

## SPOUSAL BEREAVEMENT AMONG WOMEN IN TÜRKİYE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF POST-LOSS AND COPING EXPERIENCES

Nur Başer Baykal, & Ahmet Giden

*Department of Psychology, Bartın University (Turkey)*

### Abstract

**Introduction:** The loss of a spouse is considered one of the most distressing life events, linked to various psychological, social, and physical challenges. As such, it represents a significant stressor that may result in conditions such as depression and prolonged or complicated grief. This study aims to explore the emotional and practical experiences of spousal bereavement among women in Türkiye, focusing on how they navigate grief and cope with these challenges. **Method:** This study investigated the mourning process of eight women (age range 42-59) living in Türkiye using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The inclusion criterion is having lost a spouse at least six months ago. The data gathered from the interviews were analyzed by using phenomenological analysis in MAXQDA 22. **Results:** Two main themes emerged: post-loss experiences and coping experiences. The theme of post-loss experiences consists of two sub-themes: intense emotions and increased responsibility. Women expressed feelings of emptiness and pain after the loss of their spouse, as well as shock and paralysis. Some of them stated that they could not remember the first moments they experienced due to the shock. Participants also mentioned depressive symptoms such as hopelessness about the future, feeling disconnected from friends and family, and loss of a sense of pleasure. In addition, women talked about their increased responsibilities after the loss. Participants were worried about having to take on all the responsibilities, especially those related to the house and children, and it was difficult for them to think about these responsibilities along with the pain they experienced after losing their husbands. Another emerging theme was coping experiences, consisting of three sub-themes: receiving psychological support, social support, and religious beliefs and rituals. Some participants mentioned that psychotherapy and psychiatric medication support were beneficial for them. Others did not receive psychotherapy or medication support, resorted to religious coping mechanisms during their mourning process, and shared their pain with friends and family. Participants reported a sense of relaxation and spiritual peace with the small communities they formed with their friends and family members and the religious rituals they performed there. **Conclusion:** The findings provide insights for mental health professionals working with bereaved individuals, highlighting the role of both emotional and practical support in the grieving process.

**Keywords:** *Grief, bereaved women, bereavement, loss, meaning, qualitative study.*

---

### 1. Introduction

The death of a spouse is universally acknowledged as one of the most challenging life events, with profound and far-reaching consequences for the bereaved. Spousal loss often triggers a range of psychological, social, and physical difficulties that may persist for months or even years (Holm et al., 2019). The grief process is marked by intense emotions, including sadness, anger, and guilt, as well as a sense of emptiness and disconnection from others. These experiences are compounded by practical challenges, such as managing household responsibilities and adjusting to life without a partner, which may further exacerbate the stress of bereavement (Seiler et al., 2020). For women, particularly in cultural contexts where traditional gender roles prevail, the loss of a spouse can bring unique challenges that require closer examination.

Grief is a complex and multidimensional process that varies significantly across individuals and cultures. While some individuals adapt to their loss over time, others may develop prolonged or complicated grief characterized by persistent distress and an inability to return to daily functioning (Sekowsk and Prigerson, 2022). Cultural norms, social expectations, and individual coping mechanisms are critical in shaping the grieving process. In Türkiye, a society that blends traditional and modern elements, bereavement practices are deeply influenced by cultural and religious values (Çaksen, 2024; Kaya et al., 2024; Ümmühan et al., 2022). Rituals, social support networks, and spiritual beliefs often

provide solace and a sense of continuity for the bereaved. However, these same cultural expectations can also pressure individuals to conform to specific grieving behaviors, potentially hindering personal expression and healing (Tanacioğlu ve Erdur, 2022).

The psychological impact of spousal loss has been widely studied in Western contexts, where individualistic cultural norms often emphasize personal autonomy, financial wellbeing in coping with grief (Bonanno et al., 2004; Chami & Pooley, 2023). In contrast, collectivist cultures like Türkiye emphasize interconnectedness and communal support, which may shape the grieving process differently (Jasmita et al., 2024; Turkish women may face unique challenges due to societal expectations surrounding widowhood (Ergün-Başak, 2024). They are often expected to prioritize family responsibilities and maintain composure in public, even while experiencing profound personal pain (Gedik, 2018). Understanding these cultural nuances is essential for providing effective psychological support to bereaved individuals in Türkiye.

