

Life after loss: A phenomenological study of the grief experience and the meaning of loss due to pandemic in adult individuals

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Abstract

Loss is inevitable in human life. One of the most difficult forms of loss for individuals is the death of a parent. In addition to experiencing this profound loss, they also experience depression. Approximately 10-15% of individuals who experience loss experience pathological grief reactions such as depression and prolonged grief disorder. This study aims to understand the crisis experienced by individuals, the risks arising from grief, their adaptation and efforts to cope with grief, and the meaning of loss (of a parent, partner, or other family member). This study used a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach. The sampling technique used purposive sampling with the criteria of adult individuals aged 18 to 40 who experienced the loss of a loved one due to a deadly viral infection during the pandemic. The number of participants in this study was three. Data analysis used phenomenological analysis through the stages of bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing. The results showed four main themes related to loss: risk factors, impact of the loss, overcoming the loss, and meaning. Losing their parents has a significant psychological impact, but individuals are able to achieve psychological balance and build new meaning through an adaptation process that involves self-reflection, social support, and strengthening religious beliefs.

Keywords: death; grief; loss; phenomenological study



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INTRODUCTION

Loss is an inherent human experience that often precipitates profound psychological distress (Winch, 2017). Among the various forms of loss, the death of a parent or a close family member is recognized as a uniquely severe and traumatic event, frequently surpassing other life stressors in its intensity (Keyes et al., 2014). According to the Holmes and Rahe Stress Inventory, the loss of a spouse or a close relative consistently ranks among the most significant stressors an individual can encounter (AIS, 2023).

While the ideal psychological trajectory involves healthy adaptation and the restoration of stable functioning, the reality for many is a complex and prolonged grieving process. This intensity is often exacerbated when individuals are unprepared for the suddenness of the loss (Nasution, 2022), leading to a range of psychological challenges, including grief (Lenferink et al., 2017), depression (Van Eersel et al., 2021), and shifts in religiosity (Klass, 2014; Hizbullah et al., 2019).

Previous studies have emphasized the psychological impact of loss, such as the intensity of grief, disruption of daily activities, and loss of self-identity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Van Eersel et al., 2021). Worden (2018) explains that factors related to the deceased family member and the cause of death, particularly death due to unpredictable illness, can increase the risk of pathological grief. Approximately 10-15% of individuals who experience loss have pathological grief reactions such as depression and prolonged grief disorder (Lundorff et al., 2017; Eckholdt et al., 2018). In addition to grief, loss is also associated with depression. Loss caused by death triggers a complex series of emotional, psychological, and behavioral reactions. The deep, internal, and exhausting grieving process can lead to depression. The sadness felt by individuals over the loss of a family member is often associated with regret over past behavior, which then contributes to the onset of depression (Umah & Handayani, 2014).

Although studies on the psychological impact of loss have developed extensively, most research still focuses on the symptoms, risks, and clinical consequences of loss. The aspect of an individual's subjective meaning-making process of the experience of loss, particularly how individuals understand, interpret, and give meaning to the loss in the context of their lives, has been relatively less explored in depth. In fact, subjective meaning-making plays an important role in determining the direction of an individual's psychological adaptation after loss.

Furthermore, loss is also related to religiosity. Religiosity plays a role in helping individuals through the grieving process when facing loss or death (Pitman et al., 2016). Research suggests an inverse relationship between religiosity and grief-related sadness, where higher levels of religious engagement often correlate with more resilient outcomes (Wortmann, 2008). Religiosity acts as a coping mechanism that reduces vulnerability during stressful life events (Pargament, 1997; 2011). However, many quantitative studies treat religiosity as a mere supporting variable, failing to explore how it is subjectively experienced and integrated into the coping process.

