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The Complicated Process of Disenfranchised Grief While In College

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Introduction

Death is an inevitable and natural life process. When a death occurs, the grief experienced by the bereaved survivor is also an inevitable and natural process. Yet despite how definitive death and grief are, they remain taboo subjects, propelling a certain degree of discomfort to those both experiencing a death of a loved one and moving through the grieving process and to those who are not. The term “moving through the grieving process” is used because grief is complex and does not simply end but is instead a journey. Grief is something that one must live with; bereaved persons must learn how to adapt their grief to their lives. However, society does not always view grief to be an adaptable process, but instead as a structured event with an end point. The standards of grieving set forth by society also do not recognize the individuality of grief, and instead view grief to be a similar experience for all. Grief, conversely, is very different from person to person, though this idea also seems to be difficult for society to understand and further contributes to the possible experience of two negative, or unhealthy, grieving processes: complicated and disenfranchised grief.

This research focuses on the grieving process experienced by the emerging adult population living in a traditional four-year college environment away from home. I argue that this population, ranging from eighteen to twenty-nine and used in this research to encompass undergraduate students, is underrepresented within the larger community when actively grieving, contributing to an increased risk of experiencing complicated and disenfranchised grieving. With this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that emerging adults experience complicated and disenfranchised grieving processes more often than society realizes by exploring different factors that are both influenced by society and influential to the grieving process.
The structure of this paper is formatted in a manner to enhance the understanding of the grieving process and the factors which contribute to complicated and disenfranchised grief in their entirety. In order to do this, the paper begins by defining bereavement, grief, and mourning, followed by an explanation of complicated and disenfranchised grief. I then go on to discuss the prevalence of grief among emerging adults before exploring how the following factors impact the grieving process, especially in terms of complicated and disenfranchised grief: the college culture, social influences and reactions, relationships between the bereaved and the deceased, stigma and mode of death, gender and social media influences on grief, and meaning-making. These factors are outlined within different sections in order to clearly explore each of them.

The emerging adult population is not an exception to experiencing the death of a loved one; the remainder of this paper examines how they can enter a complicated grieving process or become disenfranchised quickly due to the social standards which their peers follow. As a bereaved emerging adult myself, attempting to navigate through my own grieving process was deeply impacted by the social standards in which my peers followed. Their reactions were discouraging and hurtful, combined with my overwhelmingly perceived lack of support, prompted me to recede from social activity; in isolating myself, I did not have to be concerned with bothering others with my own anxiety, need to talk through my emotions, or feel the deep disappointment when others stopped the conversation when I mentioned my dad. I was neglected though assumed to be functional and unchanged when returning to work and activities, when I was actually and unwillingly entering four of the five categories of disenfranchisement. I fought to hold onto my father because my environment was not supporting me in accepting his death and in order to feel welcomed back into the culture, I felt a need to avoid the reality of his
death because death was an event too discomforting for others. My grief was complicated and I was disenfranchised, but I recognize that the lack of death discussion and education perpetuated by society had a strong impact in such an outcome. With this in mind, this research stems from my personal experience; with this research I hope to begin the conversation about death and the subsequent grieving process to decrease the instance of other bereaved emerging adults experiencing complicated or disenfranchised grief.