**EXPRESSING 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**

1. It's hard to get over the death of your partner. 2. You feel you are not yourself anymore. 3. It's hard to think about your partner. 4. You feel you are not recovering. 5. You are finding it hard to accept your loss. 6. You feel that you have lost a part of yourself. 7. You have nightmares about your partner. 8. You feel that you have lost your sense of purpose. 9. You feel that life is empty. 10. You feel that you are not doing things for yourself. 11. You feel that you have lost a part of your identity. 12. You feel that you are not the same person you were before. 13. You feel that you have lost your sense of hope.

- **Posttraumatic growth inventory (PTGI; Cann et al., 2010), 10 items, response categories 0 = I did not experience this change to 5 = I experienced this change to a great degree**

1. I have a greater appreciation about what is important in life and a sense of gratitude. 2. I have a sense of urgency about what I want to do with my life (commitment). 3. I feel more confident about myself (self-esteem). 4. I have a greater sense of personal adequacy. 5. I have a stronger sense of purpose in life. 6. I have a greater appreciation of family and close relationships. 7. I have a greater appreciation of my personal strengths. 8. I feel more optimistic about the future. 9. I have a greater appreciation of the opportunities I have in life. 10. I feel greater personal growth.

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**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.

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**RESULTS**

Do some items behave differently for widowed and divorced participants with 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 higher 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: = .08, p = .549). Items had a very similar standing on the latent growth dimension. Items regarding religious growth and greater connectedness with others were related to higher levels of growth on the underlying trait.

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**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.