



Parenting While Grieving: The Experience of Widows with Young Children

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Abstract

The death of a spouse while parenting young children brings unique challenges for the widow who must not only grieve the loss of a partner but also navigate the demands of solo parenting and help their children through the grieving process. The multiple layers of losses place young widows at risk for the development of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety and negative health trajectories. Bereavement outcomes are influenced by the practical and emotional resources that a widow has available to them as well as the strength of their social support network. This qualitative study explored the grief experiences of widows with young children and the factors that influenced adaptation post-loss. Open ended survey questions were used to gather data from 232 widows and thematic analysis was used to identify themes in the data. All of the themes centered on the multiple layers of grief that must be navigated as widows adapt to being a solo parent and the practical and emotional challenges that they experienced. The widows identified that they were simultaneously grieving the loss of their spouse, while helping their children manage the grieving process, and grieving the life, plans, and opportunities that the death of their spouse had taken from them. While the demands of parenting increased challenges to adaptation and increased experiences of self-doubt, parenting was also identified as a role that had a positive impact on bereavement, helping the widows to remain engaged in their lives as they navigated this difficult journey.

Keywords: Grief; Bereavement; Death; Parenting; Adaptation; Resilience

Introduction

Bereavement, while a normal part of the lifespan, is one of the most difficult experiences that one will endure and can have a significant impact on life trajectory as well as physical and emotional well-being. While the loss of a loved one is an expected life event, the coping and adaptation processes can be complex and includes not only managing grief reactions

but also the life adaptations that must be navigated as roles and identities shift and need to be redefined [1]. Many factors influence how grief is experienced, the loss integrated, and the capacity of the individual and family to experience resilience post loss including practical, emotional, and social support [2], personal resources [3], and the contextual environment in which grief occurs.

While people experience loss in all familial relationships, the death of a spouse, has long been identified as one of the most distressing experiences in an individual's life [4], one that can impact the health and psychosocial functioning of surviving family members [5-7]. The negative experiences of the bereavement process have been found to be intensified when the loss is sudden [8-11], occurs at a socially unexpected time [12-14], and involves a traumatic death [15-16]. Although most widows will integrate the loss of the spouse effectively into their lives over time and will not experience distressing or complicated grief responses long-term [1,17], there are factors that influence how the bereavement process is experienced. A widow's capacity to manage their emotional responses is complicated when they have young children that they are raising as there is the additional need of having to help their children in the grieving process [18-21], while simultaneously trying to adjust to being a solo parent, as well as navigating the many identities and role shifts that require adaptation post-loss.

Young Widows with Children

Becoming a widow is widely thought of as an experience that occurs later in life with the majority of widows being over the age of 65 [22], there is less known about the grief experiences of younger widows, particularly those who are raising young children [19]. Previous research has found that young widows experience acute grief reactions more intensely than older widows [8,17,23], with young widows reporting heightened experiences of loneliness and isolation [21,24], disruptions in their sense of self and identity [1,12], and self-doubt related to their ability to be successful in the parenting role without the support of their spouse [23,25]. The loss of a partner shifts the entire dynamics of a widow's life requiring them to navigate alone experiences, tasks, and responsibilities that were once shared with another.

The loss of a spouse is felt in every aspect of a widow's life and influences their emotional well-being, increasing the demands that they experience during the bereavement process, the challenges and obstacles post loss, as well as placing them at increased risk for the development of psychological disorders such as depression [26,27] and anxiety [6,28]. The psychosocial well-being of widows directly influences not only their adaptation to the loss of a spouse but also their ability to help manage the grieving process of their children and create a home environment where healthy adaptation is fostered [7,20]. In 2022, it was reported that the number of children under the age of 6, in the United States living with a single widowed mother was approximately 60,000 and the number of children living with a single widowed father was approximately 21,000 [29], these statistics do not include those who were remarried, speaking to the importance of researching how grief and

adaptation are experienced for young widows with children, a sizeable and vulnerable population.

Multiple Losses

The death of a spouse includes not only the loss of the individual who has passed away but also a multitude of secondary losses for the widow, each of which requires adaptation as the widow navigates life in the absence of their spouse. The death of a spouse creates a complicated process of adjustments as the surviving spouse, who is coping with grief and emotional distress, must also redefine a practical and social reality that reflects their new identity as a widow [30]. Parenting roles, as well as personal and social identity must be redefined, and plans for the future must be abandoned or rewritten without their partner.

Widows are faced with many practical losses as they experience the loss of a partner. These losses include no longer having their partner to help navigate parenting activities, perform daily tasks [30], share in decision making and with the financial demands of the household [30], and manage daily and ongoing life stressors. Widows must manage the additional burden of these losses as they navigate the grieving process taxing their existing resources and increasing the likelihood that they may experience a prolonged or complicated grief reaction [2,9]. Practical questions about when to return to work, how to find a job if they had been a stay-at-home parent, how to manage financial demands and parenting tasks that their spouse had once been responsible for, are prominent for widows in the time immediately following the death of a spouse [12,31]. These new challenges and questions have the capacity to disrupt family communication strategies, including the ability to ask for help and support, creating feelings of isolating and loneliness [24,11].

These losses also transcend the practicalities of daily life into the emotional and social experiences of widows including the loss of connection to others such as friendships and social networks [23,30], the loss of a shared narrative of life experiences both lived and planned for, including the maintenance of a future vision and anticipated shared life events [20]. The loss of a partner also impacts a widow's self-identity as the spouse is no longer there to validate the reality of the widow through shared worldviews [25]. It has been argued that the ability to successfully navigate stressful life transitions, such as the loss of a spouse, are contingent upon the resources that the individual has to assist in the adjustment to a life post-loss [32] and to engage in a process of redefining both who they are and what their future will entail.

