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Project Submission Sheet

Student Name:	Olivia McCarthy……
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Lecturer:	Dr Barry Coughlan ……
Submission Due Date:	31/07/25……
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Exploring Perceived Social Support in Grief and Its Impact on Bereaved Individuals

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Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Psychology

BAHPSYCH 3

31/07/25

Abstract

This study explored how grieving individuals perceive and experience social support following significant loss. In-depth and semi-structured interviews were undertaken with nine participants

(aged 19 – 56) who had each experienced the death of a loved one. Reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), was used to interpret the data, revealing three central themes: Social Discomfort and the Awkwardness of Grief, Inadequate Grief Support and Emotional Disconnect and Support That Heals: Connection, Compassion and Feeling Seen. Findings suggest that experiences of grief support, as perceived by bereaved individuals, are deeply influenced by societal expectations and attitudes toward grief as well as the unique needs of grieving individuals themselves. Participants described the forms of support they received while grieving, distinguishing between those that felt helpful and unhelpful, and the impact each form of support had on their grieving journeys. The findings reflect a need for more attuned and individualized bereavement support practices that respect the emotional complexity and non-linear nature of grieving.

Introduction

Grief and loss are painful, distressing and universal aspects of the human experience. While individual experiences of grief vary from person to person, they are often shaped not only by the nature of the relationship with the deceased (Lehman et al., 1986) and the circumstances in which the death occurred (Pitman et al., 2018), but also by the social context in which the grieving process unfolds (Eyeisemitan, 2025). Social interactions, whether supportive, dismissive or absent, play a critical role in how grief is expressed, understood and processed. The value of adequate social support for grieving individuals is repeatedly emphasized throughout bereavement literature (Cutrona, 1989; Haseeb et al., 2023; McNally et al., 2021; Sarason et al., 1978). This research study aims to explore grieving individuals' experiences of social support during bereavement, the factors that shape their perceptions of support and the impact that both inadequate and adequate forms of social support can have on the grieving processes and lives of

grieving individuals. The following review will examine the growing body of grief support research, the nuanced and complex findings surrounding helpful and unhelpful support and how these experiences of support shape grieving individuals. The concept of perceived social support and its ability to alleviate or exacerbate the experience of loss will be central to this review.

Understanding grief and its impact is built into our earliest understandings of human psychology. One of the most influential frameworks of grief is Sigmund Freud's Mourning and Melancholia (1917), which posits mourning as a natural, psychological response to a "grief-inducing event" (Freud, 1917). Freud argued mourning stems from the destruction of the grieving individual's relationship with the lost person, object or idea (Hey, 2020) and believed individuals must process grief by learning to detach from the deceased person and adjust to the loss of the attachment over time. If this process is inhibited or unresolved, Freud argued that it can evolve into melancholia, a more severe state of grief similar to contemporary understandings of complicated or prolonged grief (Stroebe et al., 2005). Contemporary neuroimaging studies have reaffirmed Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, indicating that pathological grief involves distinct brain activity in areas of the brain associated with rumination and depressive symptoms (Carhart-Harris et al., 2008).

Another formative and influential grief framework is the Five Stages Model introduced by Kubler-Ross (1969) which poses the processes of grief as a sequential emotional journey consisting of five separate stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The first stage, denial, serves as an emotional buffer, allowing individuals to process the reality of loss in manageable increments. Subsequent stages reflect efforts to make sense of the loss and emotional pain. Depression, though painful for the grieving individual, is portrayed as being vital for emotional healing. Finally, acceptance involves reconciling with the permanence of the loss

and learning to live around it. This idea is further elaborated on, posing acceptance as being a form of adaption to grief rather than a resolution (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). While contemporary grief research recognizes the historical significance of the Kubler-Ross model, it also emphasizes the deeply persona; and non-linear nature of grief, cautioning that rigid application of the model could mislead and potnetially cause harm to bereaved individuals (Avis, Strobe & Schut, 2021).

