Effect of a bereavement support group on female adolescents’ psychological health: a randomised controlled trial in South Africa

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Summary

Background Bereavement increases children’s risk for psychological disorders, highlighting the need for effective interventions, especially in areas where orphanhood is common. We aimed to assess the effects of an eight-session support group intervention on the psychological health of bereaved female adolescents in South Africa.

Methods This randomised controlled trial enrolled female adolescents at 11 schools in three peri-urban towns of Free State province, South Africa. 453 bereaved ninth-grade students aged 13–17 years who had expressed interest in taking part in the group were randomly assigned (1:1) to receive the intervention or to be waitlisted for programme enrolment after the study period and serve as the control group. The intervention, Abangane (“friends” in isiZulu), is a locally derived, curriculum-based support group focused on coping with loss incorporating indigenous stories and cognitive behavioural therapy components. Weekly group sessions were facilitated by trained social workers or social auxiliary workers from a local non-profit organisation. The primary outcomes included indicators of grief and depression as reported by adolescents and behavioural problems reported by their caregivers. Grief was measured with three scales: the grief subscale of the Core Bereavement Items to assess normative grief; and the Intrusive Grief Thoughts Scale and the Inventory of Complicated Grief–Revised for Children to assess maladaptive grief symptoms in the past 4 weeks. Depression symptoms in the past 7 days were measured with the Center for Epidemiological Studies–Depression Scale for Children. Caregivers completed the Brief Problem Monitor-Parent Form to report on adolescent’s behaviour in the previous 4 weeks. Analysis was intention to treat. This study is registered with ClinicalTrials.gov, number NCT02368808.

Findings Between Sept 30, 2014, and Feb 5, 2015, eligible female participants were identified, of whom 226 were assigned to the intervention, Abangane, and 227 were assigned to the waitlisted control group. Analysis included 382 adolescents who completed both surveys (193 participants assigned to Abangane and 189 assigned to waitlist). At follow up, the intervention group had significantly lower scores for primary outcomes, including intrusive grief (p=0.000, Cohen’s d=−0.21), complicated grief (p=0.015, d=−0.14), and depression (p=0.009, d=−0.21) relative to the waitlisted group, while core bereavement scores were similar between groups (p=0.269). Caregivers in the intervention group reported lower levels of behavioural problems among adolescents (p=0.017, d=−0.31).

Interpretation Short-term, structured, theory-based support groups with contextually relevant content show promise in mitigating psychological and behavioural problems among bereaved adolescents. Abangane is replicable in resource limited settings, using freely available curriculum materials, existing programme structures, and appropriately trained personnel to implement it.

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Introduction Early bereavement is common in South Africa, where almost a fifth of children have lost a parent and many more have experienced the death of another family member or friend.1–3 Of the 3·8 million children in the country who have lost one or both parents, almost two-thirds were orphaned due to AIDS.4 Violence and accidents also contribute to high and increasing adult mortality in the country.4

Despite the serious potential consequences of bereavement in childhood, including risk for depression, maladaptive grief, and other emotional and behavioural problems,5,6 few evidence-based bereavement support services are available to children in South Africa.7 Four randomised controlled trials done in sub-Saharan Africa of psychological treatments for children experiencing depression, trauma, or parental loss have shown the positive effects of group interventions with a trained facilitator,8–10 as has one pre-post assessment focused specifically on grief.8 Related systematic reviews emphasise the need to develop and test interventions that can be feasibly implemented in low-income and middle-income
Abangane, on the psychological health of bereaved children to adequately address children’s grief and depression.15−16

We aimed to assess the effect of a locally derived, theory-based support group for female adolescents who have experienced the death of someone important in their lives. To the best of our knowledge this study represents the first rigorous evaluation of a structured bereavement support programme for adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa.

Methods
Study design and participants
This randomised controlled trial was designed to evaluate the effect of a structured intervention, Abangane, on the psychological health of bereaved female adolescents in the Free State province of South Africa; an area with high HIV prevalence.17 The intervention was implemented in 11 peri-urban schools in three towns by a local non-profit organisation, Child Welfare Bloemfontein & Childline Free State (CWBFN), with all 11 schools included in the evaluation. The schools were chosen by the provincial Department of Education in consultation with CWBFN with emphasis on serving those most in need considering vulnerability indicators of the area and school population.

The study population was identified through a school-based intake process routinely used by CWBFN to identify orphans and vulnerable children eligible for services. Eighth grade students (ages 12–17 years) from participating schools completed an intake form from
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