
LIFE AFTER LOSS AFTER LOSS: A CASE STUDY OF GRIEF FROM PARENT LOSS AFTER BEING SEPARATED FOR A LONG PERIOD OF TIME

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Abstract

This paper is a qualitative case study that focuses on defining the grief experiences, coping mechanisms, and support systems of those people who have experienced parent loss after being separated for a long period of time. Four (4) individuals aged 19-40 years are interviewed through online platforms in order to gather necessary information. The findings revealed that physical time spent with parent prior to its death could impact the grieving experience and process of the bereaved child. Part also of the grief experience of the participants is the recollection of memories that maintained their relationship with their departed parents. Participants in this study denoted that reliving and recollecting the positive image of their parents helped them to deal with their grief, inspired them to continue life and be closer to their departed parents. Engaging with a strong support system can help a grieving individual in better coping and maintaining their physical and mental well-being.

Keywords: death; grief; bereaved; coping; physical and mental well-being

Introduction

Parent-child relationship refers to the relationship that is built by the parents and their children (Beckwith et al., 2002) that is special and prominent (Mihalec et al., 2020) from other family members. Family is the first environment wherein a child experiences interaction (Thomas et al., 2019). Maintaining constant communication, strong bonds, and openness with their children (McClure, 2020) is important for parents and vice versa to maintain the

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family's healthy well-being (Morillo et al., 2013) both physically and psychologically (Johnson et al., 2005). Bowlby's Theory of Attachment also pointed out that a child formed his bond during his early age therefore parents must be present to cater to it and further nurture it by continuously responding to a child's needs throughout his development stage (MSEd, 2023). The role of the parents is very important to a child's development because it can affect his later cognitive and social functioning (Sheinbaum et al., 2015).

In the Philippines, family relationships are rooted in the value of familism (Lacar, 1995). Familism refers to the orientation of a family member that the family should always come first and alongside this is the fulfillment of the obligation of helping them and providing for their financial and emotional needs, even if it requires sacrifices (Choi et al., 2017; Corona et al., 2016; Morillo et al., 2013; Germán et al., 2008). Due to the economic challenges in the Philippines Filipino families have stepped on the era of parent migration, wherein a parent will shoulder the challenge of the family by migrating to another country and earning money that will suffice the family's needs (Démurger et al., 2015; Semynov & Gondzeisky, 2004). The family will be left at home and the remaining parent and other family members will have to assume dual responsibilities (Cuong & Vu, 2015; Morillo et al., 2013) to fill the absence of one parent. The reality of Filipino families is a reflection of the ever-changing world and how it affects some aspects of an individual's life and well-being.

The reasons why some parents are away from home and their child varies from one family to another. One reason was discussed in the previous paragraph, while others included cases of separation of parents, a child was sent to a relative that can support their study, and in the light of the Coronavirus Infectious Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, there are cases of parent and child separation due to community quarantine restrictions and health and safety protocols. The effects of separation from parents can be detrimental (Chen et al., 2019) to the parent-child relationship because it can affect their emotional and behavioral growth, and their attachment to their parents. Numerous studies are showing that parental absence, caused by the aforementioned reasons, has negative effects on the education, and physical and mental health of children. The mental health of children experiencing separation from their parents can be vulnerable while going through different emotions (Mahilum, 2013) and situations in their lives. It shows that a child that is far away from his parents can be affected in many ways such as their ability to deal with loss and death.

In the past two years, the death rate in the Philippines has once again reached one of its highest peaks. The Philippine Commission on Population and Development reported 768,504 registered deaths in December 2021, it was the highest mortality rate in 63 years since World War II. Many Filipino families have suffered loss for many reasons but one of the main reasons for the past year is COVID19 Infection. The effects of COVID-19 vary from person to person, some have been comfortably staying inside their homes, some have been away from their loved ones due to quarantine restrictions, some have been halted from

working due to workplace policies, and some have lost their loved ones. Because of this, Tee, Tee, Anlacan, Aligam, Reyes, Kuruchittham, and Ho (2020) found that the COVID-19 pandemic set off moderate-to-severe psychological impacts (*such as* anxiety, depression, and stress) among Filipinos. About this, mental health professionals suggested that the rampant occurrence of anxiety is found to be linked with the loss and death of a loved one ("Anxiety Causes and Prevention", 2006).

Loss (Blehart, 2021) and death (Mammoser, 2017) have become a painful and inevitable part of human life. Try asking someone randomly on the street and they will tell you that they have experienced even once, the death of a friend or a loved one. Every individual has an equal chance of losing someone in their life. Even though it is a normal part of life, many people still find it difficult to deal with. The question is how do people deal with loss and death?

