

# GRIEF SYMPTOMS IN WIDOWED AND DIVORCED OLDER ADULTS

Jeannette Brodbeck, Bina Knoepfli, Hans Joerg Znoj, & Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello

University of Bern, Switzerland,  
contact: jeannette.brodbeck@psy.unibe.ch

## Background

Divorce and spousal bereavement in later life cause distress and require adaptation to a new life situation. Few studies have compared grief reactions after different types of relationship-related life events.

## Aim

- To explore whether the level and the expression of grief was associated with the type of event and whether the expression of grief was distinct in widowed and divorced older adults.

## Study description

- Data stem from a longitudinal, survey-based study (IP 212, wave two, 2014) being part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES'. Participants were recruited using a random quota sample, stratified by age, gender, and marital status supplied by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.
- Sample: 795 persons who experienced a divorce (45%) or the death of a partner (55%) within the previous seven years. Mean age was 64 years, SD = 13 years, range 34 - 90), 65% were women.

## Measure

- Prolonged Grief Questionnaire (PG-13, Prigerson et al. 2008), 13 items, response categories 1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = quite a bit, 5 = extremely

- In the past month, how often have you felt yourself longing or yearning for the person you lost?
- In the past month, how often have you had intense feelings of emotional pain, sorrow, or pangs of grief related to the lost relationship?
- For questions 1 or 2 above, have you experienced either of these symptoms at least daily and after 6 months have elapsed since the loss?
- In the past month, how often have you tried to avoid reminders that the person you lost is gone?
- In the past month, how often have you felt stunned, shocked, or dazed by your loss?
- Do you feel confused about your role in life or feel like you don't know how you are (i.e., feeling that a part of yourself has died)?
- Have you had trouble accepting the loss?
- Has it been hard for you to trust other since your loss?
- Do you feel bitter over your loss?
- Do you feel that moving on (e.g., making new friends, pursuing new interests) would be difficult for you now?
- Do you feel emotionally numb since your loss?
- Do you feel that life is unfulfilling, empty, or meaningless since your loss?
- Have you experienced a significant reduction in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning?

## Statistical Analyses

- Descriptive statistics with the observed variables
  - Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses for categorical data: confirmation of a single-factor structure (Goodness of fit of the CFA: CFI = .94; TLI = .93, RMSEA = .125 CI .117-.133)
  - Test and adjustment for differential item functioning using a MIMIC Model
  - Multiple group models: Comparison of factor loadings, thresholds, and items characteristic curves
- Statistical analyses were carried out by a multiple group model using Mplus V 7.4.

## RESULTS

**Levels of grief in the observed variables:** Widowed participants reported **higher levels of grief** in the overall scale ( $M = 1.98$ ,  $SE .04$  vs.  $M = 1.69$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t = -5.77$ ,  $p < .0001$ ).