Research on bereavement has highlighted the importance of various coping mechanisms, including psychological interventions, social support, and spiritual practices (Rogalla, 2020; Sullivan & Infurna, 2020; Purrington, 2023). Studies have shown that psychotherapy and counseling can help individuals process their grief, develop adaptive coping strategies, and rebuild their sense of purpose (Asgari et al., 2023; Zuelke et al., 2021; Den Elzen et al., 2024). Social support, whether from family, friends, or community networks, also plays a crucial role in alleviating feelings of isolation and promoting emotional well-being (Gai et al., 2024; Scott et al., 2020). Additionally, religious and spiritual practices often serve as vital coping resources, offering comfort and a sense of meaning in the face of loss (Martins et al., 2024; Park & Halifax, 2021). In Türkiye, Islamic traditions and rituals provide a framework for mourning and remembrance, which can help bereaved individuals navigate their grief journey. Despite the wealth of research on grief and bereavement, there is a relative paucity of studies focusing specifically on the experiences of bereaved women in Türkiye. Existing literature often overlooks the interplay between cultural, social, and personal factors in shaping the mourning process (Aksoz et al., 2018; Ergün-Başak, 2024). This gap highlights the need for qualitative research that captures the lived experiences of bereaved women, shedding light on how they navigate the emotional and practical challenges of spousal loss.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the post-loss and coping experiences of bereaved women in Türkiye. Using a phenomenological approach, the research seeks to uncover the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of grief, providing a comprehensive understanding of how women adapt to life after the loss of a spouse. The findings will contribute to the growing body of literature on bereavement and inform culturally sensitive interventions for mental health professionals working with bereaved individuals. By examining the unique experiences of Turkish women, this study also aims to highlight the broader implications of cultural context in shaping the grieving process.

## **2. Research design and method**

In this study, a descriptive phenomenological design, a widely used qualitative approach, was adopted to explore the experiences of bereaved women who have lost their spouses. This design enables a detailed examination of participants' lived experiences, allowing the development of an in-depth understanding of the phenomena by analyzing their expressions (Forrester, 2010; Patton, 2014).

Eight participants were selected using purposeful sampling to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. These criteria included (1) being a woman aged between 30 and 60, (2) having lost their spouse at least two years prior to the study, and (3) possessing sufficient cognitive capacity to comprehend and answer the interview questions. Eight women participated in the study, with a mean age of 48.5 years. All participants resided in Türkiye and provided informed consent to participate in the study. The study's primary aim was to understand the lived experiences and coping mechanisms of women navigating spousal loss. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the information was analyzed using phenomenological analysis with MAXQDA 22 software. This approach provided insights into both the emotional and practical challenges faced by the participants and highlighted their adaptive strategies for coping with grief.

### **2.1. Data collection and analysis**

The semi-structured interview questions were the main data collection tool in this study. Interview questions, which the authors created, were checked by two clinical psychologists, and the final version of questions was asked to participants. The interviews were carried out online as a Zoom meeting. The interviews were recorded for transcription and lasted about 20 minutes. Some example questions were: "Can you describe the process of losing your spouse?; If you shared your experiences with your

family after your loss, how would you describe this? How did it make you feel?; What do you think is the role of religious beliefs in the grieving process?”.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim were fed into the MAXQDA20 computer program to complete the data analysis. Each transcript was read multiple times, and recurrent themes were defined. Initial codes were identified by the author, and then an inquirer checked the codes and discussed the themes with the author (Patton, 2014). Until saturation was achieved, the process of coding themes was continued. In order to ensure rigor, the author wrote reflexive notes and completed an audit trail (Forrester, 2010).