Social Supports

While bereavement is often initially met with an outpouring of support and condolences in the days immediately following the loss, this usually dies down as the services and rituals end and daily life resumes. For the bereaved family, this is often a time of increased hardship as they experience a return to daily life of their friends and family, while they are tasked with returning to an unrecognizable existing life without the presence of their spouse [15]. Connection to social support from friends and family can positively influence this adaptation process and provide encouragement and empathy at a time where self-doubt and negative self-evaluation is common. Social support has been found to not only aid in the management of emotional responses to loss for widows but also to be positively correlated to increased feelings of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and identify reformation post-loss. Strong support networks can lead to increased experiences of resilience, assist in meaning reconstruction post-loss [25], and increase the capacity of widows to envision and create a life post-loss.

While there is a great deal of literature that identifies the risk to children following the death of a parent there remains a gap in the literature about how widows with young children experience the transition to being a solo parent. The majority of research on widow(er)s focuses on older widows, who have their own set of unique needs and challenges associated with the grief and adaptation process. Widows with young children are a particularly important topic as research has found that the presence of a warm, nurturing, caretaker can buffer the negative psychological impact of parental loss for children, making looking at the experience of these widows important [33] as well as the factors that aid or inhibit the adaptation process. In fact, previous research has identified that stress experienced post loss by widows may interfere with parenting capacity which can lead to less optimal outcomes. Additionally, there is little research that captures the experience of being a “solo” parent, a unique experience of widows that does not fit neatly into other categories of single parenting.

Methods

To explore the experience of young widows, who are often overlooked in the grief literature, this qualitative study used open question survey data from widows with young children. A qualitative approach was used to look at the subjective grief experience of the participants and their perspectives on adaptation to solo parenting. The current study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board.

Participants

The selection of participants was done utilizing a criterion sampling approach to identify widows who were currently raising children under the age of 12. To be included as a participant in the study, a widow needed to meet the following criteria:

- a) be 18 years of age or older,
- b) fluent in English
- c) have experienced the death of a spouse more than 6 months ago,
- d) have one or more children under the age of 12 that they were presently parenting,
- e) Live in the United States.

Widows were excluded if they have not been raising their children consistently since the loss of their spouse. A total of 712 participants began the survey, with 304 completing all the questions, and 232 participants meeting all of the inclusion criteria. Time since loss was chosen as at least 6 months post loss in response to the body of literature that identifies the first 6 months post-loss as a time of acute grief reactions and the experiencing of negative emotional responses [2].

Participants were primarily white (85.8%) and ranged in age from 24-57, with a mean age of 38 (SD=5.82 years). Most of the participants reported widowed as their current marital status, with 23 identifying as having more than one marital status (9.9%), and the participant sample was primarily made up of widows who reported that they were not presently in a romantic relationship (61.6%). The widows in the current study shared that they had one to four or more children (Mdn=2) with just over half (52.2%) reporting that they had been widowed for two or more years, the others having been widowed less than 2 years. The majority of the widows (82.3%) in the current study had experienced the sudden, unanticipated loss of their spouse. Participant education levels spanned from some high school to a doctoral degree and reported income ranging from \$25,000 to \$150,000 (Mdn=\$62,500).

Data Collection

This research was conducted as part of a wider study exploring the parenting experiences of young widows and factors that influence adaptation. As a part of the larger study, participants were given survey questionnaires that explored their perspectives on parenting, grief adaptation, and self-efficacy in these roles. This article focuses on open survey question responses that centered on participant experiences of grief as widows who were parenting young children. Specifically, participants were asked what they

wanted to share about their experience of being widowed with young children.

Data for the study was collected in a cross-sectional manner from December of 2019 through May of 2020, using self-administered web-based questionnaires on the SurveyMonkey platform. To recruit a diverse, sufficient sample size, and reach a large geographic area, recruitment was conducted online via social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, and in online grief support forums. Online posts were created that provided a brief description of the study including that participation was anonymous, the basic purpose of the study (to explore parenting experiences and the relationship to grief outcomes), the approximate time that it would take to complete the survey questions, and criteria for participation. All questions were contained within the online survey with informed consent imbedded into the survey design so that participants were not required to have contact with the researcher.

Data Analysis

This study utilized 6-phase thematic analysis as recommended by Clarke V, et al. [34] to identify themes across the survey responses. Thematic analysis was chosen due to its reflexive and recursive approach which allowed for the essence and meaning of widow's experiences to be captured [34,35]. Open survey responses were first inductively hand coded and then uploaded into NVivo12 for another round of manual coding and the data was compared to the paper codes to ensure consistency in the coding process. All codes that were relevant to the research question were incorporated into candidate themes. The themes were then reviewed, named, and defined to ensure that they distinct and captured the essence of the data.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed five themes about the experiences of widows with young children. The themes centered around the concept of connection with the widows describing the loss of a spouse as severing a partnership that provided not only personal support but support in the parenting role. While parenting is inherently stressful, and can be compounded by the grief experience, the widows in the current study reported that their children helped to keep them going and helped them to heal. Themes included the layers of grief, my child(ren) saved me, being a solo parent, the loss of a partner, and heightened insecurities/self-doubt. Also included in the results is some of the advice and recommendations that the widows wished to share with others who may be in similar situations.

