

Psychological Outcomes of CBT Intervention for Persons Who Loss the Partner: A Review

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Abstract: Loss of a life partner has been referred to as one of the most stressful and life-altering events that a person can experience. While grief is an emotional response to bereavement, a significant proportion of the bereaved population can experience psychological distress. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy for the treatment of psychological disorders. CBT is effective in the treatment of psychological disorders through the modification of maladaptive cognitions and behaviours related to psychological disorders. This review aimed to explore the psychological outcomes of CBT interventions on people who have experienced the loss of their life partners. This review found that CBT interventions were effective in the treatment of depression, anxiety, guilt, and prolonged grief disorder in the bereaved population. This review found that CBT interventions were effective in enhancing the levels of resilience and quality of life in the bereaved population. Despite the effectiveness of CBT interventions in the treatment of psychological disorders, the limitations of CBT include cultural issues and grief response. This review found that CBT is effective for people who have experienced the loss of their life partners.

Keywords: CBT, Bereavement, Partner loss, Prolonged grief disorder, Depression, Anxiety, Psychological outcome.

1. Introduction

Loss of a spouse or a partner is one of the most painful experiences, which has a significant impact on emotional security, attachment relationships, and daily life. Although it is a natural process, complicated or prolonged grief, which includes prolonged sadness, longing, and difficulty readjusting to life without the partner, has also been reported by some people. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), introduced by Aaron Beck, has proven effective in helping people cope with the challenges of partner loss by challenging and changing negative thought and behaviour patterns. This paper seeks to critically discuss the psychological outcomes of CBT interventions for people who have experienced partner loss.

The process of reviewing the psychological outcomes of the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) intervention on the lives of people who have experienced loss due to the death of their loved ones involves a critical review of the outcomes obtained from the existing research studies on the impact of the CBT intervention on the psychological outcomes of people who have experienced spousal or intimate loss. The psychological

outcomes in this case include the measurable outcomes on depression, anxiety, grief, rumination, guilt, emotional control, and overall quality of life following the intervention.

The importance of the review is to assess the effectiveness of the overall intervention model in helping people cope with complicated grief following loss. The overall review is done on the basis of the outcomes obtained from the randomized controlled studies, longitudinal studies, and clinical studies to assess the effectiveness and limitations of the CBT model in helping people cope with loss.

2. Understanding Psychological Outcomes of CBT in Partner Loss

To fully understand the psychological outcome of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for individuals who experience the loss of a loved one, the psychological effects of the loss need to be considered. Psychological outcome, on the other hand, is the effects on depression, anxiety, grief, and other psychological states following a particular intervention. When an individual loses a loved one, such as a spouse, the loss is associated with maladaptive thoughts such as guilt, hopelessness, and negative thinking about the future. Cognitive theory, according to Aaron T. Beck (1976), indicates that cognitive distortions intensify emotions and behaviors. CBT, on the other hand, enables the individual to cope with the loss more productively and hence return to productive and meaningful activities.

Moreover, research has shown that grief reactions are mediated by attachment and coping processes. This has been supported by the Dual Process Model of Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut (2010). According to the model, individuals who experience bereavement experience a constant shift between processing the bereavement and readjusting to their life roles. This is precisely where CBT can play a role in helping individuals readjust to their life roles by minimizing negative thoughts and maximizing coping skills. Research has been done to support the effectiveness of CBT in helping individuals cope with grief and depression. Paul A. Boelen et al. (2007) and another study done by M. Katherine Shear et al. (2005) support the effectiveness of CBT in helping individuals cope with grief and depression. This indicates that when CBT is applied to individuals and cultures, it can be an effective evidence-based practice to promote mental health in the case of partner loss.

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3. Challenges affecting Positive Psychological Outcomes Following CBT Intervention after Partner Loss

When individuals lose a partner, they face a number of complex challenges that may affect the overall outcome of the cognitive behavioural therapy interventions. Similar to the challenges faced by the athletes, who face a number of barriers that prevent them from achieving the required balance, individuals who lose a partner face a number of challenges that may prevent them from achieving the required psychological outcome.

A. Intensity of Grief and Emotional Overload

Among the main challenges that face the individuals and, therefore, prevent them from achieving the required outcome include the overwhelming nature of grief. When the individuals continue with the cognitive behavioural interventions, the overwhelming nature of the loss that the individuals experience may affect the overall outcome of the interventions. When the nature of the emotions that the individuals experience remains overwhelming, the individuals may not be able to apply the required cognitive behavioural techniques. In addition, severe depression and anxiety may affect the overall outcome of the interventions.

