

Role of Resilience in Dealing with Parental Death

Kranti Purandare^{1*}, Anuradha Sathiyaseelan²

¹Student, Msc Psychology (Clinical), Christ University, Bangalore, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Christ University, Bangalore, India

*Corresponding author

Kranti Purandare

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Abstract: Resilience is the process by which one is capable of managing stress or trauma. The young adult individuals have their own capacities that they use to deal with obstacles and their problems and eventually to go on with their lives. Resilience can be most useful in traumatic situations like parental death. This paper studies the literature to understand the effects that parental death causes on early adult population and the different sources that help an individual in being resilient. Parental death has seen to cause various effects like decreased competency, depressive symptoms, low psychological well-being, increased binge eating, etc. among individuals. Supporting others, using our strengths, family support, coping styles have been found in various studies as important factors in being resilient. Thus it is necessary to study, find out and make available to the aforementioned vulnerable population, especially in India the different activities, factors or techniques of building resilience. This would help them overcome situations through understanding resilience as a protective factor.

Keywords: Resilience, Parental Death, Trauma, Positive Psychology, Coping, Protective Factors.

INTRODUCTION

“All the adversity that I’ve had in my life, all my troubles and obstacles, have strengthened me...You may not realize it when it happens, but a kick in the teeth may be the best thing in the world for you” [1].

Adversities teach us to face difficult situations. Every situation has its advantages and disadvantages. But how we face a situation is dependent on us. Remembering negative life events is easier than the positive ones. Amongst various situations, death is one of the inevitable events that one faces in a life time. As one faces death of a loved one, one goes through grief and it helps in telling an individual that nothing is life is permanent. It is the power which is present in us that helps us heal and gain courage to get through this difficult time. It is the process of adjusting to the absence of the loved one [2]. Every other person being unique has their own and a different grieving process [3]. The process of grief can manifest into multiple ways. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance are five different stages of grief that a person goes through since they get diagnosed terminal and until till they die [4].

Facing a death of a loved one is just not painful but also can be said as a “trauma” that one has or goes through. Trauma in itself causes a large profound impact on the society with more than 150000 deaths annually [5]. Trauma can include all kinds of accidents and situations in which a death of an individual occurs. Thus, sudden deaths might be more difficult to face and deal with. Facing a sudden death of

a parent seems to have no bounds to the pain and grief that the individuals go through and causes them to experience and face a lot of problems and risks for their future.

Death has been defined as an eternal disappearance of all the signs of life at any time after birth has taken place [6]. The most difficult situation that a person might go through is facing a parent’s death.

The most tragic loss an adolescent might face is the loss of their parent [7]. Losing a parent is the most difficult, traumatic and a major loss to a person irrespective of the relationship and age difference between the parent and child marking it as a true entry of the child into the adult world [8]. The person does not just lose a parent but also the attachment and connection between them and to their past and their childhood [8]. The trauma of death of a parent itself can be traumatic in nature. It has been found that the connection between the two generations of child and a parent today is closer than in the past because of the more prolonged duration of connection among them. The relationship between the child and the parent is very significant for an adult-child’s psychological wellbeing and the quality of relationship between them

recognizes the child's reaction towards parent's death [9].

Risks for suicide, violent criminal convictions and psychiatric hospitalizations in individuals who have experienced the death of a parent was studied between three age groups (childhood, adolescent and young adulthood) and it was found that offspring of those parents who committed suicide were more at risk than those who did not face any parental death [10]. A three folds risk was seen for individuals who lost a parent to accident or other cause and children and adolescents who faced parental suicides were more at risk than compared to young adults [10]. Despite different ages and the situational circumstances, all those who experienced parental death were vulnerable and at risk for violent criminal convictions [10].

A study conducted in understanding the developmental competence of individuals between the ages of seven to 18 among bereaved and non-bereaved families found that individuals who had lost parents were found to have less competence in various areas like work, career planning, relations with friends, and future educational goals and interests than those who were not bereaved [11]. Thus it can be seen that bereaved individuals have risks in multiple areas of functioning.

Death is something that a young adult is not much prepared for. If an individual faces death of a primary family member, it disrupts the individual's life to a greater extent. It makes the person feel lonely, broken as well as it takes a toll on his health and attention. Very little difference is found with respect to the health of those young adults who had or had not lost a parent. But it is found that these adults being young and physically healthy might have an advantage in coping with such a situation.

