

Acknowledging sexual bereavement: a path out of disenfranchised grief

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Abstract: *Despite increasing awareness of the importance of sexuality for older adults, research and popular literature rarely acknowledge what we term “sexual bereavement” – mourning the loss of sexual intimacy when predeceased. The reluctance to acknowledge sexual bereavement may create “disenfranchised grief” leaving the bereaved unsupported in coping with this aspect of mourning. This preliminary study focuses on women in the United States and sought to determine whether they anticipate missing sex if predeceased, whether they would want to talk about this loss, and identified factors associated with communicating about sexual bereavement. Findings from our survey of 104 women, 55 years and older, most of whom were heterosexual, revealed that a large majority (72%) anticipates missing sex with their partner and 67% would want to initiate a discussion about this. An even higher percentage would want friends to initiate the topic. Yet, 57% of participants report it would not occur to them to initiate a discussion with a widowed friend about the friend’s loss. Disenfranchised grief can have negative emotional and physical consequences. This paper suggests a role for friends and professionals in addressing this neglected issue. © 2016 Reproductive Health Matters. Published by Elsevier BV. All rights reserved.*

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Introduction

In recent years, both the academic and popular press have increasingly acknowledged that older people are engaging in and, importantly, enjoying sex.^{1–3} Fortunately the field of sexual health has come a long way since 2007 when DeLamater and Moorman wrote,

*If a social scientist from an alien planet wished to learn about Earthling behavior from reading our scientific research literature, she might well conclude that sexuality is not important to humans older than 50 (p.1).*⁴

In a 2007 U.S. study, more than half (54%) of men and almost a third (31%) of women over the age of 70 reported they were still sexually active.⁴ It is now acknowledged that many partnered men and women well over 55 years of age consider sex an essential part of their lives, and sexuality a “critical part” of their relationship.^{1,5,6} A 2012 study reported that a substantial number of adults in their eighth

and ninth decades consider sexual expression to be an important part of their lives.⁷ The end of sexuality is no longer expected as a feature of aging, and sexual activity across the lifespan is now linked to overall health. The medical community is being advised to pay more attention to a decline in sexual function as possibly symptomatic of deterioration in physical health rather than a natural consequence of aging.⁸

Given the aging population, a growing number of seniors will experience the death of a long-term partner and the accompanying loss of sexual and affectional activities that enrich their lives. Yet, almost no studies are looking at this loss despite a growing older population. A recent report states that 40% of women over 65 in the U.S. were widowed in 2016⁹ and fifty-three million people are projected to be over 65 by 2020.¹⁰ The United Nations General Assembly on Women in 2000 reported statistics on widows over 60 years of age worldwide, ranging from 34% in the Caribbean to 59% in Northern Africa. Corresponding figures for Western and Eastern Europe are 40% and 48% respectively.¹¹

*Retired.

Researchers have learned that mutual coping patterns develop over time in enduring sexual relationships,^{12,13} however much of the focus on older women and men has been on sexual dysfunction.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Although some research has focused on widows and sexuality,^{17,18} the topic of sexual *bereavement*, the grief resulting from the loss of the sexual relationship with a long-term partner, has been overlooked.¹⁹ Courtney notes that it is natural to feel the loss of the sexual relationship as much as the loss of companionship and practical help.²⁰ However, she notes the surviving partner may be embarrassed to bring this up in counseling. It has also been documented that physicians/counselors are generally uncomfortable discussing sex with older women and men.^{21,22} As a result, such discussions either never happen or happen awkwardly. Sexual bereavement, as a specific aspect of bereavement, has not received adequate attention from grief counselors in their practice or training.

Grief following the death of a spouse is associated with physical symptoms, emotional distress, and sexual feelings that have been described as, “floating, unanchored and undefined.”^{23,24} To mitigate these consequences and to overcome isolation, the surviving partner is urged by bereavement counselors to discuss all aspects of their grief without fear of criticism.^{25,26} However, a culture of silence surrounds feelings of sexual bereavement following a partner’s death and these feelings are left unvalidated. In silence they become disenfranchised grief – a grief that is not openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned and publicly shared.²⁷

Best-selling memoirs about the death of a spouse that fail to mention sexual bereavement reinforce the message that raising the topic is inappropriate.²⁸⁻³⁰ Self-help books for widows also usually exclude discussions about loss of sexual intimacy with the deceased partner and the grief surrounding that loss.^{31,32}

Seeking support and information, some widows are now turning to blogs to share their stories. The anonymity provided by these forums has allowed widows, mostly women, to raise the topic of sexual bereavement and describe their discomfort when they have tried to discuss their grief. A brief review of these blogs uncovered poignant examples of women who felt alone and isolated because they were unable to talk about it.

A single posting from a woman sarcastically stated that she was not a good widow because,

“A good widow does not crave sex. She certainly doesn’t talk about it. ...Apparently, I stink at being a good widow.”³³

Her post unleashed a flood of responses about sexual bereavement and the frustration of being unable to express this grief:

“I wish there were more open forums to discuss this because I think it’s a huge hurdle.”³⁴

“Sex is one of the things that I miss the most...but it is not something that you can share with the everyday person.”³⁵

“I have not felt at ease to talk about this to any of my family or friends... I think they don’t know how to listen to this without it becoming uncomfortable for them.”³⁶

Little is known about how extensively sexual bereavement is experienced or what widows believe would make communication with friends and professionals easier. This study attempted to gain a better understanding of whether women anticipate missing sex if predeceased and explore factors associated with their communication about this loss.

Methods

Sample

Not knowing if sexual bereavement is of legitimate concern, this exploratory study recruited currently partnered women rather than widows because of the discomfort that might be experienced by bereaved women. The difficulty of raising the double taboo of death and sex with bereaved subjects has been previously described.²³ The convenience sample, appropriate for an exploratory study in a new and sensitive area of inquiry, was selected using a snowball technique that started with a network of currently partnered women aged 55 and older. This network was known personally to the researchers who were aware that the group was predominantly Caucasian, college-educated, and middle-class residents of the Northeast United States. Most of the women were heterosexual, but the sample also included lesbian women. The core network provided addresses for women in their networks. A chain referral technique assumes the majority of women outside the core network shared the characteristics of the core. Despite its limitations, a non-random, convenience sample was used to explore

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