B. Avoidance and Resistance to Exposure

CBT techniques in grief therapy usually involve exposure to the memory of the deceased partner. However, it is common for people to avoid grief. There is a possibility that the grieving person might resist this therapy, perceiving it to have an adverse effect on their mental state. This might interfere with the effectiveness of the therapy.

C. Social and Cultural Expectations

Culture plays a major role in the way people show their grief. In some cultures, people are dissuaded from showing their emotions, particularly if they are men. This might interfere with the effectiveness of the therapy since the individual might not be dealing with their grief. In other cases, the pressure to "move on" with life or "stay stuck" in their grief rituals might interfere with the therapy.

D. Structural and Organizational Barriers

There are situations that make the accessibility of mental health care complicated, for example, the absence of a Grief Focused CBT therapist, financial issues, conflicting work schedules, and geographical issues, among others. In some cases, the client who is juggling work and care-giving responsibilities and/or parenting after the loss of a loved one may face difficulties in attending therapy sessions.

E. Financial and Role Instability

The loss of a loved one may result in financial and role instability, for example, the client may face difficulties in meeting their financial responsibilities, which may result in increased levels of anxiety, thereby affecting the client's emotional availability for therapy. For example, the client who is preoccupied with meeting their responsibilities to survive may hardly consider therapy as a priority, and thus the client's

psychological outcomes may be affected.

F. Psychological Challenges

The combined impact of the various stressors of bereavement is, therefore, not only situational but also psychological in nature. The loss of a life partner affects an individual's emotional well-being, attachment relationships, personal identity, and daily life. The complicated or prolonged nature of the bereavement, therefore, affects an individual's mental health, relationships, and life satisfaction. As much as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is an effective tool in helping individuals overcome unproductive thought processes and behaviours, the level of emotional distress experienced may compromise the healing process if addressed in a holistic manner.

G. Prolonged Grief and Emotional Exhaustion

The prolonged nature of the bereavement experienced by individuals may result in emotional exhaustion. The prolonged grief experienced by individuals results in a situation whereby they feel "stuck" in their grief process and cannot move on to more productive activities in life. Such individuals may find it difficult to participate in a structured therapy program that incorporates various techniques of cognitive behavioral therapy, thereby compromising their ability to adapt to their situation in life.

H. Mental Health Disorders

There is a high risk of developing a major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, sleep disorder, and suicidal thoughts after the loss of a partner. This imbalance, which is caused by emotional distress, social withdrawal, and role disruption, may cause the instability of the mental health state of the individual. This is because the state of hopelessness and fear of the future may cause increased levels of anxiety and depression if the psychological state is not addressed during the early stages of the grieving process.

I. Identity Disruption and Role Confusion

An intimate relationship, especially one that is long-lasting, has a way of blurring the roles and the identity of the individuals. Thus, the loss of a partner causes a disruption of the roles and the identity of the individuals. This is because the loss causes a sense of purposelessness and a disruption of the ability of the individuals to redefine their roles and purposes.

J. Strained Relationships and Social Isolation

In some cases, grief may appear in the form of social isolation from a social group. This leads to a lack of emotional support during a critical period in life. Changes in relationships with peers, such as becoming a widow or widower, may lead to a reduced number of shared experiences. Emotional numbing and irritability may lead to strained relationships with family and friends. Since emotional support is a determinant of psychological resilience, a lack of it may lead to loneliness and grief.

4. 4. Strategies for Promoting Positive Psychological Outcomes Following Partner Loss

People experiencing partner loss have a number of emotional and practical challenges to face. In order to improve positive psychological outcomes, it is necessary to apply individual therapeutic and support-based interventions, which go beyond the issue of symptom reduction and coping with the problem of partner loss in a positive way.

A. *Structured Cognitive Behavioural Interventions*

One of the most essential interventions for improving the psychological outcomes of people experiencing partner loss is the application of a structured Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) intervention. People experiencing partner loss have negative thoughts and beliefs about themselves and the partner loss they have experienced. CBT intervention helps people cope with partner loss in a positive way. This intervention assists people in replacing negative thoughts and beliefs about themselves and the partner loss, and then exposes them to partner loss problems gradually. It has been found that CBT intervention assists people in overcoming prolonged grief and depression and enhancing coping skills (Boelen *et al.*, 2007; Shear *et al.*, 2005). It is very important for people experiencing partner loss to be engaged in therapeutic intervention early, as this helps prevent the consolidation of avoidance.