Expressed grief can have various effects on an individual. Grief deals with the negative traumatic events and also works on getting the best out of the person. If it is not dealt with properly or if the process is somehow disturbed, it can have varied reactions. Study conducted to understand the process of grief after sudden parental death and its impact on the individuals psychiatric and functional status among 182 individuals between the ages of seven to 18 found that most of the participants had resolution of their grief within one year of facing parental death while others had a different and longer course of grief [12]. Some showed gradual decrease while others had chronic grief even after three years of the incident showing vulnerability and early onset of depression [12].

There can also be seen differences in how females and males deal with parental death. Rossi and Rossi states that adult daughters are more likely to have

greater affective closeness with parents as opposed to adult sons stating that daughters would be more adversely affected by the death of the parent than would sons [9].

A longitudinal study found that death of an individual's father affect sons more than daughters and they were found to have greater depressive symptoms while death of mother predicted low levels of psychological wellbeing for both daughters and sons [13]. Daughters were seen to have increased binge drinking, decline in self-esteem and a low level of personal mastery while loss of happiness was observed in sons [13]. Due to the longitudinal contact and attachments with parents, the effects of death of a mother or a father in the adulthood causes various negative effects on mental and psychological wellbeing [13]. Death of the father has more negative impact for sons compared to daughters and similarly death of mother has more negative impact on the daughters than compared to sons while death of both the parents within a period of five years affected equally to both sons and daughters [13].

A group comparison study conducted among South African individuals aged eight to 19 years and who had either lost one parent, both the parents or had faced no death at all found that those individuals who were double orphaned had higher depression, were not allowed to go to school, were made to do more household work than others, had more responsibilities, had worst psychosocial functioning and had a higher risk of being slapped [14]. Single orphans were seen to be one and half times more at risk for depression and worse in experiencing the feeling of belongingness than those who did not face any death [14]. The individual who had one of the parents alive had various protective variables against stigma, social and emotional, self-efficacy, pro social, slapping, self-help, unwell self-efficacy etc., Overall stating that loss of parent affects these offspring in various aspects like mood; social, emotional, and total self-efficacy and in living conditions [14]. Similarly, another study also found out that the presence of at least a parent was seen to be a protective factor [15].

After facing a death of loved one, it is followed by grieve and then life goes on. For some it is easier than others. This moving on can be attributed to the process of resilience. Resilience is an entire process which includes different components like negotiating, adapting and managing with respect to the trauma faced and various factors like strengths of the individual and environment help in 'bouncing back' when faced with trauma [16].

Resiliency can also be defined as a process to deal with shortcomings, change and opportunities that would help in finding, building and strengthening of the

existing protective factors [17]. Thus it can be said that going through resiliency is a positive process.

Resilience is necessary for a healthy childhood development and also it can be very helpful in facing adverse situations in midlife like setbacks, divorces and parental death. Among the various techniques given, supporting others and remembering our strengths is very important [18].

Resilience can also be used as a shield to deal with harmful emotions. A chain of three studies were conducted to find how resilient individuals use positive emotions to bounce back, to find meaning in their negative and stressed experiences, and in the first study it was found that between the age group of 17 to 40, those who focus on positive emotions and state themselves to be resilient recovered faster of cardiovascular reactions to negative emotional arousal [19]. The second study was conducted using threat appraisal and challenge appraisal found that positive emotions and appraisals of challenge are indeed predictors of psychological resilience, stating that those individuals who focus on positive emotions also have the capacities to regulate their negative emotions [19]. The third study conducted to understand the negative experiences of high and low resilient individuals between 18 to 23 year olds found that though there was equal level of frustration relating to the negative experiences, higher level of mood was reported from high resilient people along with the feelings of eagerness and happiness amidst and in relation to their expression of frustration [19].

Facing a trauma or situation like death of a parent can be very challenging in nature. But there are certain techniques that have been given by the experts through which the grief can be reduced or prevented till a certain point. It cannot be totally avoided though. It is impossible to get over the loss of a person just by grieving as mourning a loss and getting over it is a myth [20]. Loved one's memories always come back to one's consciousness on various occasions like birthdays and anniversaries, but the intensity of the grief will be reduced as the time passes or gets suppressed due to the presence of new memories [20].

Grieving is an important component in the process of dealing with the trauma of parental death. According to Carbon, the more one socializes and is able to talk and express one's feelings, the better it will be as it is important and necessary to have a support system when one is in the grieving process [21].