In response to critiques of stage-based models, the Dual Process Model, introduced by Strobe and Schut (1999), offers a more dynamic and flexible conceptualization of grief and its emotional responses. Rather than viewing grief as a linear progression, the Dual Process Model proposes that individuals alternate between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping. Loss-oriented coping involves direct engagement with the emotional pain of the loss while restoration-oriented coping focuses on adjusting to the life change and rebuilding routines. The model reflects the non-linear nature of the grieving process, emphasizing the shifts between confrontations of grief and engagement in everyday tasks as part of the adjustment to the loss. Multiple contemporary studies have supported the model's relevance in grief coping (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

The Role of Social Support in Grief

Building on the Dual Process Model's recognition of grief as an individual and dynamic experience, it becomes essential to consider how external factors, particularly social support, can shape grief. Varying experiences of grief result in varying methods of support that may be perceived as either effective or ineffective by the bereaved individual. Social support, defined as the perception that one is valued and cared for by others (Taylor, 2007), plays a pivotal role in supporting emotional recovery and well-being in grieving individuals. For support to be

effectively provided, the need for support must be recognized, available, sufficient and seen as helpful (Kaunonen et al., 1999). Adequate social support has been linked to the promotion of cognitive processing during trauma (Cevik & Yildiz, 2017), the alleviation of grief intensity (Juth et al., 2015; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) and the prevention of psychological disorders (Weber et al., 2021), particularly prolonged grief disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder and depression (Vanderwerker & Prigerson, 2004). Conversely, inadequate support has been associated with depression, maladaptive coping behaviors, reduced life satisfaction, an increased risk of physical health deterioration and even premature mortality (Wang et al., 2003; Cacioppo et al., 2015). Though strong social support may not accelerate recovery and healing (Kammer, 1983), a growing body of literature recognizes the importance of social support in bereavement support.

Despite its recognized importance in grief support, the adequacy of social support during bereavement is deeply complex and shaped by many factors. Social support can be divided into three types: informational, instrumental or emotional (Taylor, 2007). Informational support offers advice and guidance, instrumental support involves offering tangible aids such as goods and services and emotional support consists of the provision of empathy, warmth and presence (Breen & O'Conner, 2011). The type of support offered can be perceived differently depending on the bereaved individual's needs and experiences (Lehmen et al., 1986). Well-meaning attempts of support can be received as unhelpful and even harmful (Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984), especially when they conflict with the griever's needs or come from those who may struggle to cope with the intensity of visible grief (Peters-Golden, 1982).

Social discomfort surrounding grief reflects a broader cultural taboo about death and emotional vulnerability which can be deeply harmful to bereaved individuals. In many Western contexts,

grief is treated as an obstacle to productivity or as a disruption to social norms (Cable, 1998). Expressions of grief deemed "too intense" or not conforming to expected timelines of recovery are not only felt by grieving individuals themselves (Balk, 1997; Granek, 2014) but are frequently pathologized within cultural and clinical narratives (Forstmeier & Maercker, 2007). This contributes to a tendency among bereaved individuals to feel the need to suppress or conceal their grief and emotional experiences, often leading to feelings of alienation and isolation (Smith et al., 2020). The pathologization of grief, which treats mourning as a disorder rather than a natural process, represents a society that deems grief to be a process with a start, middle and end point, with ideal grievers seeking professional help and medication to "heal" from their grief as quickly as possible to get back to living productively (Aries, 1974; Granek, 2008). Many argue that the recent inclusion of Prolonged Grief Disorder within the DSM-5 can be not only harmful to grieving individuals but a clinical representation of these taboos (Eisma, 2023).