Theme 1: Layers of Grief

For widows with young children, the grief process includes the complexities of not only managing their own grief reactions, but also navigating the grief experiences of their children.

The grief is complicated. You make your way to the surface of that ocean, confused, beaten, shocked, and finally able to breathe. You hold on to whatever memory you have as a life preserver, and think you're okay, until a wave slams you back down into sadness, where you're forced to swim back to the surface in order to breathe and survive. (P299)

While this includes understanding and comforting their child(ren) who is in pain, it is further complicated by the grief that they experience for their child(ren) who no longer has a father, and grief for their late spouse who will miss all future experiences and milestones with their children (P99, P225, P271). P225 shared the recognition that the loss will be present at every stage of their child's life as a reminder of the things that their spouse and child will not get to experience together.

The biggest obstacle I have to face is dealing with the death of my children's father through all of their milestones in life. There will always be hurt because of all the things they will not get to experience with their father over the years to come. I can try as much as I can to be there for them, but I know that will never be enough no matter how hard I try. (P225)

For the widows in the current study, there was a sense of recognition that no one parent can provide what their children would have gotten from two parents that led them to understand that grief was not going to be something that they just moved through and got easier with time but rather that it would resurface in periods of transition or at major milestones and that this would be a normal part of the grief process for these widows.

The widows in the present study shared that at a time where they are trying to make sense of the loss of their spouse that they also must help their child understand this loss. "You can hardly understand the loss yourself, let alone trying to explain and comfort a child" (P136). While many widows identified the widow experience as being excruciating (P89, P155, P242, P254, P299) and overwhelming (P3, P10, P97, P100, P127, P284), "a nightmare within a nightmare" (P82), they were also acutely aware of their children's need to grieve and had empathy for how hard this must also be for their child(ren) who were experiencing this loss with the coping skills of a child (P11, P155, P257). "Being a widow is difficult and being a child who lost a parent is also difficult" (P257). Raising grieving children was a concept that the

widows identified as being one of the greatest stressors post loss (P57, P136, P155, P157, P190, P191, P198, P205, P247, P257, P293) and many correlated being thrust into this nontraditional parenting role while also trying to coach their child through grieving as contributing significantly to their self-doubt in their parenting abilities (P39, P136, P190, P201). P11 shared "Helping them with their grief is sometimes heavier than my own," highlighting the added pain of watching their child process loss. The widows described the need to attend to both their own grief and the grief of their children as "incredible heavy" (P155, P247) and as "a major challenge" (P157, P191). P304 questioned the capacity to grieve in these circumstances "I do not feel that I will ever fully be able to grieve their father because I am too busy tending to the living." The tasks of parenting often took precedent over their own grief process (P242, P247, P157, P179, P304) "I keep plugging along because I have to" (P179). The widows described the conflicting tasks of having to maintain a focus on being alive to care for their children and attending to the pain of the life altering loss of their spouse, finding themselves often deferring their own needs to focus on responsibilities and the tasks of parenting.

Grief for the Parent I Cannot Be

In addition to the complex nature of grieving while supporting a child through the experience of parental loss, the widows in the current study shared feeling cheated of what they believed their parenting experience would be and described a diminished capacity to experience the joy that parenting can bring (P5, P55, P280). P5 shared "I feel like dealing with my grief and transition to being a single mom has robbed a lot of joy from her infant/toddler period." P55 recognized that she was "not the mother I was before my husband passed." Many felt the loss of the plans that they had made as parents, with their spouse, and were disenchanted by having those plans replaced with having to parent alone. P124 shared "I thought we'd be doing it together. It's not new and exciting, I just don't want to do it all again alone." For many of the widows, this was yet another layer of loss, the loss of who they believed they would be as parents and the pride that they had previously experienced while parenting.

The widows recognized that their experience of motherhood, which should have been a time of celebration, was eclipsed by becoming a widow and that this changed their capacity and satisfaction with their performance as mothers (P55, P62, P65, P69, P90, P143, P159, P280, P293). "It's so much harder to be patient with the kids. I need them to be more compliant/prepared/competent now that everything is on my shoulders. I lose my temper more. But I apologize too" (P159). The widows could see the toll that their exhaustion and grief had on their parenting performance (P201, P260, P293) and struggled to differentiate between what was the normal stress of parenting and what was magnified by their

grief (P220). P62 shared "I lose my patience so much more quickly than I used to." They shared experiencing a shift from the organized, on top of everything parent, to being weighed down by all the responsibilities. Feeling as if their children have not only lost one parent but were also deprived of the level of engagement that two parents could bring (P39, P55, P242, P260). "I used to be on top of everything room mom, girl scout leader, chaperone, now, I wing it...all of it. I'm the same person, but I'll never be the same" (P242). The changes that the widows experienced in them magnified the loss they perceived for their children and themselves. "I still can't get it right. I used to be so organized and focused and accomplished. Now I feel like I don't know where anything is, my house is always messy, and I'm always overwhelmed" (P90).

The widows in the current study shared an immense recognition that their children did not get the best version of them as parents and having to let go of the illusion of who they thought they would be as parents (P55, P65, P90, P69, P159, P280). "I often feel angry that my son gets grieving me instead of happy me" (P280). Many widows recognized a shift in their capacity to parent the way they wanted to post-loss which created feelings of guilt and shame (P55, P62, P242) and some even identify a sense of losing the person they had been. P55 shared

I feel like I am not the mother I was before my husband passed. At the time my oldest was 10 months old, I worked full-time, he was a stay-at-home dad and I always would get on the floor and play with her. I feel like I had the time to enjoy her. Now I am always stressed trying to cook, clean, work, be involved in their school, and trying to take care of myself. I have no time. I hate saying I'm sorry I have to clean or I'm sorry baby mommy has to work...I just want to be the mom that I once was again. I don't feel like I can ever be that calm again.