This research gap is even more apparent in the context of loss due to the pandemic. Sudden deaths, the restriction of traditional farewell rituals, and the burden of social isolation created a unique and challenging dynamic of loss. However, studies exploring the experience of loss due to the pandemic from an individual's subjective perspective, especially regarding the meaning of loss and the role of religiosity, are still limited.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to explore individuals' subjective meaning-making of the experience of losing loved ones due to the pandemic, identify the risk factors and psychological impacts experienced, and describe individuals' adaptation efforts in coping with grief, taking into account the role of religiosity. The research questions posed are: How do individuals interpret the experience of pandemic-related loss, and what is the role of religiosity in this process?

RESEARCH METHODS

Approach

This study employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach that explores the lived experiences of individuals navigating the phenomenon of loss. The phenomenological approach focuses on individuals' life experiences (Nebauer et al., 2019) and requires detailed descriptions and in-depth analysis to reveal the meaning of phenomena from an individual's perspective (Fauziah & Atmaja, 2022).

Research participants

The participants for this study were selected using criterion sampling, a purposive technique designed to identify individuals who possess specific experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Moser & Korstiens, 2017). The criteria for participants in this study were individuals aged 18-40 who had experienced the loss of a family member due to the pandemic.

Data collection

Data acquisition involved a dual-source approach, incorporating both primary and secondary data to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observations, while secondary data consisted of supporting documents relevant to the participants' experiences of loss.

The use of semi-structured interviews facilitated an in-depth investigation into the participants' subjective experiences. The main questions asked included, *"Describe the experience of loss you encountered," "How did you cope with the grief of that loss,"* and *"What transformations occurred in you after the loss."* Each interview with participants was conducted face-to-face (*offline*) with three meetings and a duration of 60 minutes for each meeting, allowing researchers to explore the data in depth and clarify the meaning of the experiences conveyed by each participant.

All interviews were conducted with the participants' consent, recorded using voice recording devices, and then transcribed verbatim by the researchers. The interview transcripts were then used as the main material in the data analysis process.

Non-participant observations were conducted to capture paralinguistic cues, including facial expressions, vocal intonations, speech pauses, and non-verbal gestures. The observation data were used as supporting data to enrich the understanding of the participants' experiences and to assist the researchers in the process of interpreting meaning during data analysis. Secondary data used in this study included personal documents (such as diaries), social media posts, photos, and other recordings relevant to the participants' experiences of loss. All use of secondary data was done with the participants' consent, taking into account research ethics, confidentiality, and protection of sensitive data. The data collection process was stopped when the information obtained showed a repeating pattern, and no new significant themes were found, thus reaching data saturation.

The phenomenological approach comprises four stages: bracketing, intuiting, analysing, and *describing* (Greening, 2019). *Bracketing* is the process of suspending the researchers' preconceived beliefs and opinions about the phenomenon to ensure the data remain grounded in the participants' authentic voices. This is followed by the *intuiting* stage, in which the researchers focus on the open interpretation of the research participants. Researchers can compare each participant's perceptions or interpretations of the observed phenomenon. The next stage is *analyzing*, which is the process of codification by the researchers by categorizing significant themes from the phenomenon data obtained. The final stage is *describing*, in which the researchers explain the understanding and definition of the phenomenon being studied based on the identified themes (Greening, 2019).

The findings are presented through vignettes and a conceptual framework. Vignettes provide a nuanced technique for illustrating participants' perceptions and beliefs in sensitive contexts (Barter & Renold, 1999). Meanwhile, a conceptual framework is a model of the relationships between variables that implies a particular theoretical perspective for describing a phenomenon (Yamauchi et al., 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Following the phenomenological analysis of the data collected from three participants, the findings are presented through a combination of vignettes and detailed psychological descriptions. The researchers compiled all this information into a comprehensive concept of interpretation related to *Life After Loss: The broken ones will arise, the lost ones will be replaced*.

Vignette and meaning-making from Participant R

R is a 22-year-old graduate of a prominent private university in Yogyakarta who maintained a distinguished academic record and an exceptionally close bond with her family. Her mother, in particular, served as his primary confidante and source of emotional support. R was forced to confront the sudden death of her mother due to COVID-19, a tragedy that occurred shortly after she had accompanied her through a grueling battle with breast cancer. The pandemic-imposed isolation, which prevented her from being present during her final moments, precipitated a state of traumatic grief characterized by intense guilt and regret. As she reflected on that period, R

noted, "*I did regret it, why did she go home, why didn't she stay (in the hospital)*" (A.1.5.4). This emotional burden was further compounded by insensitive inquiries from her social environment, which indirectly deepened her psychological pain.

