GRIEF SYMPTOMS IN WIDOWED AND DIVORCED OLDER ADULTS

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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 (P 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 54 – 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

Statistical Analyses
1) Descriptive statistics with the observed variables
2) 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)
3) Test and adjustment for differential item functioning using a MIMIC Model
4) 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).

Differences:
- Widowed participant reported significantly and substantially (β = 0.2) higher levels of:
  - Longing or yearning
  - Emotional pain
  - Feeling stunned
  - Trouble accepting the loss
  - but lower levels of:
  - Avoidance of reminders of loss
  - Difficulties to trust others

Similarities:
- Similar levels were found for:
  - Confusion
  - Bitterness
  - Moving on is difficult
  - Emotional numbness
  - Reduction in social or other areas of functioning

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 (β = 0.21, p < .0001). 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 (β = 0.08, p = .033)

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.