



THE MEANING OF BEAREAVEMENT AMONG SENIOR CITIZENS DURING COVID19 PANDEMIC

Chavez, Coleen

And

Danao, Ines, Phd

Lourdes College., Cagayan de Oro, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Bereavement and grief experienced due to the loss of a close family member or friend is an interesting phenomenon worth investigating. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study explored the meaning of bereavement among senior citizens. It sheds light on their struggles with loss, grief, and the process of adapting to life without their spouse. The research employed a phenomenological qualitative design, aiming to elucidate the lived experiences of widowed seniors. The study gathered insights from the participants through in-depth interviews, field notes, observations, and recordings. To ensure credibility, evaluative criteria were followed, and reflexivity was incorporated. Using HyperResearch software, the analysis identified codes, categories, and themes that encapsulate coping mechanisms and meaning-making strategies among widowed seniors. Three themes emerged in the study such as grappling with life challenges, coping mechanisms, and self-sense reconstruction. Grappling with life for widowed senior citizens means explicitly going through the emotional challenges characterized by the feeling of loss, desire for the lost attachment, and reminiscing memories. bereavement. The study further revealed various coping strategies and resilience-building approaches, including emotion-based coping, engagement in activities, seeking support, prioritizing work, and fostering family bonds. By embracing their pain, seeking support, and cultivating resilience, bereaved seniors manage their emotional distress and find purpose and meaning in their transformed lives. The study emphasized the significance of personalized grief management, maintaining routines, fulfilling family obligations, and engaging in social connections for overall well-being and resilience among bereaved seniors.

Keywords: *Meaning of Bereavement, Senior Citizens during COVID-19, Coping loss and grief.*

INTRODUCTION

"The only cure for grief is to grieve." (Earl Grollman). Bereavement is part of life's realities that must be faced squarely. It would be interesting to gain a deep understanding of the plight of those who are widowed, most especially among senior citizens during the pandemic period. While the world is becoming an aging society due to the rapid increase in the elderly population, the Southeast Asia National Human Rights Forum's statements on the rights of older persons declared that by 2050, there will be older persons than children under the age of 15 worldwide. It is projected that the number of older persons will more than double from 900 million currently to nearly 2 billion. The declaration in the forum further states that as the population of older persons increases, there is a need to advance the promotion and protection of their rights. The most frequently mentioned rights are social protection, care, an adequate standard of living, equality and non-discrimination, dignity, and integrity.

In the study context, Cagayan de Oro City's Office for Senior Citizens Affairs (OSCA) listed more than one hundred thousand senior citizens. City Health Office (CHO) epidemiologist Dr. Teodulfo Joselito Retuya Jr. reported

that those 60 years and older made about a third of the 949 cases of COVID-19 deaths from March 15, 2020, to August 19, 2022. Dr. Retuya stated that this figure reflects the comorbidities or underlying illnesses that older people experience (Sunstar, 2022). The Department of Health also noted that the elderly comprise seven out of ten COVID-19 deaths in the Philippines (DOH, March 2020 to July 2021).

There is a dearth of studies on the plight of the senior citizens sector in Cagayan de Oro, specifically on their grief. Bereavement is one of the most commonly experienced life events in older age, and grief is the natural response to any significant loss. Bereavement and spousal loss lead to many emotional and practical problems, especially for those in failing health who struggle with their limitations when performing everyday activities (Naef et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics underscores the core value of service, emphasizing social workers' responsibility to help people in need, address social problems, and promote clients' well-being and self-determination. In this regard, the initiative to assist widowed senior citizens, especially those in the marginalized sector, aligns with the fundamental principles of social work. The study aimed at understanding the experiences and coping mechanisms of older adult widows who lost their husbands, mainly due to COVID-19, is crucial for developing targeted support programs and services. The data from this study can serve as valuable baseline information for the Local Government Unit (LGU) to enhance the care and well-being of widowed senior citizens; hence, this study is hinged.

Theoretical Perspectives. This study presupposes that to assist widowed clients effectively and appropriately, social workers must be exposed to various situations and experiences of widows after the death of their husbands, the difficulties they faced, and the resources available to them, such as access to social support system which will contribute to their faster recovery.

