



Grief and Young Adults in Military-Connected Families

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Today's Program

- General factors associated with grief and mourning
- Emerging adults and death losses
- Ties to the military environment
- Themes in the grief of emerging/young adults
- Ties to the military experience



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General Factors Associated with Grief and Mourning

- Culture, ethnicity, and existential/spiritual beliefs
- Relationship with the person who died
- Circumstances surrounding the death
- Personal responses to loss
 - Avoidant approach to coping
- External concurrent influences/stressors
 - Social support and changes in peer relationships
- Familial communication and general functioning
- Developmental level





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Diversity Questions/Prompts

- What does a community consider to be a loss?
- What life events, circumstances, and relationships exist that may introduce loss into people's lives?
- Explanations as to causes/beliefs about losses
- Norms regarding how intensely a loss "should" or "can" be grieved
- How the loss compares to other losses
- Who is allowed to feel distress about a loss?
- Those who have the power to affect the loss or the grieving of it

(Murray, 2016)



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Diversity Questions/Prompts, cont.

- The structure of the social network around the griever
- Beliefs about how the consequences of the loss should be interpreted and dealt with
- Beliefs about how such losses can be avoided/prevented
- Practices by which the loss will be recognized (or not)
- The time span offered for grieving
- The acceptable emotions and forms of expression associated with loss
- The meaning of the loss in the life of the group
- The manner and interpretation of the loss into the future

(Murray, 2016)



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Emerging Adults: Characteristics

- Identity explorations
 - Personality, career, love/romantic, values, etc.
- Instability
 - Frequent shifts in work, education, love, and living situations
- Self-focused
 - Minimal social control—freedom
- Feeling in-between
 - Self view as not adolescents, but not quite adults
- Possibilities
 - Optimistic, hopeful, "life will eventually be kind"

(Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2010; Tanner & Arnett, 2009)



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Millennial Generation: Characteristics

- Special
- Sheltered
- Confident
- Conventional
- Team-oriented
- Achieving
- Pressured
- Technology



(DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000)

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Generation Z: Characteristics



- Loyal
 - Compassionate
 - Thoughtful
 - Open-minded
 - Responsible
 - Determined
 - Motivated by not wanting to let others down, advocating for someone else, having the opportunity for advancement, and earning credit toward something
- (Seemiller & Grace, 2016)

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College Context

- Overwhelmingly young
- Physical separation from family
- Growth, activity, and fun
- Alcohol
- Structured vs. unstructured



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Most Common Losses/Stressors for College Students (Past year)

All challenging life events and significant stressors can be viewed from a loss lens:

- Career indecision 84.1%
- Interpersonal conflicts 71.3%
- Financial problems 63.1%
- Academic setback 51.8%
- Parental pressure/conflict 44.6%
- Romantic breakup 39.0%
- Self-injury/illness 34.9%
- Death of family member 33.8%

(Lockman, 2016)



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Possible Pandemic-Related Losses/Stressors

- Way of being in the world
- Rites of passage
- Future plans
- Community and connection
- Informal support
- Structure
- Autonomy
- Additional deaths and altered death-related rituals



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College Students: Lifetime Adverse Life Events

- Highest lifetime prevalence was a death loss (64%)
- Other common events included divorce or separation of parents, sexual trauma, violent event and academic upheaval
- Death loss was rated as more severe compared to other life events
- Women reported greater severity (except for parental divorce) and were more likely to disclose than men

(Smyth, Hockemeyer, Heron, Wonderlich, & Pennebaker, 2008)



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Trends in the Deaths Young Adults Experience

- 37 to 44% report a death loss within the past 2 years (multiple investigations)
- Longitudinal study indicated just over 30% of students experienced a death loss **each year** (Cox et al., 2015)
- Who died?
 - Grandparent/Aunt/Uncle 45 to 66% (underestimated impact)
 - Parent, Friend 10 to 28%
 - Sibling, Child 5 to 16%
- Cause of death?
 - Illness 50 to 70%
 - Accident 11 to 21% (leading cause for young adults)
 - Suicide & Homicide 10.5 to 12%

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Multidimensional Grief Reactions

- Affective
- Cognitive
- Behavioral
- Physiological
- Social
- Spiritual



Appear less likely than older adults to meet criteria for Complex Persistent Bereavement Disorder

(Balk et al., 2010; Dillen et al., 2008; Holland & Nemejyer, 2010; Prigerson et al., 1999)

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Young Adults in Military-Connected Families

- Current or prior service by one or both parents, a sibling, or other family members
- In some families, a tradition that spans generations; in others, a single tour in the past
- The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan span the entire lives of young people entering college today
- Seminal experiences of military life include relocation, separation, and deployment
- Diversity – Branch, component, duties
- For young adults, especially in active component, frequent changes in schools, frequent and sometimes prolonged separation from military family members, exposure to the consequences of deployment for service members and family members

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Young Adults in Military-Connected Families

