



## RESILIENCE AFTER LOSS: REFLECTIONS OF INDIVIDUALS LOSING LOVED ONES IN THEIR FAMILIES

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### ABSTRACT

The loss of a loved one in the family has the potential to bring loss of significant roles and responsibilities and disrupt the normal family functioning processes. The process of adaptation demands re-organization and re-calibration of roles and responsibilities and regaining the coherence of reality in life. Such processes of rebuilding and moving forward in lives are referred to as Resilience. The relational position and the familial context have an important influence on the experiences of adaptation among bereaved individuals. It is therefore important to understand the experience of reconstruction and rebuilding of individuals belonging to different relational positions in their families.

The paradigm of constructivism was followed to answer the research questions of the present study. In-depth interviews were conducted with eleven bereaved individuals belonging to different relational positions in their families. The age of participants was in the range of 19 to 50 years with a mean of  $M= 35.6$  years. Five participants had experienced the death of a spouse, four had experienced the death of a parent and two had experienced the death of a child in their families. The time since the death of a family member was in the range of 2 to 5 years with a mean of  $M= 3.1$  years. The data from participants was analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The experiences of participants were portrayed in the following themes: “changed Life Perspective”, “Reconstructed Identity”, and “Increased Commitment Towards the Family”.

The findings identify the positive aspects of the experience of bereaved individuals belonging to different relational positions in their families. Such findings have implications for grief counselors and therapists in helping the bereaved individuals build upon their positive aspects and focus on what is working in their lives as they move forward in reconstructing their lives.

**KEYWORDS:** Resilience, family, bereavement, constructivism, themes, thematic analysis

### BACKGROUND

Every significant relationship in family is integral to the being of every other individual in the whole unit. A family is a social-emotional unit or amalgam and the death of an individual in such a unit tends to bring about changes in the structural and functional dimensions of the whole unit (Bowen, 2018).

The concept ‘family’ has been defined in many ways. The definitions of the family include; a group of people related by blood or marriage (Oxford Dictionary, 2017); a group consisting of parents and their children living together as a unit (Oxford Dictionary, 2017); the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2017). For the present study family means a unit of two or more individuals who, through the context of their relationships, support one another in various roles and responsibilities (Wright & Leahey, 2014).

The amount of disruptions that death of a family member brings in the whole unit depends upon centrality of relationship with deceased in the whole unit. In a family context, grief brings along the crisis of identity and attachment for the interdependent members (Gilbert, 1996). It shatters the assumptions of reality and disrupts the coherence in the daily lives of individuals related to the deceased (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). It disrupts family stability in the interrelated domains of emotions, interactions, social roles, and meanings (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2013). Therefore, death in the family is a stressor that brings tension or pressure on the status quo of the whole unit.



The process of adaptation involves reconstructing and re-building the disrupted lives. It demands revising shattered assumptions and building coherence in one's life (Attig, 2001). Maintaining family as a functioning entity demands re-organization and re-calibration of roles and responsibilities along with the resolution of bereavement in the family. The processes of reconstruction and rebuilding of disrupted lives involves the utilization of individual and shared resources in the family and in socio-cultural context (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1989). Such processes of adaptation have mostly been explained by the stress adaptation researchers.

In the recent years, the focus of stress adaptation researchers has moved toward resilience. They began to identify the strengths and resources that facilitate positive adaptation. The resilience orientation rebalances the problem focus to how individuals are challenged in the face of crisis and are operating well (Walsh, 2016).

The construct resilience has been defined and refined in a number of ways. The process of adapting well in the face of adversity, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress is most generally referred to as resilience (Masten, 2014). The social-ecological context is considered to have an important bearing on the resilience of an individual. The process of resilience takes place at the levels of the individual, the family and the community (Masten, 2018). Therefore, when exploring the good outcomes or positive adaptation to loss in families, it is important to have an understanding of relational, familial and cultural contexts that has its impact on manifestation in the lived experiences (Osterweis et al., 1984; Shapiro, 1996).

The evidences of coping and adaptation in bereavement have been observed in the previous studies on bereaved individuals. Many studies feature growth and positive change out of adversity.

Apelian & Nesteruk (2017), observed coping strategies among bereaved young adults in dealing with the stressors that piled up in their lives. Positive adaptation processes were linked to receiving social and emotional support from friends, family and other relatives. Working hard in school, using friends as distraction and isolating when needed were some of the coping strategies described by the participants. The participants described their resilience and personal growth in terms of changed life perspective and becoming stronger than they were before bereavement.

