

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

“We Hardly Ever Talk About It”: Emotional Responsive Attunement in Couples After a Child's Death

Hooghe, A., Rosenbaltt, P. C. , & Rober, P. (2017). “We hardly ever talk about it”: Emotional responsive attunement in couples after a child's death. *Family Process*, doi:10.1111/famp.12274

SUMMARY: Data from 26 Dutch-speaking couple and individual interviews are used to explore the meaning of not talking about the grief experience with a partner following the death of a child to cancer. Four main themes emerged that highlight the importance of talking and not talking as a way of coping with the loss of a child among grieving parents.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Parents discussed how words failed to capture their grief experiences and seemed pointless because they could not bring their child back.
- Not talking about their grief with their partners allowed them to distance themselves from the pain of losing a child.
- Grief was considered a personal, intimate, and private process, and not talking was used as a way to respect their spouse's own grieving process.
- Parents who chose not to participate in the current study listed reasons for nonparticipation that corresponded with the results from the study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Could help military families identify appropriate resources to support them through the grieving process
- Facilitate support groups for Service members and their spouses who have lost a child to increase kinship among those families

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide support services for couples and individual military parents dealing with the loss of a child
- Disseminate information about the importance of talking and not talking with a partner to manage grief to military parents who have lost a child

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Provide support for programs and services that offer grieving military parents and their families resources and information about the grief process
- Encourage collaboration among DoD and community-based organizations to provide grieving families with appropriate resources and services

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Dutch couples who lost a child to cancer between 2003 and 2007 at the University Hospital in Leuven, Belgium, were contacted via mail and phone to participate in face-to-face interviews regarding their grief process.
- Most couples were interviewed twice (one couple completed a third interview); 16 interviews included both parents, three interviews included the mother only, and one interview included the father only.
- Interviews occurred between May 2009 and December 2011.

PARTICIPANTS

- Twenty-six parents between the ages of 36-53 years participated (12 fathers and 14 mothers) in the study.
- The deceased children died of cancer and were between the ages of 6 months to 18 years.
- Participants were culturally Flemish; no other racial or ethnic demographic were provided.

LIMITATIONS

- Data was analyzed at interview level and therefore, does not capture gender differences in the grieving process for parents who lost a child.
- Only parents with children who died of cancer were included in the study; results may not capture the grief experience of parents who lost a child in a different manner (i.e., car accident).
- Conducting the interviews with the couple, as opposed to conducting individual interviews, may have influenced how spouses chose to talk about their grief experience.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore the grief process of military parents to better understand the unique challenges a grieving parent may face within the military context
- Examine gender differences among grieving parents and explore if the process of not talking about the grief experience differs among other family types (i.e., same sex parents)
- Explore how the interview type (i.e., couples versus individual) influences the results

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>