

Supporting Families Who Lost Their Parents Due to COVID-19

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Abstract

On July 7, 2021, the global death toll from COVID-19 surpassed 4 million as the crisis devolved into a race between the vaccine and highly contagious variants. According to estimates from the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, the number of lives lost in the last year and a half, as compiled from official sources by Johns Hopkins University, is roughly equal to the number of people killed in battle in all of the world's wars since 1982 (Segarra, 2021). Among those who died from COVID-19, many people were parents in their families. Their deaths have severely affected their children's physical and mental health. Therefore, through a review of various reports, this paper will develop a familiarity with families whose parents have died of Covid-19. These families have received counseling and other types of support.

Keywords: COVID-19, died, parents, families, counseling.

Introduction

COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2, which has never been seen before. The World Health Organization first became aware of this new virus on December 31, 2019, following a report of a cluster of cases of "viral pneumonia" in Wuhan, People's Republic of China. COVID-19 typically causes mild symptoms such as a dry cough, fatigue, and fever, although a fever may not be present in some older people. Aches and pains, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat, and diarrhea are also considered to be mild symptoms. Some people become infected but do not experience symptoms. The majority of people recover from the disease without specialized care. However, one in every six people who contracts COVID-19 becomes seriously ill and has difficulty breathing (WHO, n.d.). Covid-19 can cause death. In addition to causing the death of over four million people worldwide, it has orphaned at least one million (Taylor, 2021). Many families have lost their parents due to COVID-19. In families, parental loss due to COVID-19 has caused those left behind to experience serious psychological crises and psychological trauma, especially among children (Phuong Thuan, 2021).

Theoretical underpinnings:

1. Definitions:

- a. Parental death is one of the most traumatic events in childhood and can have a wide-ranging impact on an affected individual's life path. Parentally bereaved children have been shown to have significantly lower self-esteem and experience more feelings of helplessness, sadness, guilt, and anger than children who grow up with both biological parents. Parental loss during childhood is also linked to lower educational attainment and a higher risk of school failure during adolescence, which could be explained by bereaved children's increased risk of developing mental health problems. Indeed, bereaved adolescents in modern Western societies are more likely to report behavioral problems, attempt suicide, be hospitalized for psychiatric disorders, and commit violent criminal acts (Rosenbaum-Feldbrügge, 2019).
- b. Psychological crisis:
A psychological crisis is a condition in which a person finds himself or herself in a state of distress and is unable to cope effectively with the distress. When an individual feels overwhelmed by a major change, his or her psychological equilibrium is disrupted, and his or her normal physiological life is also disrupted. If inner tension is not released it will continue to build up. It can then cause disorientation and even disordered thinking and behavior. The individual will enter a state of imbalance, resulting in a psychological crisis. A psychological crisis occurs when a person realizes that

an event or situation has outstripped his or her ability to cope (Zhao and Song, 2021). Families who have lost their parents due to the COVID-19 pandemic have suffered from the following psychological crises: anxiety, panic, depression, and hostility (Han et al, 2021).

c. Psychological trauma:

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), trauma is a result of being exposed to an event (i.e., traumatic event) that involves actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. This exposure could take the form of experiencing the event, witnessing the event, or learning that a family member or close associate experienced the event. Trauma symptoms can include: intrusive memories, dreams, or flashbacks; avoidance of traumatic event reminders; negative thoughts and feelings; increased alertness or reactivity. Because of the complexities of the interaction between traumatic event occurrence and trauma symptomatology, a person's distress response to aversive details of a traumatic event can range from intense fear to helplessness, depending on the context (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Therefore, psychological trauma is mental damage caused by one or more events that cause overwhelming amounts of stress that exceed the person's ability to cope with or integrate the emotions involved, eventually leading to serious, long-term negative consequences (Wikipedia, n.d.). The death of parents' from COVID-19 has caused psychological trauma to the rest of the family because of the suddenness of the loss of their loved ones.

2. Basic concepts:

In families, parental loss due to COVID-19 has resulted in serious psychological crisis and psychological trauma for those left behind, particularly children. However, they can recover from loss if they have social support and the effective treatments such as Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), complicated grief treatment (CGT), and bereavement therapy.

3. Examples:

Two sisters, N.T. (18 years old) and D.T. (10 years old) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, whose parents died in two days of COVID-19. From the day they knew of their parent's death, the two sisters were almost desperate, sad, crying a lot, and isolating (Vu, 2021).

Another case is that of Shawez. Shawez (18 years old) lives in Murad Nagar, India, with a sister who is 9 years old. Shawez soon dropped out of school to work with his father on construction sites. When his parents showed signs of Covid-19 in April, Shawez took them to see a local doctor. The doctor suggested testing and hospitalization, but Shawez's parents decided to self-medicate due to poverty. Living in a shack, their parents quarantined themselves inside the house, and the Shawez brothers lay on the porch. Unfortunately, the illness worsened; a few days later, Shawez's parents died. When Shawez returned to the motel, the landlord refused to let the Shawez brothers in due to unpaid rent. Losing a loved one always leaves a difficult feeling. But for children, this loss often leads to instability and severe psychological trauma. Shawez's sister calls her mother every day and talks as if she were still alive. Shawez himself was often startled at night when he heard his sister calling to her mother in a dream (Thuy Chi, 2021).

This paper will consider two main stages: First: Assessment; Second: Treatment for families whose parents have died from COVID-19.

Methodology

The literature review method is used in this paper because relevant theories and sources support the methods. During the first stage of this paper's research, 20 articles were found from 2014 to 2021 using the keywords "parents lost due to COVID-19" in Google search. This method aims to delve deeper into the issues raised to understand better the topics being discussed.