As a response to loss and death, people grieve ("Mental Health / Husky Health & Well-Being", 2023). Grief is about more than just death. It is a normal yet painful reaction of a person to a loss. People can grieve for the loss of any kind, it can be a loss of a significant belonging that a person treasures as his own. Losing a loved one through death is shocking and painful especially if it is sudden. Sudden death does not prepare the family for such a situation, it just comes. The remaining family members will be left to grieve for the loss of their loved one. Grief is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as a profound and strong emotion that can cause distress to someone's mental state. People show and define their grief differently (Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2017). Children, commonly exhibit changing moods wherein they will cry for quite some time and will be giggly the next moment, and they might have a hard time grasping their emotions related to the death of a loved one because the concept of death and grief itself might be still new for them (Ehmke & Saltz, 2023). Adolescents commonly express their grief through anger, sadness, and guilt (Andrienssen et al., 2018), and they define it as an overwhelming and challenging emotion (Haley, 2023). While for adults, view grief as a normal part of life because as people progress in life, they create relationships with other people and when they lose someone, grief is a normal response (Webmaster & Webmaster, 2020).

Objectives

About the experience of parental loss and grief, this study aimed to explore and describe the grief experience of people who experience parental loss from a parent who was separated from them for some time (2 years or more). Specifically, this study aimed to identify and understand (1) how individuals separated from a parent for some time describe their grief experience after that parent's death, (2) what are their coping mechanisms, and (3) support systems through the course of their grief experience. This study aimed to give another perspective on grief experiences given the different contexts surrounding the grief of each individual in this study. This study will fill the gap in the existing

literature because it mainly provides information about parents' or spouses' grief experiences.

Methods

Participants

The participants of this study are 4 Filipinos aged 19-40 who experienced parent loss after being separated for a long period, specifically 2 years or more. This age group was selected to avoid issues with giving consent. Specific criteria for experience are also included to obtain more specific, objective, and orderly data that are important for the data analysis. Therefore, this study did not include minors and those people who do not experience parent loss after being separated for a long period. Only participants who qualify in the following inclusion criteria are included in the study. Due to some difficulties in finding qualified participants, the researcher proceeded with only 4 participants for the study.

This study aimed to explore and describe the grief experiences of people who experience parental loss after being separated for years before the death of their deceased parent. Participants of this study aged from 19-40 years old. Participants in this study have lost their parents under different circumstances, thus their definition of their grief experience varies.

In Table 1, the Participants' profile is presented, all of them have qualified for the selection criteria of this study. Lourdes, David, and Elizabeth came from the same family and lost their mother due to cancer. Lourdes is the eldest of four children in the family, a mother of two sons, and currently employed. David is the second child and the only son of her mother, and also currently working. Elizabeth is the third child and is currently a college student. Before the death of their mother, she worked overseas and thus separated from her children for 10 years. She came back to the country for rest and treatment when she found out that she had a cyst on her breast and continuous bleeding. Later on, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 cervical cancer, and after a year and three months when she came home, she died in the hospital.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Participant's assigned name	Age	Number of years separated from parent
Participant 1 Lourdes	30	10
Participant 2 David	27	10
Participant 3 Elizabeth	22	10
Participant 4 Agatha	37	15

Agatha, on the other hand, is the eldest daughter of her father who died of a sudden heart attack. She lives abroad and is a mother to her two daughters. Before the sudden death of her father, they were separated for more than 15 years because Agatha is currently based abroad and her father also worked abroad when she was a child. Agatha's father died a week after she took her vacation in the country, met her father, and returned abroad.

Measures

To achieve the goals of this study, the researcher crafted interview questions. A thorough review of the literature provided a crucial part of the guided construction of the questions since it allowed the researcher to delve into multiple facets of grief, which is essential for identifying the core concepts that the questions will cover. Questions were created for the grief experience to explore grief's emotional, bodily, and mental effects on people. For the coping mechanisms questions focused on the methods that individuals use to deal with their grief. The focus of the support system questions was on identifying sources of support, how these support systems have changed over time, and their perceived efficacy. To ensure the accuracy and validity of the interview questions, it went through the review and validation of experts in psychology, counseling, and test development. After the validation, the researcher revised the questions based on the suggestions and comments of the validators regarding the arrangements, choice of words, relevance, and ethical considerations. After the revision, it is returned to the validators for final checking and the final recommendation that it be administered. Validation is necessary to ensure that the material is understandable, well-organized, relevant to the research topic, and capture what the study requires. It also necessary to ensure that no questions are offending to the respondents and abide by the ethical standard of research. Validation also assures that no questions will be redundant. This procedure makes sure that the data that is produced is rich, significant, and beneficial for improving comprehension of grief as a human experience.

