



The role of negative interpretations of grief reactions in emotional problems after bereavement

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Abstract

This study explored the role of negative interpretations of grief reactions in emotional problems after bereavement, with 234 individuals who had been confronted with the death of a close relative. It was found that negative interpretations of grief reactions were highly associated with the degree to which these reactions were experienced as distressing, the degree to which mourners engaged in avoidance behaviours and the severity of symptoms of traumatic grief and depression, even when controlling for the frequency of grief reactions and the influence of relevant background variables. Furthermore, behavioural and cognitive avoidance strategies were significantly related to the severity of traumatic grief and depression. Negative interpretations of grief reactions and rumination explained most variance in symptom severity, when controlling for the shared variance between the predictor variables. The results have implications for the treatment of emotional problems after bereavement.

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1. Introduction

In the first weeks after the death of a loved one, most people experience a wide variety of psychological symptoms such as sadness, anger, separation distress, loss of

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interest in usual activities, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts. Several studies have shown that, in this period, significant proportions of bereaved individuals even meet criteria for disorders such as major depression (Zisook, Shuchter, Sledge, Paulus, & Judd, 1994), post-traumatic stress-disorder (PTSD) (Schut, De Keijser, Van den Bout, & Dijkhuis, 1991) and other anxiety disorders (Jacobs et al., 1990). In addition, a study by Prigerson et al. (1997), among conjugally bereaved elders, showed that at two months post-loss, more than half of the participants suffered from the disorder traumatic grief, encompassing symptoms of separation distress and traumatic distress. However, most of the aforementioned studies that investigated the long-term impact of bereavement have shown that as time progresses, most individuals recover from their symptoms. Only a minority of bereaved individuals continue to suffer from debilitating symptoms of traumatic grief or other emotional problems (cf. Horowitz et al., 1997; Prigerson et al., 1997). This suggests that the mere presence of intense emotions and other symptoms shortly after a loss does not indicate disturbance. Some theorists (e.g., Horowitz, 1986; Rachman, 1980) have even suggested that such symptoms are necessary for emotional processing, because they imply confrontation with the reality of the loss, and thus facilitate adaptation to the loss and the integration of the loss into pre-existing schemas. Given that the occurrence of grief reactions shortly after a loss is not abnormal, and perhaps even necessary for emotional processing, for a full understanding of the nature of persistent emotional problems after bereavement research will have to clarify what factors determine the maintenance, prolongation and intensification of these basically normal and benign grief reactions.

Different theorists (e.g., Horowitz, 1986) have proposed that grief reactions persist and exacerbate if emotional processing of the loss is prevented or incomplete due to avoidance behaviour. Avoidance may prevent habituation to painful memories (Foa & Kozak, 1986) and may interfere with the integration of the loss into pre-existing schemas and the development of new schemas that take the loss into account (Horowitz, 1986; Horowitz, Bonanno, & Holen, 1993). Avoidance may manifest behaviourally in the form of staying away from places or people, or avoiding cues that are reminders of the deceased. In addition, mourners may engage in cognitive avoidance strategies, such as thought suppression and rumination. The suppression of unwanted thoughts or memories has been known to cause paradoxical increments in the frequency of these phenomena, which may lead to an increase in emotional distress (Lavy & Van den Hout, 1994; Wegner, 1989). Rumination may block emotional processing because it focuses on experiences surrounding the loss rather than the implications of the loss itself, and because it makes negative thoughts and memories more accessible and salient, thus enhancing the negative mood state (cf. Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Wells, 1994).

What then determines who engages in avoidance behaviours? Building on the theoretical considerations of Ehlers and Steil (1995) concerning psychological maintaining factors in PTSD, it is assumed that mourners who experience their grief reactions as distressing are more likely to engage in strategies to avoid and control these reactions, than mourners who do not experience these as distressing. Thus, it is assumed that the occurrence of grief reactions does not necessarily mean that they

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