



**RESEARCH PAPER**

## **Understanding Psychological Consequences after Early Parental Death: A Qualitative Exploration of Lived Experiences**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Parents are the first people with whom the child connects with. It is indeed a blessing in disguise. Children learn a lot of things from their parents like building trust, love, care, attention, support, and creating a sense of identity. So, losing a parent in itself a complex emotional experience. This study primarily focuses on those individuals who lost one or both of their parents in a very early age. The objective of this study was to explore the psychological well-being of the child after the loss of his parents. This study is qualitative in nature and research design was the interview guide. The total of 12 participants were recruited: 6 females and 6 males from Karachi, Pakistan. The results showed that there's milder psychological problems in participants such as anxiety, stress, low self-perception, low self-esteem, future uncertainty, and more. The study clearly concluded that the ones who have faced the loss of their parents will have adverse impact on their psychological well-being. This study further recommended that surviving parents should be psychoeducated on children's grief responses, early psychological screening can be done for the children to check the emotional and behavioral difficulties at an early age, and school teachers and counselors to be vigilant enough to recognize the signs of grief, emotional withdrawal, and behavioral issues.

**KEYWORDS** Psychological Consequences, Early Parental Death

### **Introduction**

Psychological well-being is a crucial indicator of mental health and it plays a significant role across the lifespan of every individual. This is created by parental presence in childhood. However, early life experiences, specifically the death of one or both of the parents impact one's emotional regulation, behavior, and coping mechanism. Previous researches have shown the loss of parental death in childhood have caused long term psychological consequences like vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and self-esteem issues (Pham et al., 2018).

Extensive research have been conducted in western societies which quoted long term psychological outcomes of parental death in early childhood such as (Ellis et al., 2013a)depression, (Li et al., 2022) PTSD, anxiety, and grief reactions (Peng et al., 2022)The researches are grounded in Western cultural societies where the concept of remarriage of the surviving parent is common as it's considered as a support system for the bereaved child. In such societies, remarriage is considered as the protective factor for children. It will restore caregiving stability in bereaved children's lives.

In contrast, the sociocultural society of Pakistan is different where the concept of remarriage of the surviving parent, particularly widowed woman is limited due to cultural norms, gender stereotypes, and social stigma. Consequently, children in Pakistan live with their surviving parent and under the shelter of their extended family.

Pakistan's society is considered to be as culturally embedded family structure. The research grounded in Pakistan's society have highlighted that parental death is associated with self-esteem issues, self-perception issues, and behavioral issues in children but such studies are limited in scope and rarely researched on the long-term psychological consequences of parental death in childhood.

Though both the Western and Pakistani societies have highlighted the psychological distress faced by the children who faced parental death but there is notable lack of research in Pakistan's society which explicitly quotes the consequences of parental death in Pakistan's unique cultural environment. Precisely, little attention is given to how reduced likelihood of remarriage of surviving parent, extended family members support, and the importance of emotions influence psychological well-being of the bereaved children. This gap demands research into the determinants of the psychological well-being among individuals who has experienced the parental death in early childhood.

### **Literature Review**

Parents are the first friends of the child. They shape the emotional regulation, behavior, coping strategies, resilience, and social relationships of their children. Although, the relationship between parents and their child evolves over time, the parents remain the closest one can experience. However, if any child experiences the death of any of his parent will lead to adverse consequences in future.

Extensive research has been done which highlighted the psychological outcomes of the parental death. One of the studies proved that childhood parental bereavement leads to depression and results in unhealthy parent-child relationships. The parentally bereaved children will have an unhealthy relationship with their surviving parent. The parental childhood bereavement is associated to depression (Benson, 2012)

