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## Hidden Trauma, Quiet Drama: The Prominence and Consequence of Complicated Grief Among College Students

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# Hidden Trauma, Quiet Drama: The Prominence and Consequence of Complicated Grief Among College Students

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*Previous studies suggest the loss of a loved one is a common experience among college students. This paper draws from 2 independent but complementary studies to (a) update statistics regarding the scale of student grieving, (b) characterize the short and long term consequences of loss among college students, and (c) identify factors that deter grieving students from seeking professional assistance at campus counseling centers. The paper concludes with suggestions for ways in which institutions can help affected students stay on track to college success.*

When the death of a college student makes national news, it comes as no surprise that an entire campus is affected by the loss. Institutions respond in a variety of ways, canceling classes, hosting candlelight vigils, or hiring additional counselors to help students who may feel the residual effects of the loss. The hazing death of a Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University band member and the murder of the University of North Carolina student body president reveal just how impactful loss can be in the eyes of an institution (Balona, 2012; "Police call UNC," 2008). Still, such headline-grabbing incidents are infrequent on most college campuses.

Far more common are instances when individual students must cope with the death of someone who is not directly affiliated with the institution. Studies led by David Balk

(Balk, 1997, 2008; Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010) have suggested that between 22% and 30% of college undergraduates "are in the first 12 months of grieving the death of a family member or friend" (Balk, 2008, p. 5) and that 25% to 48% have lost a loved one within the past 2 years. Results of a now-dated multi-institution study by LaGrand (1981) found that 28.8% of surveyed students described their "most recent major loss" as the "death of a loved one or sudden death" (p. 237). Whatever the precise figures, the available literature suggests that a nontrivial number of students deal with loss while in college.

For most of them the grieving process, though difficult, is temporary and will resolve itself within 6 months or a year (Balk, 2008). Yet some affected students remain in "a chronic state of mourning" (Schnider, Elhai, & Gray, 2007, pp. 344–345) in which they experience symptoms such as yearning for the deceased, emotional numbness, and agitation, a condition known as complicated grief (CG). For 10% to 15% of bereaved persons, particularly those with concurrent risk factors (e.g., other recent losses; Neimeyer & Burke, 2013), complicated grief can result in long-term anxiety, depression, and cardiovascular problems (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008) that can undermine a student's personal development and academic success (Balk, 2008).

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Thus, although institutions cannot prevent students from experiencing loss, colleges and universities have a considerable interest in ensuring that affected students receive appropriate assistance and stay on track to college success. Researchers have suggested that many grieving students would benefit from counseling or other institutional interventions (e.g., Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). For college students, such interventions would typically be administered through an institution's psychological counseling/service center, though some institutions have begun outsourcing services or merging counseling centers with other wellness services on campus (American College Health Association, 2010; Gallagher, 2012; Gragreen, 2012a, 2012b). Yet only a small fragment of the student population actually seeks on-campus psychological support services (Gallagher, 2012). Many barriers are thought to contribute to this limited prevalence of professional help-seeking in college students; however, it is the stigma associated with psychological help-seeking that is most often referenced in the literature (e.g., AEGisdóttir, O'Heron, Hartong, Haynes, & Linville, 2011). In response, more than 64% of campus counseling centers responding to the 2012 Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Survey (Mistler, Reetz, Krylowicz, & Barr, 2012) have recently conducted outreach in an effort to reduce the presence of stigma.

Nonetheless, grieving students often turn to their classmates, roommates, and friends in search of support (Balk, 1997). These nongrieving peers, however, often lack the knowledge or skills required to comfort a grieving friend, and many feel keenly aware of the risks in navigating tumultuous psychological territory (Tedrck Parikh & Servaty-Seib, 2013). The risks for both parties are particularly severe at the present, as these acute experiences with death occur on top

of the already high and increasing levels of anxiety, depression, and other psychological complications among the current generation of college students (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton, 2003; Twenge et al., 2010).