### 3. Results

Two main themes emerged: post-loss experiences and coping experiences. The theme of post-loss experiences consist of two sub-themes: intense emotions and increased responsibility.

Women expressed feelings of emptiness and pain after the loss of their spouse, as well as shock and paralysis. Some of them stated that they could not remember the first moments they experienced due to the shock. Some quotations from participants are:

*Participant 4 (P4): "I feel like I'm bursting inside like I'm going to go crazy. There's nothing outwardly wrong, but inside, there's anxiety and stress. That stress is unbearable. It's so painful, like knives stabbing your heart over and over every second. It was very painful. I thought I would never smile again, let alone laugh. It's such intense pain like your soul is being crushed."*

*Participant 1(P1): "I cried all night when he first passed away. I would cry, and then suddenly remember that he was gone, and it would jolt me—it's like a void."*

In addition to intense emotions, participants mentioned the increased responsibilities they faced after their loss. They expressed that the shared duties and tasks they once carried out with their spouses were now solely their responsibility. This included the added burden of parenting their children alone. Participants shared concerns about their children and noted that thinking about these responsibilities, coupled with the pain of their loss, was particularly challenging for them.

*Participant 3: "Along with the loss, you also take on the responsibilities you once shared, like caring for the children or anyone else involved."*

*Participant 5: "Even if I was worried, I didn't have financial concerns like whether the kids would get into university or if I could afford to send them to tutoring. I used to think, 'My husband will handle it.' I didn't have such worries. But after the loss, the father's role fell to changed. I work so much now. Life is different."*

Another emerging theme was coping experiences, consisting of three sub-themes: receiving psychological support, social support, and religious beliefs and rituals.

Some participants mentioned that psychotherapy and psychiatric medication support were beneficial for them. Those who underwent psychotherapy shared that this support helped them navigate the grieving process in a healthier manner. Participants who received psychiatric and medication support mentioned that the medication made them feel happier and enabled them to view life more positively. However, some participants experienced difficulties in finding the right medication for themselves, had to switch medications, and struggled with emotional regulation during this process.

*Participant 4: "I started, it didn't suit me, I didn't quit but switched. I started again, it didn't suit me, so I stopped and restarted. Then, I found more comfortable medications. Of course, I felt better. I'm still using them."*

*Participant 7: "After starting medication, I got better. I became calmer and happier with the medications. I started treating those around me better. I forgot how to cry. Even though my heart was bleeding inside, I smiled at everyone around me. It made me look at life more positively. That's why the support was beneficial."*

*Participant 2: "I personally received psychiatric and psychological support, and I made sure my children did too. The three of us underwent EMDR therapy — me and my two daughters. After the therapy with our psychologist, we accepted this trauma and started returning to a more routine life. I think I acted consciously in this regard."*

Others did not receive psychotherapy or medication support, resorted to religious coping mechanisms during their mourning process, and shared their pain with friends and family. Participants reported a sense of relaxation and spiritual peace with the small communities they formed with their friends and family members and the religious rituals they performed there.

*Participant 2: "I believe religious beliefs have a significant impact. Accepting death is difficult. Let me put it that way. In such times, faith becomes much more important. You want to believe in something and hold on to something. Knowing that you will reunite with them someday and see them again is important. That's why you cling to religion, to your faith."*

*Participant 7: "I have 3-4 close friends. Two of them lost their spouses before I did. They never left me alone. They were very close family friends and visited me often, and sharing with them made me feel better. Even now, they are always there for me. Day or night, if I have a problem, they are my safety net, my second door to turn to. That's why having support is essential."*

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of spousal bereavement among women in Türkiye, underscoring the interplay between emotional and practical challenges and the role of cultural and social dynamics in shaping the grieving process. This discussion contextualizes the results within existing literature and highlights their implications for mental health professionals and bereavement interventions.