Positive childhood experiences – Resilience

- Access to resources – health care, shelter, financial, high quality childcare, parental education and employment
- Strong cultural traditions – values, rituals, ‘can-do’ spirit
- Experience in weathering transitions – changes in friends, staying connected with family
- Awareness of others with similar experiences
- Extensive formal and informal support mechanisms, especially during service and deployments



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Young Adults in Military-Connected Families

Adverse childhood experiences – Risk

- Strong cultural traditions – stigma, shame
- Challenges in maintaining strong peer networks
- Systematic exposure to adversity
- Primary deployment exposure: Separation from parent
- Secondary deployment exposure: Mental and physical consequences of deployment for service members cascade to family members
- Secondary deployment exposure: Mental and physical consequences of deployment for caregiver parent

Some cause for concern, based on Youth Risk Behavior Surveys

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Percent of Youth Reporting Risky Behaviors

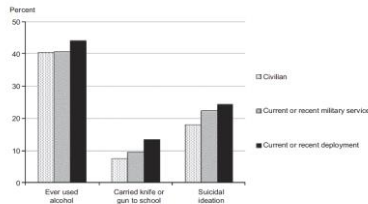


Figure 1. Percent of youth reporting risky behaviors, 2008-2013.
 Note: Data reflect average across 2008, 2011, and 2013. The 2008 data cover from 9th, 10th, and 12th-grade youth in Washington State (civilian, alcohol, weapons); 2011 data cover from 9th, 10th, and 12th-grade youth in California (civilian, alcohol, weapons); 2013 data cover from 9th, 10th, and 12th-grade youth in California (alcohol, weapons); 12: suicidal ideation, 9th and 10th grade only. (20)

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Themes in the Grief of Young Adults and College Students

We Get It: Voices of Grieving Colleges Students and Young Adults
Edited Volume (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015)

- For grieving young adults/students to hear from peers who “get it”
- For those who seek to support young adults/college students including parents, non-grieving friends, clinicians, support group leaders, and college student personnel
- Aim was to create a “portable support group”

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We Get It: 12 Themes

- Isolation
- Active grief expression, memorialization, and altruistic instrumental grief
- Forced maturity
- Importance of connecting with grieving peers
- Disconnection with grief expectations
- Life transition challenges
- Existential questions
- Importance of connecting with a mentor
- Life lessons learned
- Powerful reactions
- Importance of a community of support
- Changing family relationships

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Theme 1: Isolation

- Distance, lack of connection, and feeling of separation from their non-grieving peers and often also from family members
- Marked by complexity and paradox
- Desire to talk about their grief with others combined with fears that others would not respond supportively or would feel burdened by their sharing
- Sense of loneliness and need to pretend everything was OK in the midst of an inability to find a place to just be alone when they needed to express their grief



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Theme 2: Active Grief Expression and Memorialization



- Acceptable physical and active outlets for grief-related energy
- Maintain a connection with their loved one who died, to not forget them, to keep their memory alive through thoughts and/or actions
- Memorialize their loved one through what we have termed altruistic instrument grief (i.e., public actions that directly benefit and offer service to others-often others who are also grieving)



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Theme 3: Forced Maturity

- Experiences that distinguish them from their peers; serious life and death situations that are out of their control
- Do not believe their peers can truly understand the depth of their grief or the added responsibility, worry, and required divided attention that comes with the experience of family illness and/or death
- Decreased desire to "go out all the time" and difficulty relating and integrating into the carefree environment of college life



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Theme 4: Importance of Connecting with Grieving Peers



- Knowledge of even one other grieving peer seemed to provide relief, let alone the mutual understanding that emerged through conversation
- Freedom that came from not "having to explain everything" and the power of the normalcy that came with being in a setting where they did not have to monitor self-presentation related to their grief (e.g., not mentioning loved one who died, not allowing tears to rise)



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Theme 5: Disconnection of Grief Expectations

- Differences between their experience and understanding of grief and the expectations regarding the expression and processing of grief directly and indirectly communicated to them by others (e.g., friends, family members, society)
- Grief as dynamic, complicated, unpredictable and ongoing in contrast to messages received suggesting that grief has a timeline and moves in stages
- Sensitive to messages that imply judgment of their grief and perceived most support from those who listened to them with an open-mind, acknowledged the complexity of their experience, and who did not define them as people based on their bereavement status

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Theme 6: Life Transition Challenges

- Life transitions such as starting and graduating from college were periods of heightened reflection, reaction, and interpersonal negotiation
- Internal struggle as they began college related to whether or not to be honest and open with peers about their grief
- Difficult transition of returning to school and the lack acknowledgement of their loss and the challenge of returning to a setting that continues on as normal
- Tension between home and college/work settings

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Theme 7: Existential Questions

- Deep questions about their identity and future now that their loved one was no longer physically present in their lives
- Sense of not wanting to be defined as a person by their grief, yet also wanting their death loss to be recognized as a life experience that has had significant influence on their identity
- Practical questions regarding shifts in roles and responsibilities within their family systems as well as concerns about their own future without the often unconditional love and support offered by their deceased loved one



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Theme 8: Importance of Connecting with a Mentor