This assumption is supported by the dual process model (DPM) of grief, a theory created by Stroebe and Schut (1999) that uniquely approaches grief processing. Unlike other grief theories, the dual process model theory posits that during healthy grief processing, individuals will move between focusing on their loss and distracting themselves from their loss. The dual process model of coping with bereavement notes that part of a healthy grieving process is both focusing on and avoiding loss-related material.

The DPM was designed to represent the bereavement experience in ways that built on but extended earlier models. Its basic parameters include descriptions of *stressors* associated with bereavement to categorize what is troublesome, understood to be either loss-oriented (LO) or restoration-oriented (RO). Loss orientation refers to the concentration on dealing with and processing stressful aspects of the loss experience itself, most notably concerning the deceased person (e.g., visiting the grave to be close to the deceased or looking at photos of him/her). Restoration orientation refers to secondary (to the loss itself) sources of/coping with stress. Such orientation focuses on what else needs to be dealt with as a result of the loss and how these matters are dealt with (e.g., taking up employment to compensate for the deceased's lost income and learning skills that had been done by the deceased). (Stroebe, 2010, & Ho, Ka Kin, 2023)

The loss of a loved one is a ubiquitous human experience that is often regarded as a severe threat to health and well-being. Bereavement has been linked to social, mental, behavioral, and physical issues, consistent with a stress-induced weathering process (Das, 2013 Roman Palitsky et al. I, 2023). Thus, bereavement is seen as a significant stressor that triggers problems such as depression and complicated grief (Shear et al., 2011). This research undertaking explored the experiences of widows following the loss of their husbands, the challenges encountered, and their support resources as they adapted to their loss.

The phenomenon of bereavement can also be attributed to attachment, as Bowlby (1958) described as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings." Attachment is an emotional bond with another person. Bowlby believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life. Attachment theory focuses on relationships and bonds (particularly long-term) between people, including between a parent and child and between romantic partners. It is a psychological explanation for the emotional bonds and relationships between people. The theory implies a cause-effect relationship between early attachment. Patterns and later reactions to bereavement, arguing that "whether individuals exhibit a healthy or problematic pattern of grief following separation depends on the way their attachment system has become organized throughout development."

Furthermore, Bowlby suggests that grief is an instinctive universal response to separation and posits four distinguishing attachment characteristics. First is proximity maintenance, which is the desire to be near the people one is attached to. Second is the Safe Haven, which is the return to the attachment for comfort and safety in the face of fear or threat. Third is the Secure Base; the attachment figure acts as a security base from which the child can explore the surrounding environment. Moreover, Separation Distress is described as an anxiety that occurs in the absence of the attachment figure. Bowlby argues that attachments develop early in life and offer security and survival for the individual. When affectional attachments are broken or lost, individuals experience distress and emotional disturbances such as anxiety, crying, and anger.

In addition to the support theories, the five stages of Grief is one of the best-known grief theories as espoused by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969), who identified denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as the key 'stages person's minds go through after someone dies. The Kübler-Ross model (sometimes called the DABDA model) surmises that there are sequential stages of various emotions that a patient goes through when diagnosed with a terminal illness, starting with denial and ending with acceptance. Some people have said that the five stages of her grieving process are too orderly to reflect just how messy grief can be. Dr. Kubler-Ross later said that her theory was never intended as a linear journey but a series of points one may often revisit while adjusting to life without someone.

Moreover, Psychologist William Worden outlined four tasks of healthy grief in his book "Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner." (2017). These tasks are: 1. accepting the reality of the loss; 2. experiencing the pain of grief; 3. adjusting to an environment with the deceased missing; and 4. finding an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. Accepting the reality of the loss is the first step in the grieving process. It involves acknowledging the loss and not pretending that it did not happen. This task allows individuals to absorb the total weight of the loss slowly and is the first step towards adapting and moving forward. Adjusting to an environment without the deceased involves external and internal adjustments, such as taking on new responsibilities and adapting to a new identity. Finding an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life is about balancing the memory of the person who died with living a whole and meaningful life.

