

A structured support group improves bereaved female adolescents' psychological health: Results from a randomized controlled trial in South Africa



Almost one-fifth of children in South Africa have lost a parent; many have experienced multiple losses. Bereaved children are at increased risk for psychological health problems including maladaptive grief and depression. Despite the scale of need, evidence for effective psychological support services is limited.



Intervention

Abangane ("friends" in isiZulu) is a locally derived, curriculum-based support group for bereaved female adolescents incorporating indigenous stories and cognitive behavioral therapy components. It originated from activities and resources developed by a South African non-profit organization, Khululeka Grief Support, to support the growing population of children who had lost parents and others to AIDS. Under the guidance of Khululeka and Tulane University's Highly Vulnerable Children Research Center, Child Welfare Bloemfontein and Childline Free State (CWBFN & CLFS) adapted the activities into a standardized 8-session curriculum designed to help adolescent females cope with loss. Weekly group sessions were facilitated by trained social workers or social auxiliary workers affiliated with CWBFN & CLFS. The Free State Department of Basic Education supported the intervention, allowing it to be offered during school hours.

Study design

- A randomized controlled trial was used to evaluate the impact of Abangane on the psychological health of female adolescents in three peri-urban towns of the Free State province.
- Within 11 participating schools, bereaved ninth-grade students age 13-17 who expressed interest in taking part in the group were randomly assigned to receive the intervention in 2015 or waitlisted for enrollment in 2016. Survey data were collected prior to the intervention and again at three months post-intervention from 382 adolescent girls and their caregivers.

Findings

- Adolescents in the intervention group demonstrated significant improvements in their psychological health, in terms of both reduced maladaptive grief and depression symptoms, compared to adolescents in the waitlisted group.
- Caregivers of intervention participants reported significantly lower levels of behavioural problems among adolescents, relative to those unexposed to the intervention.

Policy and program recommendations

- The need for bereavement support among children in generalized HIV epidemic settings is high. Short-term, structured, theory-based support groups like Abangane show promise in mitigating psychological and behavioral problems among bereaved female adolescents.
- Abangane is replicable using freely available curriculum materials and appropriately trained personnel. For the curriculum and information on training, contact Khululeka Grief Support: <http://www.khululeka.org>.
- Programs serving orphans and vulnerable children should prioritize psychological support alongside other interventions, and future research should aim to provide additional evidence for the intervention models that best support integrated health and wellbeing in this population.

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