While many were able to identify that they had confidence in their parenting skills post-loss (P143, P190), this was often shaken by being unprepared to navigate the complicated landscape of managing the multiple layers of grief.

Grief for My Child's Loss

In addition to grieving for themselves, the widows in the current study grieved for their children. They grieved that their children were missing out on both the experience of having a father and also the experience of getting to know someone they (the widow) loved and admired so much (P11, P33, P225, P136, P149). "I feel my children's loss to my core. They will never truly know their father and that hurts" (P11). P33 shared that this awareness of their child's pain is with her all the time "I am aware of the loss that my kid has from not having HIS father. I think about that often." P43 highlighted

the unique challenge bereaved children face “it’s tough on him growing up without his dad.” They also struggled to see their children in pain and the pain of watching their children struggle with emotional issues. “Seeing her without joy and unhappy, anxious, grieving, is harder than dealing with these emotions in myself” (P155). They expressed feeling that while they tried to keep their spouse’s memory alive that these attempts paled in comparison to what their child(ren) would have had gotten to experience had their spouse lived.

This loss also shadowed many of the events and traditions that the widows and their families enjoyed. P151 shared “Christmas is hard because the kids lost their dad. Toys don’t mean the same thing, birthday parties don’t feel the same. Holidays feel different.” They also recognized that their experience of life had shifted as well and that “fun things aren’t fun anymore” (P274). Many of the widows shared that they created new traditions and focused on creating the best possible life for their child(ren) but this did not decrease the underlying sense of loss in all of these experiences.

While initially the ways in which their children expressed their grief intensified the widow’s personal grief, P108 shared that these experiences while extremely painful, got better with time. “My son unbuckled his car seat a lot saying he wanted to die to go be with daddy (he was 3), but with time it got better.” A sentiment of the ebbs and flows of grief while parenting that many of the widows in the current study experienced.

Theme 2: My Child Saved Me

Widows in the current study experienced parenting post loss as both increasing the challenges that they faced but also shared that their child(ren) had a significant positive impact on their grief experience. They identified that parenting obligations buffered against engaging in unhealthy and self-destructive coping mechanisms and gave them a reason to live (P5, P87, P149, P254). “If I hadn’t had her, I would’ve probably engaged in some really unhealthy coping mechanisms. So being a widow with a young child makes life much harder but so much better at the same time” (P5). They shared that the unconditional love of their child(ren) kept them going even in times of extreme stress (P84, P87, P99, P229, P254). P87 shared “My kids are what made me get up every day. They are my reason to live.” And P254 explained that the “unconditional love of children is the most lifesaving thing that actually keeps you ‘sane’...and I’m thankful.” The widows shared that despite the multitude of challenges they faced post-loss the rewards of parenting helped them get through (P72, P84) giving them purpose and a way to focus their energy. The widows often highlighted the difference between their initial struggles and adaptations over time with some of the widows sharing that they saw changes in themselves that they were proud of in the face of such

overwhelming loss (P127, P149, P299). P127 recognized that she had shifted her parenting style to be “more forgiving of them.” P149 expressed “My kids are amazing, loving, trying beings. I’ve been told they are well-adjusted and just great humans. So, while this solo parenting thing sucks, I can’t imagine changing it.” Rather than feeling a personal sense of accomplishment in the face of such a recognition, many of the widows shared a sense of awe at the resilience their child(ren) possessed.

The widows in the current study also recognized the fine line between being vulnerable and sharing your grief experience so that your child does not feel alone and ensuring that it does not exacerbate their challenges. “It can be such a challenge because there is a delicate balance between allowing your children to see your pain and suffering and not allowing them to hold your pain and suffering for you” (P213). This was also true in the face of the lack of social support that many of the widows faced, which led them to caution against sharing too much with children “not letting the kids become my friend/confidant because I don’t have anyone else to talk to” (P119). The need to model healthy grieving and be open about the expressions of grief for their children was experienced with caution and fear of the additional pain that they may burden their child(ren) with in.

Theme 3: Being a Solo Parent

The widows in the current study shared that they felt vastly unprepared for both the loss of their spouse but also for assuming the role of solo parent (P138, P143, P217, P276). They shared finding themselves in the “club that no one wants to join” (P84) as they experienced a shift from a social role of wife and mother to no longer fitting in with friends, family, their communities, and society. This was exacerbated by feelings of being marginalized, isolated, lonely, and the pressure of increased responsibility (P36, P51, P101, P130, P194, P213, P217, P233, P242, P264, P284). P284 shared “I don’t fit in with nuclear families. I don’t fit in with divorced single moms. I don’t fit perfectly into a grief population because my marriage wasn’t in a good place.” Despite similar struggles to other single and solo parents, many participants experienced the additional pain of feeling rejected from social support groups due to the type of loss and the status of their relationship when their spouse died.

While the concept of not fitting in was shared by many of the participants, some also shared not being welcomed into grief communities due to marital dynamics and feeling ostracized about their right to grieve by other widows (P26, P284). For widows whose spouse died in a stigmatized manner they experienced challenges in being able to openly grieve.

