

# PERSONAL GROWTH AFTER SPOUSAL BEREAVEMENT IN OLD AGE

Anna Rederer, Stefanie Spahni, & Hansjörg Znoj

University of Bern, Switzerland,  
contact: anna.rederer@students.unibe.ch

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH AIMS

Spousal bereavement is a critical life event with possible negative psychological and physiological health outcomes. However, spousal bereavement can also lead to positive changes, such as personal growth. Despite increasing academic interest in personal growth, little is known about its correlates, processes and consequences.

The aim of this study was to explore personal growth after spousal bereavement, its predictors, course and relation to well-being.

## METHODS

### Study description

Data stems from the longitudinal, survey-based study NCCR LIVES IP 212.

The Sample consists of 332 persons who experienced spousal bereavement within the previous five years. Mean age (wave one) was 73 years, SD = 8 years, range 60 - 89, 58% were women.

### Measures

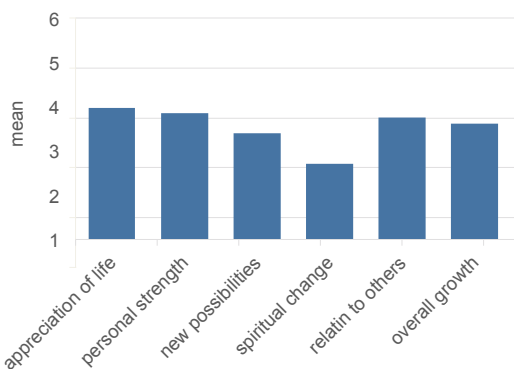
The questionnaire contained items created by the IP 212 team and standardized test instruments, e.g.:

**Personal growth:** Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI-10, Cann et al., 2010; Maercker & Langner, 2001)

**Well-being:** Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985; Schumacher, 2003), Center for Epid. Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977; Hautzinger, 1993), De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (De Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985; De Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg), Swiss Household Panel (P09C01, subjective health), Hopelessness Scale (Beck et al., 1974; Krampen, 1994)

## RESULTS

### Dimensions of Growth



### Correlations of Growth and Well-being

Growth (respectively its subdimensions) was correlated with less loneliness, more hopefulness and more life satisfaction (all wave one and wave two).

In the subsample of the recently bereaved, higher growth was correlated with more emotional loneliness (wave one), higher life satisfaction (wave two) and lower social loneliness (wave two).

There was no significant correlation of growth with depression and subjective health.

### Predictors of Growth

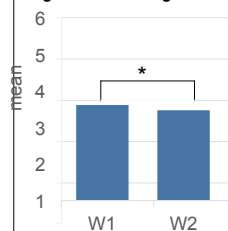
Hierarchical regression analysis

	$\beta$
sex	.09
education	-.22**
age (years)	-.05
extraversion	.18**
neuroticism	-.00
conscientiousness	-.16*
agreeableness	.03
openness	.13
resilience	.16
duration of marriage	.02
development in relationship	-.10
marital happiness	.01
time since loss	.09
predictability of loss	.09
emotional valence of loss	.01
social support	-.05
new relationship	-.03
current stress	.15*
$R^2$	.15

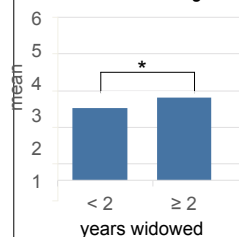
### Change over Time

t-test

#### longitudinal testing



#### cross-sectional testing



## DISCUSSION

The results support the assumption that personal growth occurs after spousal bereavement in old age. Furthermore, growth could be related to well-being, but not with all dimensions significantly or in either way.

Growth seems to be associated with lower education, higher extraversion, lower conscientiousness and higher stress. Interpersonal resources, relational and context factors appear to be less important. Yet these results should be regarded with suspicion, as some are not in line with other studies and growth could not be predicted well.

The course of growth remains unclear because of contradicting results.

Knowledge about growth could be valuable for a more holistic theoretical understanding of the adaption to loss and for psychological interventions.

