

The Association of Family Composition with Prolonged Grief Disorder, Depression, and Thoughts of Death in Military Widows

T. Ryan O'Leary, M.D.³, Joscelyn E. Fisher, Ph.D.^{1,2}, Christin M. Ogle, Ph.D.^{1,2}, Jing Zhou, M.S.^{1,2}, Alexander Rice^{1,2}, Ph.D., & Stephen J. Cozza, M.D.¹



¹ Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Bethesda, MD

² Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, Inc., Bethesda, MD

³ National Capital Consortium Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellowship

INTRODUCTION

Background

- No prior studies have explored the relationship between family composition and bereavement outcomes in military widows.
- While prior research suggests that bereaved female spouses with children are at lower risk for suicide^{1,2,3}, having dependent children is associated with an increased risk of developing depressive disorders.⁴
- While it is generally reported that being married is associated with a lower the risk for suicide and depression¹, it is unclear whether remarriage or re-partnering after bereavement is similarly associated with a lower risk of depression or prolonged grief.
- The National Military Family Bereavement Study (NMFBS) explores bereavement outcomes in military families by surveying families of active duty military service members who have died, and offers an opportunity to examine the influence of family composition on grief outcomes in widows

Study Aims

- To examine the association of family composition [relationship status (married/repartnered vs. single); number of children in a home] with clinically relevant grief outcomes (threshold Prolonged Grief Disorder [PGD], threshold depression, and thoughts of death) in widows from the NMFBS

Hypotheses

- H1:** Single widowhood will be associated with greater risk for threshold PGD and depression, as well as thoughts of death
- H2:** Greater numbers of children in a home will be associated with higher risk for PGD and depression (due to greater demands on their time, increased stress, and consequently less time for self-care)
- H3:** Greater number of children will be associated with lower risk for thoughts of death

METHODS

Design: Cross-sectional survey

Sample: 454 female spouses of military service members who died between Sept 11, 2001 and Sept 11 2011

- Mean Age (at time of survey) = 38.1 years (SD = 8.9)
- Mean Time Since Death of Spouse = 5.32 years (SD = 2.9)
- ~ 2/3 had minor children in the home, 26% 1 child, 42% 2+ children
- ~ 1/6 were not single
- 41% of deaths were combat-related, 18% accident, 11% suicide, 7% homicide/terrorist attack, 13% illness and 10% reasons unknown to participants

Data Analysis: Multivariate logistic regression adjusting for age, time since death, and cause of death

Outcomes

Thoughts of Death

- Endorsement of Item 9 of the Patient Health Questionnaire 9 (PHQ-9) of several days or more for "Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself" in the past 2 weeks

Threshold Depression

- Score of 10 or more on the remaining 8 items of the PHQ-9

Threshold Prolonged Grief Disorder

- Score of 30 or more on the Inventory of Complicated Grief
- >1 year following bereavement

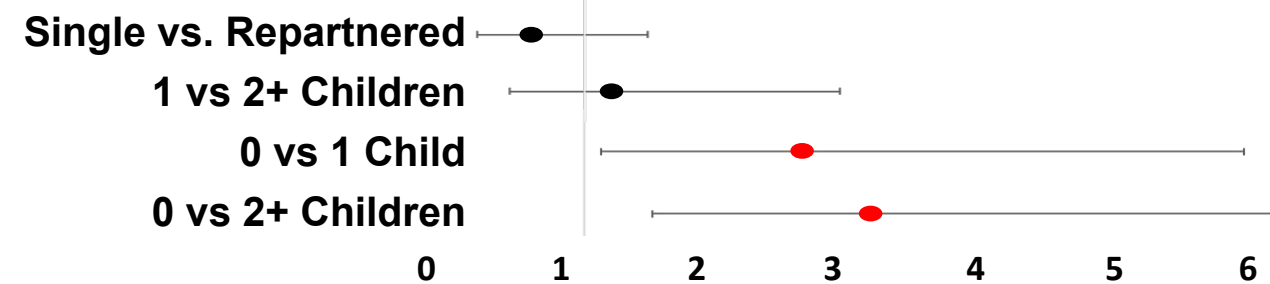
Predictors

- Relationship status: Single versus Re-partnered
- Number of children: 0, 1, 2+

Thoughts of Death

13% of respondents had a score of 1 or more on PHQ-9 item 9.

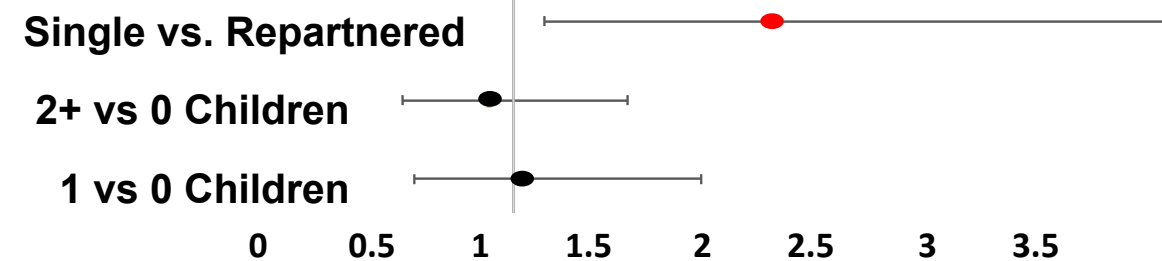
Not having children was associated with increased odds of thoughts of death (0 vs 1 child: OR=2.43 [95% CI = 1.11, 5.28], $p<0.05$); 0 vs 2+ children: OR=2.85 [95% CI = 1.45, 5.62], $p<0.01$); 1 vs. 2+: 1.17 [95% CI = 0.52, 2.66], n.s.).



Depression

36% of spouses met threshold for depression.

Single widows had increased odds of meeting threshold for depression versus those who were remarried or re-partnered (OR = 2.038 [95% CI: 1.126, 3.687], $p<0.02$).



Prolonged Grief Disorder

40% of respondents met threshold for PGD.

Not having children (vs. 2+ children) was associated with higher odds of PGD (OR=1.77 [95% CI: 1.08, 2.90], $p<0.03$).



Images created using Google Gemini 2.5 Pro and edited in Adobe Photoshop 2025

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

This is the first study to explore the influence of family composition on clinically relevant bereavement outcomes among military spouses.

We hypothesized that bereaved spouses who are not repartnered are more likely to meet clinical threshold for prolonged grief and depression and be more likely to report thoughts of death. **Being single increased risk of reporting depression, but was not associated with reporting prolonged grief or thoughts of death.**

We hypothesized that the presence of children in the home would increase stress on the surviving spouse, thus putting her at higher risk of depression and prolonged grief, but at a lower risk of reporting thoughts of death. **Having no children in the home increased the odds of a widow reporting thoughts of death or hurting oneself, and was associated with increased odds of threshold PGD.** Presence or absence of children in the home was not significantly associated with reporting symptoms of threshold depression.

Future work is needed to examine how factors previously shown to modulate the effects of bereavement are relevant to military spouses, including amount and quality of social supports available, perceived parenting efficacy, whether a death was anticipated or not, socioeconomic status^{1,2,4} and cultural norms such as the value placed on widows within a society.

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