In response to this grief, R initially sought to occupy her mind by immersing herself in various activities. However, her deeper recovery was guided by emulating her father's fortitude and turning toward spiritual devotion as a means of surrendering herself to God. These efforts were not limited to private reflection; R also utilized her digital footprint as a cathartic space to externalize pent-up emotions. Through social media, she sought to validate her sorrow and find inner calm, eventually posting, "*I am sure that everything that happens is part of His plan, right?*" This digital expression became a sign of how R was trying to reconcile her inner pain with the reality that she had to accept.

As time progressed, R began to process her memories and her mother's past advice into a transformative new belief system. She moved away from viewing death as a definitive conclusion, instead conceptualizing it as an ongoing form of spiritual devotion. This shift is evident in her social media reflections, where she describes a child as a "spiritual investment" for parents in the afterlife, stating, "*It will never be enough to repay what they (parents) have given me, but there is still something I can do.*" This perspective effectively transmuted her debilitating grief into a constructive motivation for self-improvement and the performance of good deeds.

Ultimately, this developmental process led R to a point of sincere acceptance. She successfully transformed her sense of loss into a mature awareness of the inherent limitations of human control over destiny. R articulated this understanding through a poignant reflection: "*The meaning of loss is learning to accept... that you have no power over your life*" (A.1.24.6). Today, R moves forward with renewed confidence, actively integrating her mother's core values into her daily actions and decisions.

Vignette and meaning-making from Participant D

D is 23 years old and the eldest of two siblings. Currently employed at a child development agency in Jakarta, D is recognized for her intellectual curiosity and active engagement in self-development initiatives, particularly those centered on early childhood education and welfare. The loss occurred when D's father passed away during the pandemic due to cardiac complications. Although her father initially experienced only mild symptoms and sought non-medical treatment, his condition deteriorated, necessitating hospitalization. At the same time, D and her mother were simultaneously infected with the virus and were placed in government-mandated isolation. These pandemic-related restrictions deprived D of the opportunity to be present with her father during his final days.

D interpreted the loss of her father as a pivotal, albeit painful, element of her transition into adulthood. However, the early stages of bereavement were marked by regret, specifically regarding her perceived lack of attentiveness and emotional responsiveness toward her father before his death. During the interview, D's emotional distress was evident through visible tears

and physical tremors in her hands, requiring several moments to regain her composure. She expressed this heavy burden of guilt, stating, *"I really regret why I was so lazy at that time"* (D.1.17.6).

D experienced a premonition regarding her father's passing, which provided a degree of cognitive preparation even as she grappled with emotional grief. Nevertheless, her sorrow was intensified by pandemic protocols that prohibited a traditional funeral procession. Consequently, D and her mother were forced to witness the burial from the confines of an ambulance, a restrictive experience that hindered the mourning process (D.1.5.1).

The emotional pressure was further exacerbated when D had to continue fulfilling her academic obligations after the funeral. D forced herself to complete her thesis while holding back her sadness, which shows the conflict between role demands and the ongoing grieving process (D.1.5.3). In coping with her grief, D used adaptive coping strategies through emotional catharsis by painting a portrait of her father. The activity of painting became a medium for expressing emotions, remembering memories with his father, and symbolically closing the mourning phase, *"Painting my father... all my sadness comes out"* (D.2.6.4). Furthermore, she relied heavily on communal emotional support, sharing stories and grieving openly with her mother and sister.

