

# EXPRESSION OF GRIEF AND PERSONAL GROWTH IN DIVORCED AND WIDOWED OLDER ADULTS

Jeannette Brodbeck, Bina Knoepfli, Hans Joerg Znoj, & Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello

University of Bern, Switzerland,  
contact: jeannette.brodbeck@psy.unibe.

## Background

Divorce and spousal bereavement in later life cause distress and require adaptation to a new life situation. Few studies have compared grief reactions and growth after different types of relationship-related life events.

## Aim

- To explore whether the level and the expression of grief and growth was associated with the type of event and whether the expression of grief was distinct in widowed and divorced older adults.

## Study description

- Data stem from a longitudinal, survey-based study (IP 212, wave two, 2014) being part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES'. Participants were recruited using a random quota sample, stratified by age, gender, and marital status supplied by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.
- Sample: 795 persons who experienced a divorce (45%) or the death of a partner (55%) within the previous seven years. Mean age was 64 years, SD = 13 years, range 34 - 90), 65% were women.

## Measure

- Prolonged Grief Questionnaire (PG-13, Prigerson et al. 2008), 13 items, response categories 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *slightly*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *quite a bit*, 5 = *extremely*

- In the past month, how often have you felt yourself longing or yearning for the person you lost?
- In the past month, how often have you had intense feelings of emotional pain, sorrow, or pangs of grief related to the lost relationship?
- For questions 1 or 2 above, have you experienced either of these symptoms at least daily and after 6 months have elapsed since the loss?
- In the past month, how often have you tried to avoid reminders that the person you lost is gone?
- In the past month, how often have you felt stunned, shocked, or dazed by your loss?
- Do you feel confused about your role in life or feel like you don't know how you are (i.e., feeling that a part of yourself has died)?
- Have you had trouble accepting the loss?
- Has it been hard for you to trust other since your loss?
- Do you feel bitter over your loss?
- Do you feel that moving on (e.g., making new friends, pursuing new interests) would be difficult for you now?
- Do you feel emotionally numb since your loss?
- Do you feel that life is unfulfilling, empty, or meaningless since your loss?
- Have you experienced a significant reduction in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning?

- Posttraumatic growth inventory (PTGI; Cann et al., 2010), 10 items, response categories 0 = *I did not experience this change* to 5 = *I experienced this change to a great degree*

- I have a new perspective about what is important and a priority in life.
- I have a new sense of how important my life is to me.
- I'm doing more with my life.
- I now have a greater understanding of religious and spiritual matters.
- I developed a sense of connectedness with others.
- I've taken a new path in my life.
- I know now that I can deal with difficulties.
- I have stronger religious or spiritual beliefs.
- I discovered that I am stronger than I thought.

- I've learned a lot about how good people are.

## Statistical Analyses

- Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses for categorical data: confirmation of a single-factor structure (Grief: CFI = .94; TLI = .93, RMSEA = .125, CI .117-.133; Growth: CFI = .94; TLI = .92, RMSEA = .161, CI .151-.171).
- MIMIC model to identify differential item functioning (DIF): a) Regression of scales on type of event (1 = divorce; 2 = bereavement); b) constraining associations between items and type of event to 0; inspection of modification indices for local misfit indicating signs of DIF.
- Regression analyses of the scales on the type of event with direct paths from items with DIF on the type of event (Grief: CFI = .95; TLI = .94, RMSEA = .103, CI .096-.111; Growth: CFI = .94; TLI = .92, RMSEA = .149, CI .140-.159).
- Multiple group model with inspection of loadings and thresholds for divorced and widowed participants. Statistical analyses were carried out by a multiple group model using Mplus V 7.4.

## RESULTS

### Do some items behave differently for widowed and divorced participants with the same level on the underlying dimension?

**Grief symptoms:** Being widowed was related to higher levels of grief ( $\beta = .42$ , S.E. = .07;  $p < .000$ ). However, DIF based on modification indices was found for 3 items: Being widowed was associated with higher levels of longing and emotional pain and lower levels of difficulties trusting others. When accounting for DIF by adding direct effects of these symptoms on the grief factor, the association between being widowed and higher levels of grief decreased ( $\beta = .17$ , S.E. = .08,  $p = .036$ ). Furthermore, some symptoms were associated with a different severity on the latent grief dimension (see Figure 1).

**Growth items:** Personal Growth was not associated with being divorced or widowed ( $\beta = -.04$ , S.E. = .08,  $p = .630$ ). DIF was found for one item "I've taken a new path in my life". Including a direct path between this item and marital status indicated that being widowed was related to lower levels on this item ( $\beta = -.65$ , S.E. = .06,  $p = .000$ ). Overall results did not change ( $\beta = -.05$ , S.E. = .08,  $p = .549$ ). Items had a very similar standing on the latent growth dimension. Items regarding religious growth and greater connectedness with others were related to higher levels of growth on the underlying trait.