Collectively, the literature offers limited evidence suggesting that a substantial portion of the college student population is at risk for personal or academic problems related to the prolonged grieving of a loved one's death but several barriers keep affected students from seeking assistance at campus counseling centers. The current article presents evidence, from two independent but complementary studies, that advances this body of literature in three important ways. First, in Study 1, the scale of student grieving is updated and clarified by using data from a multi-institutional, longitudinal survey of 3,419 racially diverse college students to estimate the frequency of student grieving for various losses and at various times in college. Study 1 also allows a comparison of psychological service usage rates by grieving and nongrieving students. Study 2 uses data from a single institution (that did not participate in Study 1) to examine the short- and long-term consequences of loss among college students and identifies deterrents among affected students who choose not to seek assistance. In the discussion section, drawing upon clues from both studies, we suggest ways in which traditional service-awareness campaigns—often employed to encourage student use of campus counseling centers—could be tweaked to improve support for grieving students without placing significant new burdens on campus counseling centers.

## STUDY 1

### Methods

These data come from the public-use data files of the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen

TABLE 1.  
Student Reports of a Death Among Family or Friends Within the Last Year

	Sophomore Year	Junior Year	Senior Year	Any Death Since End of First Year	Multiple Deaths Since End of First Year
Students Surveyed	3,419	3,153	2,470	2,470	2,470
Total Affected: <i>n</i> (%)	1,252 (36.6)	1,041 (33.0)	759 (30.7)	1,480 (59.9)	562 (22.8)
Loss in Immediate Family	181 (5.3)	158 (5.0)	143 (5.8)		
Loss in Extended Family	872 (25.5)	778 (24.7)	564 (22.8)		
Loss of Friend	436 (12.8)	295 (9.4)	180 (7.3)		

*Note.* Total of students affected may not equal sum of other responses, as some students experienced more than one loss in a particular year. For Sophomore Year the word “close” was omitted from question about friends.

(NLSF; for details, see <http://nlsf.princeton.edu>). Starting in 1999, NLSF researchers interviewed a stratified random sample of Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian students from 28 competitive-admission, 4-year colleges and universities over a 4-year period. More than 75% of initial participants were interviewed all 4 years. Results from students’ second, third, and fourth years are presented here. During each wave of interviews, NLSF researchers asked participating students if, in the last year, anyone among the students’ “immediate family,” “extended family,” or “close friends” had died. In students’ sophomore year, the word “close” was omitted in regard to the death of a friend. Results presented here indicate the proportion of students who reported such a death in the year preceding each wave of data collection. In addition, during their sophomore year, students were also asked whether they saw a psychological counselor at least once.

## Results

In each year, roughly one third of the participating students reported experiencing at least one loss among their families or friends (see Table 1). More than 1 in 20 students lost

an immediate family member; about 1 in 4 had a loss in their extended family; roughly 1 in 10 lost a friend. Approximately 60% of interviewed seniors had lost at least one family member or friend since the end of their first year in college, and nearly 1 in 4 (22.8%) reported experiencing multiple losses among family and friends. During their sophomore years, students reported the frequency with which they sought counseling services for psychological issues, with 84.6% of responding students indicating that they never visited a counselor. Of those who lost a friend or family member during the previous year, 17.7% reported visiting a counselor at least once; in comparison, only 14.4% of the students who did not experience a loss reported visiting a counselor ( $\chi^2 = 6.5, p \leq 0.05$ ).

## STUDY 2 Methods

The data for this study are drawn from an online survey of 117 college students who had recently experienced a loss, recruited through an online subject pool at a medium-sized, public, Southeastern 4-year institution. Although the sample is disproportionately

first-year and female, the sample was closely representative of the campus as a whole in terms of race, where more than 80% of the students identify as Caucasian. Analyses presented here are derived from students' self-reports about their grieving process and any barriers to seeking campus psychological counseling. Students were also assigned a score from 0 (*worst*) to 7 (*best*) based on how well they were able to correctly identify each of 7 services (4 real and 3 fictional services) potentially offered by the campus counseling center.

## Results

Although 25 (21.4%) grieving students reported "long-term" effects within the academic, social, and physical/psychological spheres of their lives (see Figure 1), only 4 students reported utilizing psychological services on campus. Over half of bereaved students ( $n = 61$ ; 52.1%) reported having one or more barriers to utilizing the services offered at the counseling center. Roughly one quarter of students reported not knowing that services were available ( $n = 29$ ; 24.8%). Moreover, fewer than half (41%) of those students who experienced a loss were able to correctly identify 5 or more of the 7 services. Other commonly referenced barriers included not having enough time ( $n = 26$ ; 22.2%), not

thinking the services would be helpful ( $n = 21$ ; 17.9%), and not knowing how to access the services ( $n = 18$ ; 15.4%). Twenty-five students (21.4%) wrote in an "other" barrier, all of which were variants of students' belief that they did not need counseling. Only 6 students (5.1%) reported that they avoided the services because they didn't want their peers to think less of the student seeking treatment, though we suspect social desirability may have played a larger role than is reflected in these numbers.