Once they find out your spouse overdosed, they immediately think that you were an addict too. They

wait “politely” until they feel it is the right time to ask if you did everything you could do. They ask how you didn’t know. P299

And these feelings of being mislabeled and misunderstood carried into many different aspects of the widows’ stories and created increased feelings of guilt and shame for not only their actions but at times their spouse. They shared frustrations when others compared their experience as a solo parent to being divorced or making a choice to be a single parent. “Being an only parent is hard and people can’t relate. My boss actually told me that she was in the same boat as I was, because her husband didn’t help her with the kids” (P242). P99 shared her recognition that there is a permanency to being a widow that does not exist in any other absent parenting dynamic, one that the widows found difficult for others to relate to or begin to understand.

I strongly dislike when my family or friends compare single parenting out of choice vs. our situation. Parenting in general isn’t easy, but now we have to worry about all of the milestones and events in life without the other parent. It’s so different in my opinion. Even the worst parents who choose not to be in their child’s lives, at least they are here and inside somewhere they love that child with what they can. P99

The widows shared hating when people in their lives made comparisons to their own divorces, or children’s uninvolved fathers, and that this detracts from the unique challenges a widow faces in going from having a co-parent relationship to being a solo parent “It is much harder to figure out how to be a solo parent if you have been used to co-parenting. It has been increasingly difficult where my husband was the primary caregiver and took care of things around the house, so it was experiencing a loss on another level” (P276). While they recognized the attempts at relating that were the source of these comments, they shared that they often felt less understood and alone afterwards.

The responsibility for all of the parenting and discipline decisions without anyone to bounce them off increased the stress that the widows experienced, with many of the widows identifying being a “solo parent” as the hardest part of losing their spouse and an aspect that they felt completely unprepared for (P51, P87, P130, P143, P217, P242, P254). They perceived themselves as being in the role of both parents and needing to rethink their parenting skills, sharing that parenting a grieving child requires one to relearn how to be an effective parent (P99, P190, P204, P220, P241). “Parenting as a widow is different, you need to relearn in order to be both a mother and a father” (P220).

The widows in the current study shared feeling as if they were thrust into the role of being both parents placing

them in the difficult position of deciding whether to be a disciplinarian or to be more lenient in their parenting styles. Many shared that their partner had helped to balance out the parenting dynamics and there was increased pressure in navigating these new roles. “My husband was our middleman, so it’s been quite an adjustment being the loving mommy and the disciplinarian at the same time. It’s a work in progress” (P204). P241 shared “It is difficult to be both the disciplinarian as well as the nurturing parent. Each parent had their role while living, that adjustment is challenging.” This decrease in parental self-esteem that the widows reported was most prevalent in the ability to set rules and boundaries with their children. Some of the widows shared realizing that they needed to be mindful of the role of guilt in their decision-making and not overcompensate for their perceived short-comings or their child’s pain. “It’s very hard not to parent out of guilt or be too lenient” (P65). They shared living in fear that that having one parent was not enough to buffer against the effects of grief and wanting to make the best possible decisions despite often feeling unequipped to do so.

Will I Ever Be Enough?

The widows in the current study reported an immense amount of pressure to be all things to everyone without the support necessary to be successful and feeling a “gaping hole” that their spouse used to fill (P87). “It is a tremendous responsibility to tackle alone. I feel pressure to do a good job. Everything is my fault. It is exhausting” (P87). P36 shared “Everything falls on me.” The pressure to be both parents to their children, to keep things functioning as well as they were pre-loss, was often reported as being challenging due to a lack of supports, lack of understanding from key individuals in their lives, and being exhausted emotionally and physically.

Some of the widows shared that these increased demands were exacerbated by the need to shift major life roles such as returning to work and being responsible for things that their spouse used to take care of. “I had to return to work full-time. Be Mom, Dad, nurse, everything to everyone” (P242). This included all the demands of the household, working, managing finances, and extra-curricular activities for their children. Tasks that had previously been done by two people were now the responsibility of the widowed parent. “Having to complete all household tasks plus extracurricular activities and whatever else has to be done on my own has taken a toll on me” (P39). In addition to being exhausted, the widows shared that there was a depletion of their emotional and physical resources that significantly impacted their overall well-being.

For some of the widows this led to feelings of resentment towards their late spouse for not having to be there to manage

the tougher aspects of parenting, especially when they did not feel successful in their own attempts. "When I feel like I'm failing, it causes many feelings of anger and resentment towards my late husband because he got out of doing the hard parts of parenting and left this all to me. I didn't sign up to be a solo parent" (P101). And others highlighted that they felt like no one could truly relate to their experiences. P242 describes the complexities of grief and its pervasive influence on a widow's life:

Very few understand. It's been almost 5 years. I've got this...I do. It's so much more complex than anyone could realize...it's lonely...exhausting...you have no other opinion...everything is your fault...the weight of the world is on my shoulders in all aspects...work, have benefits for insurance, pay bills, manage everything for everyone.

Even when sharing their successes, the weight that the widows carried far outshone any feelings of pride or accomplishment speaking to the emotional impact of being a solo parent.

Doing it Alone is Exhausting

The widows in the present study shared that in the face of their own grief and additional responsibilities, without a partner to help with the demands of parenting, they quickly experienced feelings of being overwhelmed, burned out, and exhausted. They described these demands as being placed on them at a time where they did not have the emotional resources to manage the additional load which led to regularly feeling tired and emotionally exhausted (P86, P89, P97, P235, P258, P260).

