SUPPORTING BEREAVED UNDERGRADUATES DURING THEIR JOURNEYS THROUGH GRIEF

Fang-Yi Lin, RN, MS¹; Tzu-Ying Lee, RN, PhD¹; Hung-Ru Lin, RN, PhD¹; Jiin-Ru Rong, RN, PhD¹

¹Department of Nursing, School of Nursing, National Taipei University of Nursing and Health Sciences, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China.

Abstract

This article outlines strategies for university students dealing with bereavement. In the present study, survivors who had lost a classmate to suicide reported struggling with grief. The early adult developmental period during the transitional developmental stages is filled with uncertainty. Faculty members proposed an action plan to enable students to deliver mutual peer support, to increase awareness about bereavement, and to prevent suicide contagion among students on the campus. The results suggest that support from peers, faculty members, and professionals can have positive effects on grieving students in a school context. These findings can assist other existing crisis management teams working within schools in successfully accomplishing their work.

Keywords: suicide survivor, grief, bereaved students, early adult

Introduction

The death of a peer can be devastating to young survivors, who are naturally vulnerable. The developmental issues facing young survivors around the age of twenty may further complicate their grief. Hence, schools must quickly take action to respond to a crisis event and manage bereavement in the classroom. This raises important issues regarding the kind of knowledge and experiences which are necessary to provide guidance to bereaved students and their peers.

Background

The following case is a real-life experience of death among undergraduate students. Iris (a fictitious name) was a twenty-year-old young woman pursuing a Bachelor of Nursing Science degree at a two-year senior college. She committed suicide six months ago. I was her class teacher at that time. I will never forget the morning I received a phone call informing me that a student in my class had committed suicide. Iris committed suicide by jumping from the 10th floor of her dormitory. Prior to her death, she had always seemed distant and reserved. She had no history of mental illness, but a note was later found which showed that her life lacked joy. Iris and her classmates were in their last semester of nursing school. For many of the students, it was their first experience with death. Mourning a peer (a close friend, or even an acquaintance) can be a devastating experience for young people at this age. Schools have an important role to play in helping students to relieve their grief. Therefore, we must provide systematic outreach support to students affected by the suicide of a friend or peer.

Literature review

There are some theoretical reasons why the loss of a friend during the early adult period may generate difficulties. Even young people not directly connected with the deceased may still be affected. The following section provides a review of several authors’ empirical studies regarding such crisis events.

Grief and its complications in early adults

University students are generally experiencing transitions in their life cycle. According to the stages of development proposed by Erik Erickson (1975), early adulthood is the period of time ranging from ages 20 to 39 years old. Furthermore, the early adult developmental period is filled with rapidly changing situations. Hence, the youth survivors’ grief reactions could be more complicated (Fig1.). Balk (2001) reported youth may hesitate to express their feelings to adults as they are trying to become more...
independent. Thus, a healthy grieving process could be especially difficult for them. During the transition period experienced by youth in this age group, individuals are concerned with developing the ability to share intimacy, forming autonomous lives, and seeking to form intimate relationships. Normal development in this transitional period is characterized by dependable relationships with significant others. Social networks are important for the engagement and growth of such youth. Essentially, they are faced with forming a stable, focused identity regardless of their circumstances. One research study indicated that young survivors dealing with a friend’s suicide became more circumspect in relationships and reduced their circle of close friends (Bartik, Maple, Edwards, & Kiernan, 2013).

Young adults’ impacts and reactions to the suicide death of a peer

Students react to the suicide death of a classmate in different ways depending upon their personalities and cultural expectations. Sveen and Waley (2008) reported that suicide survivors’ show higher levels of rejection, shame, stigma, need for concealing the cause of death, and blaming than those who have been bereaved through other causes of death. Survivors of suicide deaths were often left with a feeling of abandonment. For late adolescence survivors, peers often become sources of support and comfort, serve as a secure base, and can even become sources of separation distress (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999). However, Joiner (2003) found the university students in this study talked less often about their private feelings to teachers despite the fact that they were given a definite signal that it was secure to do so. It is important for students to understand the emotions were normal reactions to a significant loss. Bereaved students often demonstrated acute grief reactions which led them to doubt that the outcomes they desire are within their personal control. Furthermore, such losses can weaken an individual's self-confidence and threaten their self-image.

