

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Parental Experiences with a Hospital-based Bereavement Program Following the Loss of a Child to Cancer

Berrett-Abebe, J., Levin-Russman, E., Gioiella, M.E., & Adams, J.M. (2017). Parental experiences with a hospital-based bereavement program following the loss of a child to cancer. *Palliative and Supportive Care*, 15, 348–358. doi:10.1017/S1478951516000821

SUMMARY: Parents who lost a child due to cancer experience intense trauma and sadness, and bereavement programs may provide the intervention and support parents need. This study interviewed eight parents who participated in a two-year hospital-based bereavement program to examine their experiences of the program. Results revealed that parents appreciated communication with the healthcare team and wished to extend the intervention through continued connections both with the providers and with other parents.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Support from health care team members both during children's cancer treatment and after children's death was important for parents.
- Parents suggested that the bereavement program last longer and that a formalized peer-support program be provided.
- Parents perceived the individualized gift basket received one week after their child's death as meaningful and comforting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Send personalized comfort baskets containing items of remembrance or grief books to military families that recently lost a family member
- Follow up periodically with families that experienced the loss of a family member to check how they are doing and offer support when needed

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for military families that lost a family member due to military service or illness
- Design workshops on how to cope with grief and loss for military families that lost a family member

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support the development of bereavement programs for military families who recently lost a family member
- Encourage training for professionals who work with military families on how to help them cope with the loss of a family member

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METHODS

- All families that lost a child to cancer and completed at least 12 months of the 24-month Massachusetts General Hospital Bereavement Program were invited by mail to participate in the study (response rate = 22%).
- Participants were enrolled in a two-hour focus group where they answered questions regarding their experience of the bereavement program.
- Data were coded and analyzed to identify significant statements and common themes regarding parents' experiences of the bereavement program.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were eight parents (six mothers and two fathers) from six families; the average age of the parents was 51 years (age range = 33-62 years, SD = 10).
- All participants were White and well-educated; four of them were married, two were divorced, and two were single.
- The average age of deceased child at death was 13 years (SD = 10) and the average time since death was 3.1 years (SD = 1.7).

LIMITATIONS

- Only a small portion of families that were reached out agreed to participate in the study, therefore the results may not represent the experiences of other families.
- All participants were White and well-educated, so caution must be taken to generalize the results to a broader population.
- Participants were interviewed in a focus group, so their answers may have been influenced by each other and may not fully represent their real opinions.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Try different recruiting methods (e.g., talking with potential participants in-person) to increase the response rate so that more families' experiences could be examined
- Increase the diversity of participants in terms of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic level so that the sample may better represent the general population
- Interview participants not only in group format but also individually so that parents feel secure to share their opinions freely

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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