The concept of being tired and overwhelmed that arose for these widows with young children often was contextualized with never having a break and having to provide support without having enough support for themselves. Several of the widows shared recognizing the need for a break for themselves and knowing that it was not possible to get one (P19, P86, P89, P97, P198, P235, P297). "There are no breaks at all which makes it overwhelming. You are constantly running to keep up" (P97). This inability to slow down decreased opportunities for self-care and many experienced having to choose between time to themselves and much needed rest. "Being a solo parent is hard. There are no breaks, ever. I often struggle with wanting to go to bed because I'm exhausted or wanting to stay up late to get some time to myself" (P235). Participants often found themselves putting their children's needs and emotional well-being in front of their own and recognizing that it exacerbated their own struggles (P198, P205, P242). P198 shared "the hardest part for me has been worrying about the children instead of myself. I feel like I've been put on the back burner to make sure they are handling it ok." This inability to attend

to their own grief process was often exacerbated by feeling misunderstood and as if they did not matter outside of their parenting role or that they should have already moved on from their grief.

Most widows in the current study shared that they wished they had more help and that people recognized that the support they needed was appropriate in the context of grief for themselves and their children. "It definitely takes a village, and you find out who truly cares" (P242). They experienced ongoing challenges in finding support and many shared that the lack of available resources and support networks increased their internalized belief that they were completely isolated and alone (P12, P14, P27, P213, P215, P233, P267, P280). "There is absolutely NO support systems locally. None. You have to do everything alone" (P27). Some shared that they had found support online and that this was the only time that they felt genuinely supported. "The only support I've found is online, from strangers, unbiased and completely honest" (P215). This highlighted not only feelings of being alone and alienated from their pre-loss support systems but the benefits they found in the support of others, particularly those who had also experienced spousal loss.

Theme 4: Loss of a Partner

The widows in the current study shared that the struggles of being a solo parent were confounded by the responsibility for every aspect of their lives, assuming roles and tasks that they had previously shared with their deceased spouse. "I miss the help of my spouse and working as a team" (P120). This was also evident in the small day to day tasks, where the absence of their spouse was felt immensely "I have no one to discuss small problems with, plan schedules, or relish small victories" (P11). They identified having someone to bounce ideas off and receive validation from as being a significant missing piece in their post-loss lives, a role their spouse had previously filled (P89, P100, P119, P157, P162-63, P171, P183, P203, P271, P276, P304). "I miss having another adult to run things by and to temper my reactions" (P62). This was also felt in not just the trying moments but also the celebrations. "I believe the hardest part in parenting as a widow is not having the co-creator of your child there for all the highs and lows" (P303).

The loss of a partner was also felt intensely when the widow experienced the pain and struggles of their child(ren) and was exacerbated during times when their child(ren) experienced mental health challenges or demonstrated behavioral issues (P75, P101, P159, P190, P197, P201). This included when they experienced challenging behaviors between their children. "My biggest difficulty is dealing with how to stop the sibling fighting. I end up yelling when they fight and it makes me feel badly. It seems like someone in my house is always yelling or crying" (P69). Some widows shared

that their children experienced anxiety post loss which was an additional stressor and worry for them (P75, P190). “My child who was 6 when her dad died has experienced a lot of anxiety as a result of his death. Trying to help her with her anxiety is an additional stressor that makes parenting more difficult” (P75). For widows who have children with disabilities, they reported feeling that they faced increased challenges in the parenting role (P73, P79) particularly related to navigating health situations and the healthcare system (P73), trying to explain the behaviors and reactions to others (P197), and managing their own feelings of self-doubt to navigate the unique challenges they faced (P127, P190).

Future Partnerships

While many of the widows identified not wanting to spend the rest of their lives without a partner, they expressed concern as to how a future relationship could impact their children. Many questioned if they would find someone who would truly love and accept their children and highlighted the loss of shared pride and unconditional love that their spouse had once provided (P108, P242). “I have no one else who loves my kids unconditionally even when they are behaving badly” (P11). Re-partnering concerns also included the type of support they could expect and needed, particularly would a new partner be able to truly support them in the way their spouse had. “It’s hard not having someone to work through issues as they arise and to get a second opinion from...the only other person who knows your kids as well as you” (P203).

Theme 5: Heightened Insecurities/Self-Doubt

The loss of a spouse and partner creates a shift in the identity of the widow creating disruptions to self-esteem and a need to create a new sense of self and identity in the face of loss. This shift in identity from partner to widow while being inherently fraught with challenges, was exacerbated by the expectations and lack of understanding that others had about the grief experience of widows. P89 shared that “not being able to freely move through grief because people around you either think you are too emotional or should be moving on faster. It’s very isolating.” Further complicating widows’ self-perception of their parenting were internalized societal expectations and social pressures related to how they should behave, grieve, and parent. P293 shared

Parenting while also grieving is the hardest. Most people expect you to embrace your child but I’ve found that at times, in the beginning, I pushed him away because he was so much like his father, in looks and mannerisms. It took almost 2 years to get past that. It seems selfish looking back, but at the time, I was just doing whatever I could do survive every minute of every day.

While the widows in the current study missed having their spouses to bounce ideas off, their responses highlighted

an increased need for validation due to questioning their own decision making in the face of a new parenting landscape (P9, P21, P41, P57, P87, P98, P100, P149, P152, P159, P162, P203, P231). “I feel like I’m always second-guessing my every parenting decision” (P57). P230 shared the recognition that this led to a more difficult decision-making process “making major choices are harder because you always second guess if it is right or wrong. And if it is wrong, it is all on you.” These insecurities were not limited to parenting skills and often existed in every day decision making including at work for some of the widows. “The gaping hole in our lives, the insecurity it causes in all aspects of life. It even filters into work” (P242).

