

Research Paper

Exploring the Impact of Childhood Loss as Emotional Trauma

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the psychological impact of experiencing childhood trauma as a result of the loss of someone close. More than 100 respondents provided input by answering questions presented on a survey instrument. Open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis. The results show that the overwhelming majority of respondents expressed their emotions through feelings of sadness, loneliness, and sorrow. Some respondents expressed feelings of fear and anxiety, whereas others shared their cognitive experiences, such as confusion and regret. Finally, a small number of participants demonstrated some signs of adaptation and coping, indicating acceptance and a process of healing. The paper highlights the significant impact of childhood bereavement on people's emotional well-being and demonstrates that it is possible to overcome childhood trauma. Thus, this research will help raise awareness of this problem, contributing to the implementation of more efficient psychological care measures.

Keywords: *Childhood, Childhood Trauma, Impact on Adolescence, Low Emotional Stability*

Childhood is an important and sensitive period when emotional, cognitive, and social foundations are being developed (Malik, 2022). Furthermore, the way people develop their emotional intelligence depends on the experiences they go through. Experiencing something unpleasant can have a negative effect on mental health in the long term (Alvis, 2023). One such experience could be the loss of someone the child knew, causing childhood trauma. In order to explain why losing a loved one causes such intense psychological effects in children, the concept of attachment should be taken into consideration. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, childhood stages are crucial for developing attachment and establishing trust. Erikson proposed that the "trust vs. mistrust" stage is the most critical one. At this age, children need to feel safe and develop confidence. Losing someone close can make this stage difficult because there is nobody to establish trust with (McLeod, 2018). Other theories that can be applied to this topic include those presented by Erikson. In addition to Erikson's ideas, another theory that explains the relationship between childhood and adulthood is attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby (1969). The attachment theory states that children build close emotional relationships with their parents, which give them safety, comfort, and protection. These bonds are important for proper psychological development. The sudden death of a parent

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might cause severe anxiety, grief, and a sense of loss in a child. Moreover, it can impair the child's ability to create stable bonds throughout their lifetime.

Firstly, the child may experience separation anxiety after losing their loved one. Separation anxiety is defined as emotional discomfort experienced when the child feels separated from their loved one or parent (Feriante, 2023). Although separation anxiety is an appropriate reaction to separation at any age, it intensifies in traumatic situations. For instance, after the loss of a parent, the child may develop a fear of losing other people. Thus, the child may become overly dependent on their loved ones and may refuse to go to kindergarten or school. Additionally, they might experience sleeping disorders and feel insecure. Childhood trauma caused by the loss of a loved one can take various forms. One type is emotional trauma, including strong feelings such as sadness, despair, loneliness, and anger. Children may not express these feelings explicitly. Nevertheless, they can feel them very strongly (Osterweis, 1984). Emotional trauma is usually the most obvious outcome of the loss experienced by a child. Another form is cognitive trauma, which changes the way a child perceives a certain event. Young children are unlikely to understand that their loved one will never come back because they cannot comprehend the concept of death. As a result, the child may deny the event, try to rationalise their thoughts, or continuously ask about the deceased person (Patronick, 2025). The child can also experience strong regrets and guilt for being unable to prevent this incident. The third sign involves behavioural trauma. It occurs when a person exhibits a change in their behaviour and actions. In such a case, a child withdraws from society, performs poorly in class, and becomes aggressive and irritable. Behavioural symptoms occur as a result of emotional and cognitive problems.

Studies conducted around the world have shown the prevalence and severity of childhood trauma. For example, according to various reports from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), many children throughout the world suffer adverse experiences, including loss (UNICEF, 2007). The information obtained during these studies proves the likelihood of developing psychological problems, such as anxiety, depression, irritability, etc. It is worth noting that these adverse experiences influence not only the psychological state of children but also affect their emotional state, cognitive processes, social interaction, and quality of life.

However, despite the negative impact of childhood trauma on a child's life, it is possible for children to recover through various means, including family and friends. Emotional support can be of great help when children need to come to terms with the death of someone close (Silverman, 2008). Moreover, it contributes to the process of adaptation in society.

This study will investigate the psychological effects of childhood trauma associated with the loss of a loved one. To conduct the study, the researchers will need to collect and analyse the responses of people. Based on these data, it will be possible to identify psychological symptoms of people who have suffered similar traumatic experiences.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several psychological studies have looked into the emotional and psychological effects of childhood trauma caused by the death of a loved one. These studies show how these experiences can affect emotional stability, cognitive growth, and long-term mental health.

