

Social group participation as a coping strategy after the loss of an intimate partner: well-being in the second half of life

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INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

Losing a long-term intimate partner in the second half of life through separation, divorce or death is the biggest social and psychological stressor in adult life¹. Little is known about coping with these critical events². Literature shows how active participation in social groups can be beneficial for coping with critical life events, such as coping with severe brain injury, surviving cancer, or being HIV-positive (Jetten, Haslam & Haslam, 2012)³. Social groups then function as active resources that these vulnerable people use to maintain or regain their well-being. As resources, identifying with social groups and strong social networks offer a **buffer against the negative impact of change, illness, and stress**³. This theory of Jetten, Haslam & Haslam (2012) will be further explored in this study regarding people who experienced another type of critical life event; the loss of an intimate partner in the second half of life. The aim of this study is to **test the effect of identifying with- and participating in (important) social groups on subjective well-being after the loss of an intimate partner** and to compare the outcomes to a control group of married people who never experienced the loss of a longtime partner.

HYPOTHESES

What is the effect of active social group participation on subjective well-being?

Hypothesis A: Individuals who participate in one or more social groups will report a higher subjective well-being than individuals who don't participate in social groups.

Hypothesis B: Individuals who feel well integrated in the (important) groups they participate in will report a higher well-being than individuals who don't feel integrated.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

METHOD

Data

Vulnerability and Growth. Developmental dynamics and differential effects of the loss of an intimate partner in the second half of life (Hutchinson, Perrig-Chiello et al., 2012). The sample (N= 2761) consisted of 1107 divorced individuals aged 40-69, 569 widowed individuals aged 60-89 and 1085 married individuals aged 40-89.

MATERIALS

Group participation

We used the measures of the Exeter Identity Transitions Scales (EXITS)⁴ to measure the amount of social groups individuals participated in, as well as the level of importance of and – integration in the group(s).

Subjective well-being

To define subjective well-being we measured three different indicators of well-being:

- 1) Depression, measured with the CES Depression Scale
- 2) Current stress, measured with the Perceived Stress Scale.
- 3) Life satisfaction, measured with the Satisfaction of Life Scale

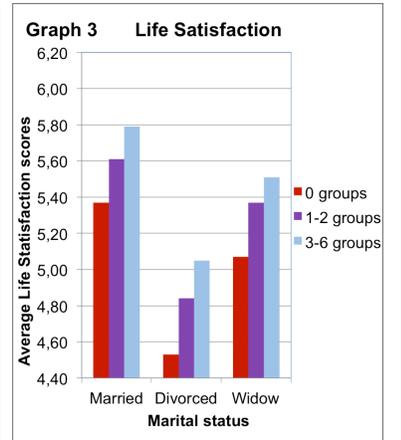
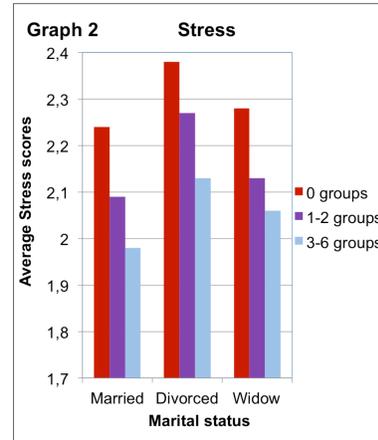
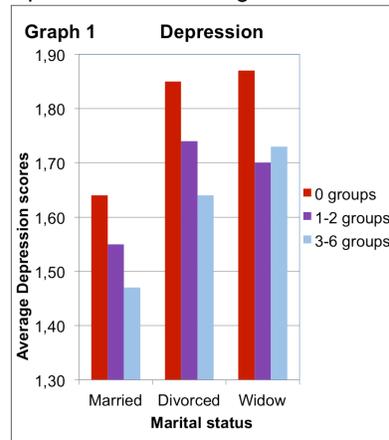
REFERENCES

- 1) Holmes, T.H. & Rahe, R.H. (1967). The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11, 213-218.
- 2) Hutchinson, S., Perrig-Chiello, P., Höpflinger, F., Morselli, D., Van Rhee, E., & Spini, D (in press). Vulnerability and Growth. Developmental dynamics and differential effects of the loss of an intimate partner in the second half of life. *NCCR-Working Report IP12*.
- 3) Jetten, J., Haslam, C., & Haslam, S., (2012). *The social cure: Identity, health and well-being*. New York, NY, Psychology Press; US.
- 4) Haslam, C., Holme, A., Haslam, S.A., Iyer, A., Jetten, J., Williams, W.H. (2008). Maintaining group memberships: social identity continuity predicts well-being after stroke. *Neuropsychological Rehabilitation*, 18, 671-91.