Procedure

The data are collected through semi-structured interviews in Google Docs and Zoom, meetings are recorded only upon having an agreement with the participants. Recorded interviews will ensure the accuracy and preciseness of the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Semi-structured interviews are conducted which include open-ended questions and follow-up what, why, and how questions that are essential to the research problem. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) described this type of interview as an effective way of maintaining a balance of relationship and rigor because it can help a researcher better explore the thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and experiences of an individual or group of people toward deep and intricate topics. Interviews in Google Docs are done by the researcher posting the interview questions and allowing the participants to answer the questions during their free time.

Data analysis

Data must be gathered in a systematic process to gain accurate and objective results (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is utilized in analyzing and interpreting the data because it can help the researcher in having "a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher has utilized coding to have an organized and brief overview of the data. The coded responses are collated according to the preconceived themes that are based on the research questions which are grief experience, coping mechanisms, and support

system. Under these main themes, the researcher has also defined and generated different sub-themes. This analysis has been useful in looking at the similarities of participants in their perspectives, reactions, and insights that help conclude.

Results and discussion

From the interviews conducted by the researcher, the following sub-themes are identified as part of their grief experience: reaction to the death, effect of prior separation and distance to grieving, impact of death, and recollection of memories with the deceased parent.

Definition of grief experience

Grief experience is usually composed of (1) reactions to death, (2) impact from death, (3) thoughts related to the deceased, and (4) coping strategies (Guzzo & Gobbi, 2021). It is a universal feeling experienced in a time of death or loss of someone. It is usually characterized by great sadness, defeat, loss, or hollowness. The grieving process and grief experience vary across people as each has a different and unique context and circumstances of experiencing grief. From the interviews conducted by the researcher, the following sub themes are identified as part of their grief experience: reaction to the death, effect of prior separation and distance to grieving, impact of death, and recollection of memories with the deceased parent.

Reaction to the death

Though death was somehow expected for the mother of Lourdes, David, and Elizabeth after being diagnosed with Stage 4 Cervical Cancer and getting confined in the hospital for four months, the pain of her death still left her children unprepared. As Elizabeth mentioned in the interviews:

"I think I was the most aware at the time that my mother may be gone any time soon, though my older brother got time to be prepared too in the last week because my mother already showed physical signs of deterioration. So when I heard the news of her passing, I was not surprised. But still, the amount of pain and loss was so much and I am not prepared for it".

Pain is an inevitable feeling felt by the bereaved after their loved ones die. As noted by Elizabeth, no preparation can prepare someone for the amount of pain and loss that a bereaved person can experience in the instance of death. This pain can be expressed in various ways but its most common manifestation is through crying. Participants of this study resorted to crying to express their pain in the departure of their parents. Accompanied by crying is the constant calling of the parent's name to express the pain. In the case of Agatha, who was based abroad when her father unexpectedly died of cardiac arrest, crying helped her to process the death of her father.

"...and then at the time little by little it sunk because my father was gone and then that time when I got back in the car I cried, really cried. 'Daddy, I miss you, thank you, sorry' things like that".

This pain felt by the bereaved families is intensified by the feeling of regret felt toward the lost dead parents. Participants expressed their regret for

wasted time and opportunities to say personally to their parents how much they love them, apologize for their wrongdoings, and repay the sacrifices done for them. These thoughts contributed to the pain of losing their loved ones.

Another reaction is denial and a feeling of surrealness. All participants experienced the feeling of not immediately accepting the fact that they lost their parents, and the slow "sinking in" of that reality. Participants cling to the hope that the news they received was some kind of joke. They feel like they are dreaming and waiting to wake up.

For the participants of this study, pain, crying, regret, and denial were the common reactions they felt when they learned of the death of their parents. Grief was intensified by these negative reactions resulting in an intense sense of loss experienced by the bereaved family members.

Effect of prior separation/ distance on grief experience

Participants in this study were separated from their parents before their parents' deaths because these parents worked overseas for the family. When asked if they would feel or react differently to the death of their parents if they were not separated before the demise of their parents, participants responded that they would. According to Agatha, she cannot use the excuse that she is using today to hide the fact that her father is dead if they were not separated before her father's death, that is why she believes that "everything has a purpose why it happened".

"...very different (I will be sadder if we are not separated) because as you can see right now I always, I can easily change, I don't know if it's easy but maybe it's easy for me to think that my father is not here, I grow up without him' so I can easily change my thought like he's just abroad".

