

Denial in Bereavement: Psychological Well-Being of Parentally Bereaved Students in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Bereavement is one of the most stressful events in a young adults' life. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which denial affects psychological wellbeing of bereaved students. The study was conducted in day public secondary schools in Gatanga Sub-county, Murang'a County, Kenya. A sample size of 50 bereaved students was used. The findings indicated that there was no significant effect of denial of parental loss on psychological wellbeing at the $p < .05$ [$F(1, 48) = 0.041, p = 0.841$]. This demonstrates that the lower the denial of parental loss, the lower the psychological wellbeing can be attributed to other factors outside denial of parental loss. Implications of this finding are discussed.

Keywords: Bereavement, denial, bereaved students, psychological wellbeing, Gatanga Sub-County

1. Introduction

When experiencing denial, life becomes meaningless and an overwhelming sense of loss of direction sets in and people numb themselves to try and cope with the situation each day (Worden, 2010). In denial, people only let in as much as they can handle to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the sense of the loss. Students behave in the same way as a coping mechanism with a phenomenon that they have never experienced before.

School life in the UK observed denial as a recurrent theme among the students, Cupit *et al* (2016). It was noted that students used denial to 'postpone' the need to feel the pain and inadequacy associated with loss. Likewise, in other western nations students are observed to make statements such as 'This isn't happening' to the counsellors when discussing the loss of a parent (Carr, 2015). Another study in India on female adolescent is reaction to bereavement show that they use denial as a mechanism to buffer the immediate shock of the loss (Rastogi, & Singh, 2015). Denial is the first stage that individuals experience and although temporary, it helps the student through the first wave of pain. Some students could also isolate themselves and start seeing life as meaningless and that nothing is of value anymore (Li, Chi, Sherr, Cluver, & Stanton, 2015).

Another study in South Africa based on the effects of bereavement on the psychological well-being of students found that girls exhibit indifference to help them to forget about their suffering (Thurman, Luckett, Nice, Spyrelis & Taylor, 2017). Students try to find way through which to go about every day activities despite the loss through denial, which makes them, cope and survive the day, as observed among Ghanaian students (Yendork & Somhlaba, 2014). Among Zambian students, researchers found that students even try

to strike a deal with a higher power to reverse the death of their parent(s) and they will in turn do something back like becoming more disciplined or work harder in school (Mellins, & Malee, 2013).

Similarly, in neighboring Uganda, Kinyanda, Kizza, Abbo, Ndyabangi and Levin, (2013) sought to investigate the prevalence and risk factors of depression in childhood and adolescence as seen in a community sample derived from four disadvantaged districts in north-eastern Uganda. They found that denial was used as a coping mechanism by adolescents to avoid bearing the brunt of the effects of losing a parent or close relative. Owaa, Raburu and Aloka, (2015) mention that denial is a common strategy used among orphaned students to help them cope with the pressure of losing one or both of their parents.

Students in denial will often behave as if nothing is wrong despite the fact that they have just lost a parent. They interact with their peers in a somewhat normal way and carry on with their lives despite obvious signs that they are hurting. Some might even seem more energetic than usual turning to class early, joining clubs or making a host of new friends they were not interacting with. Normally quiet students might turn loud or become class jokers and clowns (Cousins, Servaty-Seib & Lockman, 2017). On the extreme, students might turn to alcohol or other drugs to numb the pain and shock of loss (Puffer, Drabkin, Stashko, Broverman, Ogwang-Odhiambo, & Sikkema, 2012). These behaviors help the student to carry on for a while but it all comes down and the façade is broken giving way to anger and sadness (Owaa, Raburu & Aloka, 2015). Helping the student to come to terms with the loss can help accelerate the healing process. Intervention strategies that help the students to come into terms with the passing on of their parent should be undertaken to help them move on with life.

2. Methods and Procedures

The study employed descriptive research design on the variables and explained them in details resulting to a comprehensive study on the phenomenon in the area of study. The dependent variable for this study was psychological wellbeing that is manifested in three levels; levels of anxiety, levels of attentiveness, and self-awareness. The independent variable was denial in bereavement. Information on denial in bereavement and psychological wellbeing was collected using questionnaires. The study was conducted in day public secondary schools in Gatanga Sub-county in Murang'a County, Kenya. The Sub County is located in the southern eastern part of Murang'a County. Gatanga has an increased record of demise of adults, some of whom are parents of students in day public secondary schools.

2. Results

The objective of the study was to determine the extent to which denial affects psychological well-being of parentally bereaved students. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Denial and Psychological Wellbeing

		psychological wellbeing		Total
		Low	High	
Denial of parental loss	Count	30	12	42
	Low denial % within Denial of parental loss	71.4%	28.6%	100.0%
	Count	6	2	8
	High denial % within Denial of parental loss	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	36	14	50
	% within Denial of parental loss	72.0%	28.0%	100.0%

Source: Field Data (2019)

Table 1 indicates that 30(71.4%) of participants who had low denial of parental loss had low psychological wellbeing while 12(26.8%) had high psychological wellbeing. Among participants with high denial of parental loss, 6(75%) had low psychological wellbeing while 2(25%) had high psychological wellbeing. Majority of the bereaved students have low denial of parental loss. Also majority of the bereaved students have low psychological wellbeing. This concludes that the lower the denial of parental loss, the lower the psychological wellbeing.