### Widowed participant

#### Most severe grief symptoms

- Bitterness over the loss
- Trying to avoid reminders of loss
- Hard to trust others

#### Least severe symptoms

- Emotional pain
- Trouble accepting the loss
- Longing and yearning and emotional pain

### Divorced participants

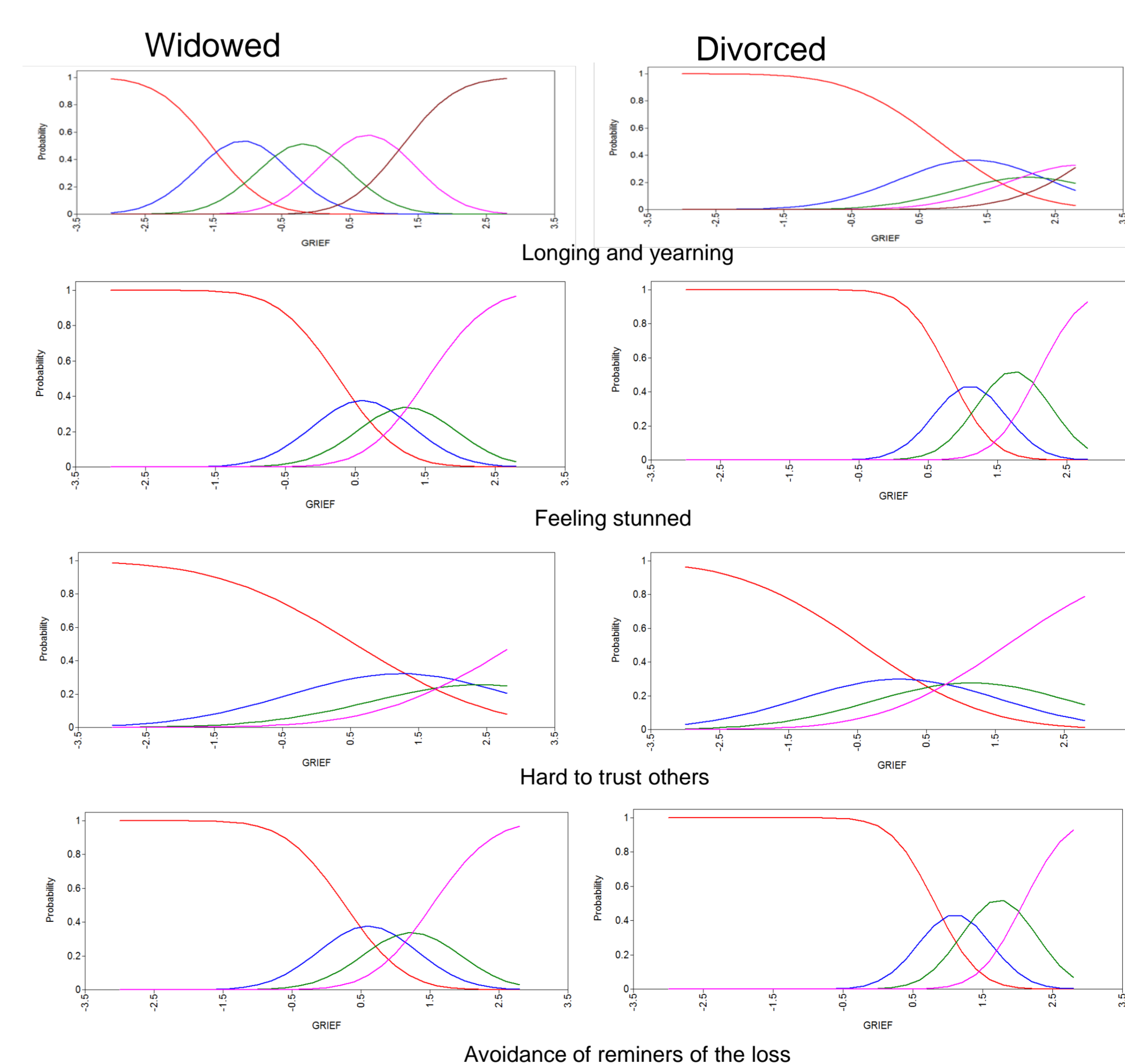
#### Most severe grief symptoms

- Feeling stunned
- Life is empty
- Longing and yearning and emotional pain

#### Least severe symptoms

- Trouble accepting the loss
- Hard to trust others

### Item Characteristic Curves based on a multiple group model



## DISCUSSION

- Some symptoms of grief were related to a different level of severity in divorced and widowed participants, therefore, items and overall scores of the Prolonged Grief Questionnaire should not be compared without adjusting for DIF. Growth items showed no DIF, apart from one item related to taking a new path in one's life.
- Implications for interventions: For widowed participants, bitterness over the loss, trying to avoid reminders of loss, and difficulties trusting others may indicate a need for intervention, while difficulties with trust are rather common and less severe after divorce. In divorced participants, feeling stunned, and feeling that life was empty or meaningless, longing and yearning for the ex-partner and emotional pain were indicative of high levels of grief, while the latter two were less severe in widowed participants.