EXPRESSED GRIEF AND PERSONAL GROWTH
IN DIVORCED AND WIDOWED 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 and growth after different types of relationship-related life events.

Aim

To explore whether the level and the expression of grief and growth 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., 2009), 13 items, response categories 1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = quite a bit, 5 = extremely
- Personal Growth Inventory (PGI, Cann et al., 2010), 10 items, response categories 0 = not at all, 1 = somewhat, 2 = quite a bit, 3 = extremely
- Posttraumatic growth inventory (PTGI; Cann et al., 2010), 10 items, response categories 0 = not at all, 1 = somewhat, 2 = quite a bit, 3 = extremely

Statistical Analyses

1) Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses for categorical data: confirmation of a single-factor structure (Grief: CFI = .94; TLI = .93; RMSEA = .125, CI .117-.133; Growth: CFI = .94; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .161, CI .151-.171).
2) MIMIC model to identify differential item functioning (DIF): a) Regression of scales on type of event (1 = divorce; 2 = bereavement); b) constraining associations between items and type of event to 0; inspection of modification indices for local misfit indicating signs of DIF.
3) Regression analyses of the scales on the type of events with direct paths from items with DIF on the type of event (Grief: CFI = .95; TLI = .94; RMSEA = .103, CI .096-.111; Growth: CFI = .94; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .149, CI .140-.159).
4) Multiple group model with inspection of loadings and thresholds for divorced and widowed participants. Statistical analyses were carried out by a multiple group model using Mplus V 7.4.

RESULTS

Do some items behave differently for widowed and divorced participants on the same level on the underlying dimension?

Grief symptoms: Being widowed was related to higher levels of grief (beta = .42, S.E. = .07; p < .000). However, DIF based on modification indices was found for 3 items: Being widowed was associated with higher levels of longer and emotional pain and lower levels of difficulties trusting others. When accounting for DIF by adding direct effects of these symptoms on the grief factor, the association between being widowed and higher levels of grief decreased (beta = .17, S.E. = .08, p = .036).

Furthermore, some symptoms were associated with a different severity on the latent grief dimension (see Figure 1).

Growth items: Personal Growth was not associated with being divorced or widowed (beta = -.04, S.E. = .08, p = .630). DIF was found for one item “I’ve taken a new path in my life”. Including a direct path between this item and marital status indicated that being widowed was related to lower levels on this item (beta = -.65, S.E. = .06, p = .000). Overall results did not change (beta = -.05, S.E. = .06, p = .549).

Item Charateristic Curves based on a multiple group model

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 participant

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

Discussion

- Some symptoms of grief were related to a different level of severity in divorced and widowed participants, suggesting differential item functioning (DIF) or a different «meaning» of the symptoms. Therefore, items and overall scores of the Prolonged Grief Questionnaire should not be compared without adjusting for DIF. Growth items showed no DIF, apart from one item related to taking a new path in one’s life.

- 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.

REFERENCES


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