Ultimately, grief is hugely shaped by social expectations, interactions and responses that massively influence how individuals experience loss and the support they receive. As the literature above highlights, the adequacy of support is not only dependent on its availability but on how it's perceived, interpreted and emotionally aligned with the needs of the mourner. This study aims to deepen current understandings of how grief is felt and supported within social contexts by centering the voices of grieving individuals and exploring their personal experiences of social support and its impact on their grieving processes. Through this lens, the research seeks to identify what forms of support feel most beneficial to bereaved individuals and inform others how to best support those around us dealing with loss.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to explore bereaved individual's perceptions and experiences of social support. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen to contextually interpret the data and detect distinct patterns and themes within the data. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of explicit content as well as underlying meanings within participants' accounts.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling following interest in a social media story (Instagram) and through word of mouth. Inclusion criteria required participants to be over the age of 18 and to have experienced significant loss, defined as the death of a person affecting one's life to noticeable degree (Collins Dictionary). To avoid causing potential harm or distress, those who had experienced a significant loss within 12 months prior to the interview were excluded from the study.

While the current study initially aimed to interview 12 participants, data collection concluded at 9 interviews due to saturation as well as time constraints. The data proved rich, nuanced and thematically consistent after 9 interviews, aligning with literature suggesting saturation can occur with smaller samples when responses are conceptually dense (Guest et al., 2006; Hennik et al., 2017). A larger sample size was not necessary to offer sufficient information power as the participants of the study held specific characteristics (have experienced grief) that are specific to the study's aims (to explore perceived social support). Of the final sample of nine participants, seven identified as female and two identified as male. Ages ranged from 19 to 56 years, with experiences of significant loss spanning from 2 to 7 years prior to participation.

Data Collection

Each interview was conducted and recorded via Microsoft Teams and saved to the National College of Ireland's OneDrive. Interviews were transcribed for analysis and permanently deleted following transcription. Prior to participation, participants were sent a digital consent form highlighting their right to withdraw from the study, the study's aims and the potential risks and benefits involved in taking part of the study. An information sheet was also given to the participant which included contact details for both the researcher and project supervisor. A debriefing sheet offering helplines and support resources was also provided at the end of each interview. Participants also completed a short demographic survey once they had given their informed consent.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for flexibility within the sample size and the generation of meaningful interpretations of the data (Guest et al., 2006). Reflexive journalling was used throughout the study to reduce the potential of researcher bias (Silverman, 2013). The smaller sample size contributed to greater analytic depth. Existing research supports 6 – 12 participants as being appropriate sample sizes for qualitative, phenological studies addressing complex emotional topics (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the National College of Ireland's Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Results

Analysis of participants' experience of grief revealed three overarching themes reflecting the social and emotional nuances of bereavement support. These themes, Social Discomfort and the Awkwardness of Grief, Inadequate Grief Supports and Emotional Disconnect and Support That Heals: Connection, Compassion and Feeling Seen, represent the existing social barriers to adequate social support and the qualities of support that foster emotional connection. Participants' responses highlighted the prevalence of social awkwardness and discomfort around grief that often resulted in emotional withdrawal, leading to feelings of alienation from others. They also spoke about inadequate forms of social support such as unsolicited advice, humor or pressures to "move on" that, while were mostly well-meaning, perpetuated emotional distance and feelings of isolation. Participants also emphasized the transformative impact of effective forms of social support such as emotional acknowledgement and validation, empathetic listening, holding space for grief expression and connection with other grieving individuals. Together, these themes highlight the importance of emotional support in grief recovery that validates pain, fosters connection, and aligns with the individualistic needs of the mourner.

Social Discomfort the Awkwardness of Grief

Many participants described a sense of a sense of awkwardness and discomfort surrounding their grief that manifested in ways such as a lack of connection, their expressions of grief being ignored and avoided, and being ignored and avoided themselves following the loss. This perceived sense of discomfort, while often unspoken, was obvious to many of the participants and contributed to feelings of isolation and emotional abandonment.

One participant shared:

> "I would have liked if they even just hung out with me a bit more or something. And they didn't really do that. I noticed as well, people kind of avoid you a bit too when it happens".

