

The effect of grief on ageing populations' physical and mental wellbeing.

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EBN commentary

Study Type: Secondary data analysis of self-reported survey data

Authors Declarative Title: The effect of grief on ageing populations' physical and mental wellbeing.

Commentary on: Ayoyama M, Sakaguchi Y, Fujisawa D, Morita T, Ogawa A, Kizawa Y, Tsuneto S, Shima Y, Miyashita M. Insomnia and changes in alcohol consumption: relation between possible complicated grief and depression among family caregivers. *J. Affective Disorders* 275 (2020) 1-6

Commentary

Implications for practice and research

- Bereaved relatives are at greater risk of physical and psychological disorder and this should be considered as part of bereavement care and health assessment.
- Longitudinal cohort data about the bereaved' health status, across cultures and age groups, could inform better bereavement care and support.

Context

Bereavement is distressing; the effects of grief, including distress and associated insomnia are known¹. Complex grief² is characterised by its severity and duration, it can limit normal activity and function. Alcohol consumption and insomnia are both known to be potentially damaging to mental and physical wellbeing³. Exploration of the associations between bereavement, alcohol consumption and insomnia are less well understood and form a relatively novel area of research. In this study⁴ Akoyama and colleagues considered excessive alcohol consumption in bereaved individuals and explored the association with complex grief and major depressive disorder.

Methods

The purpose of the study⁴ was to consider prevalence of alcohol consumption, sleep disorder and general health data amongst a population of recently bereaved Japanese adults and explore potential associations. The team accessed information from a large existing health data set; a survey of bereaved family members of people who had died from cancer and had been in receipt of palliative care services. Survey instruments included the Brief Grief Questionnaire (BGS) and a Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), and were accessed for information about demographics, sleep pattern, alcohol consumption, grief and depression. The data were used to generate descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis to identify associations.

Findings

Retrospective data were obtained from 814 adults, 57% male and 43% female. The majority were >60 year of age and 35% were >80 years. The distress of sleep disturbance was noted by 59% of the participants. A significant relationship was found between complicated grief (CG) and major depressive disorder (MDD). The most noteworthy finding is that alcohol consumption changed, it either increased or decreased, and was significantly related to psychosocial consequences (CG & MDD).

Commentary

This value of this study⁴ is that it promotes the potential benefits of earlier engagement with the potential deleterious consequences of bereavement on physical and mental wellbeing. The potential health benefits, of a family bereavement programme, have been established in other research with bereaved families¹.

Sleep disturbance and alcohol consumption are known risk factors for poor physical and psychological health^{5,6}. Hence the identification of sleep disturbance and changes in alcohol consumption could be considered as part of a comprehensive strategy, for the support of bereaved families, in the prevention of psychological impairment. The findings of this study⁴ align with those noted in a 2014 review of health behaviour changes following bereavement⁶. Given the ageing global population and existing potential for co-morbidities, the effects of bereavement on health behaviour is an area in need of greater understanding.

The survey⁴ utilised is a snapshot of self-reported data about bereavement due to cancer, and may reflect Japanese culture in term of health behaviours and personal expression. The findings also reflect a particular moment in time for each person reporting the survey and may not reflect the actual volume of alcohol consumed the severity of grief or depression, or the degree of disordered sleep. Definitions of alcohol consumption or sleep disturbance, as applied to the survey participants, were limited by the nature of self-report.

More detailed, longitudinal data could provide a more comprehensive and authoritative data set related to alcohol consumption and health concerns in bereaved populations.

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Commentator Details

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No competing interests