

# DEATH OF A CHILD: GRIEF EXPERIENCES AND COPING MECHANISMS OF SELECTED FATHERS

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## ***ABSTRACT***

*The study examined the grief experiences of fathers related to the death of their child and how they coped with this loss. A total of eight fathers were interviewed and the results were analyzed through thematic content analysis. Results indicated that the father-participants experienced pain, acceptance and regret as a result of the loss of their child. It also showed that the fathers used two coping mechanisms: emotion-focused or avoidant coping and positive appraisal, to deal with their child's death.*

**Keywords:** *Grief, Coping Mechanism, Father, Death of a Child, Bereavement*

## INTRODUCTION

Grief is a normal reaction to loss. It affects individuals differently. Although the death of a loved one is considered as one of the most difficult forms of loss, individuals grieve whenever they lose something significant especially if they have invested their time, energy, affection, money, dreams and hopes (Schmall & Bowman, 2004). Depending on whom or what people lose, there is a variation on how the experience of grief symptoms, the symptom intensity, and the length of such an experience (Amaral-Lombard & Bailey, 2008).

Early grief theories hypothesized that over time the bereaved would experience decreasing intensity of grief, ultimately ending in a form of resolution, or a “getting back to normal.” However, more recent bereavement researchers have identified that bereaved adults and children are quantitatively and qualitatively different than they were prior to the loss (Wright & Hogan, 2008).

In Kübler-Ross’ (1969) five stages of grief, also known as ‘grief cycle’, the stages are not linear; neither are they equal in their experience. People's grief and other reactions to emotional trauma are as individual as a fingerprint. The grief cycle model is a useful perspective for understanding our own and other people's emotional reaction to personal trauma and change, irrespective of cause. These stages of grief are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Denial is a conscious or unconscious refusal to accept facts, information, reality, etc., relating to the situation concerned. Anger can manifest in different ways. People dealing with an emotional situation can be angry with themselves, and/or with others, especially those

close to them. Bargaining involves the hope that the individual can somehow postpone or delay death. Usually, the negotiation for an extended life is made with a higher power in exchange for a reformed lifestyle. Depression is where the individual may become silent, refuse visitors and spend much of the time crying and grieving. Acceptance is where the individual begins to come to terms with the mortality or death of a loved one.

People who have lost someone and have gone through the grief process will normally adjust to their loss and try to move on with their lives. This is called coping. Coping is defined as the process of managing external and/or internal demands that exceed the resources of the person. It is a complex and multidimensional process that is sensitive to both the environment and the personality of the individual. Folkman and Moskowitz's (2004) types of coping includes Positive Appraisal, Problem-Focused, Emotion-Focused and Meaning-Focused. Positive Appraisal is reframing a situation to see it in a positive light. Positive Appraisal has been significantly and independently associated with increases in positive affect. Problem-Focused or Approach Coping happens when efforts are directed at solving or managing the problem that is causing distress. It includes strategies for gathering information, making decisions, planning and resolving conflicts. This type of coping effort is usually directed at acquiring resources to help deal with the underlying problem and includes instrumental, situation specific and task-oriented actions. Emotion-Focused or Avoidant Coping is coping that is directed at managing or reducing emotional distress, which includes cognitive strategies such as looking on the bright side, or behavioural strategies such as seeking emotional support, drinking, or using drugs. Meaning-Focused coping involves searching for meaning in adversity and drawing on values, beliefs and goals to modify the meaning given to and personal response to a stressful situation.

The research aimed to examine the grief experiences and coping mechanisms of fathers whose children passed away. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to find out how fathers grieve the loss/death of their child and their respective coping strategies/mechanisms. This is done with the goal of better understanding the concept of grief and coping mechanisms.

## **Literature Review**

At any point in one's life, one may experience losing someone. People grieve and cope in varying ways and at different lengths. A study by Littlewood et al. (1991) revealed that fathers who have lost a child expressed their feelings less than fathers who have not lost a child. Several studies have indicated (Dyregrov & Matthiesen, 1987; Schwab, 1992; Vance et al., 1995) that after the death of a child, fathers' grief included heavy or increased alcohol and drug consumption in order to try to avoid the pain of loss (Bendt, 2000; Doka and Martin, 2000; Gray, 2000), which often masks depression.

Some people confronted with the loss of a close relative develop emotional problems. Frequently observed syndromes include major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other anxiety disorders (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001). Bereaved individuals can also develop symptoms of complicated grief (CG) that are distinct from established mood and anxiety disorders.

Although erroneous, both everyday beliefs and the media show that words cannot help a person through the grieving process. Moreover, most people feel ill-prepared to help another person deal with a loss (James & Friedman, 1998), even though they really want to help. Grief management is one type of emotional support somewhat similar to comforting. Burleson (1994) conceptualizes comforting messages as those intended to help others who are dealing with a variety of everyday stressors (e.g., getting a poor grade; having an argument with a friend). However, Burleson distinguished such everyday comforting from “strategies used to cope with extreme feelings of depression or grief arising from extraordinary events (such as the loss of a spouse)” because some research (Brockoop, 1973; Lindemann, 1965) suggests that these more intense emotional experiences require responses qualitatively different from those used to manage everyday emotional upsets.