Another participant reflected on the change of familiar relationships following the loss:

> "Not bothering to try and build a connection and being awkward with it. If I was more comfortable with my uncles, even, maybe I could've talked about it. I just didn't see my uncles much after it".

Grief was described as being overwhelming for both the bereaved and those around them. The emotional weight the loss carried seemed to drive people away:

> "It's so big and like, some people are better at dealing with it. And they can just do it. But for other people, it's so big that they're avoiding it and that makes it worse".

Participants also noted how some social environments offered no space to voice their pain:

> "Certain people, you can't really mention it even...I felt like I would have benefitted from talking about it but a lot of people don't want to talk about it, basically".

Even smaller expressions of grief and emotional vulnerability, such as texting someone that they missed a loved one, were met with emotional withdrawal:

> "I've done that before, and people have left me on seen. Yeah, like, best friends have left me on seen. And like that sort of shit, you don't forget it actually."

These reflections show how social discomfort with grief can negatively impact existing connections and worsen grief isolation, particularly when others withdraw in response to and avoid expressions of grief.

Avoidance and Emotional Withdrawal

Many participants described the topic of grief and loss as being uncomfortable to navigate in social interactions. This discomfort often presented itself in a lack of acknowledgement and avoidance of the subject of loss, leaving participants feeling emotionally invalidated and unheard. While some participants expressed a desire for open conversation, others noticed the obvious reluctance of friends, colleagues and even close family members to engage with their loss.

One participant captured this lack of acknowledgement:

> "I hate seeing my dad's brothers 'cause it's like, they don't bring it up...Nobody's talking about it."

The same participant also articulated the frustration of carrying a loss that others seemed unwilling to recognize:

> "I want people to acknowledge it and I want people to realize that it's still a big thing. Because I think people just try to forget it because it's so awkward for them, but it's still really big to me".

The discomfort was particularly apparent for participants who experienced loss at a younger age:

> "Friends at that age [..] none of them have experienced grief. So it's like they just get awkward immediately".

When some participants attempted to express their grief, they were met with sudden topic changes and emotional withdrawal:

> "I think I expected to at least be able to like let it all out and they would just sit there even. But I could see like, such discomfort or like, even boredom, to a certain extent like changing the topic when it came up suddenly and stuff like that you know?"

Another participant interpreted the avoidance as being a reflection of social unease with grief:

> "People ignoring it didn't help. But I think that's people being awkward"

Inadequate Grief Supports and Emotional Disconnect

Although often well-intentioned, many participants described how certain attempts of support were often perceived as being unhelpful and resulted in frustration and intensified feelings of isolation and emotional pain. Frequently cited forms of unhelpful support included unsolicited advice, jokes as a form of deflection or an attempt to “make light” of the grief and external pushes to return to normalcy following the loss.

Advice

Participants frequently described unsolicited advice as unhelpful, particularly when it came from individuals who had not experienced personal loss. This form of attempted grief support was often perceived as invalidating and generic and often contributed to feelings of frustration and lonliness.

One participant reflected on the disconnect between advice and lived experience:

> "The people who were giving you advice was from a place of somebody who had never been through it. The advice was useless"

Advice was also described as overly simplistic and lacking a genuine understanding of the gravity of loss:

> "Advice can be very trite and mean...and is a bit meaningless [.] There isn't any advice anyone can give you because you can't get the person back".

Generic phrases such as "life goes on" or "time heals all pain" were described as being particularly frustrating:

> "Like grandparents going, 'well we just have to get on with it'. Stuff like that isn't helpful. And stupid advice like 'life goes on'. Yeah, no shit."

Advice as to how someone 'should' grieve also provoked resistance.

> "It would just kind of annoy me..'well, I wouldn't do this to grieve, I'd do that'. You can't really advise me on something you don't really understand"

These responses illustrate how unsolicited advice or advice lacking empathy or personal experience can contribute to feelings of isolation and frustration among grieving individuals. The participants' experiences of advice also seem to suggest that active listening may be more valued than instructional responses or solutions.