Furthermore, the meaning-making model, developed by Park (2010), describes how individuals recover from a stressful event by reducing the discrepancy between its appraised meaning and global beliefs and goals. This model involves changing the meaning of the stressor or one's global beliefs and goals to improve the fit between the appraised meaning of the stressor and global meaning, thus facilitating the process of finding and making meaning. Grief counseling and therapy include exploring Worden's tasks and the meaning-making model, which can help individuals work through the grieving process and find strategies to cope with the changes and emotions associated with loss (Joseph & Linley, 2005).

In this study, the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut), Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Dabda's Model, and Park's Meaning Making Model were utilized as foundational constructs to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of bereavement among senior citizen widows.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study aimed to explore the bereavement experiences of widowed senior citizens, challenges encountered, coping mechanisms, and social support during the bereavement process. Despite the growing body of literature on bereavement, there is scant research on the experiences of senior citizen widows, specifically in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines. The existing studies have focused on the general population, and there is a need to understand the unique experiences of senior citizen widows (Farinasso & Labate, 2015). Additionally, there is a gap in the literature on the effectiveness of different types of social support for senior citizen widows during the bereavement process (Ghesquire et al., 2013). This study aimed to address these gaps in the literature by exploring the bereavement experiences of senior citizen widows and identifying effective social support mechanisms to help them cope with their loss.

Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1) What was life like for senior citizens before they lost their husbands?
- 2) What is the lifeworld of senior citizens who lost their husbands during the covid-19 pandemic?
- 3) How do senior citizens experiencing the loss of their husbands view life in the future?

LIMITATIONS

This study was only limited to the experiences of six widowed participants who lost their husbands due to Covid 19. The participants who were selected were undergoing the bereavement process. The generalizability of the findings could not be established as the findings only reflect the experiences of the 6 participants. This study only represents certain typical cases to a certain extent and cannot fully cover all social phenomena among other senior citizens.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design This research is a phenomenology qualitative study that describes the meaning of the lived experience of the participants about a concept or a phenomenon and uncovers the meanings of the lived experience (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1990 as cited by Creswell, 2007; Polit and Beck, 2014 as cited by Rutberg and Boudikis, 2018). In the conceptual framework of transcendental phenomenology, as espoused by Moustakas (1994), he recognized the efforts of Edmund Husserl in pushing forth such a philosophy that is "rooted in subjective openness." For Moustakas, phenomenon, in the context of phenomenology, is the very experience that "appears in consciousness," which means "the totality of what lies before us in the light of day" (Heidegger, 1977, as cited by Moustakas). The authors advanced the idea that any investigation in phenomenology must begin with a phenomenon and move forward to arriving at new knowledge in the forms of "epoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. Transcendental phenomenology starts with the process of epoche where the researchers attempt to distance themselves from the phenomenon by suspending their judgments or biases as humans naturally do in naturally occurring situations. Epoche demands that people view things from a new perspective, which requires them to learn to see what stands before them.

Research Context. Bhattacharya (2012) described the research setting as a "physical, social and cultural site in which the researcher conducts the study. This study was conducted in Cagayan de Oro Metropolis, the capital of Misamis Oriental, a highly urbanized city with 728,402 permanent population as of 2022. The city is also a commercial center and a gateway to Northern Mindanao. With Macalajar Bay and the nearby Cagayan River, it is a thriving metropolis (Camella, June 22). More than 91 thousand seniors are listed with Cagayan de Oro City's Office for Senior Citizens, and they reside in the area. According to Dr. Teodulfo Joselito Retuya Jr., between March 15, 2020, and August 19, 2022, there were 949 incidents of COVID-19 fatalities, with people 60 and older making up nearly a third of the total.

Sampling and Sampling Procedures. This study employed purposeful sampling, which is a non-probability kind of sampling. Purposeful sampling, also known as selective sampling, is a sampling technique that recruits participants who can provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation. Creswell (2013) proposed that a suitable sample size for a phenomenological approach consists of three to ten subjects to receive tangible information for the researcher to understand the participant's experiences. In this study, the participants were chosen according to the following criteria: 1. they shall be women who are widowed during the pandemic covering the time duration of School Year 2022-2023; 2. they shall be residents of Cagayan de Oro City and are enlisted in the Office of Senior Citizens Office; 3. they shall be female widows with age ranging from 60 to 70 years old; 4. and they shall be physically, mentally, and socially able during the conduct of the study.

