

Bereavement: Understanding Widowhood in 2024

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Definition of Widow

A woman (or male widower) whose spouse has died and who has not married.

The death of a spouse is one of life's most difficult transitions yet, we know very little about the experience. While there is vast literature on grief and bereavement, research specific to the experience of widowhood has been quite limited.

What we know

Hardest time is closest to the death

Challenges with depression, anxiety, and poor health

22% diagnosed with major depressive disorder in first year; 12% with PTSD

48% increased risk of mortality compared to non widows

Questions

- 1) What are the physical, financial, psychological, social and spiritual experiences of widows?
- 2) How do the physical and mental health change over time?
- 3) What difference does hospice make?

Methods

Modern Widows Club Members from US

- Established 2011 not for profit online community with a mission to understand widows experiences and promote personal growth
- <https://modernwidowsclub.org>

Online survey- gather demographic, psychological assessment, and historical information – 45 day window

Results

1150 female respondents from 43 states

Mean age= 60

Race 91% white non-Hispanic

Mean years married 27 years

Mean years widowed 5 years

Remarried 7%

63% employed prior to widowhood

35% cancer; 5% heart disease

Who are they?

On scale of 0-10 with 10 best rated themselves as 7.8 financial well-being

60% had cared for their spouse for an average of 3 years with a difficulty rating of 6.7

28% received palliative care; 37% enrolled in hospice

54% had used bereavement services; 65% counseling

Health

20% Health was well below the general population

40% said health worse during widowhood

Approximately 1/3 spoke to 3-4 people per week.

Strong continuing bonds with the deceased

What difference did hospice make?

Looked at depression, anxiety, social networks, social support, general health and grief meaning.

Compared those who reported having been on hospice prior to death with those who did not receive hospice care.

What did we learn?

The length of time widowed mediates the effect of widowhood; longer they are widowed more positive their mental health.

Those whose spouse died suddenly reported more personal growth

Those dying of disease issues had higher sense of peace

By 5 years social networks have been rebuilt

Hospice vs Non hospice

Those using hospice were older than those who did not

Those in hospice more likely to have used palliative care and bereavement.

Hospice caregivers were more likely to have higher sense of peace, emptiness and meaninglessness. Also higher sense of peace, emptiness, meaninglessness, anxiety, and overall better mental health.

Those with hospice had

- Better sense of peace
- higher emptiness and meaninglessness
- lower anxiety
- overall better mental health

Going forward

Important to explore benefit of bereavement

Challenges comparing bereavement services

Need more evidence on bereavement intervention efficacy