- **Stylianou and Zembylas (2021)** examined childhood grief, especially in cases of sudden parental loss. Their research pointed out that children often don't have the maturity to fully grasp the permanence of death, which heightens emotional pain.

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The lack of preparation during sudden losses adds to confusion, fear, and emotional instability. The researchers discovered that these experiences can impair a child's emotional regulation and coping mechanisms.

- **Rachel Kentor and Julie Kaplow (2020)** studied children and adolescents following parental loss and found that such loss can lead to intense distress, including symptoms of trauma and grief. The study indicates that some children develop childhood traumatic grief. The report also underlined that early care and psychological support are crucial for children's adjustment and coping.
- **Iloakasia and Conceição, (2025)** studied the psychological effects of sudden parental death and found it causes significant emotional disruption. They reported increased stress, grief, and confusion about identity among children. The researchers highlighted that losing a primary attachment figure can weaken emotional security and impact personality growth.
- **Boelen and Smid, (2017)** focused on prolonged grief responses, finding that children who face sudden loss often struggle with managing their emotions over time. Their research suggested that unresolved grief can lead to ongoing psychological distress that affects emotional and behavioural functioning.
- **Susan Hillis et al. (2021)** studied children who were affected by COVID-19-related parental loss. The research found that millions of children experienced the loss of a caregiver, leading to high risks of mental health issues such as trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression. The research shows the long-term psychological impact of such loss.
- **Rachel Kidman et al., (2021)** Kidman examined the effects of parental loss on children's well-being. The study presented that children who lost their parents or caregivers experienced higher emotional distress, including sadness, fear and losing interest; they even faced long-term development challenges.
- **David Brent and Nadine Melhem, (2008; 2011)** The author studied children going through parental loss and who were facing and going through continuous depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. This shows that such trauma has long-term psychological effects.
- **Joan Hagan and Celia Daly, (2019)** Hagan and Daly studied how children understood and coped with death and highlighted the importance of communication in grief. Their work often showed how a child had been through emotional causes.
- **Cohen and Mannarino, (2015)** further indicated that trauma-related psychological support helps children process grief and also reduces the long-term effects of psychological difficulties. Their study highlighted that early support is essential for recovery.
- **Skinner, Cuddeford and Breen (2024)** they studied the questions asked by the grieving children to understand how they think about death and grief. The research found that children show curiosity, confusion, and emotional distress when dealing with any loss. Their question highlighted the different thoughts that go through their mind while thinking of death, as they want to understand the cause of death, emotional coping and the concept of life and death. Studies suggest that because children experience and handle loss in complex ways, they need opportunities to openly share their thoughts on death.

In summary, these studies demonstrate that childhood trauma from the death of a loved one has significant emotional, cognitive, and behavioural effects. Most studies stress the increased risks of anxiety, depression, and prolonged grief while highlighting the importance

of protective factors like emotional support, communication, and timely psychological help in encouraging resilience and recovery.

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

The current study adopted a qualitative approach with a thematic analysis method.

Sample: More than 100 people were sampled using a convenience sampling technique.

Tool: Questionnaire with open-ended questions to collect data on the feelings, changes in behaviours, and coping measures, among others.

Procedure: The questionnaire was distributed through an online tool such as Google Form. Responses were captured in a spreadsheet, and the thematic analysis method was employed in coding and analysis of the data.

Data Analysis: Data was organised and sorted into codes and then thematically analysed into categories such as Emotional Impact, Fear and Anxiety, Cognitive Impact, and Coping/adjustment. Frequency analysis of each theme was conducted using spreadsheet features.

Need for the study

This problem is rarely discussed and needs to be addressed in terms of the psychological impacts to encourage emotional well-being.

This research provides information that can prove helpful for stakeholders such as teachers, psychologists, parents, and others.

Inclusion

1. Participants who are within the relevant age group in the study.
2. Participants who have experienced the loss of a close person in their childhood.
3. Individuals who have adequate cognitive and emotional abilities to participate in the research.
4. Participants with appropriate cognitive and emotional capacity to participate in the study.

Exclusion

1. Individuals who have never faced the problem of losing a dear one in their childhood.
2. Participants falling outside the age bracket for this study.
3. Participants unable or unwilling to participate in the research sincerely.
4. Individuals with serious psychological conditions.