Humor

Several participants described the use of humor as an uncomfortable and unhelpful form of grief support. While participants felt that jokes were sometimes used as an attempt to acknowledge the loss or reduce emotional tension, they also felt as if this approach avoided deeper engagement with grief, leaving many feeling as if their loss was minimized and ignored.

One participant reflected on the complexity of using humor as a coping mechanism:

> "People would make jokes, and I'd make jokes, but I get this horrible pain in my stomach...I want it to be more accepted, and that's why I make jokes...but it actually doesn't feel good."

Another participant felt as though making jokes about their grief made their grief more palatable to others, even if it felt personally invalidating:

> "Maybe people will laugh it off and then it'll be less awkward...Grief is awkward. Nobody wants to get into it out of nowhere".

Jokes and humor as a support mechanism were also perceived as being a mechanism for others to attempt to acknowledge and talk about the loss while avoiding emotional presence:

> "People making light of it doesn't help...they're too scared to actually talk about it. And that doesn't help"

> "People making jokes...they're not even being mean to my dad, they're just trying to make light of it...I think people are terrified of seeing you upset".

These reflections seem to suggest that humor is often used to avoid emotional vulnerability and in turn, hinders authentic grief expression and internal grieving processes.

Expectations to "Return to Normal"

While many participants felt supported during the immediate aftermath of their loss, they also described feeling increasingly unsupported as time passed. As the initial shock of the loss eased and grief settled into their daily lives, participants felt pressure to "move on" despite still experiencing huge emotional pain. This perceived normalization of grief was experienced as invalidating and ultimately unhelpful.

One participant reflected on this shift:

> "I think once, like, the immediate aftermath was over, everybody just expects you to go back to normal completely".

Another participant echoed this, also feeling as if the attempt to normalize grief was unhelpful:

> "It's like people want to normalize it, make you feel like it's normal. But it's not. I don't want to feel like that even though it is 'normal'."

A participants also described how others seemed to dismiss or underestimate the impact grief has on their daily lives:

> "You're not able to sleep...nothing really makes you happy for the first two months...I felt like nobody really understood that fully".

These insights suggest that timelines and expectations imposed by others can leave grieving individuals feeling misunderstood and their pain minimized.

Support that Heals: Connection, Compassion and Feeling Seen

In contrast to the inadequate or lack of social supports many participants regularly experienced while grieving, many participants also reflected on moments of helpful and genuine support that helped ease emotional pain. While many acknowledge that ultimately no support could completely eliminate their grief, they also emphasized the importance of feeling seen, heard and emotionally held by those around them.

Being Heard

Participants often described the act of being listened to without judgement, advice or pressure as one of the most helpful forms of support they received from others. Holding space allowed for

authentic emotional expression which many participants felt fostered emotional safety, validation and connection and was often described as being central to participants' healing journeys.

One participant described how empathetic and authentic presence made space for deeper emotional processing:

> "My friends holding space for me and my family holding space for me and like, letting me be sad, helped me process it really well...I'm grieving in a way that's not suppressed, you know? Like, I feel like I'm allowed grieve".

Another participant reflected how feeling as if they're allowed to be upset without being rushed or fixed was a helpful form of support:

> "It's nice when people will still let you be upset...Like, I want to be supported in the fact that people will still be okay with me being upset".

This sentiment was echoed consistently. Participants often emphasized that support was most impactful when others listened to their grief expressions without imposing advice or avoiding their emotional pain:

> "My friends... they just listened to the pain. They didn’t try and solve anything".

> "I think being listened to and heard is huge"

Some participants also reflected how emotional presence and availability while listening was hugely important:

> "People listening to your pain is important and not offering advice...But being there and holding your hand while you cry...That's important".

These accounts suggest that active listening and emotional presence can create a space where grief is acknowledged, expressed and allowed to exist. Such support allowed for grieving individuals to feel heard and validated which, for many, positively impacted their grieving journey.