- Emphasized and expressed gratitude for the assistance of a mentor in their lives
- Individuals were often adults from their extended family (e.g., aunt, uncle) or an unrelated adult (e.g., coach, family friend)
- Most helpful in their consistent presence, availability, and nonjudgmental attitude

Theme 9: Life Lessons Learned

- Spontaneously identified at least one life lesson they drew on from their death experience and/or from the life of their loved one who died
- Lessons they could take with them as they moved forward in their lives
- Examples included heightened valuing of interpersonal relationships, increased confidence in their ability to cope with life stressors, reorganization of life priorities, and enhanced clarity regarding their purpose in life

Theme 10: Powerful Reactions

- One of the most common emotions described was shock (e.g., unreality, disbelief and dissociation) at the time of diagnosis and/or upon hearing about the death
- Many offered bodily metaphors to express the extent of this experience such as "I'd been stabbed," "pit formed in stomach," and "hit me like a ton of bricks"
- Less common but quite strong descriptions of anger and also destructive coping



Theme 11: Importance of a Community of Support

- Some authors received support from multiple people within their community, such as teachers, friends, teams, and extended family members
- Different types of support from different members of network

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Theme 12: Changing Family Relationships

- With the death of a loved one, many family members will respond differently, which can make supporting one another challenging
- Shifting family-related roles and responsibilities
- Parents also often go on to remarry and/or have additional children



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Grief for Military-Connected Young Adults

- Grief can result from separation, injuries, death and other factors
- Diversity in the cause of death, such as accidents, illnesses, combat, and suicide
- Military deaths may be especially likely to be sudden or violent
- Service members and their children are typically young, so young adults may have been exposed early in life to grief-generating events
- The consequences of wartime deployments can be long-lasting, so grief-generating events also can be recent
- Younger children (age 10 and under) substantially more likely to experience sudden or violent death of a military parent
- Older children (age 11 and over): Single largest category is illness

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Percentage of children by age (years) and cause of death of SMs

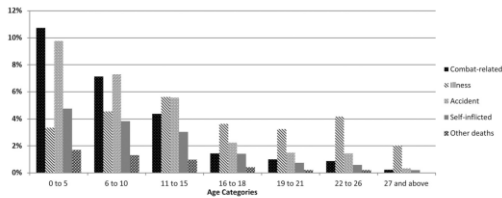


FIGURE 1. Percentage of children by age (years) and cause of death of SMs.

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Developmental Implications of Military Deployment, Injury, and Death

- Separation distress
 - Anticipatory and current grief
 - Anger
 - Pining and yearning
- Identity distress
 - Sense of self
 - Roles and responsibilities
 - Life plans
 - Hopelessness
 - Shame or embarrassment
- Circumstance-related distress
 - Fear of lethal risk
 - Preoccupation with death, intrusive thoughts
 - Worries
 - Emotional withdrawal
 - Guilt



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Some grief goes beyond the usual... “Persistent complex bereavement disorder” “Complicated grief” “Prolonged grief disorder”

- More likely among young adults' parents than young adults themselves
- Persists beyond 6-12 months following death
- Associated with functional impairment
- Diagnosis should include persistent yearning, sorrow, or preoccupation with the deceased AND one or more other symptoms such as:
 - excessive avoidance of reminders of the painful loss
 - distressing and intrusive thoughts related to the death
 - anger and bitterness
 - suicidal thinking
- Exact diagnostic criteria are still being debated; how many additional symptoms should be required for diagnosis?
- Treatment is distinct from other disorders, such as depression, and can be effective.

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Tips for Supportive Others

- Display empathy rather than sympathy and acknowledge the depth of grief; be open to listening and not pitying or judging
- Be open to the topic of grief and try not to avoid it
- Keep the support going and communicate belief that grief does not end
- Be present and offer tangible and practical support when appropriate
- Ask about the loved one who died
- Consider your own strengths; what can you uniquely offer?
- Encourage reaching out to others for support
- Encourage memorializing and active ways to express grief



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Take Home Points

- Grief is a real and substantive issue in the lives of grieving young adults
- Their grief is dynamic and unique based on cultural, individual, developmental, and contextual factors
- Common themes include isolation, active expression, and forced maturity
- Military connections bring both supportive and challenging circumstances

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Questions?

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About the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®

Launched in March 2018 through an alliance with HFA, the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® serves as a resource and training center, providing programs for both professionals working in the field of grief and loss and the public.



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Upcoming TAPS Institute Programs

October 13 A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance: Finding Balance in the Midst of Grief

Live Webinar, Noon-1:00 p.m. ET

Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv, TAPS Advisory Board Member

October 22 Is it Depression or Is it Grief?

Live Webinar, Noon-1:00 p.m. ET

Robert A. Neimeyer, PhD, Portland Institute for Loss and Transition

Visit taps.org/institute to learn more and RSVP!

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3. Complete the exam
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4. Choose your board category and board
5. Complete the program evaluation
6. Enter payment information
7. Print your certificate

CE Code expires September 14, 2021



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