Fikry (2019) observed the stressors and positive experiences on two young adults who had experienced parental death. Becoming more independent, responsible and sensitive to the future conditions of family were some of the positive experiences described by the participants. The perspective of their life changed and they saw their life in a more mature and rational manner. They described that by relying on their own abilities, they became more steadfast and daring to face the challenges of life.

Dabla (2010), in an attempt to identify social and financial factors that help and hinder the daily life among women after spousal bereavement in Kashmir by, it was observed that they faced the major challenge in terms of parenting their children irrespective of their economic status. They coped in their lives by giving priority to the education of their children and striving hard to educate them. The major support for widows were observed to be parental families, ex-husband's families, other relatives and individuals, government organizations and NGO's.

In an identification of the resilient qualities in families, Greeff et al (2011) conducted a study on 89 families in Belgium who had lost a child to death. The resources and coping strategies that helped them through difficult period was observed. The results indicate that family strengths in general, and commitment to the family helped the families' adaptation after the loss. Viewing crisis as a challenge by the family also aids in adaptation. In response to the open-ended question, 72% of the participants indicated commitment to family as an important recovery factor, and 10% indicated the importance of fostering hope and a positive attitude in adaptation to the loss.

Cadell and Sullivan (2006), in a study on bereaved parents observed the positive aspects of bereavement experience in three main domains: finding new possibilities like giving or receiving service to others; increased appreciation and positive changes in relationship with friends and family, renewed relationship with the deceased; achieving personal growth, appreciating life in new ways and experiencing a change in the philosophy of life. Bereavement was viewed as a chance to learn more about themselves, their views of life and their relationship with religion and spirituality.

It is evident in the literature that most people adapt to bereavement and move towards positive change and growth after experiencing loss and adversities in their lives.

## CURRENT STUDY

There is a dearth of literature exploring the experiences of coping among bereaved individuals from different relational perspectives in their families. The aim of the current study is to address such a gap in the literature and gain an understanding of the adaptation experiences of bereaved individuals belonging to different relational contexts in their families. The purpose of the present study is to gain an insight into the stories of adaptation with loss in their lives so that pertinent help can be provided to such individuals. The study needs to answer the following research questions: What are the positive changes experienced by bereaved



individuals as they adapt to the difficulties and challenges in their lives? How do such experiences differ from different relational position in their families?

## METHODOLOGY

The research questions of the present study are answered within the paradigm of constructivism. Constructivism is a post-modern philosophy which argues that all experiences and concepts are constructed through language situated in a particular context. It is the language which creates what we envisage as 'real' (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). Phenomenology was used as a method of enquiry to elicit and interpret the experiences of individual participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In-depth interviews were used so as to gain an insightful understanding of the participants' experiences.

The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed. Field notes and observations were also taken. Huge amount of time was taken to build rapport with participants while taking consent from them and during interview sessions. Confidentiality was maintained in handling information from participants. The names of the participants mentioned in the study are pseudonyms.

Eleven participants were interviewed for this study. The participants were in the age range of 19 to 50 years with mean of M= 35.6 years. The time since the death of family member was in the range of 2 to 5 years with a mean of M= 3.1 years. Five participants had experienced the death of a spouse, four had experienced the death of a parent and two had experienced the death of a child in their families.

The technique of thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) was used to identify themes in the data. The steps of analysis included: Familiarization with the data involving transcribing, reading and noting down main ideas in the transcript; Generating codes and collecting data relevant to each code; Generating themes after clustering codes with similar meanings; Reviewing themes and finally Producing the report.

## FINDINGS

Following themes encompass the adaptation processes of individuals after facing disruption in their lives; "*changed life perspective*", "*Reconstructed Identity*", and "*Increased Commitment towards the Family*".

### *Changed life perspective*

The participants described that they view their lives quite differently than they used to before experiencing loss in their lives. The participants who had lost their spouses and had to struggle with the stressors of parenting and managing daily activities without the help of spouse increased their understanding of the harsh face of life. The participants who had lost their parents described that feelings of deprivation gave them humbled and patient attitude towards their life. The participants who had lost child described that experiencing such a tragedy in their lives increased their understanding of the temporality of life.

The woman who was parenting her children and working for her family expressed her changed perspective towards life which was seen in positive light by her.

*After the death of my husband, I started coming out of the confines of my home and working for the sustenance of my family. I met many people and I found that there are many others who are struggling with the same kind of situation. It pacified my heart that I was not alone. My way of looking at life changed. A woman can achieve anything when she does not give up at the hands of situations.*

(Rafiq, 42 years)

Another participant spoke similarly about the changed her perspective towards life.