Moreover, parental bereavement leads to emotional, behavioral or psychiatric disturbances in children. This study suggested that death of a parent and/or sibling do overlap. Many psychologists have proved that if there's traumatic loss in childhood it will result in psychopathology. There can be immediate (weeks or months), intermediate (later childhood or adolescence) and long-range effects on children following the parental death. The immediate reaction would be behavioral or emotional reactions such as crying or withdrawn from school. In adolescents, the child may fear crying or expressing the emotions due to the fear that society will think of them as abnormal. In intermediate reactions, the child can prove to any medical consequences or psychiatry consequences. The medical consequences can be arthritis or diabetes whereas, the psychiatric consequences can be depression or neurosis. In the long-range or sleeper effects, the medical consequences can be severe medical illness, the psychiatric consequences can be psychosis and neurosis, the development of autonomy, and the capacity for intimacy. There's an association between early loss and the life of adult's sexual identity is impaired. Also, in adulthood, the person is prone to major depressive disorder (Osterweis et al., 1984)

Furthermore, the risk of developing psychopathology and dissociation in the surviving parent and the adolescents are predictors of the occurrence of physical illnesses. And the dissociation is an important predictor of significant physical problems (Tafà et al., 2018). The parental death can have an adverse influence on self-esteem of children (Worden & Silverman, 1996). The low self-esteem is linked to a rise in mental

health problems in children who are parentally bereaved (HAINÉ et al., 2003). Other than lower self-esteem, children who are parentally bereaved face other problems like no positive connection with people who are important and/or a rise in strict parenting from a depressed surviving parent (Haine et al., 2006a). The children who faced parental death think that they are helpless and have a low sense of internal control of the situations that they are facing in comparison to the children who doesn't face parental death. If there will be an increased sense of external control so it would be linked to mental health-related problems leading after parental death (Silverman & Worden, 1992). If the person can control the adverse situations that happen outside one's control, this leads to negative evaluation of oneself. For example, if I am unable to find the solution something unpleasant will take place (Ayers et al., 2014). The children who are mentally bereaved experience many emotions such as feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger and guilt (Stroebe et al., 1984). There's a decrease in crying and sleep disturbances of children after parental death. Much research have suggested that it is important for children to express negative emotions, otherwise they are more likely to experience mental health-related issues. The 'cathartic' of emotions is important for all children (Tein et al., 2006)

The long-term outcome of childhood bereavement is that they are prone to stress (Hammen, 2003). The people who face the loss of a mother, father or child are likely to be less happy than those who never face such experiences. The important life events do have an influence on SWB. It's not the temporary effects only. The age at which the child faced the loss is important for the link between bereavement and SWB than the time length of the loss (Moor & de Graaf, 2016a). According to several research, children who experienced parental death often face depression in childhood and adulthood.

The children who faced parental death is linked to lower grades (Berg et al., 2014a). If the child is going to the same school or living in the same locality so the parental death might not impact the child much. And, if the surviving parent is unable to cope from the loss and the child is not given the correct information about the death of the parent so this may affect the child. This study suggested that an individual's parental death consequences are mistrust, problems in relationships, low self-esteem, isolation and impact on self-worth and unable to express feelings (Ellis et al., 2013b). This study concluded that there's no single approach which can understand the parental death complexity of impact on the child (Palombo, 1981).

This concept is further supported by Kubler and Ross's 5 stages of Grief Theory. The research have suggested people normally respond to the loss in several ways. One of the researchers, David Kessler and Kubler Ross, have suggested five stages in which a person with grief experience to live with the loss. It's about remembering your loved ones with love than with pain. It's not necessary that each person with grief experiences these stages in a prescribed order but there can be more or less stages which the person may experience. The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The first stage is denial which is all about the person is not able see reality and not ready to accept it. The second stage is anger in which the bereaved individual will show anger towards his friends, his family members or maybe the surviving parent. It's important to show anger rather than suppress it. The third stage is bargaining in which the individual start bargaining with the God to bring the loss loved one back and take something other from him. For example, the person with grief will negotiate with God that 'please return my father back I will never fight with him' or 'What if I follow all my religious obligations would he be back to me.' The fourth stage is depression. It is not unusual to be depressed once you've lost your loved one. It is necessary step in the process of healing. It is not considered to be a mental illness but a necessary response to the dead of loved one. When

the grief reaches a deeper level, so that's depression. People in depression may want to be withdrawn from society and want to be alone. The fifth and the last stage is acceptance. The acceptance is not 'Ok or all right' but it's about accepting that the loved one who died is physically not present with us. The person with grief accepts that the past life can't be possible, so re-adjustment needs to be done. The person with grief will assign new roles to themselves or others. The person with grief will make new and meaningful relationships and new interdependencies. The person with grief will move, change, grow and evolve after the loss of loved one. The person with grief starts to live again but before that we need to give some time experience grief. (Maciejewski et al., 2007)