Individual's wellbeing depends on the meaning that they make of their social surroundings and the different kinds of experiences that they go through [22]. It is brought into light that what an individual go through after suffering from a traumatic loss, majorly

depends in the reactions and abilities of the individual. It states that being physically fit might act as a resilient factor in facing the traumatic incident.

As a predisposition, one needs to face obstacles or problems in life to figure out whether that person is resilient or not [23].

An individual can encounter negative situations not just with respect to death or parental death but other things like divorces, career setbacks, chronic health issues etc., if one is not being prepared even when there are so many options available, it can lead to worst outcomes which could have been prevented easily. Thus, it is necessary for an individual to at least try being resilient and ready for certain inevitable situations. And it is seen that both the processes of grief and that of resiliency are helpful in facing and dealing with such traumatic situations.

It is also seen that some individuals are more resilient than others. Lopez and Snyder stated multiple factors like parental style, parental education level, socioeconomic status, home environment level which can influence on how a person, especially a child becomes resilient [24]. It was found that there are two types of factors, internal and external that help a family be resilient, adjust and to adapt after losing a parent [25]. Among the internal factors, intra familial support like emotional and practical support plays a major role, while in the external factors support from extended family and friends was found to be very helpful [25]. Family's internal strengths were found to be interdependent and working together, while it's passive coping appraisal style, the inactive behaviour towards the crisis and social support through religious activities are also recognized as an important resilient factor [25].

A study conducted on African Americans between 18 to 82 ages found that ancestral messages, rituals and activities in relation to religious beliefs that were taught to face challenges were useful ways to be resilient after experiencing a homicide of a family member, while faith in God and power of prayer were seen to be very strong coping mechanisms helping in making meaning of the situation [26]. Memories of the bereaved, talking and eliciting the good time spent with them also helped the individuals in coping [26]. Coping with family was more to support the emotional and practical needs of the grieving members of the family while coping in groups and caring for others helped in dealing with situation rather than facing it alone [26]. Concealing the emotions to avoid inflicting pain on others also lent a helping hand in coping with the bereavement [26].

All the factors mentioned above will help in being resilient if an individual faces a traumatic situation like parental death. But one can always be

proactive in being resilient. Resilience is said to be a way of living life, not just a conscious decision stating that we should be more preventive than taking steps after the situation has become worse with spiritual and cultural backgrounds helping one in being resilient in the face of adversity [27].

Forming and maintaining relations, exercise, relaxation, having fun, positive attitude, taking control, acceptance and continuously trying or working to be resilient are 8 ways that help in building resilience [28]. Other ten things that help us be resilient are being flexible, learning lessons, taking action, staying connected, releasing tension, having a sense of purpose, maintaining healthy habits like exercise diet and proper rest, believing in yourself, laughing and being happy and being optimistic [29].

So there is enough literature advising us to be resilient in traumatic situations. And from the above researches, it can be safe to say that the process begins from each individual themselves. Every person has varied capacity to be resilient in the face of adversity and how one uses this capacity depends on that person itself. Thus, finding one's own strengths and working on the weaknesses would definitely help individuals in dealing with traumatic situations of losing a parent and in finding meaning in their loss and move on in life.

But with context to Indian culture further study as to what factors are needed by the young adult population to deal with parental death is necessary because though eventually life goes on and time heals, there are no specific or explicit techniques that might help these individuals recover faster and be resilient.

To conclude the most important aspect is to give that human being a safe and open atmosphere by their trusted ones to vent out and express their feelings. Seeing a parent who is going through the death of the spouse puts an immense emotional and psychological pressure on the individual. In this situation, to balance the atmosphere, these young adults choose to repress their feelings instead of sharing them with others. This repression can lead to various emotional, psychological or even pathological issues in the future. Thus, allowing the individual to grieve appropriately and letting them express their feelings is very important, making the search for better opportunities and resilient an inevitable one. To deal with such unavoidable traumatic events in life in which nature plays a major role the individual or the group of people should learn to follow some coping mechanisms like integrative mindful practices to boost their resiliency and for promoting positive health [30]. Mindful living practices helps human beings to be calm and focused helping them to deal with any situations [30]. And as we are all aware that the current world is very highly competitive and

stressful, young adults need to prepare them well ahead in time to live their life normally.

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