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# THE CANVAS OF GRIEF AND LOSS: PAINTING A WAY FOR MENTAL VITALITY

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## Abstract

The purpose of this systematic review was to explore the relationship between grief and loss counseling and the beneficial effects it has on mental health. By analyzing a variety of different studies and peer-reviewed journal articles that targeted bereavement topics, it revealed how grief and loss counseling is beneficial depending on the person and type of grief that has developed. Key findings include how grief impacts an individual emotionally, physically, and spiritually which reflects how the overall well-being of a person is. It is also noted how psychological wellness may impact physiological wellness. Another key finding was how complicated grief therapy is one of the most successful grief and loss counseling practices to help bereaved individuals, but other interventions were also found successful. Those other interventions consisted of emotionally focused therapy, compassion-focused therapy, family-focused therapy, interpersonal therapy, standard psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, bibliotherapy, and snow globe therapy. There are more interventions to help people than listed, but the paper specifically addressed those. However, future research needs to be completed to gain further understanding of grief and loss and how to help bereaved individuals obtain care that fits their desired needs. It is essential to take note of how everyone processes grief at their own pace which also explains why certain interventions may not be successful for every grieving individual. It is also significant to acknowledge when people can find benefit through the loss, it helps the individual move through the process of grieving which highlights the meaningful influence of finding a purpose for the pain.

## Keywords

Bereavement, Mental Vitality, Physiological Wellness

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## Introduction

Bereavement is an impactful experience that greatly shapes the emotional well-being and psychological resilience of a person. This systematic review aims to correlate the relationship between grief and loss counseling and the beneficial effects it has on mental health. Additionally, the review paper will discuss common themes found throughout the scholarly articles reflecting on the idea of the influence concerning grief and loss. Understanding the different external and internal factors that are critical when it comes to bereavement then results in a deeper understanding of how to help those needing support.

## Definition of Grief

Grief is an emotional response that everyone will encounter at some moment in their lives. One study defined grief as a universal experience that people go through when a significant person dies (Waller et al., 2016). Another study defined grief as the state people enter after experiencing a loss (Ungureanu & Robey, 2023). Therefore, grief is a cross-cultural emotion people will experience when a prominent loss has emerged.

## Risk Factors to Develop Elevated Grief

Research has identified some risk factors for individuals who are more prone to develop elevated grief. A study claimed that people are more prone to specifically deal with anticipatory grief if they are female, have a hard time coping, younger in age, or have pessimistic thoughts (Waller et al., 2016). Another study also identified how being female and having psychiatric difficulties before the loss occurred heightened the chance for intense grief to unfold

(Kristensen et al., 2012). Being able to identify people who are at high risk for developing elevated grief, then allows professionals to take precautionary/defensive measures.

### ***Emotional Reactions Tied to Grief and Loss***

Emotional reactions tied to grief and loss in recent studies discuss how similar bereavement people comprehend loss. Researchers, Newsom et al., highlighted grieving people dealing with feelings such as frustration, brokenness, and betrayal (2019). An additional study looked more in-depth over certain circumstances when it came to loss and discovered how grieving people may struggle with blaming themselves or others, having survivor's guilt, and may even develop PTSD (Kristensen et al., 2012). In a study done by Wood and McMahon, they found that children who are in K-1 school will most likely have increased psychological problems, anxiety, and depression (2024). These findings show numerous emotional reactions people go through when experiencing grief, but the primary feelings that tend to surface are frustration, guilt, anxiety, and depression.

### ***Physical Reactions to Grief and Loss***

Oftentimes psychological problems are the framework for physiological problems to evolve during bereavement. Researchers, Newsom et al., claim that people going through grief have a harder time remembering, learning, or even thinking (2019). A separate study involving college students who were grieving stated that the students had greater academic struggles, changes in their motivation and concentration, and were more prone to high-risk behaviors (Varga et al., 2021). Another study that focused on married couples claims that when a couple is grieving the loss of their child it will influence the intimacy levels of the relationship (Ungureanu & Robey, 2023). These articles show how there is a correlation between people grieving and negative changes in their physical behavior.

### ***Spiritual Reactions to Grief and Loss***

Studies have shown that the role of an individual's spirituality while grieving tends to positively impact the outcome. One study emphasized how it had been shown that when someone is grieving, but is religious or very spiritual, then they tend to have positive health after the traumatic event (Altmaier, 2011). A second study emphasized how bereaved college students tend to feel like their beliefs in religion and spirituality are also affected (Varga et al., 2021). A third survey even talked about how people tend to lean on religious beliefs to achieve some sense of control (Pargament et al., 2000). These claims illustrate how there is a pattern when it comes to spirituality and the benefits it acquires on one's mental health while going through the stages of grief.