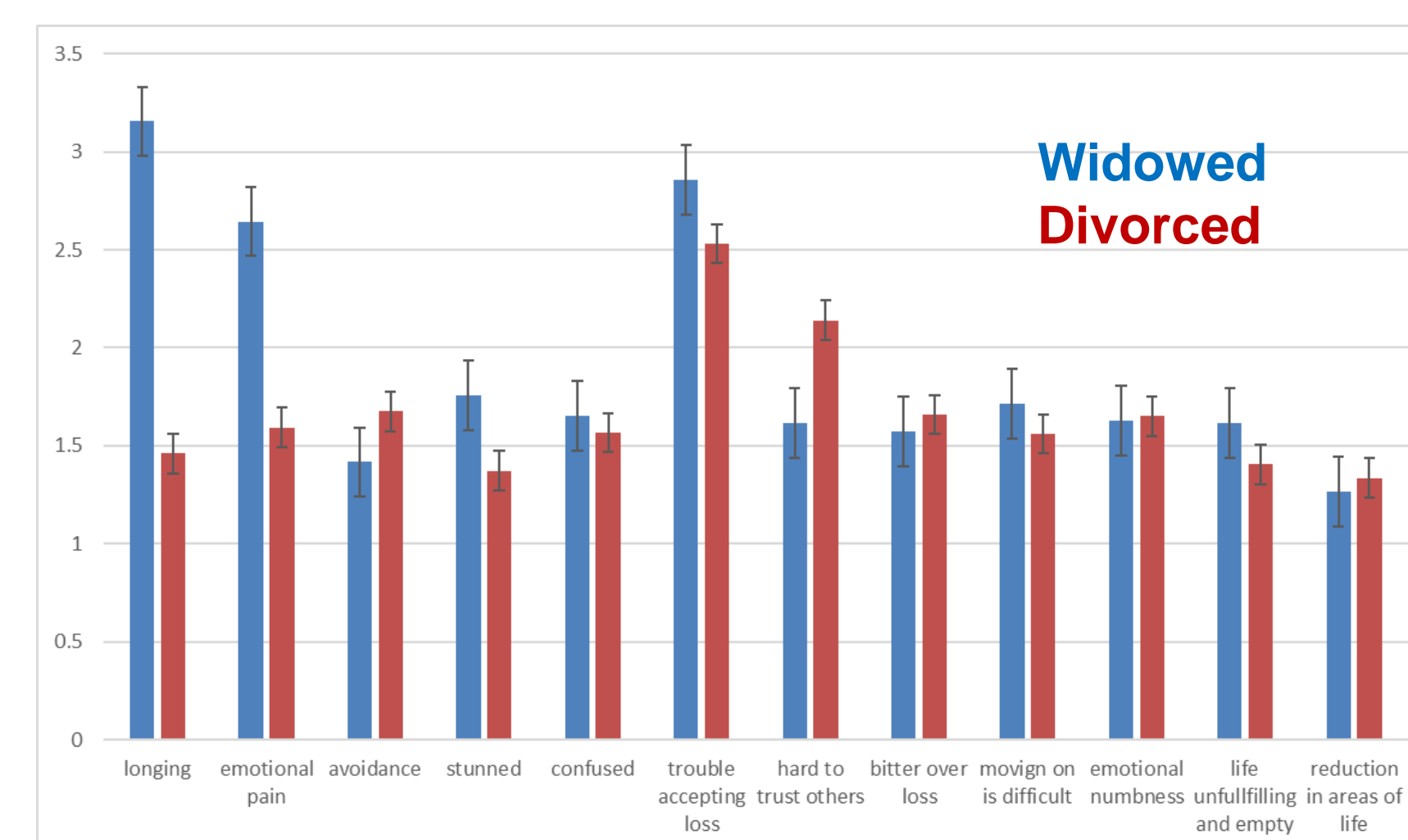


Figure 1: Means and standard errors of grief symptoms in widowed and divorced participants

### Differences:

Widowed participant reported significantly and substantially ( $d \geq 0.2$ ) **higher** levels of

- Longing or yearning
- Emotional pain
- Feeling stunned
- Trouble accepting the loss

### Similarities:

Similar levels were found for

- Confusion
- Bitterness
- Moving on is difficult
- Emotional numbness
- Reduction in social or other areas of functioning

but **lower** levels of

- Avoidance of reminders of loss
- Difficulties to trust others

**IRT Analyses: Do some grief symptoms behave differently for widowed and divorced participants with the same level on the underlying dimension?**

Being widowed was related to higher levels of grief ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .000$ ). However, modification indices based on a MIMIC model suggested that longing, emotional pain, difficulties with trusting others and avoidance were affected by differential item functioning. Furthermore, some symptoms were associated with a different standing on the latent grief dimension (see below). When accounting for differential item functioning by adding direct effects of these symptoms on the grief factor, the association between being widowed and levels of grief decreased ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p = .035$ )

## Severity of symptoms

### Widowed participant

#### Most severe grief symptoms

- Bitterness over the loss
- Trying to avoid reminders of loss
- Hard to trust others

#### Least severe symptoms

- Emotional pain
- Trouble accepting the loss
- Longing and yearning and emotional pain