Data Collection Methods. In collecting the data, Yin (2014) consulted documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts; Bogdan and Biklen (2006) likewise classify existing material into three categories: personal documents, official documents, and popular culture documents. In this study, the researcher employed in-depth one-on-one interviews, field notes, one-on-one observations, and audio recordings. The purpose of the in-depth interview is to understand the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of their experiences (Polit & Beck, 2017). An in-depth interview is the best avenue of inquiry for this study as the researcher encouraged the participants to contribute to the dialogue about their experiences of bereavement and their experiences of their husbands' loss during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Collection Procedures. After obtaining the Ethics Committee's Certificate of Approval, the researcher employed a purposeful sampling technique to recruit participants for the study, focusing on widowed senior citizens of Cagayan de Oro City who had applied for financial or burial assistance. The process involved obtaining permission from the City Social Welfare and Development Department, contacting the selected widows to seek their willingness to participate, and sending them informed consent forms. They were further oriented that their participation would benefit them because the study's result would be used as a reference for the welfare programs accrued to them and that their involvement would not pose any risk.

Subsequently, six widows were recruited, and the data gathering commenced through face-to-face and virtual interviews. The researcher adhered to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 by assigning pseudonyms to the participants before the interviews. Following Irving Seidman's model, the researcher conducted three interview sessions, each lasting 60-90 minutes and spaced three days apart, to explore the participants' life history, experiences related to losing their husbands, and their reflections on the future. The first interview session covered the participants' life history and present experiences. Life history focused on the participants' experiences before losing their husbands. The present mulled on the current details of experiences. After three days, the second session was conducted, and it was noted that the researcher had validated the responses before starting the remaining session. For the second session, it was focused on the context of the experiences of participants who lost their husbands during the COVID-19 pandemic. The third session was more on reflection on how the participants see life in the future after they experienced the loss of their husbands.

Data Analysis. The participant narrative analysis follows a unique format created especially for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007). Creswell quoted Moustakas (1994), who presented his adaptation of the Stevick-Colaizzi Keen method, which Creswell referred to as the "most practical, helpful approach." However, the Colaizzi (1978) method of analysis of the participant narratives was used in this study since the researcher deemed its structure to be practical based on the review of other studies using a similar methodology (Morrow, 2015; Suryanim et al., 2016; Shosha, 2012). The Colaizzi analysis technique used a seven-step procedure, including familiarization, identification of relevant statements, formulation of meanings, theme clusters, exhaustive description, fundamental structure, and verification. First, the researcher described her "personal experiences with the phenomenon under study" before incorporating Colaizzi's (1978) methodology (Creswell, 2007). This is termed *epoché* or bracketing where the researcher avoided biases by doing this, which may distort the individuals' accounts.

After bracketing the researchers' biases, the researcher familiarized herself with the narratives by reading through all the participants' accounts several times. During this step, separate readings of the narratives were done to ensure the researcher fully knew the data. From the transcripts of the narratives, the researcher identified all significant statements in the accounts. The researcher reviewed the entire transcript word-for-word, phrase-for-phrase, statement-for-statement, and paragraph-for-paragraph to determine the important statements. For ease of recollection, significant statements were underlined. "Non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements" are what these are (Creswell, 2007). The important statements were determined and then grouped to investigate each statement's meanings. After carefully examining the critical statements, the researcher identified the meanings pertinent to the phenomena. To adhere closely to the phenomenon as experienced, the researcher had reflexively "bracketed" her presuppositions. Formulated meanings emerge from this procedure.

Furthermore, the researcher grouped the developed meanings into themes that ran through all narratives during the topic clustering process. Again, bracketing presuppositions is essential to eliminate any potential impact from the current theory. The researcher can already tell which theme a given pattern of meanings fits within. Regarding exhaustive description, the researcher conducted further analysis to identify the recurrent themes. The emerging themes would direct how to construct a comprehensive description of the phenomenon that incorporates

all the themes. Regarding the fundamental structure, the thorough explanation was reduced in this step to a brief, dense statement that only includes the elements considered crucial to the phenomenon's structure.

Trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines for establishing trustworthiness were used for the empirical investigation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that the criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

For the first criterion of consistency, the researcher employed debriefing to ensure consistency in the study. The researcher reached out to a colleague who is a research expert to review and assess the study's transcript, methodology, and findings. Transferability refers to generalizing a study's conclusions (Padgett, 2008). The result of this study was used to relate other contexts and compare outcomes to previously published research findings. Moreover, the researcher employed thick descriptions to ensure the external validity while acknowledging the uniqueness embodied in the phenomenological approach. As for the criterion of dependability, bracketing was done throughout the whole research process. The researcher also enlisted an external auditor who is an expert in qualitative research studies to evaluate the accuracy of the findings, interpretations, and conclusions based on the data. After receiving the auditor's recommendations and suggestions, the researcher incorporated them into the study. For the last criterion, confirmability, the researcher used the reflexivity technique. With this, the researcher developed a reflexive journal to track the record of the data collection process. Moreover, confirmability was ensured by the researcher's attention to the practical data organization, including interview logs, overall research project log, writing notes/memos, and an external auditor.

Reflexivity Statement. The researcher, at present, is the LGU CDO's senior citizen focal person under the City Social Welfare and Development Department for six years. She has been a witness to the plight of senior citizens who have experienced the sudden loss of their life partner. As a government worker assigned to social services, she advocates that every person has equal rights no matter what the person's economic or social status is. Because of this, every person deserves an equitable right to quality of life. Social Workers should be oriented to the situation to appreciate and understand the context. Through this study, the researcher hoped that something had to be done with this sector, especially regarding the need to assist them during their bereavement challenges.

Ethical Considerations. The fundamental ethical principles for conducting research with human participants are described in the Belmont Report, a document published by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979). The Belmont Report was based partly on internationally agreed-upon standards that came before it, including the Nuremberg Code and the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (Amdur & Bankert, 2011).

Respect for persons is built upon two component standards: 1) individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and 2) persons with diminished autonomy, such as children, prisoners, and those with limited education, should be protected. Four concepts flow out of those two standards: 1) participation in research must be voluntary, 2) participants must provide informed consent, 3) privacy and confidentiality must be protected, and 4) participants may withdraw from research at any time without penalty (Amdur & Bankert, 2011). All these standards guided the researcher in the conduct of the study to ensure that the participants' rights were protected and upheld.

Furthermore, the first version of the NASW code of ethics, published in 1960, states that social workers are "dedicated to service for the welfare of mankind" and should "promote the well-being of all without discrimination." These basic tenets hold today and were applied in the study.

As applied, the researcher conducted the interviews sensitively to decrease the older person's feelings of grief related to the lived experiences of bereavement (Liamputtong, 2011). The older persons were provided with detailed written information before signing the consent form. They were assured that their names and identities would not be disclosed and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. Nevertheless, they were informed that their participation in the study would provide baseline information and input needed by the Office of Senior Citizens and that their involvement would not harm them. All data were stored in a locked and fireproof filing cabinet. The researcher ensured that there would be no violations of ethical protocols during the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presentation of Findings. This section describes the lived experiences of widows following the loss of their husbands. The description is arranged according to themes with the corresponding categories supported by codes.

Three themes emerged from the data: grappling with life challenges, coping mechanisms, and self-sense reconstruction. These three themes captured the widowed senior citizens' life world after the loss of their husbands during the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes bring to light the issues and challenges of senior citizens as they navigate life without their husbands. Table 1 encapsulates the themes, and categories with the corresponding codes.

Themes	Categories	Codes
Grappling with Life Challenges	Emotional Turmoil	Feeling of loss and grief
		Desire for the lost attachment
		Reminiscing memories
	Financial Complexities	Dealing the world alone
		Financial adjustment
	Parental Challenges	Double parenting
Coping Mechanism	Adaptive strategies	Embrace pain
		Seek family and social support
		Accept reality
		Develop resilience
	Positive Disposition	Establish work priorities
		Prioritize the upbringing of children and family
Engaging in social group		
Self- Reconstruction	Deepening of Faith	Remaining positive
		Strong faith in God
	Strengthening Bond with Family	Prioritize self and family
		Draw strength from children
		Devoted self to deceased spouse

Theme 1. Grappling with life challenges. The bereavement experience of widowed senior citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by profound feelings of loss, grief, and the challenge of adjusting to life without their spouse. To the participants, navigating loss and transitioning to another phase of life means explicitly going through the emotional challenges characterized by the feeling of loss, desire for the lost attachment, and reminiscing memories.

