students experience when losing a loved one. This question was answered with descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. Students reported the strongest effects of grief emotionally. Moderate to strong cognitive, behavioral, physical, and interpersonal grief effects were reported, with moderate world assumptions/spirituality grief effects. All results appear in Table 3.

Table 2. Student Loss Experiences

Loss Characteristics	N	Percentage
Deceased Relationship		
Grandparent	170	41%
Parent	80	19%
Friend	60	15%
Other	33	8%
Aunt/Uncle	30	7%
Cousin	18	5%
Pet	11	3%
Sibling	10	2%
Cause of Death		
Illness	184	45%
Accident	75	18%
Suicide	40	10%
Murder	28	7%
Unsure	14	4%
Drugs/Alcohol	13	3%
Other	58	14%
Time Since Loss		
0-6 months	75	18%
7-12 months	35	8%
13-24 months	47	11%
25-36 months	46	11%
More than 36 months ago	184	45%

N = 412 student participants

Table 3. Grief Effects Experienced by College Students

Grief Effects	Mean	Standard Deviation
Emotional	4.53	0.88
Cognitive	3.64	1.34
Behavioral	3.41	1.45
Physical	3.38	1.41
Interpersonal	3.23	1.47
World Assumptions	2.95	1.60

Note. 1 = Not affected at all, 2 = Slightly affected, 3 = Affected, 4 = Moderately affected, 5 = Significantly affected

Grief Effects and Gender

The second research question examined the relationship between grief effects and student gender. An independent samples t-test was run to determine if there were statistically significant differences in grief effects between female and male students.

- Female students ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.72$) experienced more emotional grief effects than male students ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.21$), a statistically significant difference, $M = 0.59$, 95% CI [-.832, -.353], $t(321) = -4.865$, $p = .001$.
- Female students ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.31$) experienced more cognitive grief effects than male students ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.42$), a statistically significant difference, $M = 0.59$, 95% CI [-.970, -.202], $t(323) = -3.002$, $p = .003$.
- Female students ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.37$) experienced more physical grief effects than male students ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.57$), a statistically significant difference, $M = 0.57$, 95% CI [-.971, -.158], $t(323) = -2.729$, $p = .007$.
- Female students ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.45$) experienced more behavioral grief effects than male students ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.49$), a statistically significant difference, $M = 0.53$, 95% CI [-.948, -.106], $t(323) = -2.465$, $p = .014$.

Overall, college students reported emotional grief effects as the strongest effects they experienced when losing a loved one, followed by cognitive, behavioral, physical, and interpersonal grief effects. World assumptions/spiritual grief effects were moderate. Female students reported statistically significantly stronger emotional, physical, cognitive, and behavioral grief effects.

Discussion

This study found similar loss experiences as previous studies (Cousins et al., 2017; Varga & Varga, 2019). Findings are also consistent with the various grief effects that college students experience. Furthermore, this study specifically outlined how students who identify as female are affected differently by their grief when compared to their male counterparts.

Colleges must strive to understand student grief that takes place on their campuses. Gaining a deeper understanding of the effects grieving college students experience is important to understand how to assist them during this process. College faculty and staff are on the front lines of encountering college students and could serve as a source of support for grieving students (Varga, Varga, Balentyne, & Lanier, 2020). College students who do not adequately cope with losing a loved one are at risk for prolonged grief disorder, complicated grief, or the newly

designated persistent complex bereavement disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Boelen, van de Schoot, van den Hout, & de Keijser, 2010; Prigerson et al., 2009). They are also at risk for engaging in unhealthy coping behaviors, which can result in discipline issues or academic concerns (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). Colleges and universities that become aware of potential grief effects can work to best support grieving students.

Campus counseling centers can also help support grieving college students. Since female students report more positive attitudes regarding grief counseling and greater grief effects, it is important for campus counseling centers to promote these resources (Breen, Croucamp, & Rees, 2018). Furthermore, female students who experience the loss of a mother are more likely to report depression, feelings of hopelessness, and suicidal ideation (Lawrence, Jeglic, Matthews, & Pepper, 2006). Campus counselors can assist with positive coping of grief effects.

Finally, student bereavement institutional policies can be created or revised to better support students experiencing grief effects. A limited number of college campuses in the United States have bereavement policies in place for students (Servaty-Seib & Liew, 2019). Otherwise, students are responsible for approaching faculty and others

about their bereavement situations during their times of grief.

Recommendations for Future Research

Continued research on grief effects is needed to understand better how to help grieving college students when they lose a loved one. The major limitation of this study is that more female students responded to the survey than male students. An additional study that includes more male students would provide additional insight into their grief experiences. Furthermore, students who do not identify as part of the gender binary (male or female) were not represented in this study. A larger response rate of college students would also strengthen findings related to grief effects.

The design of the instrument presents limitations specific to holistic grief effects. While students were asked to respond on effects at a global level (cognitive, emotional, physical, etc.), these findings do not provide data regarding more specific grief effects (loss of concentration, crying, smoking, etc.). Developing an instrument to administer to students to systematically measure these specific grief effects on six different subscales would provide specific insight into student experiences with loss. Furthermore, including a component that asks students how long their effects last and support sought to

cope with loss would also be beneficial for campus communities to know.

The quantitative nature of this study is also a limitation. Engaging in qualitative research to interview individual students would provide an opportunity to better understand more specifics about various grief effects,

especially for a diverse student population. Further investigations into the various grief effects students experience based on their demographics or other personal characteristics are important to understand as our college campuses become a more diverse place.

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