Helping young people cope with grief in a school context

Youth suicide is an uncomfortable issue; furthermore, there is limited research which investigates the grief experiences in a school setting. Researchers have indicated that students need to know what common grieving entails and how to respond to people who ignore their grief. The schools should provide opportunities for the students to talk about their problems in order to help them understand their loss (Rask, Kaunonen, & Paunonen-Ilmonen, 2002). A caring school atmosphere which allows students to openly express their feelings and concerns will help enable them to understand that these are common feelings. It is also important for university students to maintain a sense of personal control and to believe that they can achieve the outcomes they want. Rowling and Holland (2000) emphasized that peers and adults in the school setting are becoming increasingly important for the older youth group; furthermore, peers in the school are significant sources of support for students. Recently, forms of peer interaction have emerged, including computer chat rooms, e-mail exchanges, and instant messaging (Roberts, 2000). A peer-support group provided a system of giving and receiving help founded on shared responsibility and mutual help (Barlow, Waegemakers Schiff, Chugh, Rawlinson, Hides, & Leith, 2010).

METHOD

The subjects of the study were students from the nursing department of one technical university in northern Taiwan. The aim of the study was to evaluate the action plan that to enable students to deliver mutual peer support, to increase awareness about bereavement, and to prevent suicide contagion among students on the campus. This study focused on participant observations collected over a semester period while faculty members regularly attended survivors’ group suicide support meetings. The first author (FangYi Lin) had the opportunity to participate in these support groups three times. After participating in these groups, the researcher immediately recorded observational data.

The research work diary (author’s observations from the three sessions) was triangulated with the school document of this event and the work of expert co-authors and teachers at the nursing school. All authors experienced the suicide loss of Iris, and thus the investigators cross-checked each other’s work to ensure that the observations were accurately recorded.

Result and Discussion

School-based response plans could minimize the negative effects and enhance the opportunities for positive accomplishments in the context of crises. The plan utilized in this study involves team building,
training, and long-term follow-up. We discussed the recovery tasks that were completed by most students, as well as some strategies that were used in facilitating the healing process.

Discovering what helps and hinders the grief process in the university

Coping with bereavement and loss of a classmate not only complicates a university student's ability to complete the early adult developmental tasks, it can also increase the risk of the student failing to graduate. The following discussion addresses the first days after a student’s suicide death, the students’ returning to school after the death, and facing the future.

The healing journey: the first days after a suicide death

Grief in response to loss exists within the peer networks, and thus the way the students were told about the suicide death by faculty members was vital in the management of the students’ grief. The way in which students first hear about the death can influence their reactions and capability to mourn the loss later. Previous studies have shown that after students experience a traumatic event, a quick professional response, which includes organizing and offering students support, will help alleviate the effects of such traumatic events (Leek Openshaw, 2011). Thus, teachers immediately notified the rest of the class via a gathering and provided obituary information. We did not assume nursing students had learned how to master painful experiences of death or that their nursing knowledge alone would protect them from negative emotions. Faculty members anticipated that when students heard the sad information, they would also require assistance in dealing with the feelings of loss for a classmate who had unexpectedly died. Hence, a lot of healing and sharing proceedings took place.

Faculty members decided to share this obituary information with Iris’ classmates as soon as possible. We wanted students to learn this information in an empathic, supportive atmosphere. Therefore, we invited two psychologists to join the meeting. Faculty members reminded students that they should not feel shame about expressing their thoughts. We also reminded students to avoid grieving alone and that school counselors were available.

Support for survivors is usually delivered by professionals; however, in recent times there has been a growing demand and role for peer-delivered services (Barlow, et al., 2010). A peer-support group was held for 2 hours each week during the semester. Students could express a range of emotions in an accepting atmosphere, including shock, disbelief, shame, fear, guilty, anger, and sorrow. Fortunately, we found that the students never mentioned they were influenced by social stigma. Most of the students were appreciative to have had a chance to talk about their feeling. A student said, “…..meeting all those other friends who have the same feeling…..I don’t feel alone any more.” A peer-support group can reduce students’ sense of loneliness and provide a safe forum to express their concerns. Furthermore, such groups can provide a sense of normality and an instill hope in students that they can organize their lives (Jordan, 2009). They wanted was someone to listen to them in an accepting and nonjudgmental way. Researchers have mentioned the desire of the bereaved to have the support of others with similar experiences (Sveen & Waley, 2008). To facilitate the discussion, we asked students some of the following questions: What is your major concern right now? What would help you feel safer? This dialogue allowed students to talk about their emotions and raise questions about grief. In this way, we developed a greater understanding of these youths’ assumptions and experiences related to death. It is also important to identify faculty members’ feelings about suicide. If there are no faculty members that can help bereaved students without judging them, it is important to arrange for other counselors to participate in these group sessions. Understanding students personally, respecting them, and talking with them are effective ways of advocating for their well-being.