Theme 2. Coping mechanisms of. Widowed senior citizens often rely on coping mechanisms and meaning-making strategies to navigate the challenges of bereavement. The widows defined their coping mechanisms using adaptive strategies and making time for regular activities. Research by Beatrice (2020) and Abbas et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of practices like emotion-based coping, engaging in regular activities, and seeking support from family and social networks to cope with the loss of a spouse. Additionally, studies by Yang and Gu (2021) and Holmes (2021) highlight the significance of resilience and optimism in coping as widowed seniors strive to find meaning and purpose in their changed lives. These coping mechanisms and strategies not only help widowed seniors manage their emotional distress but also aid in the process of reorganizing their lives and finding a sense of stability and hope after the loss of their spouse.

Theme 3. Self-sense Reconstruction. The insights of widowed senior citizens on committing themselves to family and maintaining a positive approach to life offer valuable lessons on resilience and coping strategies. Carr et al. (2021) and Smith et al. (2020) shed light on how widowed seniors prioritize their family responsibilities and the well-being of their loved ones, finding strength and purpose in nurturing their relationships despite their grief. Studies by Burke et al. (2020) and Utz et al. (2021) further explore how these individuals adopt a positive outlook on life, focusing on gratitude, hope, and finding meaning in their experiences, contributing to their emotional well-being and overall resilience during the bereavement process. These insights underscore the importance of family connections and a positive mindset in navigating the challenges of widowhood and finding a sense of fulfillment and joy in life.

Structural Description. The experience of the researcher takes place in the different residences of the participant senior citizens who are still bereaving for the loss of their husbands due to the COVID-19 virus. The participants live with their children in several barangays in the city. Their bereavement experience is characterized by their efforts to go through life as they confront emotional challenges as well as parental and financial difficulties. Complex as it may, they can brace themselves by adapting strategies and using their time to help them cope with these challenges. Life must go on, as it has become their life's position. Their start-up is to accept and embrace the pain of the loss

and seek support from their loved ones within their respective families and neighborhoods. They further believe that by doing so, they can develop resilience and continue to find meaning in their lives.

Allowing themselves to go through the grieving process enables the widows to get back on their feet. They can find more meaning in their lives by deciding to commit themselves to their families, who are left behind, giving them a top priority instead of drowsing themselves with the pain of loss. Taking a positive approach to life by accepting reality and endorsing everything to God has been one of their realizations.

Essence. The experience of grieving during the COVID-19 pandemic has taught them a valuable lesson on the deep meaning of life, the importance of family and the social support of the community, and reliance on God no matter how unfavorable the circumstances are. Working with senior citizens can be a challenging and rewarding experience. Understanding the senior citizens' needs during their grief is a challenge. The government can only do small things, considering the budget, workforce, and other limitations. To address these challenges, the study emphasized the importance of client-centered strategies, which require a deep understanding of the bereavement experience of widowed senior citizens- a sector among the senior citizen populace who need the utmost help.

Effective service delivery depends on building a solid client-social worker relationship, strengthening client services to make them accessible to diverse needs, and upskilling social workers to work effectively with senior citizens. The composite description also revealed that agencies must be equipped to serve grieving senior citizens, and social workers find it challenging to manage their time and workloads due to the volume of clients catered to daily. The need for educational training in dealing with grieving senior citizens or other necessary skills further hampers their ability to provide quality care and support to their clients.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions. The study on the lived experiences of widowed senior citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals profound feelings of loss, grief, and the challenges of adjusting to life without their spouse. Based on the findings of the study, the assumption is that assisting widowed senior citizens effectively and appropriately after the death of their husbands, despite the difficulties they face and the resources available to them, such as access to a social support system, will contribute to their faster recovery is confirmed. The study also confirms the anchor theory of the dual process model used, which states that during healthy grief processing, individuals will move between focusing on their loss and distracting themselves from it. This was evident in the study.

