

Research Brief

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TILL DEATH DO US PART?: EXPLORING THE SOCIAL CONVOYS OF CONJUGALLY BEREAVED WOMEN

Keywords: bereavement, death, widowhood, social support, social network, romantic partners

Purpose of the Study: To understand the role of deceased romantic partners in older widows' social support networks.

Key Findings:

- ✓ The majority (95%) of participants said that their deceased romantic partners were part of their current social networks.
- ✓ In some cases, death of a romantic partner triggered change in the widows' social networks.

Major Policy/Practice Implication: Opportunities to talk about deceased partners may provide important social support to widows, and help alleviate loneliness and isolation among older women.

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Research demonstrates that social support is linked to physical, mental, and emotional health outcomes, such as decreased risk of illness, decreased memory decline, and life satisfaction. Romantic partners are especially important in social networks, but less is known about the role deceased romantic partners might still play in the lives of the surviving partners. About 40% of women over 65 are widowed, and women are less likely than men to enter new relationships after the deaths of long-term partners. Thus, they may be at greater risk of adverse outcomes, such as depression and premature death, upon the death of a partner. This study explores the role of deceased romantic partners in widows' social networks using a diagram of concentric circles (see Figure 1) to demonstrate the level of closeness of individuals in widows' social networks, including deceased partners.

STUDY METHODS

Researchers interviewed widows who were at least 65-years-old and had experienced the death of a long-standing partner (30+ years). Participants were recruited through flyers in community settings (e.g., senior centers), social media, and word of mouth. During interviews of at least 90 minutes, participants were asked to use the hierarchical mapping diagram shown in Figure 1 to place social network members (e.g., friend) in the respective levels and to record their relationship to each member. They were asked if their deceased partner remained an active member of their social network and, if so, to indicate the partner's placement in the diagram. This approach allowed researchers to analyze the data from multiple perspectives, which provided a more nuanced understanding of the roles of deceased partners. Researchers identified patterns within the interview transcripts using Dedoose software.

KEY FINDINGS

- ✓ **On average, participants placed 23 people in their diagrams.** The most common relationships were relatives and friends, and a few participants included colleagues, neighbors, and religious leaders.
- ✓ **95% of participants stated their deceased partners remained active members of their social networks, and 75% placed their partners in the innermost circle of the diagram.** Common reasons for including deceased partners were that they felt an eternal connection with their partners, they felt their partners' emotional and financial support even after death, they felt their partners would want them to be happy, they thought about them daily, and they felt grateful for the relationships they had with them.

"I still feel that he's a huge part of who I am ... in a way, some part of (husband) and I merged. And I don't mean that in a physical way ... I just know that we're part of each other."

- ✓ **Some widows' networks changed after their partners' deaths.**
 - Some participants felt they had fewer people to rely on for emotional support.
 - They described growing closer to members who embraced their grief, and further from members who seemed uncomfortable with grief.
 - In some cases, participants mentioned limited opportunities to talk about their deceased partners because very few people in their current networks knew them.

"The people here did not know him... so there's no reason to talk about him."

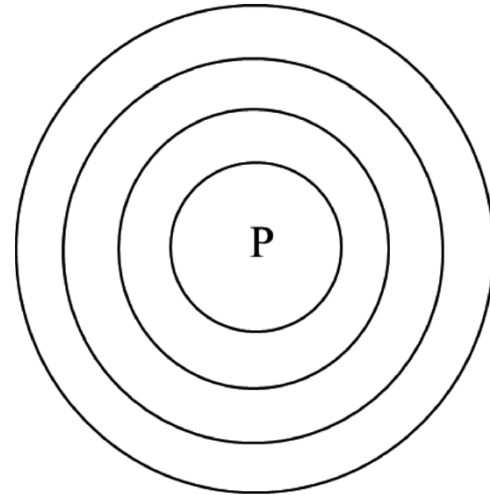


Figure 1. The individual is represented by "P" and social network members are placed in the circles, with closer circles representing closer relationships.

PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For researchers: This work focused on older, heterosexual widows. Next steps include exploring the roles of deceased partners in the lives of men, people of color, and in the LGBTQ+ community.

For practitioners: Group interventions in community and residential settings are relatively low-cost ways to provide support to widows, as well as safe spaces to talk about their ongoing relationships with their deceased partners.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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