However, there is light at the end of the tunnel. It was found that the majority of bereaved parents interviewed after the loss of a child were able to adjust to the child’s death and to integrate the experience into daily life, navigating the fine line between remembering their deceased child and reliving their intense grief, while also engaging in their family life and jobs (Barrera et al., 2007).

## **Research Questions**

The overall aim of the study is to determine the grief experiences and coping mechanisms of fathers who lost their child. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the father-participants notions or concepts of grief?
2. What are the grief experiences of the father-participants after losing their child?
3. What are the father-participants’ coping mechanisms after losing their child?

## **METHODS**

### **Design**

The research design used in the study is phenomenology because the researchers would like to know the grief experiences and coping mechanisms of the selected fathers who experienced loss of their child.

## Participants

Fathers who experienced loss of their child (at most 3 years ago) were the participants of this study. A total of eight (8) fathers were interviewed for this research.

## Data Measure and Collection Procedure

The researchers interviewed the participants using the constructed interview guide. From there, the recording of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews were then validated with the participants. The researchers processed the transcribed data through thematic content analysis. The results were likewise validated by the same expert validators of the interview guide.

The researchers constructed an interview guide that was validated by three (3) experts in the field of the study.

## FINDINGS

Participants	Concept of Grief	Grief Experiences	Coping Style
Participant 1	<i>Syempre, masakit, kasi... isang lalaki lang yun eh... kumbaga dapat ok na kasi may babae na ako meron na akong lalaki.</i>	Pain/Regret	Emotion-Focused or Avoidant Coping
Participant 2	<i>"Syempre, masakit yun kasi di ko ini-expect na pati yun mangyayari. Napagbandaan ko na rin yun eh. Inexpect ko na rin na darating na sya."</i>	Pain/Regret	Emotion-Focused or Avoidant Coping
Participant 3	<i>"Nalulungkot ako at nasaktan pero sa kabila ng lahat, may magandang naidulot din sa aking anak dahil hindi na siya nakaranas ng paghibirap pa."</i>	Acceptance	Positive Appraisal
Participant 4	<i>"Syempre (masakit), dahil sya ang breadwinner at tsaka malaki ang naitutulong sa amin, sa buong pamilya at napakabuti n'yang bata."</i>	Pain	Positive Appraisal
Participant 5	<i>"Syempre, masakit, masakit, unang-una nag-aaral na, tapos matalino s'ya at magaling sa eskwela n'ya, tsaka napapakinabangan na rin namin. "</i>	Pain/Regret	Emotion-Focused or Avoidant Coping
Participant 6	<i>"Wala tayong magagawa kung talagang ganyan ang</i>	Pain	Emotion-Focused

	<i>ano, pero kung sa nakayanan parang, gusto ko nga sumama na sa kanya dahil di ko talaga kaya ang pagkawala n'ya."</i>		or Avoidant Coping
Participant 7	<i>"masakit man isipin sa pagkawala ng anak ko pinaubaya ko siya kay Lord na maaga siya kinuha"</i>	Acceptance	Positive Appraisal
Participant 8	<i>"Ano lang, parang positive thinking na lang, na baka may dabilan kaya ganoon. Baka sa susunod, para malaman siguro namin 'yong mali namin."</i>	Acceptance	Emotion-Focused or Avoidant Coping

Three common themes were identified for the grief experiences of the fathers. Participants said to have experienced emotional pain, acceptance and regret after the death of their child.

## Pain

All the fathers admitted that it was really painful for them to lose their child.

*"Syempre, masakit yun kasi di ko ini-expect na pati yun mangyayari."*

*"masakit din mawalan ng anak"*

*"Nalulungkot ako at nasaktan"*

*"Wala tayong magagawa kung talagang ganyan ang ano, pero kung sa nakayanan parang, gusto ko nga sumama na sa kanya dahil di ko talaga kaya ang pagkawala n'ya."*

Several fathers had certain expectations, hopes and dreams for their child. They were looking forward to the future and the death of their child was the last thing on their minds.

*"Syempre (masakit), dahil s'ya ang breadwinner at tsaka malaki ang naitutulong sa amin, sa buong pamilya at napakabuti n'yang bata."*

*"isang lalaki lang yun eh... kumbaga dapat ok na kasi may babae na ako meron na akong lalaki."*

## Acceptance

When asked how they coped after the death of their child, they said that they just accepted the fact that the child is gone and there is nothing they can do about it. They also said that maybe God had better plans for their child and for them or that the child wasn't meant for them.

*"Masakit man isipin sa pagkawala ng anak ko, pinaubaya ko siya kay lord na maaga siya kinuha"*

*"Bagamat mahirap kayanin, ngunit sa Panginoon nagdarasal tayo na sana'y maging matiwasay ang kanyang, ah, ika nga'y sa kabilang buhay. Ibig sabihin kasama ang dalangin kaya medyo natatanggap namin."*

*“Kung ano man ang ano, ipagkaloob sa kanila ng Diyos, kung talagang hindi para sa amin o hindi para sa kanila, tanggapin na lang hanggang maaga pa.”*

Some said that they accepted it and it is probably a good thing that the child is gone so they will not suffer anymore.