Participants vividly express the intense emotional turmoil exacerbated by restricted access to dying spouses and limited opportunities for traditional mourning rituals due to pandemic-related restrictions. Additionally, the poignant longing for companionship and the struggle to adapt to a life devoid of shared experiences and emotional support, coupled with the financial strain following the loss of a spouse, underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by widowed seniors. Despite these difficulties, the study highlights widowed seniors' coping mechanisms and resilience, emphasizing the importance of family support, maintaining routines, and engaging in social connections for overall well-being and emotional adaptation. The commitment to family, positive outlook on life, and reliance on faith showcased by widowed seniors offer valuable insights into navigating the complexities of grief and adjustment, underscoring the significance of resilience, familial bonds, and spiritual fortitude in finding fulfillment amidst adversity.

Recommendations. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made to address the challenges faced by widowed senior citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. *Provide Emotional Support and Grief Counselling.* Healthcare providers and community organizations may offer tailored grief counseling and therapeutic interventions to help widowed seniors navigate their intense emotional distress and suffering. In addition, Support groups and online forums may be established to provide a safe space for widowed seniors to share their experiences and connect with others who have gone through similar situations.
2. *Foster Social Connections and Companionship.* Community organizations and social services may provide opportunities for widowed seniors to engage in social activities and connect with others, such as group outings, volunteer work, and social events.
3. *Promote Resilience and Coping Mechanisms.* Healthcare and social worker providers and mental health professionals educate widowed seniors on effective coping mechanisms, such as emotion-based coping, engaging in regular activities, and seeking support from family and social networks. Furthermore, widowed seniors are encouraged to prioritize their physical and mental health, engage in activities that bring them joy, and seek support from loved ones and professionals.
4. *Support Family and Caregiving Responsibilities.* Widowed seniors are encouraged to seek support from family members, friends, and community organizations to help them manage their caregiving responsibilities.

REFERENCES

- Abeles, N., Victor, T. L., & Delano-Wood, L. (2004). The impact of an older adult's death on the family. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35(3), 234–239. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.35.3.234>
- Anderson, K. L., & Dimond, M. F. (1995). The experience of bereavement in older adults. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 22(2), 308-315.
- Bennett, K. M., Smith, P. T., & Hughes, G. M. (2005). Coping, depressive feelings and gender differences in late life widowhood. *Aging & Mental Health* 0(4), 348–353.
- Boerner, K., Stroebe, M., Schut, H., & Wortman, C. B. (2015). Theories of Grief and Bereavement. In N. Pachana (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Geropsychology*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-080-3_133-1
- Bowlby, J. (1958). "The nature of the child's tie to his mother." *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 39, 350–373.
- Carr, D. S. (2004). Black/White differences in psychological adjustment to spousal loss among older adults. *Research on Aging*, 26(6), 591–622.
- Clark, E. J. (2011). Self-care as best practice in palliative care. In T. Altilio and S. Otis-Green (Eds.), *Oxford textbook of palliative social work*, pp. 771–778.
- Connidis, I. A., & Davies, L. (1992). Confidants and companions: Choices in later life. *Journals of Gerontology*, p. 47, S115-S122.
- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. and Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th Edition. Sage Publication Inc., California.
- Das, A. (2013). Spousal loss and health in late life: Moving beyond emotional trauma. *Journal of Aging and Health*, 25(2), 221–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0898264312464498>
- Dean, A., Matt, G. E., & Wood, P. (1992). The effects of widowhood on social support from significant others. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 20(4), 309-325.
- Doka, K. J., & Martin, T. L. (2011). *Grieving beyond gender: Understanding the ways men and women mourn*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203886069>
- Elwert, F., & Christakis, N. A. (2006). Widowhood and race. *American Sociological Review*, 77(1), 16-41.
- Elwert, F., & Christakis, N. A. (2008). The effect widowhood on mortality by the causes of death of both spouses. *American Journal of Public Health*, 98(11), 2092-2098.
- Farinasso, A. & Labate, E. (2015). "A phenomenological investigation into the experience of loss and the process of grieving in older people." *Journal of Aging Studies*, 33, 1-11
- Futterman, A., Peterson, J., & Gilewski, M. J. (1991). The effects of late-life spousal bereavement over a 30-month interval. *Psychology and Aging*, (5(3), 434-441.