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Mourning Alone and the Explanation of Social Support after Traumatic Loss During COVID-19: A Qualitative Study

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Extended Abstract

Aim

The loss of loved ones is one of the most stressful events a person can experience, particularly when the loss is sudden and traumatic. Research indicates that a significant percentage of the global population faces traumatic losses each year (Kessler et al., 2017). Traumatic loss refers to the sudden, unexpected, and deeply painful death of a loved one (Benjet et al., 2018). According to Birkner and Soffer (2020), not only have the survivors of those who lost their lives to COVID-19 suffered, but survivors of individuals who passed away suddenly from other causes have also been deprived of collective rituals. These individuals have endured their grieving process in isolation, which has delayed their progression through the stages of grief (Kokou-Kpolou et al., 2020).

Research shows that relationships and social support play a crucial role in coping with traumatic grief. Some studies suggest that a high level of social support can significantly facilitate recovery from traumatic grief (Lee & Hwang, 2016). Traditionally, funerals have served as a natural way for others to offer support to the bereaved, with mourning rituals reinforcing this support. However, during emergency situations—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—mandatory restrictions have drastically altered mourning rituals, preventing the timely formation of social support and complicating the grieving process, even beyond the pandemic (Long et al., 2022; Wessels, 2021).

Most previous studies on social support and grief have been quantitative in nature and have not specifically explored social support following traumatic losses in emergency situations. Moreover, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative research on the dynamics of social support during mourning, particularly after traumatic losses, and especially within the cultural context of Iran.

The present study aimed to elucidate the experience of social support in the aftermath of a traumatic loss, during which the bereavement ceremony was prohibited.

Methodology

The study was conducted using a research method that combined social constructivism and grounded theory. Participants included all Iranian youth (over 18) in 2022 who experienced a traumatic loss and encountered restrictions in organizing memorials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 individuals, who were selected through purposeful and theoretical sampling. Charmez's three-step coding method was implemented to analyse the data.

Findings

A total of 32 individuals participated in the study (50% female; Mean age = 33.1 years, SD = 4.8; age range: 22 to 40 years). From the data, several main themes were identified, including challenges in seeking social support, methods of seeking social support, alternative forms of support, and the most effective types of social support. Additionally, nine sub-themes emerged: "the double pressure of

limitations," "forced isolation," "informal support," "official support," "the importance of digital space," "the role of volunteer work and charity," "emotional support," "informational support," and "instrumental support."

More details of the themes and sub-themes along with some primary code samples from the total number of 560 open codes are given in Table 1.

Table1. Extracted Themes and Categories

Themes (Theoretical Codes)	Sub-themes (Focused Codes)	Sample Initial Codes
Challenges in Seeking Social Support	Double Pressure of limitations	Intensified emotions and distressing thoughts (confusion, anxiety and fear, irritability, mood swings, guilt, anger, shame, self-blame and remorse, sadness and despair, feelings of insecurity, avoidance of interests, thoughts of non-existence, and joining the deceased), sudden loss of identity, lack of family support, acceptance of unfamiliar responsibilities.
	Forced Isolation	Adherence to the non-holding of ceremonies, pressure from cultural customs, facing profound loneliness, withdrawal from others, avoidance of continuing work, dropping out of school, inability to tolerate being in public, escape from stigma.
Methods of Seeking Social Support	Informal Support	Family, relatives, and friends.
	official Support	Psychologists, counselors, and psychiatrists.
Alternative Ways of Social Support	Importance of Digital Space	Holding virtual ceremonies, sharing photos of the deceased, virtual prayers and condolences.
	role of volunteer work and charity	Volunteering in charitable organizations, donating financial assistance, and creating peer support groups online.
Most Effective Social Support	Emotional Support	Providing comfort, compassion, consolation, empathy, encouragement, kind words, and reassurance.
	Informational Support	Books, films, counseling, peer groups.
	Instrumental Support	Settling accounts, pursuing legal matters, transferring the deceased's assets, planning how to hold ceremonies or memorials, financial assistance, and support in daily life tasks.

Conclusion

During a pandemic, individuals who experience traumatic loss may face heightened emotional challenges due to social restrictions imposed by health guidelines. Based on the obtained model of social support, efforts by individuals and facilitators to assist the bereaved in emergency situations can focus on helping them regain their agency as quickly as possible. By actively seeking support resources and utilizing alternative methods to access social support networks, individuals can navigate the mourning process more efficiently (Long et al., 2022). Social support, particularly in the form of emotional, informational, and instrumental support, is a key factor in helping traumatized individuals cope with their bereavement during such circumstances (Wessels, 2021).

The findings of this study can be applied in the development of intervention protocols aimed at facilitating the mourning process after traumatic losses in various emergency situations. These protocols can be taught to specialists in the field and implemented in medical centers to support individuals facing traumatic losses, especially when traditional mourning rituals are disrupted.

Keywords: Mourning, Social Support, Social Constructivism, Traumatic Loss.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Isfahan (IR.UI.REC.1400.114).

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in reporting the results.

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