Consistent with prior research, the participants in this study reported intense emotional distress following the loss of their spouse, including feelings of emptiness, pain, and hopelessness (Holm et al., 2019; Sekowski & Prigerson, 2022). These findings align with Western studies on grief but reveal unique cultural nuances specific to Türkiye. In collectivist societies, such as Türkiye, cultural norms often emphasize stoicism and familial responsibility, which may inadvertently suppress individual expressions of grief (Ergün-Başak, 2024). Participants' experiences of shock and paralysis, as well as the loss of pleasure in daily activities, reflect the profound psychological toll of spousal loss. However, societal expectations to prioritize family and maintain composure in public can exacerbate this burden, complicating the mourning process and potentially hindering emotional healing (Gedik, 2018).

Participants highlighted their practical difficulties, including taking on sole responsibility for household and child-rearing duties. These findings resonate with existing studies that document the additional stressors bereaved women encounter when they assume roles previously shared with their spouses (Seiler et al., 2020). In Türkiye, where traditional gender roles often assign caregiving and household management to women, the loss of a spouse places an immense burden on widows. This increased responsibility, coupled with the emotional strain of bereavement, underscores the need for targeted support systems that address both psychological and practical challenges.

The coping strategies identified in this study—psychological support, social support, and religious rituals—highlight the diverse ways in which women navigate their grief. While some participants benefited from psychotherapy and psychiatric medication, others relied on social networks and religious practices. These findings align with research emphasizing the significance of social and spiritual resources in collectivist cultures (Jasmita et al., 2024; Park & Halifax, 2021). The role of religion appears to provide a dual benefit: fostering a sense of continuity through rituals and offering spiritual solace. Participants' reports of finding comfort in small, supportive communities and religious gatherings illustrate the importance of culturally sensitive interventions that leverage these existing social and spiritual structures.

Compared to studies conducted in individualistic cultures, where personal autonomy and professional interventions are often prioritized, this study's findings highlight the centrality of communal support and shared rituals in the grieving process in Türkiye (Bonanno et al., 2004; Chami & Pooley, 2023). While beneficial, reliance on family and community networks may also impose constraints on personal expression and hinder access to professional mental health resources. This dynamic underscores the need for a balanced approach integrating communal support with individualized care.

Mental health professionals working with bereaved women in Türkiye should adopt a culturally informed approach that acknowledges the dual importance of individual and collective coping mechanisms. Interventions should address grief's emotional and practical aspects, offering both therapeutic support and resources to manage increased responsibilities. Additionally, professionals should consider incorporating religious and cultural elements into therapeutic practices to enhance their relevance and effectiveness. For instance, facilitating support groups that blend psychological counseling with culturally resonant practices may provide a more holistic form of care.

This study's sample size and focus on women from a specific cultural context limit the generalizability of its findings. Future research could explore the experiences of bereaved men and individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds to provide a more comprehensive understanding of spousal bereavement. Longitudinal studies examining the evolution of grief over time would also offer valuable insights into the dynamic nature of the mourning process.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on bereavement by shedding light on the unique experiences of women in Türkiye. By emphasizing the interplay between emotional, practical, and cultural factors, this research highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and multifaceted approaches to supporting bereaved individuals. Ultimately, understanding these

experiences can inform more effective and compassionate interventions, helping women navigate the complexities of grief and rebuild their lives after the loss of a spouse.