Discussion

1. Assessment:

a. Common problems:

Following the death of a parent from COVID-19, bereaved family members are more likely to experience symptoms that can impair their quality of life. These symptoms include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, and complicated grief (Kentish-Barnes et al., 2021). Children, in particular, are at an increased risk of traumatic grief, depression, poor educational outcomes, suicide or unintentional death (Miller, 2021). For adolescents, the death of a parent due to COVID-19 was a traumatic experience. They had to deal with an unexpected loss along with stress, loneliness, and gruesome feelings. On the one hand, they believed that the loss of parents shattered their life and created ongoing distress. On the other hand, they thought about risky behaviors such as a suicide attempt or substance/alcohol abuse as a response to this sudden loss (Asgari et al., 2021).

b. Impact on the family system, subsystems, individual-indicators of distress:

Parents are the family's breadwinners and have a very important, irreplaceable role. Unfortunately, families whose parents have died from COVID-19 are often torn apart. Children often have to go to orphanages and some young people must become custodial parents without the necessary means of support. Karen J. Freedman - Founder and CEO of Lawyers for Children (USA) - shared: "The house is gone, the home is also gone. You will then be placed in foster care by a stranger. It's a scary prospect for any child." (Ngoc Ha, 2021). Additionally, many children and teenagers are starving due to an insufficient amount of food and with no loved ones to care for them.

c. Risk factors:

The death of a parent from COVID-19 can bring many risk factors to the surviving members of the family, especially the children. Yasmin Haque, head of UNICEF India, said that children who have lost a parent to COVID-19 "live not only in an emotional tragedy but are also at high risk of abandonment, abuse, and exploitation." In addition, the increase in illegal adoptions of children whose parents have died from COVID-19 facilitate traffickers to sell children (Ngoc Ha, 2021b).

d. Protective factors:

Governments of countries pay more attention to families whose loved ones have died from COVID-19 and offer the most appropriate support policies, specifically with regard to vaccination and financial subsidies for those families to stabilize. Society will support and care for children whose parents died from COVID-19.

2. Treatment:

Bereavement is a natural reaction to loss. However, the circumstances surrounding the loss and the closeness of the relationship can influence how people cope with grief and bereavement. A parental loss due to COVID-19 can cause intense grief. There are other tasks, such as making funeral arrangements and managing finances which can also be a challenge (Cherry, 2021).

a. Treatment objectives:

Helping bereaved family members to overcome the serious psychological crisis and psychological trauma due to the loss of parents.

b. Intervention:

- a. Medical intervention: if the bereaved family members' depression intensifies. In order to treat severe depression, a variety of options can be used, including medical intervention. Medical treatment for depression should begin with the doctor. The doctor may consult the family members. Antidepressants - specifically serotonin reuptake inhibitors - may be prescribed to help manage depressive symptoms of a persistent and complex bereavement disorder. Tricyclic antidepressants have not yet been found to improve levels of grief (Fleming, 2016).

- b. Therapy:

For families who lost parents due to COVID-19, Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), complicated grief treatment (CGT), and bereavement therapy can all help (Cherry, 2021b).

- CBT works by assisting people in identifying and changing negative thoughts that are detrimental to their mental health.
- CBT helps people how to plan for the future, set goals for their recovery, and cope with their feelings following the death of their parents.
- Bereavement therapy, also known as grief counseling, is a type of treatment intended to assist people who have suffered a loss.

For adults who have lost a parent due to COVID-19, counselors should listen to their experience of loss, allowing them express their feelings about the loss of a parent; accompany them in accepting the death of their parents due to COVID-19; sympathize with them, especially if they had not been able to say goodbye to their parents or see their parents' faces before they die, and help them celebrate the memorial day that commemorates the day their parents passed away.

When social gatherings are restricted, online interventions may help adolescents express their feelings about their parents' unexpected deaths and help them connect with their friends. These new methods appear critical, as many young people spend a significant amount of time on social media.

For children who lost a parent due to COVID-19, if possible, the therapist should choose the right time to tell the child the truth about the loss of a parent. The loss of a parent is something no one wants, and no parent wants to leave their child. If the child has relatives and can take care of him/her, they should be allowed to live in a family environment. Growing up with love from a loved one is the best treatment for a child's loss. The therapist needs to understand the children's family situation, living environment, learning, needs, and aspirations in order to assist in reorganizing their lives. In some circumstances, it is imperative to take the child to a neutral care facility. In that case, it is advisable to choose a reputable place to ensure the best care for the child, both physically and mentally (Cam Nuong, 2021). The therapist should listen attentively and empathically when children express feelings and emotions regarding the death of their parents.

- c. Pastoral themes:

The pastoral theme for families who lost parents due to covid-19 is care.

For children, Save the Children urged institutions and governments worldwide to pay immediate attention to the plight of orphaned children who have lost their parents or caregivers and ensure their care. They say governments "need to look at strengthening family-based care systems. Children who have lost one or both parents can be kept safe in family settings, instead of being sent to an institution". (FRANCE24, 2021).

In Vietnam, the Vietnamese government prioritizes alternative care for orphans because of COVID-19. In this way, children may be placed with relatives, in foster care, or other family-like settings or institutions. Evidence shows that family and community-based forms of care are more likely to meet the needs of children than institutionalized residential care (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, n.d.).

Currently, in the Archdiocese of Saigon, Vietnam, the pastoral care program for children whose parents died of covid-19 is as follows:

- A scholarship is given to all orphans in the area of the Archdiocese of Saigon, and each child will be supported with tuition until the age of 18.
- Each parish in the Archdiocese of Saigon will accompany and educate orphans about humanity and faith in the parish area.

Conclusion

People whose parents have died from COVID-19 experience severe psychological trauma. They will recover their mental health if they have early support and appropriate treatment and are given unconditional love, unconditional listening, and unconditional empathy.

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