

## Complicated grief among bereaved adolescent girls in South Africa: Caregiving correlates and programmatic implications

Early bereavement is common in South Africa, where almost a fifth of children have lost a parent and many more have experienced the death of another family member or friend. However, little is known about young people's psychological responses to loss in this setting. Greater understanding of children's bereavement experiences has the potential to improve the effectiveness of interventions targeted to this group. To that end, the present analysis examines factors associated with complicated grief among bereaved adolescent girls in the country's Free State province.

### Study design

- Analysis was performed using baseline data collected as part of the evaluation of a bereavement support group program for female adolescents who have experienced the loss of someone close to them.
- Participants were enrolled in the 9th grade at one of 11 peri-urban schools where the program was offered, and expressed interest in participating in the intervention.
- Data regarding the focal loss, contextual factors and grief and depression symptomology were collected from 339 adolescents aged 13-17 as well as their primary caregivers.

### Findings

- Nearly one in five adolescents were classified as having complicated grief (intense yearning and longing for the deceased person, preoccupying thoughts and memories, and associated functional impairment).
- Adolescents grieving the loss of a biological parent and those who had experienced economic stressors since the loss had higher odds of complicated grief.
- A significant relationship between the grief levels of adolescents and their primary caregivers was also found. That is, when caregivers exhibited higher levels of complicated grief, so did adolescent girls under their care.
- Factors not associated with complicated grief included the adolescent's age, the number of years since the loss, residential changes, multiple losses, bereavement due to death by illness, and caregiver depression.

### Policy and program recommendations

- Findings substantiate the need for effective psychological support for children in South Africa and similar contexts where early bereavement is common.
- The relationship between adolescent and caregiver grief suggests that family-centred approaches may hold promise, and future research designed to inform and improve such efforts is warranted.
- Linkages to economic safety net services may be an important first step for preventing complicated grief and helping to identify those in need of additional therapeutic support.

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