This leads to another concept suggested by Dr. Tonkins. It's all about Fried egg model of grief. He gave an example of fried egg, which includes the yolk and egg white. He mentioned the egg yolk is the grief which an individual faced after the loss of his loved one, and the egg white around that yolk is his life. It's all about growing around grief. Grief remains in our life but our life around that grief will expand like we will have new relationships, new career opportunities, new places, and more. Somehow, grief will impact every aspect of our life. (Tonkin, 1996).

Although a substantial body of Western literature is done in long-term psychological outcomes of parental death in childhood, but majority of these studies are rooted in Western sociocultural domain. It highlighted the importance of remarriage of surviving parents, diverse family structures, and larger access to formal psychological support. Consequently, such studies cannot fully be applicable to Non-Western societies such as Pakistan. In Pakistan, there is reduced ratio of remarriage of surviving parent, specifically for the mothers, the role of extended family members increases if any of the parent died, and focus is only on the bereaved children. There is lack of systematic empirical studies which examines the long-term psychological consequences of parental death in childhood. The current study will fulfill the research gap by examining the determinants of psychological consequences of parental death faced by children in Pakistan. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing literature by adding in bereavement research to the underrepresented population such as Pakistan. And, this research can highlight culturally appropriate interventions for those who have faced parental loss in early childhood.

## **Hypothesis**

H1. Early parental death will have psychological consequences later in life.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study was qualitative in nature and based on interpretative phenomenological approach. This study targeted parentally bereaved emerging adults, and semi-structured interview was used to highlight the themes and sub-themes. This helped us to know the psychological consequences the participants are facing. It will provide detailed analysis of lived experiences that the participants have experienced. This approach will help in improving how a person has made sense of life experience and deeply evaluate the experience to understand it more appropriately.

### **Sample Size and Sampling Procedure**

The research was conducted in Karachi, Pakistan. The targeted population of this study was obtained through purposive, convenience sampling, and snowball sampling technique. This included 12 emerging adults who were between the ages of 18-25 years, faced the death of at least one of their parents, and the duration of parental death was at least 5 years or more. There were 6 male participants and 6 female participants. Half of the male participants faced the death of their fathers and other half faced the death of their mothers. Same criteria were used for the female participants. The rationale for choosing this population and time frame chosen for this study was that individuals are in that phase of life where they take important life decisions and could be able to recall enough information from their past which can raise the homogeneity of the sample.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

- Adults who have experienced the death of mother, father or both at least 5 years or more.
- Age range of participants must be between 18-25.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

- Individuals who have experienced other traumatic incident than parental death.
- Individuals who have experienced parental death less than 5 years ago.
- Individuals who are below the age of 18 or above the age of 25.
- Differently abled adults.
- Individuals who have not gone for therapy before.

### **Interview Guide**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the psychological determinants of the parental death in childhood and to gain in-depth information of their lived experiences. The questions were reframed by using the research based on bereavement, grief theories, and lifespan of children which focused of psychological outcomes following parental death. The interview guide followed the themes like emotional stability, belief system, birth order, and explored parentification. The interview questions were designed in a way that participants were able to talk freely and expand on topics if they want to while the interviewer ensures that all themes were addressed.