## **Triggers/Stressors of Grief and Loss**

When bereaved people experience triggers and stressors, it can greatly impact their mental healing progression. A study clarified how people may have difficulty coping with the event if they struggle to work through all of the thoughts, memories, and reminders of the deceased person (Howarth, 2011). A second study even addressed the critical influence of triggers if the person witnessed the death, found the body after the passing, or there was a delay until the death had been confirmed (Kristensen et al., 2012). These findings conclude that experiencing triggers and stressors can cause the suffering individual to be more prone to impaired mental health since they have difficulty coping.

### ***Ethnicity's Influence on Grief and Loss***

Recent studies have addressed the special role of ethnicity's influence on grief and loss and the significance it possesses on a person's mental health. One study highlighted the flaws and biases involved in the judicial system causing an increase of Black or African Americans to be placed in jail unfairly leading to an increase of grieving in incarcerated individuals (King et al., n.d.). Another study focused more on the variety of bereaved children with different ethnicities and their behavior and found no correlation between the behavioral factors of grieving and the ethnicity of the child (Ener & Ray, 2018). Though these findings were collected from different age groups with different situations, both of these groups feature similar concerns when it comes to an individual's overall mental health including emotional response, social stigma, and behavioral expression.

### ***Socioeconomic Status Affects on Grief and Loss***

Socioeconomic status is another element that impacts bereaved people and how their mental health is shaped. One study addressed how when a parent is incarcerated, that might cause the other parent to pick up extra jobs to support the family which not only alters the family system but also endangers their children to have future relational challenges. (K. King et al., n.d.). In another study conducted by researchers, Newsom et al., they were able to confirm how people from low-income households are at a greater risk for more intense grief symptoms since they also lack the resources to help (2019). From these findings, individuals from lower social status certainly tend to have an increased risk of mental distress and emotional difficulties which could also be affected by the lack of resources to help grieving people.

## **Children and Young Adults Challenges Facing Grief and Loss**

Children and young adults when facing grief tend to have common challenges with their psychological well-being. A recent study discovered all school-aged children at some point will be affected directly or indirectly by grief and loss which will cause challenges emotionally, socially, and academically (Wood & McMahon, 2024). Another study structured around college students found that if a student reported a loss, that endangered their emotional and cognitive effects (Varga et al., 2021). Both of these sample groups showcase just how intense grief can be when it comes to the influence it obtains over the quality of one's life.

### **How Grief Impacts Those With Mental Disabilities**

Grief may appear differently psychologically for those who have mental disabilities. Calabria and Cheswick completed a study and acknowledged how people with learning disabilities experience grief in the same way as the majority of people do (2023). However, another study discussed the parents of a child who had an intellectual disability were worried about how their children might suffer since the child may not be able to fathom their disability (Fernández-Ávalos et al., 2021). These findings summarize how depending on the extent of the disability it affects the recognition an individual contains over grief and loss which also touches on how much that loss will shape their mental health.

### **The Toll COVID-19 Had on Grief and Loss**

Recent studies address the collision COVID-19 had with grief and loss and the manipulation it acquired over individuals' mental well-being. Ungureanu and Robey administered a study and emphasized how COVID-19 caused deaths across the globe which caused an increase in people's awareness of grief and loss since there were higher levels of bereaved people (2023). Another study claimed that COVID-19 caused normal routines like funerals to not be available after a loved one passed which would have also impacted the support system around the family (Morris et al., 2020). These observations not only mentioned how the pandemic caused an increase in bereaved people but also how it disrupted specific rituals that allowed families and communities to gather together in hopes of expressing their emotions.

### **The Adverse Impact Grief Has on Sleep**

Studies have also shown that there is a connection between bereavement and negative sleep patterns. Howarth states that the study claimed that one of the symptoms of complicated grief is having an unusual sleep disturbance (2011). Another study even went into depth about how insomnia that develops in bereaved college students puts them at a higher risk for developing complicated grief symptoms (Varga et al., 2021). A third survey discussed how after a violent loss has occurred a common trauma-specific symptom is sleep problems (Kristensen et al., 2012). These findings provide evidence for a correlation between bereaved people and the hostile sleep patterns that affect the mental wellness of individuals.

### **Complicated Grief Therapy**

Complicated grief therapy has been thoroughly looked into by many researchers and there are specific studies that indicate how complicated grief therapy is beneficial to the overall mental health of grieving people. One study mentioned how complicated grief therapy has had a greater outcome of success compared to psychotherapy in helping people who struggle with abnormal grief (Waller et al., 2016). A second study simply stated how people have found specific therapies to help them like complicated grief treatment (Howarth, 2011). The findings indicate how successful complicated grief counseling can be for those who are struggling with abnormal/prolonged grief, but further research needs to be completed to determine if it could also help with other types of grief.