*After the death of my husband, I was an easy target for those who wanted to take an advantage of my weakness. I feared losing my house and husband's shop. Facing such people in life changed my way of looking at life. One always has to be conscious of the people who appear in the guise of being friends to you. (Shabnum, 40 years)*

Another participant spoke similarly

*Facing such a tragedy in life was very difficult for me. I never had dealt with any such kind of a big misfortune in my life. The earlier days were very difficult for me but it gave me the realization that life can be very harsh to a person. One has to remain prepared for every untold happening in one's life.*

(Saleema, 43 years)

The participant who had lost her father at an early age described that dealing with all the restrictions and problems humbled her attitude towards the life.



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*After the death of my father, I faced many restrictions and dealt with so many difficulties without the guidance of my father. The feeling of being deprived of something significant always remains in my life. It makes you realize that everything cannot be achieved in life and makes you look at life with a humble attitude.*

(Sadia, 22 years)

Another participant spoke in a similar way.

*If God had provided me with everything in life, it would have been impossible for me to remember Him. The tragedy changed my way of looking at life. It made me more sensitive towards other people's pain.*

(Hina, 19 years)

The participant who had lost her daughter expressed that the loss increased her understanding of life.

*My daughter was quite young to die. Seeing young people leave their lives before you makes you realize that this material life is quite temporary. Everyone has to leave one day or the other. One should always be a good person. This is what makes this temporary life so beautiful.*

(Zamrooda, 48 years)

#### *Reconstructed Identity*

The participants described change in the perspective of how they view themselves as individuals after bereavement. The women who had lost their spouses and were parenting their children alone in the family expressed that they view themselves as strong, autonomous and mature beings as they dealt with many difficulties in their lives on their own. The participants who had lost their parents described that managing many activities in their without the help of parents turned them into mature and responsible individuals. The participants who had lost a child in the family described that they gained virtues in their personality after experiencing such an unanticipated loss in their lives.

The participant who had lost her spouse described gaining autonomy and maturity in her life.

*After losing my husband, many people tried to command their power over my life... But I never lost my wits. I gained control over my life, took stand for my children and decided to commit my life for them. Parenting my children alone and doing all the tasks which a man is supposed to do for his family made me learn a lot... I feel like the experience that my life gave me is like gaining the wisdom that even an old person would not have.*

(Rafiq, 42 years)

Another participant spoke about the strengths she gained in her life.

*I achieved the tasks that my husband could never achieve in his life. I am building a new house for my family and looking after all things like a man. I manage my home and also work for my family. I feel that all these experiences made me stronger than a man could ever be.*

(Shabnum, 40 years)

Another participant spoke in a similar manner.

*After the death of my husband, I learned the skill of managing many tasks like buying the things for home, dealing with vendors outside and managing budget for the family. I feel more responsible for managing the things which I less cared about when my husband was living with us.*

(Saleema, 43 years)

The participant who had lost her mother described the maturity she gained after managing things without the help of her mother.

*My mother managed everything for me. She managed my savings and always took my side whenever I made any mischief. Now, there is no one to do such things for me... it makes me think deeply about the life. Taking every step in life in a careful manner has turned me into a more mature individual.*

(Aneesa, 20 years)

Another participant spoke similarly

*Nobody can understand how difficult it was for me to make decisions after he left my life. Carrying along my studies and managing responsibilities of my home... I feel that I became a more responsible individual as I have to manage more responsibilities than I used to when my father was there for us.*

(Adil, 23 years)



The participant who had lost her daughter spoke about the virtues she gained after the loss in her life.

*It made me realize that one should always work for the better hereafter. Since her death, I always try to be good to people around me. I always try to do whatever good I can do in my life.*

*(Haseena, 49 years)*

#### *Commitment towards the family*

The participants described that their commitment and concern for other members in the family has increased after experiencing loss in their lives. The participants who had lost their spouses described their increased concern towards their children and hopes in their future. The participants who had lost parents in their lives described the feelings of increased responsibility towards their surviving parent and siblings in the family. The participants who had lost a child in their lives described that living and making efforts for the happiness of other members in family provide them with hopes for the survival.

The participant who had lost her spouse described the commitment towards her children and described her family as the hope of her survival.

*If my children are happy in their lives, it will be the satisfaction for me that I have achieved the mission of my life. They lost their father but I committed my whole life to them and always make sure that they don't feel any deprivation in their life. My children give me the purpose of my life.*

*(Rafiq, 42 years)*

Another participant spoke about the commitment towards her children.