These findings implied that denial as a result of parental loss affected the psychosocial wellbeing of students in the study area. The study established that denial of emotions significantly dominate the daily experiences of majority of parentally bereaved students as they come to term with the reality of the loss. According to a study by Yendork and Somhlaba, (2014) students try to find way through which to go about every day activities despite the loss of their parent/s through denial, which makes them, cope and survive the day. They found that denial is used as a coping mechanism by adolescents to avoid bearing the brunt of the effects of losing a parent or close relative. Based on the findings there is a significant relationship between denial and psychological wellbeing of parentally bereaved students based on denial of emotions, resistance to change and conscious avoidance.

To determine whether the descriptive results of the relationship between denial of parental bereavement and psychological wellbeing was statistically significant, a one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of denial on psychological wellbeing on whether the lower the denial of parental loss, the lower the psychological wellbeing. The hypothesis posed was: There is no statistically significant relationship between denial of parental bereavement and psychological wellbeing of students. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: ANOVA of Denial of Loss and Psychological Wellbeing

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.009	1	.009	.041	.841
Within Groups	10.071	48	.210		
Total	10.080	49			

Table 2 shows that there was no significant effect of denial of parental loss on psychological wellbeing at the $p < .05$ [$F(1, 48) = 0.041, p = 0.841$]. Therefore, the null hypothesis is not rejected. This demonstrates that the finding that the lower the denial of parental loss, the lower the psychological wellbeing can be attributed to other factors outside denial of parental loss. Owaa, Raburu and Aloka, (2015) mentioned that denial is a common strategy used among orphaned students to help them cope with pressure of losing one or both parents. This implies that there are other factors that influences bereaved students' psychological wellbeing other than denial. This includes sudden behavior changes, like turning to alcohol and drugs, to numb the pain and shock.

Moreover, refusing to face the reality, denial, can prevent students from seeking help and opening up about their struggles. Worden (2018) indicates that a bereaved individual cannot initiate the process of healing before they seek to dissociate from their preferred reality and face up to the situation that has befallen them. Without facing the reality, an individual cannot expedite the feelings of sadness, guilt, anger, loneliness, emancipation, and yearning, which accompany the grieving process (Worden, 2018). To start healing, an individual need to start living in the actual reality and for some, this could involve the help of another person. For a student, this could be a relative, another adult, a teacher or the school counselor. However, prolonged denial prevents a student from seeking the much-needed help so that they can start healing.

Furthermore, Jia et al., (2015) established that avoidant coping prevents students from experiencing post traumatic growth. Avoidant coping, the change in behavior to avoid thinking or facing uncomfortable situations can exacerbate anxiety, increase stress and lead to frustration (Rodríguez-Naranjo & Caño, 2016). Post traumatic growth is a preferred outcome for individuals who have encountered traumatic events such as bereavement as it predicts increased resilience, all roundedness and an increased awareness and appreciation of the one's environment. These are signs of a mentally sound individual, and which denial prevents a parentally bereaved student from experiencing.

Denial is also associated with unhealthy behaviour such as impulsive risk taking, substance abuse and delinquency. Glassner (2015) and Cohen, Mannarino and Deblinger (2016) found a link between delinquency, substance abuse and risky behaviour among adolescents in denial of a traumatic event. These outcomes are as a result of the adolescent seeking for ways to distance themselves with the loss and to avoid being overwhelmed by the pain of the loss. Unfortunately, these behaviours can spiral out of control and cause more misery and pain such as frayed relationships with relatives, schoolmates and teachers, as well as feelings of self-loathing and frustration (Chukwu *et al*, 2017). Delinquency and substance abuse can lead to punishment and sometimes even expulsion from the school. Substance abuse and risky behaviour can also lead to girls getting pregnant and young me becoming fathers or even turning to crime and falling with the wrong crowd. Hamdan *et al* (2013) concluded that parentally bereaved youth exhibit greater functional impairment, depression, post and traumatic loss than their peers due to alcohol and

substance abuse. This hinders them from conducting normal activities with a similar ease as their peers which compounds on their poor mental health outcomes. Denial, therefore, leads to behaviour that affects the psychological wellbeing of students such as delinquency and alcohol and substance abuse which doesn't bode well for the grieving process.

Finally, denial is accompanied by fear which affects the daily routines of bereaved students. Fritscher (2020) defines fear as a natural but powerful human emotion in response to real or imagined threat. Prolonged fear is risky to the psychological wellbeing of an individual. According to Fritscher (2020), it can weaken the immune system, lead to memory impairment, interrupt brain processing and reactivity and can also lead to mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic fatigue and depression. Post-traumatic stress disorder can lead to significant impairment in the life of a student. According to Hetzel-Riggin and Roby (2013), the long-term effects include anxiety, social isolation and withdrawal from the society, poor relationships with others, autoimmune diseases and even depression. Depression on the other hand impairs decision making, leads to a weakened immune system, causes insomnia and causes feelings of sadness and emptiness (Hetzel-Riggin & Roby, 2013). Together, these issues affect how a student carries on with daily life and impairs proper functioning and relationships with others. Fear is a precursor of denial and is accompanied by a wide range of mental health issues and could thus explain the low psychological wellbeing among students in denial.

5. Implications

Institutions like secondary schools should ensure that it establishes an active counseling desk to ensure that psychological well-being of the students is safeguarded through effective counseling.

Teachers should pay attention on bereaved students and observe psychological challenges they experience and collaborate with the school counselors to help them cope with denial in order to support and uplift parentally bereaved students' psychological wellbeing.

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