Participants shared a desire to make choices that their spouse would approve of and an increased pressure due to being in the role of both parents (P41, P98). “It’s hard knowing if you’re making choices your spouse would agree with when it comes to parenting and raising your child” (P41). Without concrete validation that their spouse would approve of their parenting decisions, self-doubt often led to the widows’ making comparisons of their parenting to what they perceived their spouse would have done. This comparative reflection process often painted the widows in the negative light. P98 shared

The hardest part for me is the doubt I have that my LH would be happy with how I am raising our son...He was a physician and a lot more ‘together’ than myself. I just have to remind myself that our son is happy and that’s all I can do.

This shift in confidence arises not just from the increased pressure of parenting alone but also from the additional challenges of managing grief reactions of their children. They shared that while there was immense pressure to be a good parent and help their children grieve while carrying their own grief, they also recognized that the accomplishments and successes were at their own hands. “I’m pretty sure they’ll grow up and realize that I did ok, and we did ok... and the accomplishments are because of you...” (P242). The widows while sharing experiences of being exhausted, overwhelmed, lonely, helpless, and insecure emphasized that these adversities were not the whole story, they shared the recognition that their children were turning into people that they were proud of and could not deny their role in that (P98, P149, 229). P299 shared “my daughter is full of joy and laughter” a sentiment that resonated for many of the widows in the current study. In addition, they recognized the intensity of the parenting role even without being a widow and were able to contextualize their own struggles in this light “The hardest thing to do in life is to be a parent, in my opinion. To be the only parent, just ups the level of difficulty. My husband was the best dad. I’m a great mom, but I do think all the time ‘what would he do, how would he have

handled the situation” (P149). For many widows, the hope for a future where they and their children had adjusted and were thriving, helped to motivate them to face many of the challenges they experienced along the way.

Advice from Widows for Widows

The widows in the current study offered some thoughts on the things that made their adjustment easier such as being able to recognize that they are human, capable of making mistakes, and having limited resources, emotionally, financially, and physically. P47 shared “Once I learned I can’t fix everything, life got easier between my son and I. We approach issues together now.” They recognized the need to accept that they were different now, different as individuals, and different parents, and that not having it all together all the time was ok. This highlights the importance of recognizing that outcomes are tied to resources and when resources are depleted, the bar for performance also needs to be adjusted accordingly. They wanted other widows to give themselves and their children the grace to be messy and to make mistakes, realizing that this is a natural part of the widow journey.

The widows in the current study highlighted the need to recognize that they did not have to be perfect, and that grief and parenting are a journey full of a wide array of experiences including ups and downs. “Some days are easier and better than others. Keeping a balanced life including working helps manage grief” (P141). This managing of expectations allows for self-love and growth in the face of loss. P140 shared

Finding your strength, purpose and self-care is the most important thing after losing your kids other parent. Being present with them and showing them love, comfort, and resilience, I believe is the best thing for them. And don’t compare yourself to anyone! ‘Don’t should on yourself’ is my favorite quote. We are still here for a reason and each of our stories is as unique as our lives. Help and love each other and encourage good parenting and support.

The widows also shared seeing the value in therapy for both themselves and their children as well as finding any available resources, including connecting to one another as crucial to healing. They recognized the challenges they experienced in finding support, leading many to online support groups and communities, and encouraged the ongoing development of systems of support for widows with young children.

Discussion

While the loss of a spouse is a normal part of the lifespan and what many have come to understand as “the price we pay for love”, it is one of the most challenging life experiences complicated for young widows with children by

the competing demands of managing their own grief while parenting grieving children. Consistent with the previous literature the widows in the current study experienced numerous losses, increasing role demands, and the need for identify reformation in their lives post loss [12]. The themes from the widows’ experiences all centered around being unpartnered by the loss and the struggles and successes they experienced as they navigated life and parenting solo. Their core experiences had both challenges and the emergence of strength and resilience through the reinvention of their parenting style and identity as a solo parent.

The widows in the current study experienced multiple layers of grief for themselves, the life that had believed they would have with their spouse, the parents that they thought they would have the opportunity to be, and the identify of spouse and partner that they had previously held and enjoyed that no longer fit post loss. They also experienced grief for their children and their deceased spouse for all of the moments that they would not get to experience together, realizing the opportunities that this loss took from them, their children, and their late spouse. Consistent with the previous literature, these losses ranged from the practical tasks of daily life to emotional and social experiences, and included the need for reconstruction of their social reality and worldviews [12,20,23,31]. The widows compared the parent they were before the loss to what they had the capacity to do as a solo parent, often experiencing feelings of coming up short and disappointment for the childhood they could not give or experience with their child(ren). This left many of the widows feeling as if they would never be enough as they found themselves in the non-traditional parenting role of solo parent.

The theme of being a solo parent and unpartnered resonated through all of the experiences of the widows and for many it created feelings of exhaustion, self-doubt, and guilt as they navigated new territory and roles. Recreating their parenting styles often required a recognition that they had to be both the parent that could nurture a grieving child and the disciplinarian that could create structure and accountability. Unique to the current study was the recognition by the participants of the positive and influential role that parenting played in their grief process. While on the one hand they recognized the pressure and stressors that parenting added to their grief reactions, they also identified relationship with their children as buffering against the use of unhealthy coping mechanisms and giving them concrete reasons to adapt and stay engaged in their lives. In fact, in some cases they shared that the unconditional love of their children was a lifeboat in a time of immense pain and despair. Many of the widows were able to recognize that they had a positive role in the adaptation of their children to life without a parent, however, this did not resonate as a source of pride or

accomplishment for them which may be directly associated with the challenging terrain they had to navigate and the loss that preceded this journey. However, for some the hope of a future where their child was thriving served as a motivator during the more challenging tasks of solo parenting.