D's acceptance of the loss deepened through her religious beliefs and the positive narratives shared by her father's associates about his character and legacy. This helped D build inner peace and accept her father's passing with a belief and acceptance: *"My father, God willing, will have a good ending (husnul khatimah)"* (D.2.18.20). D interprets her father's death as a momentum for personal growth, leading her to become a more mature, independent, and responsible individual. She views the loss as an expression of divine providence that has fundamentally shifted her perspective on life. This is reflected in her statement, *"Qadarullah (the decree of Allah) is truly the best for us"* (D.2.33.24). This interpretive process is physically manifested in her paintings, which continue to serve as a symbol of both her loss and her enduring connection to her father.

Vignette and meaning-making from Participant H

H is the eldest of three siblings. At the time of data collection, he was 26 years old and a graduate student in Yogyakarta. Known for his reflective nature and high degree of empathy, H had a closer emotional relationship with his mother than with his father. Despite living independently away from home, his mother's consistent support and communication remained his primary source of emotional regulation and psychological stability.

The loss occurred suddenly during the pandemic. Unlike some who may have had premonitions, H perceived his mother's initial condition as a routine illness. Therefore, the news of her admission to intensive care and her subsequent passing served as an immense psychological shock. His absence during her final moments and the inability to offer a final apology directly exacerbated the trauma of his loss.

This experience of loss gave rise to feelings of devastation, regret, and deep guilt. H expressed shock at his mother's passing, "*I feel completely devastated*" (H.1.20.8), and realized the significance of losing the opportunity to apologize to his parents (H.1.17.15). During the data collection process, H shed tears when recounting the experience of losing his mother and needed several minutes to calm himself before continuing the data collection session. This emotional reaction arose situationally when H recalled his mother and the loss he experienced.

Psychologically, H also reported experiencing *panic attacks*, especially about six months after his mother's passing. H described this condition as feeling shocked every time he woke up, accompanied by difficulty breathing, "*The most noticeable psychological impact is panic attacks*" (H.1.13.13). However, H assessed that this condition did not interfere with his academic functioning and daily productivity, which indicated that his coping capacity and functional control were still relatively intact. In addition to internal impacts, H also faced external factors in the form of disharmony and conflict within his extended family after the loss, which added to his emotional stress during the mourning period (H.1.10.6).

In the initial stages of grief, H engaged in relatively maladaptive behaviors, such as social withdrawal and excessive gaming as a form of distraction. However, these behaviors were transient. He gradually redirected his energy toward adaptive coping strategies, characterized by increased religiosity and a focus on self-development. H began to interpret his pursuit of knowledge and religious practice as a form of *sadaqah jariyah* (ongoing charity) dedicated to his mother, noting that "*seeking knowledge is also a form of worship*" (H.2.42.13).

At certain moments that have emotional significance for H, such as his mother's birthday and Mother's Day, H expresses his longing and emotional closeness to his mother through posts on social media. In one of his statements, H reflects on his acceptance of Allah's destiny, "*I am sure that everything that happens is part of His plan, right?*" These statements illustrate how H reflects on his experience of loss, expresses his longing, and builds meaning from the tragic events he has experienced in a symbolic way.

Over time, H began to view the loss of his mother as a catalyst for substantial positive change. His initial feelings of guilt and sorrow were transmuted into a powerful motivation for self-improvement and the pursuit of his master's degree. He noted that the experience became the primary "catalyst to become a better person" (H.1.17.16).

For H, the meaning of loss centered on the value of devotion to parents, the meaningful use of time, and the belief that change must originate from within. Support from family and friends also strengthened the process of adaptation and acceptance of loss. Ultimately, H interpreted loss as a momentum to surrender things that cannot be controlled to God and to organize life goals in a more conscious and meaningful way (H.2.41.32; H.2.49.43).

Discussion

Based on the units of meaning identified in each participant, the researchers identified the main themes in this study as Risk factors (sub-themes: family disharmony, stigma, less empathetic treatment, and shock), Impact of the loss (sub-themes: regret, guilt, insecurity, loss of energy,

anger, sadness, grief, restlessness, and yearning), Overcoming the loss (internal sub-themes: bustling, ego defense mechanism, prayer, surrender to Allah; external sub-themes: shared feeling and seeking for help) and Meaning-making (recollect, belief: acceptance and change). These themes are arranged into a conceptual framework that interacts with one another.