A student described how shocked she was, saying “I was astonished…I need to feel free to turn to someone or my friends to discuss this event and share my feelings.” We found that some students struggled to make sense of the motives and frame of mind of the deceased. Some students even stated their belief that if she had received better care, Iris would still be alive today. Through her tears, a student observed that, “Iris appeared fatigued. She secretly had a crush on a boy…and was unhappy for the past few weeks. I didn’t do something I should have done to avoid the death. I feel remorse for doing nothing...” Most of the students were shocked by this sad news and burst into tears. They tried to search for an explanation. The most often-asked question was, “Why would Iris want to kill herself?” Iris’ close friends may be
especially at risk for problems in coping with the suicide death if they believe they are responsible for her suicide or did not care enough to save her.

Suicide prevention to address copy behaviors among students, also known as suicide contagion, was vital (Hoffmann, Myburgh, & Poggenpoel, 2010). It is important to recognize and accept the young people’s level of maturity. Helpers should remember that young people cannot control where, when, or how they will be affected by their grief. Helpers should keep in mind that young people may not be asking others to solve problems for them. Much of our efforts focused on preventing the onset of debilitating consequences by reaching at-risk students before their conditions became complex. Mead and MacNeil (2006) recommend increased utilization of peer support in the delivery of mental health services. We persuaded students that peer cross monitoring (including online chat) reinforces the best practices of coping with grief in each other and provides support during difficult moments. It is also important to handle this support in a private manner. In this case, ongoing, open dialogue provided support and clarified misperceptions. Consequently, the students participated in talking about their friend’s death, which helped make their grief more manageable.

Let’s live well: Returning to school after the suicide loss

Many survivors of suicide often suffer alone and in silence. The silence that surrounds them often complicates the healing that comes from being encouraged to mourn, creating memorial plans, etc. During this transition period, youth might turn to substance abuse in an attempt to overlook their loss. Fortunately, the nursing students realized that using alcohol or drugs would only make things worse.

Several planning meetings were held involving Iris’ classmates, the counseling center, the health center, faculty members, and the student affairs committees. The action plan aimed to help students by developing a system of self-care and mutual support. The crisis management team informed other instructors of this class what their students had just experienced. The crisis management team reminded these teachers to watch for classmates of the deceased who seemed confused, forgetful, insensible, inattentive, and disruptive. If teachers reported such problems, the school would need to get involved before it became a critical situation. The panel of psychologists and school counselors at the meeting offered faculty members advice about how to help the grieving students.

Cheung and Ho (2004) discussed the factors that contribute to the grief process, including personality and culture. Al-Sabwah and Abdel-Khalek (2006) found none of the students reported turning to religion to comfort them or explain their friend’s death. However, specific aspects of their religion, such as prayers, music, could help them deal with their grief (Shaller & Smith, 2002). Death is a taboo subject in Chinese culture. Some students were told to be strong by their parents. East Asian people are accustomed to suppressing emotions and thus they might be more hesitant to talk. One student said “There is folklore about suicide. It is taboo to talk about it, but it should be talked about.” Hence, students often pretended to be strong. As a result, Chinese people do not communicate openly about suicide (Jiang, Chou, & Tsai, 2006). A few students resisted talking about their concerns with professionals. Students were encouraged to participant in expressive activities, such as drawing, listening to music, and journaling in order to provide a medium for their healing. Faculty members have to identify those youth who suppressed unresolved grief, even when such students do their best to hide their feelings. Hence, two school psychologists used art therapy to help the students cope with their grief. Some students prefer communicating their emotions through creative art as opposed to talking about such emotions. They drew pictures of what made them sad and thus expressed feelings of grief. A student who drew a bomb explosion said “As I heard the sad news, I felt as if I was being swallowed by the darkness…” These activities encouraged the creation of visual art to understand how the non-verbal medium provides an outlet for the expression of thoughts and feelings. Students appreciated the art therapy. One student said, “…Painting allowed me to express my feelings and deal with my own problems about death.” In addition, we also have an on-line, social network that ties people together. Gilat and Shahar (2009) indicated that an online support group should be moderated by paraprofessionals who function as both process regulators and support providers. In addition, private therapists were available as resources if help was needed.