Social support played a significant role in the experience of loss for the widows in the current study who, consistent with the previous literature, experienced fewer obstacles in adaptation post loss when a strong and engaged support system existed. However, for many of the widows, they also shared difficulties in feeling that they lacked a community to belong to and often felt disconnected and ostracized from their previous social circles as their identity shifted from spouse to widow. While they recognized that social support was a crucial part of their ability to navigate a world without their spouse, many struggled to find supports for themselves and their children with many sharing P270's sentiment "I wish I had more support and help." With a large number of widows reporting challenges in finding supports despite knowing they would benefit from them, there is a clear need for the development of social support networks that can meet the unique needs of young widows and their children.

The widows in the current study expressed that in the process of establishing their identity as a *solo parent* they were often disheartened by well-meaning attempts at comparisons to divorces and other single parent dynamics which fell short in capturing the unique challenges they experienced as widows, being alone in the parenting experience, and the grief associated with the death of a spouse. Previous literature highlighted the role of identity as an important factor in positive outcomes with widows who draw their identity internally faring better than those who derive their sense of self from the appraisal of others [36]. In the present study, widows who were able to introduce a sense of humanness and fallibility as acceptable experiences in the grieving process had a greater recognition of the impact of role shifts on what they had to give and could do as a parent. While they experienced sadness for the loss of the parent they were and had hoped to be, they shared more positive experiences related to their children's outcomes and future than those who focused on comparative appraisals to other parents or former versions of themselves.

Further, the widows shared the negative impact of internalized societal expectations related to the amount of time that one can grieve, how a widow should function post loss, and when they should be moving forward without outward expressions of grief, on their ability to appraise their journey in a positive light. They shared experiencing unspoken rules related to how long they should grieve before it is resolved and no longer impacting their lives and feeling

that expressions of grief after that point were often met with feelings of discomfort and advice that it was time to move on. The widows also echoed a sentiment that can be seen in the literature which mostly focuses on the experience of bereaved children rather than the widows, sharing that they felt unseen outside of their parenting role and that the expectations of their parenting post loss did not account for any grief reactions. Without their spouse to validate their experiences, the widows shared feeling additional pressure to not only meet societal expectations of how to grieve but also to make parenting decisions that their late spouse would approve of. Many of the widows in the current study shared the immense pressure to be a perfect parent despite the significant decrease in practical and emotional resources which led to experiences of self-doubt but also for some feeling accomplished when they were able to tackle and overcome obstacles by them.

The widows in this study shared some words of advice for future widows that they wish they had internalized at the beginning of their own journeys, including recognizing the humanness in oneself, allowing oneself to make mistakes, to not be perfect, and to recognize the limits of what one person can accomplish, and that resources play a major role in what they are able to do. They also wanted other widows to realize that it is impossible to be the same person they were before experiencing a life altering loss, yet there is opportunity for growth, and self-love in the process of grieving. They expressed that young widows with children should try to set realistic expectations for themselves and their children and create connections to support networks that understand the loss, while not internalizing messages of those who do not seek to understand the experience.

Overall, the experiences of the widows in the study suggest that widows with young children experience complex grief as they navigate the layers of loss for both themselves and their young children. This grief is intensified by the stress of becoming sole caregivers to their children, and the increased responsibility of having to complete all daily tasks and decision making alone. This study adds to the previous literature that identifies the experience of parenting while grieving as creating a unique set of challenges and tasks to be navigated that are different than those experienced by older adults who are widowed [37,38].

Limitations

While this research adds to the literature of the experience of widows with young children, there are some limitations to the current study that should be considered. The participants in the study all identified as women, this may be due to online recruitment strategies or the greater willingness of women to talk about emotional experiences.

Future studies should seek to identify recruitment strategies that provide a more balanced gender distribution so that differences of experiences across gender could be explored. Additionally, most of the widows in the current study had experienced the sudden loss of a spouse, while no major differences stood out between this group and the smaller group that had anticipated the death, the results may reflect more accurately unanticipated loss. Future research may seek to explore whether there are differences in adaptation and support between those who experiences a sudden and anticipated loss. While many participants shared that they wished they had more support, this group of participants may actually have more support than other widows due to their use of online support groups and forums, where the study was posted for recruitment. Future studies should include questions that can measure the level of social support that the participants experience whether perceived or actual, which can help inform interpretation about available and necessary supports for widows and their children. While the current study identified widows who lost their spouse at least 6 months prior to participation, a longitudinal approach to the grief experiences would allow further investigation of how the experiences of both grief and parenting change over time.

Conclusion

The experience of spousal loss has long been recognized as one that impacts psychosocial functioning, creating distress, and having the potential to influence parenting strategies and resources. The recognition of the multiple layers of grief can help to provide support to widows in a multifaceted nature and to develop a greater understanding of the complexities of parenting while grieving. The successful adaptation to the loss of a spouse involves a shift away from traditional concepts of moving on to one that recognizes the presence of the loss throughout the lifespan and normalizes expressions of grief without a timeline, separating newer concepts of pathology from realistic normal grieving patterns. For widows with young children, the integration of loss needs to include the recognition that the reoccurrence of grief symptoms is normal and will exist at many major milestones throughout the lifespan.

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