## References

- Aksoz-Efe, I., Erdur-Baker, O., & Servaty-Seib, H. (2018). Death rituals, religious beliefs, and grief of Turkish women. *Death Studies*, 42(9), 579-592.
- Asgari, Z., Naghavi, A., & Abedi, M. R. (2023). Grief interventions: A qualitative review of systematic reviews. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 28(3), 235-251.
- Bonanno, G. A., Wortman, C. B., & Nesse, R. M. (2004). Prospective patterns of resilience and maladjustment during widowhood. *Psychology and Aging*, 19(2), 260-271.
- Chami, J. M., & Pooley, J. A. (2023). Widowed young: The role of stressors and protective factors for resilience in coping with spousal loss. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 88(2), 477-504.
- Çaksen, H. (2024). Beliefs, attitudes, and mourning rituals of Japanese and Turkish parents whose children died. *Progress in Health Sciences*, 14(2), 1-10.
- Den Elzen, K., Neimeyer, R., & Lengelle, R. (Eds.). (2024). *Living with Loss: From Grief to Wellbeing*. Taylor & Francis.
- Ergün-Başak, B. (2024). Surviving after the Death of a Spouse: A Phenomenological Study of Young and Low-Income Mothers in Turkey. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 00302228241257375.
- Forrester, M. (2010). *Doing qualitative research in psychology*. Sage.
- Gai, Y., Li, J., Long, M., Li, M., & Shi, K. (2024). The Reciprocal Relationship Between Social Support in Bereavement and Posttraumatic Growth—A Random Intercept Cross-Lagged Analysis. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 31(5), e3069.
- Gedik, E. (2018). Testing the honor: Divorced and widow women's experiences in Turkey. *The Journal of Academic Social Sciences*, 6(82), 314-337. <https://doi.org/10.16992/ASOS.14341>
- Holm, A. L., Severinsson, E., & Berland, A. K. (2019). The meaning of bereavement following spousal loss: A Qualitative study of the experiences of older adults. *Sage Open*, 9(4), 2158244019894273.
- Jasmita, R., Juliawati, D., & Harmalis, H. (2024). Stress, Family Support, Coping Strategies in Single Mother Bereaved by Spousal Death. *Psyche 165 Journal*, 248-254.
- Kaya, E., Barlas, Z., Barlas, F., Wilson, A., & Dönmezler, S. (2024). Bereavement during lockdown: the potential impact of COVID-19 restrictions on grief and post-traumatic stress disorder in a Turkish-Muslim population. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 1-14.
- Martins, H., Romeiro, J., Casaleiro, T., Vieira, M., & Caldeira, S. (2024). Insights on spirituality and bereavement: A systematic review of qualitative studies. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 33(5), 1593-1603.
- Park, C. L., & Halifax, R. J. (2021). Religion and spirituality in adjusting to bereavement: Grief as burden, grief as gift. In R. Neimeyer, D. Harris, H. Winokuer, & G. Thornton (Eds.), *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society* (pp. 355-363). Routledge.
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: integrating theory and practice*. SAGE.
- Purrington, J. (2023). Psychological Adjustment to spousal bereavement in older adults: A systematic review. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 88(1), 95-120.
- Rogalla, K. B. (2020). Anticipatory grief, proactive coping, social support, and growth: Exploring positive experiences of preparing for loss. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 81(1), 107-129.
- Scott, H. R., Pitman, A., Kozhuharova, P., & Lloyd-Evans, B. (2020). A systematic review of studies describing the influence of informal social support on psychological wellbeing in people bereaved by sudden or violent causes of death. *BMC Psychiatry*, 20, 1-20.
- Seiler, A., Von Känel, R., & Slavich, G. M. (2020). The psychobiology of bereavement and health: A conceptual review from the perspective of social signal transduction theory of depression. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 11, 565239.
- Sekowski, M., & Prigerson, H. G. (2022). Associations between symptoms of prolonged grief disorder and depression and suicidal ideation. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(4), 1211-1218.
- Sullivan, C., & Infurna, F. J. (2020). The multidimensional nature of social support and engagement in contributing to adjustment following spousal loss. *Aging & Mental Health*, 24(6), 857-869.
- Tanacioğlu-Aydın, B., & Erdur-Baker, Ö. (2022). Pregnancy loss experiences of couples in a phenomenological study: Gender differences within the Turkish sociocultural context. *Death Studies*, 46(9), 2237-2246.
- Ümmühan, A., Gül, E., & Behice, E. (2022). Religious rituals performed by muslim palliative caregivers in Turkey during the grieving process: An exploratory study. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 61(6), 4352-4365.
- Zuelke, A. E., Lupp, M., Löbner, M., Pabst, A., Schlapke, C., Stein, J., & Riedel-Heller, S. G. (2021). Effectiveness and feasibility of internet-based interventions for grief after bereavement: systematic review and meta-analysis. *JMIR Mental Health*, 8(12), e29661.