Acknowledgement and Validation

Participants also described acknowledgements of their loss as being hugely supportive. Through gestures as small as notes and cards or explicit validation of the loss, grieving individuals felt as if their pain was recognized and as though they were not alone in carrying the weight of it.

Participants described moments of connection they had with friends following the loss of a loved one that made them feel supported and validated:

> "I was in the pub one day... I was talking about my grandad and my friend turned around to me and said, 'I'm so proud of you, if you ever need to chat, I'm there"

> "One of my friends was like 'I know you're going through a really hard time and I don't say it every day but just know I'm always thinking about how you've lost your dad'. And that made me feel nice. It's nice when people let you know"

The same participant reflected on how small gestures like kind words or invitations to communally express grief created a sense of connection:

> "It made me feel like it's not just me...I'm not left to know him and mourn him by myself."

Many participants also emphasized that the most meaningful support came from those who talked directly about the loss, rather than just avoiding it:

> "All I feel like I wanted was someone to just say it happened... like 'Oh God, I'm so fucking sorry that you've gone through this really hard thing"

> "I want people to acknowledge it and I want people to realize it's still a big thing".

Collectively, these reflections demonstrate that authentic acknowledgement can lessen grief's isolating effects. Participants did not expect others to fix or eliminate their pain, but consistently valued the presence of those who were willing to recognize and hold space for its continuous impact.

Connecting Through Grief

Participants also described the unique type of support they received from other grieving individuals as being particularly supportive, in that the support they received from those who had also experienced loss was generally perceived as more authentic and emotionally present than those who had not experienced grief themselves. Sharing pain with someone who "understood" them helped alleviate feelings of isolation and created space for healing.

One participant felt as if being around people who had experienced loss was one of the most important forms of support:

> "Being understood or like listened to or empathized with. And being with people who also were in that huge pain."

Such relationships were also described as being emotionally safer and more validating while grieving:

> "I still feel supported by my friends that have gone through this loss... I feel like it's so valid with them because they are my age and they've lost the same person."

The same participant shared how the continued emotional presence of grieving friends allowed space for the grief to remain as time passed:

> "Grief is a lonely thing, but I feel lucky to have my friends that have gone through it because they make me feel like it's valid because they're still hurting in a sense"

Being around others who had "walked the walk" of grief allowed participants to feel less alone and more connected in their experience:

> "It's like, it makes you feel like.. Like a community. It almost feels less unlucky or something"

Participants also noted that observing how others coped with grief provided guidance in their own healing journeys:

> "It kind of makes you think about how other people are dealing with it... Like learning from how other people have dealt with grief. And then I try the same thing"

In contrast to interactions where grief remained unspoken and misunderstood, these interactions offered participants a sense lived empathy:

> "People... couldn't understand the level of grief. You can’t understand the level of grief until you actually walk the walk."

These reflections highlight the power of shared loss and underscore how connecting with people through grief can humanize and validate pain in ways that people that haven't experienced loss may struggle to achieve.

The exploration of participants’ experiences of grief and grief support highlighted how social dynamics can either exacerbate or alleviate suffering in bereavement. Participants felt as if social

discomfort and the awkwardness of grief can often lead to social withdrawal and emotional abandonment which intensified feelings of lonliness and isolation when expressions of loss were ignored or avoided. Inadequate forms of support such as advice, humor, and social expecatations were commonly experienced as invalidating and emotionally distancing regardless of the support providers' intention. Effective support that helped to foster safety, emotional validation and connection were characterized by emotional presence, empathetic listening, acknowledgement of the loss and shared grief experiences. Collectively, the research findings highlight the importance of adequate bereavement support and can be used to facilitate more effective forms of social support for grieving individuals.

