

Lesbians Grieving the Death of a Partner: Recommendations for Practice

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ABSTRACT. Spousal loss is a common event that has been associated with risk of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Practitioners working with lesbians need comprehensive clinical guidelines that integrate research about lesbian partner loss with contemporary views of grief and bereavement. Using this literature, we make recommendations for clinical practice that address the possible contributions of several factors—social support, emotional closeness, relationship satisfaction, disclosure or non-disclosure of sexual identity and the relationship, faith and/or spirituality, and

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Journal of Lesbian Studies, Vol. 12(2–3), 2008

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doi: 10.1080/10894160802161380

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meaning-making—to the grieving process and positive psychological adjustment of lesbians grieving the death of a partner.

KEYWORDS. Lesbian couples, bereavement, spousal grief, grief counseling

The death of a spouse or significant romantic partner is a devastating experience that can create intense psychological distress, shatter basic beliefs about the world, provoke doubt about one's ability to cope, and necessitate the reconstruction of meaning (Bauer and Bonanno, 2001; Benight, Flores, and Tashiro, 2001; Bonanno, 2001; Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001; Parkes, 1988; Reisman, 2001; Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, and Schut, 2001). For women, in particular, spousal loss is often associated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Hayslip, Allen, and McCoy-Roberts, 2001). Indeed, Parkes (1988) theorized that spousal loss demands "... a major revision of ... assumptions about the world (p. 53). Yet, much of the research on spousal loss has focused on married heterosexual couples. Its applicability to lesbians grieving the death of a partner is simply not known (Bauer and Bonanno, 2001; Benight et al., 2001; Bonanno, 2001; Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001; Parkes, 1988; Reisman, 2001; Stroebe et al., 2001). Given the distinct differences in legal status, cultural support, sexual identity development, and gender role socialization between lesbian and heterosexual relationships, it seems unwise to assume that accounts of spousal loss among legally married, heterosexual women can adequately describe the grief experience among women in lesbian relationships (Division 44/APA Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Joint Task Force, 2000).

The empirical literature regarding lesbian grief is limited and provides only a few indicators of important factors in lesbians' adjustment to the death of a partner. Consequently, there are few clinical guidelines for psychologists, social workers, and grief counselors that integrate current knowledge about lesbians and their relationships with the existing research on grief and bereavement. We have created clinical recommendations for practice—based on existing knowledge of lesbian relationships, lesbian sexual identity development, the influence of homophobia, and contemporary perspectives of grief and bereavement—and present them here. First we will illustrate the theoretical basis of these recommendations, by briefly considering some of the psychological and relational issues that

are specific to lesbians and their relationships, and by discussing research about spousal loss in general.

SOCIAL SUPPORT, HOMOPHOBIA, RELATIONSHIP QUALITY, AND LOSS

Although several researchers have examined mid-life and aging issues among lesbians, (Claes and Moore, 2000; D'Augelli, Grossman, Hershberger, and O'Connell, 2000; Grossman, D'Augelli and Hershberger, 2000; Jones and Nystrom, 2002), only a few discuss bereavement (Jones and Nystrom, 2002). Studies of gay men grieving the death of a partner from AIDS (e.g., Cherney and Verhey, 1996; Folkman, Chesney, Collette, Boccellari, and Cooke, 1996; Lennon, Martin, and Dean, 1990; Simmons, 1999) may provide some insight into how bereavement might be experienced by a same-sex partner in a homophobic culture. However, gay male relationships often differ from lesbian relationships in emotional intimacy, balance of power, and gender-role socialization. In addition, the stigma of AIDS influenced the quality and level of support these men received; a significant factor that is less applicable to lesbians (Simmons, 1999).

Social Support and Homophobia

A few studies include information that may apply to women grieving the death of a lesbian partner. Doka (1987) reported that, among bereaved partners in nontraditional relationships (e.g., gay male couples, cohabitating heterosexual couples, and those in extramarital affairs), ability or inability to openly mourn their loss was related to the amount of social support offered to them. Similarly, Deevey (2000) interviewed lesbians whose partners died and concluded that the undisclosed nature of the women's relationships contributed to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Jones (1985), and Bent and Magilvy (2006), found that women who received low social support following the death of a partner reported having prolonged (over two years) symptoms of grief (e.g., emotional distress and sadness) compared with bereaved women experiencing high or moderate amounts of social support. Although these studies clarify the impact of

social support on the grief process of lesbians, small sample sizes and lack of cultural and/or ethnic diversity limit conclusions beyond the subject groups.