Lourdes, on the other hand, further explained that she would be sadder about the death of her mother because she might have spent more time with her.

"Maybe I would be sadder if Mom stayed with us and did not work abroad. We might have spent more time".

It can be seen from the participants' answers that their grieving experiences were affected by their prior separation. Though they are greatly affected by the loss and death of their parents, they believe that it could have been more intense if they spent more time with their parents. It can also be noted that in some ways, participants use their prior experience of separation from their parents to cope with their permanent separation. Participants are not new to the feeling of separation from their parents and they used it to deal with their grief. However, it must also be noted that while this can help in processing the acceptance of the death of the deceased parent, it can affect the acceptance of the new reality that they are permanently separated from each other which may lead to possible developmental problems.

Impacts of death

Loss of parents may affect both the family as a whole and each of its members. Lourdes observed that since her mother's death, their family seems to have lost direction.

Upon observing this, Lourdes decided to continue the legacy of their mother and was the one initiating bonding in their family. It can be seen in this situation that aside from changes in the family structure, some family members change their roles in the family. Someone must change and assume a new role to fill in the gap that was left by the deceased parent.

Elizabeth and Agatha, meanwhile, share the feeling of missing the deceased parent and a feeling of hollowness. For Agatha, it seems that she had lost her dreams upon the death of her father:

"I wanted to buy something for him, so when I lost him I felt like 'oh no, I thought I would buy this for you' things like that, I feel like I don't have dreams to chase anymore...to help my father or not help but give something in return".

The deceased parent could leave a hollow in the lives of their bereaved children that can deeply affect the life and development of their children. Missing them could result not only in reliving and remembering their memories but also the pain, frustrations, and regret of not being able to accomplish their dreams with them.

David on the other hand described the impact of their mother's death as an eye-opener situation.

"It's an eye-opener. It taught me that I need to appreciate the time I have right now with the people who are there for me right from the start".

The situation opened David to value the relationships that he has. It is noteworthy to mention that the death of a loved one opens an opportunity for the bereaved families to reflect on their other relationships, how they are dealing with them, and how they value them. The death of a loved one helps people to reinvent their views on relationships and establish more concrete relationships. This experience of David aligns with studies by Andriessen et al. (2018) that show that the death of a parent can help bereaved adolescents to better appreciate time, be grateful for life, and have a mature outlook in life.

Recollection of memories and relation with the deceased parent

Part of the grieving experience is reliving and recollecting the memories of the deceased parent. For participants of this study, recollection of the memories of their deceased parent especially during their final moments, and holding onto the positive image of the deceased parent can help them to continue in life and draw inspiration from it. On the recollection of his mother's life and battle with cancer, David noted how brave her mother was:

"She's one of the toughest people I know. There was a time when I didn't know where to go and I was one of those "tambays" who was not scared of anyone or anything but guess what? She's the one who straightened me up, lol. She made choices that other mothers out there will hesitate to make but for her children, hesitation is not an option for her. She has worked and sacrificed so much just to see that we can enjoy life and get a decent future. I respect her to this day for that and I love her so much for not giving up on us. By the way, when she worked as a call center agent when I was just in 3rd grade, I thought that it was one of the coolest jobs out there. That's why she

became my inspiration that someday I'll be a good call center agent that can provide for his family and today, I'm living that dream. Thank you 'Ma'.

"She lost her fight to cancer. I was there and I saw how she wanted to keep on going, that's how tough she is. Even cancer couldn't make her give up, her body lost the fight but her strong will to live for us never died".

From the standpoint of David, her mother's life and bravery even at the toughest of her time is something worth emulating and a source of inspiration. Participants of this study maintained a relationship with their deceased parents through reliving their memories. Gratitude to their parents' lives and sacrifices is one of the recurring answers of the participants when asked what they feel about their departed parents. It can be inferred that participants recollect most of the time the happy memories they have and experience with their deceased parent.

Coping mechanisms

Coping is a process where a person tries to adapt himself/herself to a negative event or emotion that surrounds him. Coping is usually positive things or mechanisms that a person does to maintain a normal state of well-being amidst stressful life events. Coping with a loss of any kind varies from individual to individual, everyone has their context surrounding the loss and grief that they are going through. According to Koblenz (2016), finding an individualized way to cope was recognized as an effective practice in dealing with the grief of loss. From the interviews conducted by the researcher, the following sub-themes are identified in their coping mechanisms: the feeling of relief, changes in roles and maintaining a strong image, and coping techniques.