Objective

To analyse the effects of childhood trauma from losing a loved one in terms of impact on mental health and emotional response/coping mechanisms.

Hypothesis

- **H1:** Childhood trauma from the loss of a loved one will have a substantial effect on the emotional well-being of individuals.
- **H2:** People who lost a loved one in their childhood will show signs of anxiety, fear, grief, and confusion as they grow up.

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- **H3:** The way a person copes with and adjusts to childhood trauma will depend on social support and coping skills.

Null Hypothesis

- **H0₁:** There is no shown impact of childhood trauma due to the death of a loved one on the emotional well-being of the Individual.
- **H0₂:** No significant relationship between childhood trauma and psychological response, including confusion, anxiety, fear, and distress.
- **H0₃:** No significant role of emotional support and coping processes in adjustment and recovery from childhood trauma.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The current research explored the psychological implications of childhood trauma caused by the loss of a loved one. A total of 100+ participants responded to a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions, which allowed for in-depth responses. Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data, and it was divided into 4 major themes, namely emotional impact, fear and anxiety, cognitive impact, and coping/adjustment (Clarke, 2017).

The results revealed that most respondents experienced intense emotional impacts after losing their loved ones. The most common theme among participants' responses was the emotional impact of childhood trauma, comprising around 47% of total responses. This involved sadness, loneliness, grief, anger, and emotional numbness. This clearly implies that emotional well-being is the immediate and significant impact of such experience on individuals (Keyes, 2014). Moreover, some respondents mentioned experiencing fear and anxiety after losing their loved ones, accounting for roughly 47% of the total responses. It included the experience of insecurity, fear of losing more beloved, and constant worrying. Therefore, one can conclude that childhood loss causes long-lasting psychological insecurity and emotional sensitivity in individuals (Shear, 2012).

Cognitive impact was also found among a few participants' responses, which comprised roughly 47% of the total responses. Cognitive impact consisted of confusion, overthinking, and regret, among other things. It shows that not only does it have emotional impacts, but it also affects the way individuals think and their reasoning (Mewborn, 2026). A few participants also demonstrated coping processes and adjustment, consisting of acceptance, emotional healing, and the ability to move on in life. It includes a few participants as compared to the other categories, but still shows that people get more resilient over time.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results, the current research clearly illustrates that the loss of a loved one during childhood can have a devastating effect on the individual's psychology. As per the results, the vast majority of the participants demonstrated various negative emotional responses, such as feelings of sadness, isolation, and grief. Therefore, emotional impact is the primary consequence of such a form of trauma.

Moreover, the research showed that fear and anxiety were also commonly reported alongside cognitive issues, such as confusion and regret. Consequently, the above-listed outcomes suggest that traumatic experiences related to a parent's loss not only provoke negative emotional reactions but also impair cognitive functions in a variety of ways.

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However, there was another important finding revealed within the study. Some of the respondents showed signs of coping mechanisms and adjustments, such as accepting the loss and recovering emotionally. Thus, the abovementioned evidence shows that people are capable of overcoming losses as well as developing resilience.

Therefore, despite the fact that traumatic experiences associated with childhood loss can produce severe and long-lasting negative consequences, proper psychological care, empathy, and enough time to recover can help people maintain their mental well-being. Overall, the study illustrates the necessity to provide care to those who experience traumatic losses during childhood.

According to the thematic analysis of the participants' answers, emotional impact, cognitive impact, fear, and anxiety were the most popular response themes, followed by coping/adjustments. The results show that the latter theme appeared relatively seldom in the participants' answers.

Therefore, the outcomes reveal that even though the effects of the discussed type of trauma begin with emotional reactions, their influence can also encompass the cognitive realm. The results of the research are consistent with previous psychological investigations since the latter prove that childhood trauma caused by loss may result in both emotional and cognitive problems. Nevertheless, some respondents' coping mechanisms indicate that people have the ability to recover and adjust.

A few limitations of the current study must be pointed out. First, the responses provided by the participants are likely to be affected by bias. Moreover, the use of convenience sampling does not allow for generalising the results to the population. Still, valuable information was obtained.

Overall, the results stress that the death of a loved one during childhood has a strong and lasting effect on an individual's emotional and psychological well-being. They also emphasise the importance of emotional support and the potential for resilience and adjustment over time.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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