

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Grief Communication and Privacy Rules: Examining the Communication of Individuals Bereaved by the Death of a Family Member

Basinger, E. D., Wehrman, E. C., & McAninch, K. G. (2016). Grief communication and privacy rules: Examining the communication of individuals bereaved by the death of a family member *Journal of Family Communication*, 16(4), 285-302. doi:10.1080/15267431.2016.1182534

SUMMARY: Discussing grief can be uncomfortable for both the bereaved and the confidant, and bereaved individuals may seek to control how information about grief is shared. Bereaved college students who completed interviews about a family member's death and their communication about grief indicated that they felt a strong need to control information and share and discuss the death according to their own and their families' rules.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The majority of participants felt that information about their grief and their family member's death was private and theirs to control when, where, and with whom they shared information.
- Participants tended to use some or all of the following patterns for communicating information about their family member's death: share selectively with certain people in certain situations, do not discuss at all, and focus only on positive topics when sharing.
- In each type of communication, participants felt hurt and upset when their preferred way of discussing their family member's death was not followed by others.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Facilitate support groups that allow for open communication about grief for military families
- Attend trainings about bereavement in military families to enhance their ability to support those families

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer focus groups following the death of a Service member to provide social support to other military families and to educate them about how to support the deceased's family
- Disseminate information normalizing each of the different ways of communicating about grief and encouraging families to discuss how they would like to communicate about grief

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend ongoing supports and services for bereaved military families as grief, communication about grief, and family needs change over time
- Encourage education of professionals working with military families regarding the importance of respecting bereaved individuals' and families' preference in communicating about grief

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METHODS

- Bereaved college students who had experienced the death of a parent or sibling were recruited from college communications classes.
- Participants completed interviews about their family member's death and communication within and outside of the family regarding their family member's death.
- Participant statements were coded for themes about how bereaved individuals communicate with family and people outside their family regarding their family member's death.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 21 college students from a large Midwestern university who had experienced the death of a father (52%), mother (19%), brother (19%), or sister (10%).
- Participants were age 19-28 years ($M = 21.24$) and mostly female (71%); they identified as White (62%), Black (29%), Asian American (5%), and Pakistani (5%).
- Family member causes of death included health-related problems (81%), accidents (10%), and murder (10%) and occurred between one month and 20 years prior ($M = 7.17$, $SD = 6.06$).

LIMITATIONS

- Students who agreed to participate may differ from those who did not (e.g., stage of grief, ways of communicating about grief, social support).
- Because participants were all college students and most had family members who died from health-related problems, results may not generalize to other age groups or circumstances.
- There was a large timeframe in which participants had experienced their family member's death (i.e., one month to 20 years prior), which may have influenced results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine how communication about grief changes as the time since bereavement increases
- Explore whether communication patterns and rules differ between bereaved individuals following different causes of death (e.g., accident, murder, combat)
- Investigate how military families communicate grief within and outside of their military communities following combat-related death of a Service member

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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