## DISCUSSION

### Confirmation of Problems

Our results from Study 1 suggest the number of grieving students may be slightly higher than previously estimated by Balk (2008) and Hardison, Neimeyer, and Lichstein (2005), with anywhere from 30% to 36% reporting the loss of a friend or family member in the previous year; by the end of their collegiate career, nearly 60% of students experienced at least one such loss since beginning college. These loss experiences occur on top of already high levels of psychological distress reported by college students (Benton et al., 2003; Twenge et al., 2010).

Perhaps it is this combination of acute grieving and ongoing psychological distress that caused long-term, negative consequences

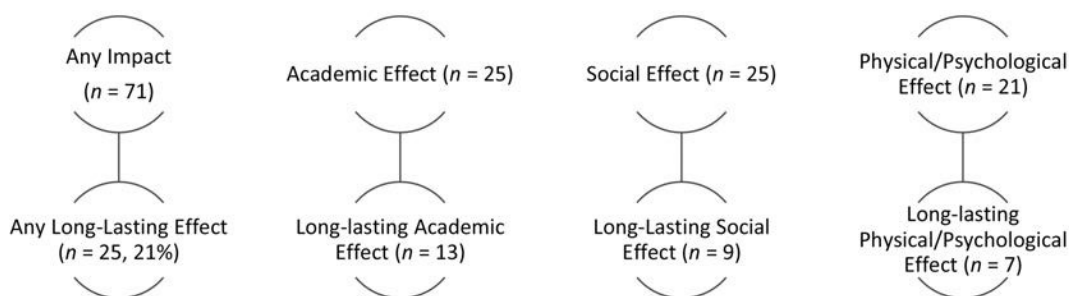


FIGURE 1. Student Reports of Impact of Loss

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate the raw number of participants who indicated such an effect.

for a disproportionately high number of students ( $n = 25$ ; 21%) in Study 2, compared to the 10%–15% who experience complicated grieving in the general population (Schnider et al., 2007). But of the 25 students who reported long-term complications—those who are most in need of and most likely to benefit from professional counseling (Wittouck et al., 2011)—only 4 (16%) actually sought assistance from the campus counseling center. Our results suggest that it is students' lack of awareness, both of their own needs and the counseling center's services, that keeps them from seeking assistance.

### Hints About Potential Solutions

Traditional outreach efforts designed to increase awareness of available services (Archer & Cooper, 1998) and to overcome student concerns about social stigma associated with their use (Mistler et al., 2012) are likely to have only limited effect. Indeed, efforts to blanket the campus with advertisements promoting campus-based psychological services may actually do more harm than good. A recent meta-analysis (Wittouck et al., 2011) concluded that psychological interventions were typically effective only for people whose grieving was prolonged and problematic. For those simply enduring the normal grieving process, such interventions showed no statistically significant immediate effects and subsequently “evolve[d] to a rather negative, though also non-significant effect at follow-up” (Wittouck et al., p. 74). At a time when administrators at campus counseling centers are feeling stretched (Gallagher, 2012; Mistler et al., 2012) in dealing with the increase in the number and severity of students' psychological problems (Benton

et al., 2003), campus counselors can ill afford to sacrifice time, money, or attention to provide ineffective interventions to healthily grieving students.

Instead, such an outreach initiative could inform students that (a) most students are affected by a loved one's death at some point during college, perhaps even citing data from this and/or campus-specific studies, and that (b) the normal grieving process involves several phases, all of which include some degree of emotional turmoil. But (c) counseling center outreach programs should place special emphasis on helping students recognize the signs (in themselves and in others) of problematic or prolonged grieving—the type of grieving that may warrant counseling center intervention. Beyond such informational campaigns, we encourage colleges and universities to integrate mental health screening, support, and strategies throughout the institution. Some universities have developed systems involving faculty members as pseudo first-responders to assist students who will not seek help themselves (Mier, Boone, & Shropshire, 2009). Other schools may find it most efficient to add or revise modules in a first-year seminar or orientation session. Regardless of the method through which institutions choose to address this issue, it is vital that colleges and universities begin taking action (if they have not already) to ensure that their students affected by long-lasting grief receive the assistance they need to thrive both developmentally and academically.

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