Each individual mourns in a unique way. Therefore, each person will feel differently regarding the most appropriate manner to remember their peer. Some students wanted to hold a memorial activity at school. They suggested facilitating communication about the
loss by making a memory book, exercising, or hugging each other. Other efforts to remember Isis included planting flowers, holding a paper crane folding event, and praying for her. Lichtenthal and Cruess (2010) indicated that directed writing helps individuals who have experienced a loss; furthermore, bereavement-specific written disclosure evidenced benefits in helping people adjust to loss. We also encouraged students to write cards or letters expressing their sympathies (McLean, 2005). The students who discover ways to care for themselves will grieve better, and will thus be able to move forward in their lives.

Some close friends who shared many memories with Isis were susceptible to longer-lasting grief reactions. They tried to compile the most recent videos recorded of Isis and made a light disk (DVD) to cope with their grief. They also made an album featuring photographs of Isis’s campus life. Doing so was a good way for these students to reconstruct their memory and resulted in a thoughtful gift that they hoped would help console Isis’ family. Lobar, Youngblut, and Brooten (2006) suggested that attending a burial ceremony will help relieve the sorrow of a youth whose friend died from suicide. The letters or cards which were written by grieving classmates were burned at Isis’ funeral (this is a Chinese custom). Although we knew that the helpers cannot change the loss these students experienced, we hoped our plan would enable them to cope with and manage their grief in a supportive environment.

Facing the future: Developing emotional awareness

As a result of facing grief and loss, the students experienced a period of reconstruction. The young people who lose friends or peers to suicide are at risk of long-term adjustment problems. One of the best ways to move on from loss is to find ways to enable students to continue pursuing normal activities in their daily lives. Therefore, bereaved students should be encouraged to participate in those activities and interests which they enjoy the most.

For the classmates of Isis who joined the supportive group, the most helpful benefits included the normalization of their experience with suicide death. However, some students who were very close with Isis were at greater long-term risk than others for experiencing, for example, generalized anxiety. Signs that students needed outside support included refusing to attend school actives and problems with sleeping and eating. The school offered clinical follow-up when appropriate, including referrals to mental health professionals. Students were told where they could receive grief counseling. However, such youth might be reluctant to seek professional help, so finding someone they trusted was important. Furthermore, the school provided students mental hygiene handouts and referred them to social support websites. Fortunately, although most of them were sad, they also continued to enjoy life. They learned how to deal with the loss quickly by using the resources we provided. One student said, “I was afraid I would say something wrong. However, in the group I learned step by step. It gives me confidence to access help...”

We knew that grief work could jeopardize students’ learning. The effectiveness of the aforementioned strategies was explored. These findings warrant increased community outreach to youth population. The authors recommended mutual support of undergraduates and better coordinated appropriate services. Students valued the school’s response following the suicide death of a classmate. We found there are some positive effects in these students. Some students exhibited an increased maturity (caring each other), better coping skills, and better communication.

Schools need to be aware of the behavioral changes in their students; keeping good records on a bereaved student can enable faculty members to note specific occasions which may trigger an emotional response. These records should be documented and stored in a confidential location. Every student grieves in a unique way. There is no single approach that applies to all situations. However, these students needed a specific space on campus that was readily recognized as a place to go for support. This study provides important information about university students’ needs following the suicide death of a classmate.

There were several limitations in this study. This study only included a small number of individuals whose experience may not be totally representative of this age group. A young person’s capacity to comprehend and cope with death is compromised by the significant ambiguities inherent in one’s own social world. This study only included students from an urban university in northern Taiwan. Consequently, these results may not be representative of survivors in more rural universities. In addition, these results are most likely not representative of survivors from other cultures.
Conclusion

A greater understanding of post-suicide interventions in a school context can be a valuable resource for others. We found students had difficulty in talking about their experience of mourning a peer. This article will inform educators regarding the warning signs of grieving undergraduates. Coming together to share with and receive mutual support from other survivors may be the first step in the long journey toward healing. It is important that the announcement of the student’s death be made in a supportive environment. Students identified the need for listening and support; furthermore, they also identified the issue of how best to support those silent survivors who are unwilling to talk about their feelings. The youth in this case used healthy ways to deal with their sorrow and move on with their lives. This study sheds light on how suicide survivors who have lost a classmate can be helped. Although teachers and counselors alone cannot assuage students’ grief, faculty can work together to make the experience a valuable part of their personal growth and development. Thus, schools are encouraged to have an action plan and to train faculty members how to effectively respond to such a situation.

Contribution

Study design: FY (with guidance from JR); literature review, data collection and interpretation of those data: FY (with TY and HR); manuscript preparation: All authors have contributed to development and revision of article. The author reports no conflicts of interest in this work.

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References


Fig1. University students grieving in the context of the developmental transitions