The feeling of relief

Death has become a part of the reality of life. At any time it can happen to anyone and bereaved loved ones may feel mixed emotions about their loss. Lourdes lost her mother to cervical cancer, she saw how this disease tormented her mother. She said that her mother has been "out" of the hospital because there are days when she will be okay and only a few days her bad state will return to the point that they cannot even talk to her.

Lourdes witnessed her mother's death firsthand because she was with her in the ambulance when they decided to take her home to let her heal in the comfort of their house and be together with their family again. At that time she could not fully accept that her mother was gone, it didn't sink in until she saw her mother, whom she idolized the most because of her courage, had completely surrendered to death.

For Lourdes, her mother is the one she admires the most because she is always positive whenever they face a problem. "Don't be discouraged, it's just a problem, you can get over it" was her mother's advice as always.

As a step in getting over the challenges of grief, Lourdes shared how she comforts herself whenever she feels sad about the loss of her mother. She said,

"Most of the time it's sad because I miss her. But when I think that she is no longer in pain, she seems to be peaceful, I feel the same way, it's better

because she won't be suffering anymore. Like, I'm now sure that she won't feel any pain".

Although Lourdes misses her mother, she feels relieved now knowing that her mother is at peace and free from pain. She said that at least now, her mother does not need to suffer anymore. This statement of Lourdes can be interpreted as her coping mechanism for accepting the loss of her mother. It hurts to see someone struggle, especially parents. People often wish to end their parent's suffering and sometimes it is fulfilled in different ways. For Lourdes, her mother's death is painful but she just thinks that maybe this is the way to end her suffering. Grieving individuals find their way to cope with their grief and in Lourdes' case, she is trying to give a more positive understanding of her mother's death by feeling relieved that she is now in a peaceful state. She is using this thought to cope and wash away her sadness.

Changes in roles and maintaining a strong image

In human life, everyone has a role to play. Role at work or school, role in the community, role in friendship, and above all, role in the family. Parents have a big role in the family, the father as the "pillar" and the mother as the "light". When it comes to the moment that they have to leave this world, their role in the family will be empty, and sometimes, someone steps up to fill it in.

One of the coping mechanisms identified in this study is the change in the roles of the family members left behind by the deceased parent. It explains how a grieving person takes on a dual role when a family member is gone. Just like Elizabeth's experience, she said,

"So me, I'm the one who cleans, goes shopping, I'm the one who budgets the money, I'm the one who cleans the house, I'm the one who tells my nephew and sibling what they should do. So, it's like I became the mother figure when (mother died)".

Elizabeth was just a sister before but now, she experienced being the mother figure in their family. Lourdes has the same experience as Elizabeth, she said that it has sunk into her that she has to be a mother to her younger siblings and be her father's companion in family duties. She said that part of her acceptance of this change is always being strong for the family despite the sadness. About this, Agatha shared the same sentiment about being strong, she shared that when she came home for the funeral of his father she had to be strong in front of her family for them not to worry about her. It has been their coping mechanism to maintain their strong image to be able to assure their family that they are doing well.

As for David and Agatha, nothing has changed in their roles in the family. David said, "I'm still the son of my mother who will continue to support our family because that's how she/they raised me. Changes won't affect my role for them.", meaning that whatever changes have happened to their family, David will always stick to his role as the one who supports their family because that's what his mother taught them. While for Agatha, is still the older sister of her brothers whom they can rely on, and nothing has changed.

Sticking to their role has helped David and Agatha in coping with their sadness. They both continue being reliable brothers and sisters to their siblings. But for Elizabeth, accepting the change in her role has helped her cope with her grief because now that she is covering her mother's role, she finds strength in it. She said,

"...because I feel like I'm doing what mom wants to happen that life goes on, that I look at my sibling and nephew and then manage the house, I'll always clean it because she doesn't want our house to be a mess. She used to always scold us when the house was dirty, so, keeping what she wanted before seems to have become my coping mechanism in some ways through this, Mom will be fond of me if she ever watches in some ah, in some (place), we already know that".

Elizabeth felt fulfilled that she was able to do the things that her mother liked and that life must go on. By playing her mother's role, Elizabeth was able to keep her family and their house in good condition. It has become a coping mechanism and hobby for her because she now understands and enjoys the tasks that her mother used to do. Even though sometimes she misses and thinks "I wish mom was here because it's not tiring when mom is here"), the feeling of fulfillment that she can finally do the things her late mother wanted is more important for Elizabeth.

It is found in this study that changing roles have been of great help for grieving individuals. It has become a coping mechanism and a part of their lives. They fill the roles of their deceased parents not as an attempt to replace them but as an attempt to rebuild themselves that has been taken away by grief.