Discussion

The findings of this study were derived through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and revealed three overarching themes that explore the lived experiences of bereaved individuals navigating grief in socially complex environments. The first theme, Social Discomfort and the Awkwardness of Grief, delves into the societal unease with grief expressions, the different ways this discomfort can manifest and the impact it has on the lives of grieving individuals. The second theme, Inadequate Grief Support and Emotional Disconnect, explores the ways in which advice, humor and expectations, while often well-intended, were experienced as emotionally distancing and invalidating. The final theme, Support That Heals: Connection, Compassion and Feeling Seen, explores the forms of social support participants found helpful such as being listened to without judgment, receiving acknowledgement of their loss and connecting with others who had also experienced grief. Together, these themes reflect existing social norms and expectations that suppress grief and grief support as well as the impacts they have on bereaved people.

A growing body of literature highlights the social stigmatization of grief and a broader social discomfort with the topic of bereavement and grief itself, both of which shape the social experiences of grieving individuals in harmful ways. Doka's (1989) concept of disenfranchised grief refers to grief that is socially denied and unrecognized, often in cases of complex or traumatic losses. Disenfranchised losses are frequently excluded from grieving norms, leaving individuals without access to emotional validation and adequate social supports while grieving (Eyetsemitan, 2025). Participants in the current study, regardless of the nature of their loss, described feeling that their grief was minimized, avoided or met with discomfort, suggesting that disenfranchisement and stigmatization may not be limited to specific types of death, but reflective of a broader societal unease with grief itself. Participants commonly felt alienated by others following the loss as well as a sense of isolation driven by negative reactions to authentic grief expressions and calls for help. This is common amongst grieving individuals, particularly those with prolonged grief disorder (Smith, Rankin & Ehlers, 2019). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that grief is not only a personal emotional experience but a socially mediated one.

While participants' experiences of support following the loss of a loved one were varied and differed from person-to-person, it is important to acknowledge that many participants of the current study felt as if their needs for support while grieving were left unmet, which is a commonly experienced amongst bereaved individuals (Cacciatore et al., 2021; Holmgren et al., 2019; Susanti et al., 2025). Though experiences of support varied amongst the participants of the current study, commonly cited forms of support included being heard and empathetically listened to while expressing pain, social acknowledgement of their loss through conversations and

gestures, advice, encouragements to move forward, jokes and connecting with other grieving individuals.

Though some of the forms of support were valued, many of them were perceived as being more harmful than healing. Unsolicited and unempathetic advice, particularly from individuals who had not experienced loss themselves, was commonly seen as an unhelpful form of grief support. Though many participants also acknowledged that advice seemed to come from a well-meaning place, unsolicited advice during a time of loss was often perceived as being invalidating, generic and emotionally disconnected. Many participants also felt as if receiving advice while grieving contributed to intensified feelings of frustration and isolation. This experience of advice is echoed within grief literature (Cacciatore et al., 2021; Eyesemitan, 2025). It's important to note that though bereaved individuals commonly feel as if receiving advice from individuals who had not experienced personal grief and loss was unhelpful, many found advice and connection with "like others" (other grieving individuals) helpful (Cacciatore et al., 2021). Another cited form of inadequate support within the current study was the use of jokes and humor as an attempt to "make light" of their grief and “lighten the mood”. Jokes were frequently experienced as unhelpful when in response to expressions of grief. Some participants who experienced humour as a form of grief support felt as if it was driven by a social unease with grief and grief expression as well as a desire to acknowledge grief without reaching any kind of emotional depth or discomfort. Participants generally felt as if jokes about their loss contributed to feelings of invalidation and emotional pain. Research on the use of humor in grief support is underdeveloped within grief literature (Wilson et al., 2023) but has been linked to triggering intense grief in bereaved individuals when used prematurely or insensitively (Wilson et al., 2022). Another frequently cited form of inadequate social support many participants experienced

was the external social pressure and expectation to “move on” and to return to “normal”. Many participants viewed this pressure or expectation to be a result of a lack of awareness in how grief impacts the lives of bereaved individuals. The encouragement of recovery and healing has been previously cited as being unhelpful in grief literature (Jakoby, 2014; Lehman et al., 1986; Smith et al., 2020) but driven by a motivation to see bereaved individuals feeling better again, suggesting that though many participants of the current study did not perceive this form of support to be beneficial, the expectations put on bereaved individuals to return to normal may be driven by a well-meaning but unhelpful attempt at grief support.