Although social support appears essential for a viable grieving process, most lesbians negotiate and manage their sexual identity development within the context of a heterosexist culture that devalues sexual minorities (Garnets, 2002). If they choose to not disclose their lesbian identity, the opportunities to receive social support will be drastically curtailed. Many lesbians bear profound interpersonal and intrapersonal losses (e.g., estrangement from family, culture, and faith communities; self-esteem, religious or spiritual certainty, and ethnic/racial identity) as a result of coming out to self, family, and community. Disclosure of sexual orientation is associated with increased social support and relationship satisfaction, but disclosure can also threaten a woman's economic security, personal safety, familial and cultural relationships, and child custody rights (Beals and Peplau, 2001; Caron and Ulin, 1997; Whitman, Cormier and Boyd, 2000).

For example, Greene (1997) suggests that, in some communities, a lesbian sexual orientation may be viewed as a rejection of one's ethnic/racial culture, and lesbians of color may face strong anti-gay and anti-lesbian sentiment in ethnic/racial communities (Parks, Hughes, and Matthews, 2004). Inclusion in one's family of origin may hinge upon keeping silent about one's sexual orientation and significant romantic relationships (Greene, 1997). These psychological and social losses may require reconstruction of both self and family identities (Li and Orleans, 2001).

Not surprisingly, threat of loss leads many lesbians to diligently manage information about themselves in public milieus (e.g., work, school, family, faith) and to constantly appraise the emotional and physical safety of even the smallest gesture of disclosure (Cass, 1979, 1984; Levine, 1997; Whitman et al., 2000). Whitman et al. (2000) argue that this helps preserve self-esteem by controlling exposure to heterosexist and homophobic reactions.

Different generations experience varying degrees of social acceptance and visibility (Parks, 1999). Older lesbians may be less likely to disclose their sexual orientation (especially in non-supportive environments), increasing the potential for low self-esteem, social isolation, and less identity synthesis (Cass, 1979, 1984; Grossman, et al., 2000; Li and Orleans, 2001; Parks, 1999).

Relationship Satisfaction: Intimacy, Equality and Autonomy

Lesbians typically value an equitable balance of power (defined as the degree of influence each partner has in the relationship), egalitarian division of labor and financial responsibility, emotional intimacy, and personal autonomy in couple relationships (Caldwell and Peplau, 1984; Eldridge and Gilbert, 1990; Haas and Stafford, 1998; Lynch and Reilly, 1985). Individual perception of relational equity has been associated with relationship satisfaction, feelings of emotional closeness, and lack of conflict in lesbian couples (Caldwell and Peplau, 1984; Eldridge and Gilbert, 1990; Lynch and Reilly, 1985). Emotional intimacy is the most important factor contributing to relationship satisfaction (Eldridge and Gilbert, 1990; Schreurs and Buunk, 1996), although lesbian partners consider an equal balance of emotional closeness and personal autonomy important to relationship satisfaction (Eldridge and Gilbert, 1990; Schreurs and Buunk, 1996).

Spousal Loss: Adjustment, Coping, and Meaning-Making

If many lesbians have already experienced interpersonal and social losses, and value especially close intimate relationships, then when they lose a partner, they may be losing a more integral and fundamental part of their identity and emotional and social world than that which is typically lost by heterosexual partners. This is important because many theories of grief and adjustment emphasize the centrality of the impact of the death on the way people understand and interpret the world around them. This is the fundamental task of meaning-making following the death of a loved one. How the bereaved make sense of the death and find benefit from the experience of loss can predict positive adjustment in spousal loss (Bauer and Bonanno, 2001; Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). The death of a spouse/partner provokes re-evaluation of previously assumed roles, identities, values, and expectations that contribute to meaning and purpose in life (Attig, 2001; Danforth and Glass, 2000; Pargament, Magyar-Russell, and Murray-Swank, 2005; Parkes, 1988; Reisman, 2001).