Coping techniques

A greater number of coping mechanism skills would benefit those people who are aiming to improve their psychological well-being. The more you have many ways to cope with sadness, the more chances that your emotions can be more stable. When asked about how they recovered from the loss of their parent, Lourdes shared that she has not recovered yet so as a way of coping with the loss of her mother, she makes herself busy at work. She also noted how her prior experience of separation from her mother is helping her to condition her mind that her mother is just abroad again.

"Right now we are thinking "Mama just went abroad". That's how we feel when it doesn't sink in that she won't come back. We just feel like she's far away again, so somehow we can fight the sadness because we're used to her being far away".

Same with what Agatha is doing, she would just think that his father is abroad again, and now that she is based abroad, she said that she has an advantage in times that she would think of her father because she will just think that he is here in the Philippines. Agatha said that she does not want to remember the death of her father which can be interpreted that she is avoiding the fact that she already lost her father. Elizabeth also tries not to confront the reality of her grief, she often distracts herself to avoid dwelling on her emotions.

While it can be helpful to avoid feelings of sadness, it can have a detrimental effect on a person's psychological well-being. Frequent avoidance of confronting feelings may result in a lower tolerance of certain emotions. In Agatha and Elizabeth's case, they often avoid their feelings of sadness which is why they are not used to it and always feel the need to avoid it. Unhealthy avoiding can lead to a vicious cycle of running away from reality.

Support system

After experiencing a loss, an individual faces the challenge of recovery. Recovery is a process that a grieving person goes through to overcome the pain brought by a loss. Important that they have strong support that they can lean on in times of grief. The support system is a vital part of maintaining the harmony of an individual's well-being and health condition. It serves as their defense and source of strength to fight the possible negative emotions that can disturb an individual's harmony (Cacciatore et al., 2021). In the study of Dyregrov and Dyregrov (2008), it is found that support is important for the survival of grieving individuals during the early phase of grief. Immediate support usually comes from family, friends, and colleagues. Based on the interviews conducted, there are four sub-themes for support systems identified, those are the deceased parent, main support, supplemental support, and self-care.

Deceased parent

After a funeral, the relationship with the deceased person is thought to be over but for the participants, it is just the beginning of a more meaningful relationship that helps them in going through life. At first, when asked about his support system, David answered, "There's none", which can be interpreted that David usually goes through his grief on his own. As a follow-up question, the researcher asked David about the self-support that he does to deal with his emotions about the loss of his mother. David shared that work is helping him "a little bit" and then he told his unique support system. He said,

"I think work is helping me a little bit because even though it's stressful at times, I just have this urge to continue because I know that she's up there smiling knowing that her only son is trying. And just like she always says, trying is worth more time than doing nothing at all".

David still thinks about his late mother whenever he is stressed at work. He always thinks that his mother is still watching over everything he does, so it can be interpreted that his mother serves as his support to continue. His mother has been his strength and inspiration since he was a child. He has shared that back then he was dreaming to be a "good call center agent that can provide for his family" just like his mother back when he was in 3rd grade, and now he said that he is living that dream. His mother's death is painful and full of goodbyes but for David, his mother was not gone for all eternity. Albeit through her memories that were left behind, his deceased mother still helps him in keeping his urge to continue and strive in life.

Aside from the social environment and social activities, David's experience showed that the deceased parent and his/her memory can also serve

as a support to grieving individuals. Thinking about them can be painful but at the same time can be helpful. David found comfort in remembering her mother that he lost. Typically, people who are grieving rely on the people/things that they have and what is left of them, they commonly find refuge in their remaining family members, friends, and/or colleagues but in David's case, he was able to rely on the person that he lost, his mother. His relationship with his mother has not ended but instead, it remains meaningful as he goes on in his life with his mother, in his mind. It is important to note that this is a unique experience among the participants and can be useful in coping but can also be a hindrance in the process of fully accepting the death of a loved one that may lead to possible developmental problems.

Main support

Family is one of the immediate and good sources of support during grieving times. They are the ones whom you can rely on in times when you feel sad and alone. Sympathy at these times plays an important role within the family. Agatha noted that "support is not just saying that 'you will be okay'", for her, simply being there or a small talk with her husband and daughters helps her. Being there for the family is strong support for those members who need support the most. Elizabeth acknowledged that she is not the only one who needs support which is why sticking together is one of her family's actions during her mother's funeral.

"Maybe our action was because I'm not the only one who needs support. We were together until the end since Mom was there and Mom died. My sibling and I immediately went to the ambulance before Mom was taken to the funeral home. We went with them, accompanied, I sympathized with my sister and my grandmother because they were first hand who were there when mom passed away. Emotional support for each other and then when we are holding the funeral, we help each other because we are the only ones who took care of everything".