RESULTS

Hypothesis A: Results show that there is a significant difference between individuals who do participate in social groups compared to those individuals who don't, in all three measured dimensions of subjective well-being. Individuals who participate in social groups report lower levels of stress, $t(1782) = 6.01, p < .01$, lower levels of depression, $t(1661) = 6.08, p < .01$, and higher levels of life satisfaction, $t(1824) = -5.83, p < .01$ than individuals who don't participate in social groups.

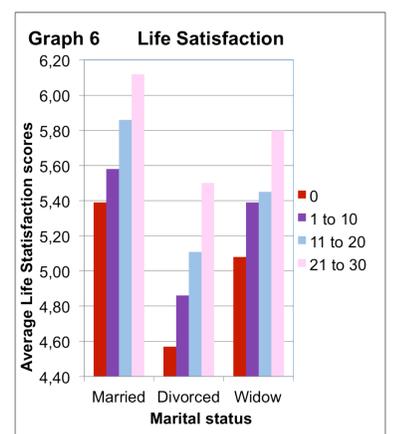
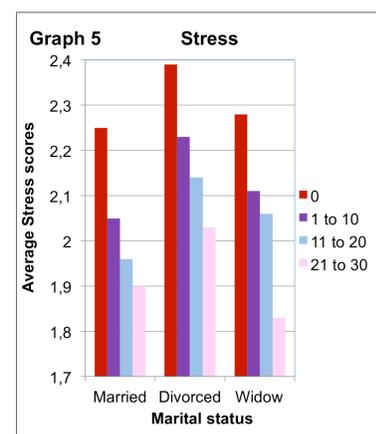
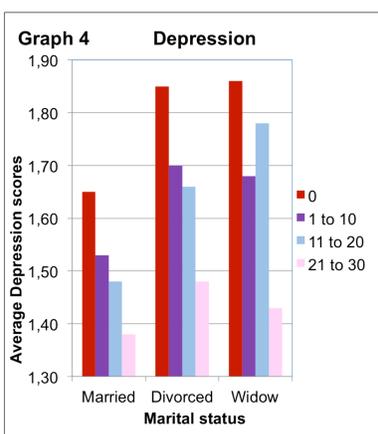
Graphs 1, 2 and 3 show a more specific picture on how group participation has an effect on subjective well-being. The effect of social group participation is visible in the married, divorced and widowed subsample where it's shown how people who participate in 3 to 6 social groups report the lowest levels of stress and depression and the highest levels of life satisfaction*.



*Differences between individuals who participate in social groups and individuals who don't participate in social groups are all significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis B: A first exploratory study on the influence of how well individuals feel integrated in the groups they participate in, shows that feeling integrated in groups that are important to you is beneficial for the subjective well-being.

Individual scores were calculated*. Graphs 4, 5 and 6 show the outcomes of the subjective well-being measurements for the different subsamples divided by the categorized individual scores. Tukey post-hoc comparisons show that individuals who don't participate in social groups report higher levels of depression and stress and lower levels of life satisfaction than all other individuals who so participate in social group activities, $p < .001$. Individuals who have the highest individual score (multiple groups that are important and in whom individuals feel integrated) report significantly lower levels of depression and stress, and higher levels of life satisfaction than individuals who have a low individual score (one or more groups that are not important and in whom the individual doesn't feel integrated). Differences are all significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).



*The difference with the previous analysis is that in this study the importance and integration play a role. Individuals who participate in e.g. 5 groups, but don't feel integrated in these groups received a lower individual score than participants who participated in e.g. 2 groups that were really important to them and where they felt integrated.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Results show that in line with research regarding various critical life events, active social group participation can help individuals to cope with the loss of an intimate partner. Married people overall report less depression and stress and more life satisfaction than individuals who experienced the loss of an intimate partner, the differences between individuals who lost a partner and do or don't participate in social groups is very clear. Individuals who participate in one or more social groups report a higher subjective well-being than individuals who don't participate in social groups (hypothesis A) and individuals who feel well integrated in the important groups they participate in report an even higher well-being than individuals who don't feel integrated (hypothesis B).