



The Impact of Coping Styles on Perceptions of Grief

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Introduction

Human and pet bereavement tend to have contrasting views as pet loss has yet to be acknowledged and has caused some pet owners to grieve in isolation. This is commonly called disenfranchised grief. Part of this manifests from the fact that “grief for a pet is considered inappropriate, since pets can be ‘replaced’” (Dye, 2003, p. 286). These two types of bereavement can, in turn, involve a variety of symptoms such as loneliness, hope, and in most cases prolonged grief disorder. “In prolonged grief disorder, the bereaved individual may experience intense longings for the deceased or preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased, or in children and adolescents, with the circumstances around death” (American Psychological Association, 2021). This also can become comorbid with other mental health concerns which can exacerbate things even further.

Current Project

Given the substantial impact of loss as well as potential differences in perceptions of grief for different types of losses, the current study sought out to examine how perceptions of grief are impacted by the type of loss and coping style.

Method

Participants

The sample included 115 participants and was primarily female (55.7%; 29.6% male; 14.8% non-binary) and White/Caucasian (40.0%; Black/African American 38.3%; Asian 13.0%; Hispanic/Latinx 5.2%; 1.7% identifying as “Other”; 0.9% Pacific Islander); with an average age of 31.5.

Materials/Procedure

After consenting to participate, participants viewed an online survey which included one of four versions of a vignette depicting someone dealing with either loss of a

Method (cont).

pet or human family member and engaging in either healthy or unhealthy coping.

Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the four vignette versions and then answer questions about the magnitude of the person’s grief, appropriateness of the reaction to the loss, and perception of coping style.

Results

The overarching purpose of the current project was to examine the effects of type of loss and coping style on perceptions of grief, specifically the dependent variables examined include participants’ perceptions of the magnitude of grief, appropriateness of reaction to the loss, and health of coping style. To assess these impacts, a 2 x 2 factorial ANOVA was used to examine main effects of as well as interaction between type of loss (human vs. pet) and coping style (healthy vs. unhealthy).

Magnitude of Grief

The analysis of the interaction between type of loss and coping style on perceptions of magnitude of grief revealed that there was not a statistically significant interaction between of type of loss and coping style ($F(3, 114) 38.651, p = .849$) on perceived magnitude of grief. Main effects analysis showed that type of loss did not have a statistically significant effect on perception of magnitude of grief ($p = .115$). Main effects analysis showed that coping style did have a statistically significant effect on perception of magnitude of grief ($p < .001$) such that participants perceived an unhealthy coping style to be indicative of higher magnitudes of grief compared to a healthy coping style.

Appropriateness of Reaction

The analysis of the interaction between type of loss and coping style on perceptions of magnitude of grief revealed that there was not a statistically significant interaction between of type of loss and coping style ($F(3, 114) 28.287, p = .246$) on appropriateness of reaction to loss. Main effects analysis showed that type of loss did not have a statistically significant effect on perception of appropriateness of reaction to the loss ($p = .275$). Main effects analysis showed that coping style did have a statistically significant effect on perception of appropriateness of reaction to the loss

Results (cont).

($p < .001$) such that participants perceived an unhealthy coping style to be indicative of less appropriate reactions to loss compared to a healthy coping style.

Perception of Health of Coping Style

The analysis of the interaction between type of loss and coping style on perceptions of magnitude of grief revealed that there was not a statistically significant interaction between of type of loss and coping style ($F(3, 114) 129.749, p = .609$) on perception of health of coping style. Main effects analysis showed that type of loss did not have a statistically significant effect on perception of health of coping style ($p = .867$). Main effects analysis showed that coping style did have a statistically significant effect on perception of health of coping style ($p < .001$) such that participants perceived an unhealthy coping style to be indicative of more unhealthy coping compared to a healthy coping style.

Discussion

Results suggest that the type of loss did not have a statistically significant effect on perception of magnitude of grief. Data from the current study do not support the hypothesis that there would be significant differences in perception of grief as a function of type of loss. In contrast, participants were able to recognize healthy vs. unhealthy coping styles.

Future Research

Interviewing participants about their own loss and coping styles may allow the opportunity to more holistically examine how coping styles impact perceptions of grief over time.

References

American Psychiatric Association (2021, September 22). Tips for understanding prolonged grief disorder. *American Psychiatric Association*. <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/apa-offers-tips-for-understanding-prolonged-grief-disorder>

Dye, L. W., & Wrobel, L. A. T. (2003). Grieving pet death: Normative, gender, and attachment issues. *Journal of Death and Dying, 47*(4) 385-393. <https://doi.org/10.2190/QYV5-LLJ1-T043-U0F9>