*My children are the sole motive that help me progress in my life. I would have managed on the little income but my children have a vast future ahead of them.. all my struggles in life are for them till they become mature enough to earn for themselves.*

*(Shabnum, 40 years)*

Another participant spoke similarly.

*Their father had many dreams for them. Fulfilling all these dreams in life gives me the reason to live. Getting my daughters married and watching my son successful in life... it makes my life meaningful.*

*(Saleema, 43 years)*

The participant who had lost her father spoke about the concern and feelings of increased responsibility towards her mother.

*After the death of our father, I look upon my mother as the blessing of God that still remains in our lives. She is quite selfless in managing all our responsibilities. My concern for her increases when she does not feel well or is late from office... she is the only shelter of our home after father left us.*

*(Sadia, 22 years)*

Another participant spoke about the increased commitment towards his family after the death of his father.

*The difficulties we faced after the death of our father in the family brought us more close to each other. Giving hopes and motivating each other helped us to get back into our after facing the hardships during the father's illness and after his death.*

*(Adil, 23 years)*

The participant who had lost her daughter described the hope that the family provides her.

*After I lost my daughter, it was very difficult for me to get back into my life again. But the love and affection I received from the other family members helped me restart my life once again. I want to be for them always so that their happiness in life never decreases. His (son's) family and happiness gives me a reason to live.*

*(Zamrooda, 48 years)*

## **DISCUSSION**

Majority of the participants described that they had to deal with stressors that are not ordinary for the phases or stages of life they are in. The participants who had lost their spouses and were parenting their children alone described dealing with stressors that are non-normative for the women at such a phase in their lives. The participants who were parentally bereaved described they feel the deprivation that is not ordinary for the individuals in the stage of life they are in. The participants who had lost their children described facing such a loss as something they never had apprehended in their lives. It is evident in their expressions that facing loss had significant consequences in their lives that had a life altering impact on them. It led to a change in their perspective and attitude towards their lives and such a change was mostly framed in positive light by the participants. Such findings are in line with observations of changed perspective towards life among bereaved individuals in the previous studies (Apelian & Nesteruk, 2017; Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Lowe & McClement, 2011).



The participants described that they view themselves as changed beings and mature individuals than they were before experiencing loss in their lives. They expressed that dealing with unexpected or non-normative difficulties in their lives turned them into mature individuals. It is evident in the expression of participants who lost their spouses and were parenting their children alone. Fulfilling all the activities of life that were previously shared with their spouses made them attain a sense of autonomy and responsibility in their lives. The participants who had experienced parental bereavement described that they attained a sense of responsibility and maturity as they went through difficult periods in their lives. The participants who had lost a child in their life described the increased spiritual and religious values in their personality. Such findings are also indicative of the positive dimensions of bereavement process. These observations have already been made in the previous studies on bereaved individuals (Apelian & Nesteruk, 2017; Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Fikry, 2019; Lowe & McClement, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The participants described the increased concern and feeling of responsibility towards their families. The expressions reflect the commitment and increased concern that participants have for their families. The participants who were single parents to their children expressed increased concern towards their children. They viewed their children as future of their lives and the basic reason that gives meaning to their lives. The participants who had lost one of their parents described the feeling of responsibility towards their family. It is also evident in the expression of the participants who had lost a child in their life that their family gives them the hope and reason to move forward in their lives. Such findings reflect the values of collectivism inherent in our culture. The feelings of responsibility towards others in life give a reason to move forward after experiencing a set-back in their lives. Such findings are in line with the previous studies on bereaved individuals (Apelian & Nesteruk, 2017; Dabla, 2010; Greeff et al., 2011; Greeff & Human, 2004).

## IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of the present study give an understanding of the complexities of the bereavement experience. Understanding the experiences of bereaved individuals while they move towards finding meaning in their lives and engage in the process of reconstructing and rebuilding their lives helps counselors to move beyond the victimhood paradigm of bereavement and provide pertinent help to such individuals. The criteria for adaptive function may vary across different contexts but it is imperative to understand what goals are important to people and what they are already doing to achieve these goals. From that sense, resilience is not just about “functioning well” or “better than expected”, it is about “making sense” of the moral aspects of life (Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012).

The findings identify the positive aspects of experience of bereaved individuals. Such findings have implications for grief counselors and therapists in helping the bereaved individuals build upon their positive aspects and focus on what is working in their lives as they move forward in reconstructing their lives.

The findings of the present study are limited to those who took part in the study and one needs caution in making generalization about such findings. In order to have a broader understanding of such positive experiences among individuals in different relational connections to the deceased, a study on a large scale needs to be conducted taking into consideration the large sample of the population.

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