### **Procedure**

The initial phase of the research was to post on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp in order to recruit specific participants for the current study. The second step was to gather participants through purposive, convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques. All participants were selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The participants were informed about the nature of the study and asked to sign the informed consent form. They were told about their right to withdraw from participation and confidentiality of their identity, personal information, findings, and responses. Participants completed demographic questionnaires after completing informed consent. They were told that their participation

is completed voluntary and they will not get any compensation or rewards for this. Once the participants were recruited, the primary investigator scheduled the day and timings for the interviews. The primary investigator conducted the interview along with recording the audiotapes by taking the consent from the participants. After the interviews, the secondary investigator transcribed the audiotapes and identified the themes and sub-themes. Later, the coding was done.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1**  
**Frequencies and Percentages of Demographic Variables of Emerging Adults (N=12)**

Variables	F	%
Gender		
Male	6	50
Female	6	50
Age		
18	0	0
19	2	4
20	0	12.5
21	2	11.5
22	0	15
23	2	13
24	4	16.5
25	2	14.5
Parental Death		
Mother	6	50
Father	6	50
Both	0	0

Note: F= Frequency, % = Percentage

The table above indicated the distribution of emerging adults who participated in the current research based on demographic variables including age, gender, and faced which parent's death.

**Table 2**  
**Themes and Sub-themes**

Themes	Sub-Themes	Sample Quote
Emotional Instability	1. Regret	1. "The ways of doing things are different of my step mother and my own mother. I still remember my father said to me and my siblings before his remarriage, "Your mother is not coming back but someone is coming to take place of your mother." - Participant A.
	2. Upward Comparison	2. "I compare a lot. I notice my friend's mothers who make food for their daughters so this hurt me a lot. I feel my mother shouldn't die." - Participant C.
	3. Emotionality	3. "I become responsible. I think that I stable in a very young age. I grow in these years. I am sensitive but just for my family." - Participant H.
	4. Negative Connections	4. "No one gave us moral support. My paternals and maternals never supported us. I felt lonely at times. At one time, my paternal uncle said, 'Now start using less things, no need to add on your expenses.' My father was not alive so that's the reason he said this to us." - Participant B
Irrational Beliefs	1. Hopelessness	1. "At one point in my life, I started thinking that nothing better will going to happen in my life. God

	2. Future Insecurity	<i>have taken my best friend from me. No one could fill the hole in my life." - Participant B.</i>
	2.	<i>"And, "I feel afraid that whatever happens with my father it might happen with me in future as well because I resemble with my father a lot, I had TB at the same age as my father had it, and so I feel like my future wife will going to have breast cancer and I'll spend the life like my father spent." - Participant L.</i>
Birth Order	Parentification	<i>"Friendly and a teacher to my younger brother. My mother have a very friendly relationship with him but I try to deal with him like his father." - Participant E.</i>

The table above highlighted the themes and sub-themes along with the verbatim of the participants.

## Discussion

The death of either the mother or the father is the most traumatic experience one can face. As this study hypothesized the early parental death significantly impact the psychological well-being of an individual, the results of this study highlighted that there's a significant impact of the parental loss on individuals. The findings of this study is correlated with the previous study which concluded that the ones who separate from their parents for more than 6 months are likely to be 'affectionless.' This study proved that the ones who faced the death of one of their parents in early life so they will have problems in adult relationships (Steele et al., 2008). Like, in this study, one of the participants had been in relationship for many years but slowly started to detach from her. For girls, two of the female participants are either engaged or married at such a young age. This is like the findings of one of the previous studies which found that there will be differences in adult relationships. The girls who experienced the death of one of their parents so they will either get married early or will never get married. Also, both bereaved males and females will likely end their relationships. They will try to start relationship at young age and will finish it early (van Heijningen et al., 2025).