*“sa kabila ng labat, may magandang naidulot din sa aking anak dahil hindi na siya nakaranas ng paghihirap pa”*

*“Natanggap ko na rin. Kasi, parang ang sabi nila kung nabuhay daw ‘yon parang babambuhay ko din na dadalhin, kasi prematured nga sya eh.”*

*“Syempre, bandang huli natanggap na rin namin, unang-una, kasi ang sabi nga ng ibang doktor bibira daw, sa sakit n’ya bibira lang daw ang nakakatagal na ganyang buhay.”*

## **Regret**

The fathers also felt like they should have done more to save their child. They hinted some regret that they haven’t done enough or they are not capable to help their child.

*“Ang kakulangan lang nga dahil sa kahirapan namin hindi natustusan ang pagpapagamot sa kanya.”*

*“natuto ka rin doon sa nangyari kasi dapat talaga, from the start pa lang inalagaan mo talaga, lagi kang nasa doktor kapag may time.”*

*“labat ng problema n’ya sinasabi n’ya, ah, di ko naman kayang tugunan labat pero at least nasasabi n’ya sa akin ang problema n’ya.”*

The researchers found two common themes of coping styles among the participants, Positive Appraisal and Emotion-Focused or Avoidant Coping.

## **Positive Appraisal**

Fathers exhibited positive appraisal as a coping mechanism. It is a coping style where a person tries to reframe the situation and see it in a positive light. The fathers tried to look for something good about the death of their child.

*“Syempre (masakit), dahil s’ya ang breadwinner at tsaka malaki ang naitutulong sa amin, sa buong pamilya at napakabuti n’yang bata.”*

*“Nalulungkot ako at nasaktan pero sa kabila ng labat, may magandang naidulot din sa aking anak dahil hindi na siya nakaranas ng paghihirap pa.”*

*“Natanggap ko na rin. Kasi... parang ang... sabi nila kung nabuhay daw ‘yon parang babambuhay ko din na dadalhin, kasi prematured nga sya eh. Siguro ayaw din nung bata na mamroblema kami parang ganoon.”*

## Emotion-Focused or Avoidant Coping

Some fathers used this coping style to cope with the loss of their child. They tried to manage or relieve the pain by drinking.

*“Bale ano, dito lang sa tindahan, nilibang ko lang yung sarili ko rito. Tapos minsan pag gabi, di ako makatulog yun. Minsan ah... di ko maimasan na uminom talaga, pakonti-konti, parang pampatulog lang.”*

*“Nagmukmok ako ng siguro, almost two to three weeks. Sa kwarto lang, hindi ako nakikipag-usap, medyo pinabayaan ko konti ang trabaho at ako masyadong kumakain. Iminom syempre. Pero that two-three weeks siguro, di naman ako uminom.”*

## DISCUSSION

The fathers felt extreme pain resulting from their child's death. All of them used the word “masakit” (it hurts) to describe the feelings they had after the death. The fathers were hurt not only because of their child's death, but they also mourn because of the loss of the dreams, hopes and expectations they had for their child.

Also noteworthy is that when the fathers lost their child, they were able to eventually accept that the death is inevitable and this death did not make them lose their faith in God. In fact, it made their faith in God stronger as manifested by their belief that their child's death is God's will. This is similar to the study of Lichtenthal, Currier, Neimeyer and Keesee (2010) which indicated that the parents' sense of spirituality increased as a result of their loss. The cross-sectional nature of the study makes it difficult to examine whether parents discussing these themes were able to fit the loss into their pre-existing worldviews or had accommodated their worldviews as part of their sense-making process. Since most, if not all of the cause of death was due to sickness or health issues, the fathers felt that it was better that the child died rather than live and suffer more.

It was also observed that most fathers felt regret about the death of their child because they feel that they could have done more or that they lack the ability and resources to help their child. This mirrors the study of Aho, Tarkka, Asted-Kurki and Kaunonen, (2006) revealing that there was self-blame at the fathers' inability to prevent the death of the child, of a flaw in their own genes, their own actions and deeds causing the fathers to be punished by the death of their children.

Quite striking is the fact that none of the participants showed signs of denial regarding the loss of their child. They all said that they have accepted the situation and are trying move on and cope from their loss. Some of the participants went through Emotion-Focused or Avoidant Coping, which is doing things that they think, would lessen the pain they are experiencing. One participant relayed that he used to drink at night to lessen the pain that he was feeling because of the death of his son. Another participant turned to smoking to releases the tension of losing his child. This

resulted in him becoming a chain smoker. Others coped through Positive Appraisal, where a person reframes the situation and tries to see things from the positive side. The fathers looked for the positive in the death of their child.

## CONCLUSIONS

In light of the foregoing findings the following conclusions are hereby put forth:

1. The fathers experienced pain, acceptance and regret because of the death of their child.
2. The fathers used Positive Appraisal and Emotion-Focused coping styles to cope with the loss of their child.

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