The forms of social support participants found largely beneficial while grieving included active and empathetic listening, acknowledgements of the loss through gestures and conversations, and sharing grief expressions with other grieving individuals. The form of support that many participants deemed to be most beneficial to their healing expressing their grief through conversation and being empathetically listened to which is echoed throughout grief support literature (Cacciatore et al., 2021; Pelacho-Rios et al., 2025). Similar to the participants of the current study, many of the participants of Cacciatore's study found that "being present", "holding space", allowing the expressions of grief, deep listening and "quiet understanding" were largely helpful and supportive during their time of need.

An additional form of social support many participants found beneficial was within explicit acknowledgements and validation of their loss. Participants found comfort in the fact that friends and loved ones were thinking about their loss and the grief they've experienced, and many felt as if outward acknowledgements of the loss lessened feelings of isolation while grieving. Within grief support literature, many bereaved individuals commonly valued gestures of

acknowledgement of their loss (Cacciatore et al., 2021; Holmgren, 2019), and like the participants of the current study, many found acknowledgement of the loss to be helpful in lessoning feelings of isolation and establish emotional safety a connection (Benkel et al., 2024).

Another frequently cited form of valued grief support was sharing expressions of grief with other grieving individuals. Various participants felt as if surrounding themselves by people who had also experienced loss allowed them to feel more understood and supported. Some participants mentioned feeling grateful to have been able to share their experiences of loss with like others as they felt grieving individuals better validated their pain, positively shaped their coping skills, and allowed them to feel emotional held and part of a community. Though participants weren't asked to specify where exactly they received support from other grieving individuals, there is research supporting the value of shared grief experiences in the forms of bereavement support groups, with many bereaved individuals feeling as if support groups offered them a sense of hope and belonging and were important to emotional processing and connection while grieving (Griffin et al., 2022).

Limitations

Of the nine participants interviewed, two identified as male and seven identified as female. Though research shows gendered differences of grief expressions and coping needs are subtle (Maccallum et al., 2021), a more diverse sample may have revealed more emotionally nuanced reflections related to support needs. Another limitation of the study included the sample's self-selection bias. Participants were mostly recruited through social media posts or word of mouth, meaning that those who chose to participate may have held more vivid grief experiences than those who chose to not engage with the study, introducing the potential of self-selection bias. Finally, the interviews followed a conversational, semi-structured format to allow for natural

discussions. In some instances, personal experiences of grief were discussed by the researcher to reduce any discomfort and while this supported emotional openness, it may have subtly influenced participant narratives. This is acknowledged as a limitation of researcher positionality.

Implications

The findings of this study contribute additional depth to a complex and often contradictory body of bereavement research (Stroebe, Zech, Stroebe, & Abakoumkin, 2005)). Through qualitative methods, the study captures the nuanced emotional experiences of grieving individuals, reinforcing the value of thematic and narrative approaches. These insights also offer practical relevance for grief support services as well as a guide to help caregivers in better understanding and supporting loved ones during periods of grief.

Conclusion

This research study set out to explore how social interactions, experiences and taboo's shape the support grieving individuals receive and its impact on their grieving journeys. Through in-depth, qualitative interviews, three themes emerged: Social Discomfort and the Awkwardness of Grief, Inadequate Grief Supports and Emotional Disconnect and Support That Heals: Connection, Compassion and Feeling Seen. The results of this study advance theoretical understandings of effective bereavement support as well as point to clear recommendations for families, communities and clinicians in effectively supporting those who have suffered a loss. Beyond this, the study highlights broader cultural dynamics influence how grief is experienced and responded to. The findings reveal that effective support stems not from rushed solutions but from authentic presence rooted in empathy.

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