Being together helped Elizabeth's family in managing her mother's funeral. While for Lourdes, she shared that even after the funeral she is keeping her contact with her family to receive and give support to them. Members rely on each other to keep things together and make sure that everyone is doing fine. Although there are times that some members seem to lie low in contacting the family, there is one member who initiates the talk, just like Lourdes.

"For me, my husband and my two kids and of course my father and siblings because we need to be together. Although they are always there, checking, "Ate, how are you?", it's like, not very often. You're the only one who will take the initiative to do something, follow up with them on things."

Having constant contact with the family helps to support each other emotionally. These contacts do not always have to be formal or emotional. It can be casual just like Agatha's experience as a grieving individual who is away from her relatives. When she is not busy she'll just talk to her cousins because according to her, it's the easiest and fun way. She also said that even though she's

abroad, she is thankful for the existence of online messaging applications because "it's a lot easier" to contact her family.

"I am so grateful I have lots of cousins because anything under the sun, we can talk about even not about my father, you're feeling alone or sad right now, for example like today I'm alone if I feel sad then I'll just call to my cousins anyone of them just how are you and what did you eat, so it will divert your feeling, your thought and then after a small chit-chat you feel happy and then your mind will be clear again so things like that".

Lourdes, Elizabeth, and Agatha received support from their family. Their experiences show that family is one of the biggest help for grieving people. They serve as a distraction, comfort, and support in facing grief from loss. Truly in times of sadness, there is a family that a person can hold on to.

Supplemental support

Aside from family, close friends, and partners (boyfriend/girlfriend) also provide support to grieving individuals. People who have experienced a loss frequently continue to feel the need for assistance from their social groups. Elizabeth's close friends are her classmates. She is in her last year in college when she lost her mother so it was very challenging for her when her mother passed away. Her grief was accompanied by a lot of schoolwork. Responsibilities at school and in her family seem so hard but luckily, Elizabeth has good and "supportive" friends who helped her catch up with everything that happened, she said,

"And then my friends, they are also very helpful because they are very supportive when I really can't cope or keep up with what's happening in our GC, they are the ones who update me when I pass late, they will tell me to pass on this, that. Because it was really in the beginning (of the happenings), I can't keep up with tasks, I always don't know anything. So, they were very supportive especially when I was here when they saw me they didn't forget to say hello and then they always included me in their plans".

The constant greeting and company of her classmates have been a great help to Elizabeth so that she feels that she is not alone. After her mother's funeral in their province, she had to return to Manila to continue her studies, which is why she was away from his father and siblings again. Elizabeth also shared how her boyfriend and his family helped her cope and maintain her sanity despite the circumstances. According to Elizabeth, her boyfriend and his mother had joined them during the funeral in the province and now that she is in Manila, she said that it seemed that she still has a mother/ mother figure in the shape of her boyfriend's mother who is very caring of her. The siblings of her boyfriend are also looking after her because they constantly check up on her.

Elizabeth has many sources of support besides her family. With her friends, she can relax by bonding with them through eating out and helping each other with school work. With the help of her boyfriend and his family, she can vent out her feelings which is a big help in expressing her emotions and thoughts to prevent her from developing anxiety or depression related to the emotion of loss. This supports the suggestion of Jacobson et al. (2017) that the perceived

emotional social support has significantly moderated the connection between anxiety and later depressive symptoms. The more a person joins social groups rather than isolating, the more likely that they will likely to cope with the loss of a loved one (Aslanzadeh, 2017). This shows that support is essential to those grieving individuals who need and want it.

Self-care

It is noted in the study of Andriessen et al. (2018) that self-care is identified by adolescents as having a later positive impact on their development after the loss of their parents. Self-care is a self-centered act that people do consciously for the sake of maintaining their well-being. Maintaining one's well-being is important during coping with a loss. It is a way of showing love and appreciation for one's own life. For Elizabeth, self-care is one of her ways to support herself while grieving. As a way of spoiling herself, she will buy something that she wants from her favorite online shops. She also perpetually performs skincare routines as a way of showing care to herself even during her sad moments. Lastly, Elizabeth still doesn't forget what her mother always taught her before. Elizabeth said,

"Uhm, maybe I always follow mom's advice, I take care of myself. So even though I'm busy, I don't stay up too much because my mom told me not to stay up too late because it's dangerous when you get sick, sometimes I do some skin care, so even if we're a little sad, we can't get pimples, so skincare is life. So those are the little things you do for yourself to be, still in control".