#### ***Emotionally Focused Therapy***

Emotionally-focused therapy and compassion-focused therapy are other types of therapies that have been found to help people who aren't struggling with prolonged grief but still need help to regulate their emotions. Ungureanu and Robey emphasized how emotionally focused therapy is a way to help clients process their emotions while creating a safe environment for them and has been proven successful (2023). Calabria and Cheswick address compassion-focused therapy and how it helps people navigate through loss orientation and restoration orientation (2023). Altmaier even claims that therapists having an empathetic presence will help them to listen better, support the client better, and even help build trust between the client and therapist (2011). Overall, these findings identify that emotional and compassion-focused therapies help people to better understand and manage their emotions which almost indicates a positive psychological state to develop over time.

### ***Other Types of Therapy***

Research has also proven other types of therapies and interventions to help people construct positive mental health after encountering a loss. One study proclaimed how family-focused therapy has been effective in helping grieving people (Waller et al., 2016). Another researcher, Howarth, implies interpersonal therapy, standard psychotherapy, and cognitive-behavioral therapy are beneficial to help those in mental distress (2011). Those findings imply how therapies target individuals who are suffering and need intervention to mend their cognitive process, sentimental process, and overall mental transformation process.

## **Creative Strategies for Helping People Regulate Their Emotions**

Studies have also found creative alternatives to help people regulate their emotions to help develop positive psychological health. One study mentioned how bibliotherapy is very effective when it comes to children because animals are very familiar with a child's life/environment (Smit & Smith, 2023). Another study discovered snow globe therapy helps people to be creative while telling a story or designing something (Rafaely & Goldberg, 2020). A third study mentioned how students have used social media as a grief support system and it has been claimed to be beneficial (Varga et al., 2021). These findings prove that there is more than just one intervention to help people who need help restoring their mental health.

### **Therapy Tools Found Successful**

It has been proven by researchers that there are specific therapy tools successfully conducted. Researchers, Smit and Smith, declared how bibliotherapy is a therapy tool that helps the child process their understanding/emotions better about death and the permanency (2023). Another study discussed how choice therapy is a tool used in sessions to help couples understand the motivation and reason behind their behaviors (Ungureanu & Robey, 2023). Those findings only capture the surface of successful therapy tools used, but both studies represent how the tools used benefit individuals who lack the understanding of emotional regulation, providing resources that teach coping strategies for managing their different longings, tendencies, or even anxieties.

### ***Concerns About Grief Counseling***

Some studies have expressed concerns about grief counseling and the negative effects it may possess on one's well-being. Altmaier discovered how some people believe that grief counseling may leave a person worse than they began (2011). Another study reported how for bereaved parents, the mothers benefited from group interventions while the fathers had no effect from the treatment (Kristensen et al., 2012). Those findings address the unease some people may feel about grief and loss therapy but also point out external factors that may affect whether the therapy will be beneficial for everyone.

### ***Concerns About Therapy Tools***

Other studies have also expressed alarm with certain therapy tools used as coping mechanisms to help bereaved people. One study discussed how having a family member in jail can cause a mixture of grief emotions, but showed no correlation for the relationship between grief and resilience and social support (K. M. King & Delgado, 2021). A second study heightened how people who turn to religious coping methods may have a poor experience since the negative religious coping methods also predicate adjustment in a negative direction (Pargament et al., 2000). These findings suggest that selective therapeutic tools designed to serve grieving individuals may only be effective for a specific group of people.

## **Process of Healing and Restoring**

Researchers have looked into the process of what healing individuals experience while grieving and how those phases influence their mental health. One study mentioned how people cope by working on acceptance, distancing themselves, or even rebuilding relationships (K. King et al., n.d.). Researcher, Haworth, in his study, made sure to include how everyone is different, which also means everyone will process the traumatic events at their own pace (2011). A third study even incorporated how when people find benefits through the loss it helps them move through the grieving process (Altmaier, 2011). Those outcomes mark how unique every individual's healing process is and how significant it is to find a purpose stemming from the loss.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, after the exploration of grief and loss counseling and the benefits it possesses on mental health, it has been found effective depending on the individual. While research has provided significant insight into grief and loss counseling and the benefits it possesses on mental health, there remains a need for further investigation into the

topic. There are still other factors that need to be investigated to gain a deeper understanding of grief and the ways it affects an individual's emotional well-being and psychological resilience. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of grief can help strengthen people's skills to provide benevolent care and enhance the well-being of those impacted by grief and loss.

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