Religious faith or spirituality has been shown to predict positive coping and the construction of positive meaning, by serving as an organizing principle for interpreting and making sense of the death (Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Golsworthy and Coyle, 1999; Niemeyer, 2000). However, many lesbians experience profound religious conflict, sometimes abandoning their faith altogether, because pervasive intolerance and negative messages about homosexuality permeate many mainstream religious

institutions (Morrow, 2003; Rodriguez and Ouellette, 2000; Schuck and Liddle, 2001). Although some lesbians join gay-affirming faith communities or maintain a personal definition of spirituality, others may be left without an overarching meaning system to help cope with the devastating loss of a partner (Morrow, 2003; Rodriguez and Ouellette, 2000; Park, 2005; Schuck and Liddle, 2001).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Grief is a normal reaction to the death of a loved one, and most individuals, including lesbian women, cope with grief without clinical intervention. Nevertheless, mental health professionals should be aware of the potential influence of particular social conditions on coping, adjustment, and meaning-making for lesbians grieving the death of a partner. The following are recommendations intended to help clinicians and others who are responding to a lesbian woman's experience of grief and loss.

Consider the Impact of Previous Losses

The death of a partner can resonate with grief from previous losses (e.g., loss of family, friends, and connection to racial/ethnic/spiritual community) that are linked to the experience of homophobia. The memory of these losses can compound or exacerbate a lesbian client's feelings of isolation, abandonment, and rejection. In addition, some families, cultures, and/or faith communities assume the partner's death means the client is no longer a lesbian, forcing her to reassert her sexual identity and thus risk additional abandonment or disconnection at a most vulnerable time.

Assess Resources for Support

A partner's death appreciably disrupts support that buffers homophobia and heterosexism, and clinicians should carefully assess the support available to the client. Disclosure of sexual orientation by a lesbian couple influences the amount of social support offered to that couple, and subsequently influences the support available to a bereaved partner. Many lesbian couples have well developed social networks comprised of lesbian, gay and/or heterosexual friends who can provide much needed support and comfort. This network is especially valuable if relationships with the families of origin are estranged or conflicted.

Consider Level and Intensity of Emotional Closeness

The centrality of the relationship to the bereaved is an important factor in determining ability to cope with the loss. As many lesbian couples cultivate significant emotional intimacy in their relationships, clinicians should assess the loss of this emotional closeness in their review of client's strengths and vulnerabilities.

Consider the Impact of Bereavement Tasks on a Client's Self-Esteem

Immediately following the death of a partner, a client may have disclosed her sexual orientation to others (family, co-workers, and health care and funeral professionals) without accurately assessing the danger or safety that may result from doing so. Thus, counseling may involve processing a client's feelings of regret, shame or embarrassment related to these disclosures, particularly if she encountered negative reactions.

Meaning Can be Constructed through Rituals and Tradition

Clinicians can assist the development of meaning by encouraging rituals and traditions that express individual preference, ethnic/racial culture, and also lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) culture. An interactive approach with the client helps her engage with significant persons, groups, and communities that both acknowledge her loss and affirm transition to new roles, identities, and worldview.

Explore Religious and/or Spiritual Issues

Some clients may rely on religious or spiritual beliefs to cope with the death, because religion may provide an overarching meaning system that can unify a great range of pleasant and unpleasant events (Pargament et al. 2005). The clinician may want to become familiar with the many welcoming and inclusive faith communities available to the religiously committed or spiritual lesbian client. Other organizations may also provide meaning systems into which the grieving partner might integrate her loss. Importantly, clinicians should be aware that failure on the part of a given faith community to recognize the loss of a lesbian member's partner may arouse in that client profound feelings of anger, guilt, and shame that should be addressed in the therapeutic process.

Consider Unique Psychosocial and Legal Conditions

Most lesbian relationships are not granted legal recognition, and subsequently, surviving partners lack rights of survivorship unless specifically designated prior to the death. The deceased's family may deny or limit participation in funeral services, and contest wills or prior financial plans made by the couple. Elderly lesbians, as a consequence of losing their partner, may be required to move into nursing or assisted living facilities that are unaware or dismissive of their loss, which may increase the potential for loneliness and isolation.

CONCLUSION

Grief is a common yet unique experience, influenced by multiple variables. It is imperative that clinicians consider the specific challenges faced by lesbians grieving the death of a partner. These recommendations only begin to address the complexities of lesbian bereavement. Research that will investigate the influence of lesbian relationships, identity development, culture, spirituality, ethnicity, parenting, and aging on the grief process will provide a contextual framework to better prepare practitioners to provide collaborative and empathetic grief counseling for lesbians and their families.

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