Elizabeth described self-care routines as little things that she is doing for herself to still be in control at times when she is occupied by her grief. Taking care of yourself is the greatest support that you can give yourself. Sometimes when people are sad they have a tendency to neglect themselves due to feelings of hopelessness and tiredness, getting used to it is not healthy. A person should take care of themselves profusely because at the end of it all, even if they lose everything and everyone, there will still be something left, themselves.

Participants of the study have shared their individual experiences that helped the researcher in defining their grief experience using different sub-themes that have emerged in the data analysis. They also identified their coping mechanisms and unique support systems that are helping them in facing their grief. Each of them was able to share newer perspectives and ideas regarding grief from parent loss after being separated for a long period.

Conclusions and implications

Grieving is a natural part of life being experienced and felt in time of death and loss of someone. Losing a parent is a painful experience, it can affect many facets of the lives of their children. From the data gathered from the participants of this study, the grief experiences of children who were separated from their parents before the latter's death because of the parent's work overseas, affect the grieving experiences of the bereaved children. Though the reaction to and impacts of the death of the parent are still experienced and described as

painful and sad, and instill the feelings and emotions of hollowness, regret, denial, and loss of direction, participants noted that they could have felt it more intense if they were not separated before their parent's death.

It can be inferred based on the results of this study that physical time spent with loved ones before their death could affect the grieving experience and process of the bereaved persons. Should a person spend more time with his/her loved ones before their death, the greater and more intense emotion a person can feel. It can be said that the grieving experience is different for people who spend more time with their loved ones before their death.

It is also worth mentioning the observation that people who were separated from their parents before the latter's death could use their experience of being separated to cope with the loss of their parents. As good as it may sound at first, it may cause a problem for the bereaved children in accepting the new reality of permanent separation from their parents.

Coping is a way to deal with and recover from the pain of losing someone in a time like death. Participants in this study cope with the loss of their parents by busying themselves with their work, school, and other adult stuff. Avoiding the feeling of grief and thinking about the permanent loss of their parents is another way of coping. Others also use as a coping mechanism the new role they play in the family because of the death of their parents with a mindset that this is what their departed parent would want for them. Participants in this study also use a positive mindset thinking that at least their departed parents need not suffer anymore in pain and sickness.

These coping mechanisms may pose problems later on in life as the bereaved family members are trying to dodge and avoid their new reality. Though it may help them momentarily to deal with the pain of losing their parents, avoidance will only prolong their pain and might cause developmental and emotional problems. It will leave their grief unfinished which might affect their moving on and forward process.

Having a support system is important in processing one's grief and moving on from a traumatic and painful experience. Engaging with a strong support system can help grieving individual in better coping and maintaining their physical and mental well-being. It is suggested that individuals who isolate tend to have a slowed recovery compared to those who engage in social support activities. Participants in this study find solace in support with their families, peers, and even the departed parents themselves. It can be seen that even up to the last, bereaved children still draw their strength to move on with their departed parents. It reflects what kind of relationship with the deceased parent the bereaved children have.

It was also observed in this study an unusual support system that was mentioned by one of the participants. His consideration of himself as his support system could be a result of his confidence in himself to deal with their grief and at the same time of clinging to the relationships and teaching of the bereaved parents. Meanwhile, it can be also inferred from this situation that the

participant's consideration of himself as his support system could be a result of his prior experience of separation from his parent before the latter's death. It can be observed that children who were separated from their parents before their death could develop and use this experience in dealing with the permanent loss and separation of their parents.

Limitations and future research directions

Due to its small sample size, the results of this study may not be generalizable to the whole population because they might not represent the entire experiences of individuals who experienced the same case, further scrutiny of this research topic using a larger population is recommended. Time constraints had been a challenge during the recruitment and the inclusion criteria also made it a challenge to find qualified participants who are willing to be part of the study. These limitations can be addressed by coordinating with local grief support group organizations, this can make the recruitment easier. Lastly, the lack of existing related literature had been a challenge during the writing of this study, it is recommended that this topic should be further studied to gain additional and increased understanding of the grief experience. It is recommended that future researchers further explore the constructs about the separation prior to death and the grief of an individual.

Ethics statement

The researcher put most importance on the anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent of the participant (Sanjari et al., 2014). All personal information of the participants, recorded video meetings, and transcribed interviews were handled in accordance to Data Privacy Act of 2012 of the Philippines.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest during the conduct of this study.

Author contributions

Christyne Anne C. Canlas, the main author of this study, is the one who conceived and designed the study, crafted the data gathering tool, collected the data, performed the data analysis, and wrote the paper.

All co-authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication. They contributed to the concept and design of the research, to the analysis of the results, and in editing of the manuscript.

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