Moreover, few of the participants have given interviews through phone calls. They pleaded with the researcher to not to call in the presence of their surviving parents because they can't talk about such topic in front of them. This study assumes the surviving parents are sensitive about this topic. While talking to such participants, it is concluded that they are likely to be emotional about this topic. A similar conclusion was found by one of the last studies. The dissociation and development of psychopathology is possible in surviving parents and adolescents. This may lead to physical problems (Tafa, et al., 2018). In this study, all the participants faced less or more problems after the loss of one of the parents. This study mainly focused on adolescents who can't cry in front of anyone as society will not accept it. Such people are unable to develop intimacy. The findings of this study give voice to the findings of the previous study that concluded there are immediate, intermediate, and longer-range effects of parental death. The child may have depression in the longer run and will have problems in developing intimacy (Osterweis, Solomon, & Green, 1984). The problem of low self-esteem was figured out by almost all the participants. This finding is correlated with the previous study which concluded that the ones who faced parental death are likely to face problem of self-esteem (Worden J., 1996). The participants were unable to focus on their self-worth; they are sensitive to criticism and want to be aloof. This leads to problems in their relationships, especially with their relatives. They started making toxic relationships. Also, many of the participants were hopeless and helpless about their lives. They keep

on regretting losing one of their parents. They either blame God or others for losing one of their parents. Such problems were highlighted in previous studies. The impact of parental death will be on child's self-esteem (Worden J., 1996). This leads to mental health problem (Haine et al., 2006b). The children who experienced the death of one of their parents will make negative connections. They will consider themselves helpless and they have low internal locus of control.

Furthermore, the level of happiness of all participants is low. They all seem to be unhappy and somewhat not satisfied with their lives. Previous studies have concluded that people who faced parental death in childhood are likely to be unhappy than the ones who never faced such experiences (Moor & de Graaf, 2016b). Two of the participants have complained about their anxiety of exams and leading to low grades. This strengthened by previous studies. The ones who faced parental death have likely chances to get lower grades (Berg et al., 2014b). Most importantly, those participants who knew about the medical condition of their mothers or fathers before their death, so they have slightly poor adjustment than those participants whose one of the parents died in sudden circumstances like target killing, murder, or childbirth. Such participants must face financial crisis, family dysfunction, and a lot of problems in adjusting to new lifestyles after losing one of the parents suddenly. This is found in several other research that the ones who know about the illness of the deceased parent before their death so they would face little adjustment problems but whose one of the parents died suddenly so they would face problems like financial difficulties, and poor adjustment to new lifestyles (Raveis et al., 1999).

When participants were asked about their reactions at the time of knowing the news of sudden death of one of their parents, so they were in denial or idealization phase. This previous study concluded the same coping strategy at the time of parental death (Osterweis, Solomon, & Green, 1984).

The consequences of parental death can be realistic too. This study highlighted that three of the participants consider their young siblings as their children. This is parentification. They become responsible after facing one of the deaths of their parents just for the sake of their family. One of the previous studies is like this study as it concluded that 'person-oriented families' are those families in which there are achieved roles, open communication, and flexible family structure. All family members will reallocate the roles after the death of one of the parents (Vess et al., 1986).

Lastly, many of the studies have concluded that the impact of parental death is different for both sons and daughters. If the same parent died so the negative impact will be more. If the mother died so the impact on daughters will be in the form that they will be involve in more binge drinking, low self-esteem, low personal mastery, and low psychological wellness. Whereas the sons who experienced the death of their mothers will face poor health, low psychological wellness, and low global happiness. If a daughter faced the death of her father so she will likely face low personal mastery and low psychological wellness. However, the son will face more depressive symptoms, low personal mastery, low psychological wellness, and low self-esteem (Marks et al., 2007).

## Conclusion

The study focused on emerging adults who lost one or both of their parents with the duration of 5 years or more. This study was qualitative study, and semi-structured interviews were done. The study highlighted the themes and sub-themes from the

interviews. The result showed the psychological determinants after the parental death in early life. The study highlighted low self-esteem, anxiety, role reversal, low happiness, and low self-perception in later life. This study can be useful for the countries like Pakistan in various ways like people will have awareness that the loss of any of the parent in early age can have adverse consequences in future.

### **Recommendations**

This study highlighted the importance of psychoeducation. The surviving parents should be psychoeducated about managing their own grief, understanding the emotional needs of their children, and creating a supportive environment. In addition to this, schools must provide screening tools through which behavioral and emotional issues can be identified to work in future with the help of teachers and counselors.

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