### Divorced participants

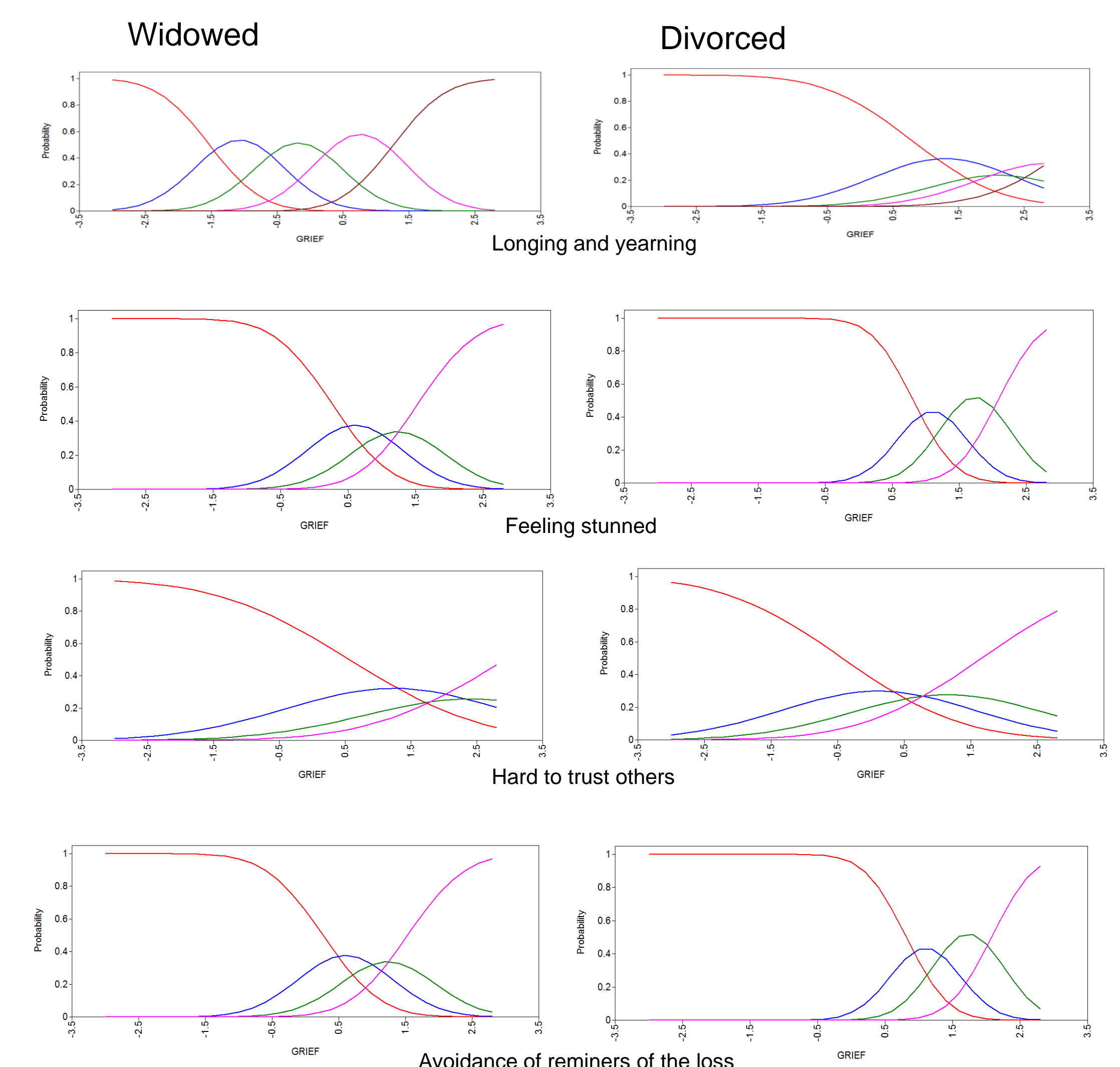
#### Most severe grief symptoms

- Feeling stunned
- Life is empty
- Longing and yearning and emotional pain

#### Least severe symptoms

- Trouble accepting the loss
- Hard to trust others

## Item Characteristic Curves based on a multiple group model



## DISCUSSION

- The same symptoms of grief were related of a different level severity in divorced and widowed participants, suggesting a different «meaning» of the symptoms. Thus, items and overall scores of the Prolonged Grief Questionnaire should not be compared without adjusting for differential item functioning.
- Implications for interventions: For widowed participants, bitterness over the loss, trying to avoid reminders of loss, and difficulties trusting others may indicate a need for intervention, while difficulties with trust are rather common and less severe after divorce. In divorced participants, feeling stunned, and feeling that life was empty or meaningless, longing and yearning for the ex-partner and emotional pain were indicative of high levels of grief, while the latter two were less severe in widowed participants.