B. *Emotional Regulation and Mental Health Support*

Mental health support is a significant factor in the healing process of individuals who have experienced the loss of a partner. Grief reactions experienced by individuals may predispose them to depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and suicidal behaviors. The availability of mental health support and education provides support to individuals who have experienced the loss of a partner. The addition of relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and emotional regulation techniques enables individuals to cope with emotions in a more adaptive way.

C. *Encouraging Identity Reconstruction*

Loss of a partner is a significant factor that affects the personal identity of individuals who have experienced the loss of a partner. Encouraging individuals who have experienced the loss of a partner enables them to develop a personal identity that is different from the one they experienced with the partner. Encouraging individuals who have experienced the loss of a partner to get involved in new activities, education, career building, and community service enables them to develop a new role in life and improves psychological flexibility.

D. *Strengthening Social Support Networks*

Strengthening social support networks is very essential for the psychological healing process of the individual. Social support networks include family support, support from friends, support groups of peers who have experienced similar situations, and support from the community. This provides the individual with a sense of belonging and validates their feelings to cope better with the situation of losing their partner. Support groups can provide the bereaved individual with a sense of

normalization of the grief process and can protect them from loneliness, which has also been known to contribute to poor psychological outcomes.

E. *Long-Term Follow-Up and Relapse Prevention*

The grief process can sometimes lead to untimely reminders of the deceased partner. This can include reminders on anniversaries and other major events. Long-term follow-ups and booster therapy can prevent the relapse of the individual into severe depression and grief reactions. This can provide the individual with better coping skills to handle the situation of losing their partner. This can also provide the individual with a sense of realistic goals to cope better with the non-linear process of grief and lead to adaptive acceptance of the situation.

5. Discussion

While undertaking the process of writing this review article, about 30 peer-reviewed research articles on empirical studies, RCTs, systematic reviews, and clinical reports published over the last two decades were analyzed. These include research articles on clinical psychology, bereavement studies, cognitive behavioral therapy, and mental health interventions on people who had experienced the loss of their spouse/intimate partners from diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds. The main aim of the review was to identify the effects of the short-term and long-term outcomes of the structured cognitive behavioral therapy interventions.

This experience of loss of a loved one results in a major psychological stressor that results in emotional, cognitive, and social changes. These unrelenting yearnings, negative thoughts, and avoidance result in prolonged grief, depression, and anxiety (Boelen *et al.*, 2007). This review of literature has identified the psychological barriers of rumination, disruption of identity, and avoidance, which result in a hindrance in adaptive recovery if not addressed through a structured intervention (Shear *et al.*, 2005). In addition, the lack of mental health resources and the stigmatization of therapy in a particular cultural group can result in a hindrance for the individual.

One of the major discoveries is the link between personal vulnerabilities and support systems. While it is expected that the bereaved will “adjust” to their loss, it seems that “adjustment” is aided if mental health support and supportive social networks are available. Structured approaches to CBT, including cognitive restructuring, behavioral activation, and exposure, have been shown to help manage symptoms of prolonged grief and depression (Bryant *et al.*, 2014). These approaches do more than simply help manage current distress; they can help individuals develop coping strategies that aid resilience in the long term (Eisma & Lenferink, 2020).

Moreover, the review highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and individualized therapeutic interventions. For example, cultural variations in expressions of grief, mourning, and gender roles necessitate the adaptation of CBT interventions (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). It is recommended that future research studies emphasize the longitudinal effects of grief-focused CBT interventions, including the prevention of relapse. In addition, the availability of evidence-based

interventions for grief and the development of community mental health resources will be crucial for the promotion of the holistic healing of the bereaved individual who has experienced the loss of a partner.

6. Conclusion

The major focus is the management of mental health of individuals experiencing the death of a loved one and the achievement of positive mental health outcomes through the assistance of mental health care professionals, mental health of the individuals, and social support systems of the individuals, with the major goal of ensuring that there are no misconceptions about the concept of natural recovery. The barriers to mental health care are prolonged grief, depression, anxiety, and loss of identity, which can be addressed through a combined approach of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy with the major goal of ensuring that individuals are able to overcome mental health distress and promote psychological well-being among individuals who have lost.

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