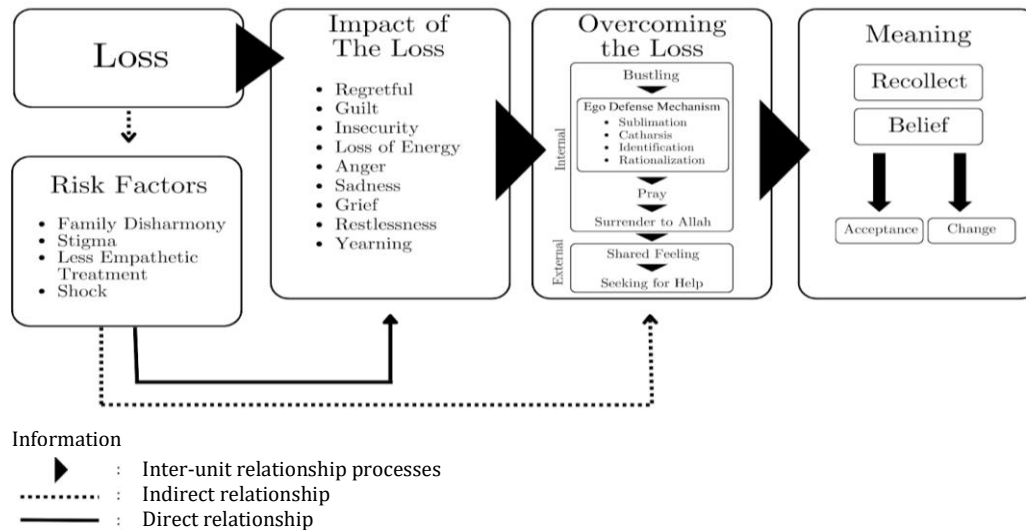


Figure 1. Framework of life after loss: the broken ones will arise, the lost ones will be replaced

The findings of this study illustrate that individuals navigating the loss of a family member undergo a layered process encompassing loss, risk factors, the impact of the loss, overcoming the loss, and meaning-making. These five components do not follow a linear trajectory; rather, they interact with each other. Risk factors act as a context that strengthens or prolongs the impact of loss and influences the coping strategies and meaning-making processes developed by individuals. These findings confirm that the meaning of loss is the result of a synthesis of emotional experiences, social context, and individual belief systems.

Loss

Loss in this study refers to the experience of losing a close family member due to a lethal virus in the context of a pandemic. This loss is not only understood as an event of death, but as the main trigger for a series of psychological impacts, adaptation strategies, and meaning-making processes. The loss experienced by participants was characterized by physical limitations (unable to accompany or offer a final farewell) and temporary disturbances in psychosocial functioning. These findings indicate that loss in the context of a pandemic has unique characteristics that complicate the adaptation process, compared to loss in normal situations.

Risk factors

The experience of loss elicits diverse reactions, influenced by both risk and protective factors (Ogliastri, 2020). The research findings identified four main risk factors, namely family disharmony, social stigma, lack of empathy, and shock. Family disharmony after loss, especially internal conflict, reinforces negative emotions such as anger and disappointment, aligning with

the findings of Wilis (Hidayati et al., 2022). Social stigma against families affected by deadly viruses also complicates the experience of loss, as reported in studies by Rahmatina et al. (2021) and Bagchi et al. (2021).

In addition, a lack of empathy from the environment, such as insensitive demands to recount the chronology of the loss, triggers anger and sadness (Fauchon et al., 2017). The element of shock resulting from a sudden death without prior cognitive or emotional preparation further hinders an individual's ability to manage the aftermath (Jacq, 2009; Ogliastri, 2020). In summary, these risk factors directly influence the impact of loss and indirectly affect individuals' coping strategies. Based on information from all participants, it was identified that these risk factors have a direct influence on *the impact of loss* and an indirect influence on how individuals cope *with loss*.

Impact of the loss

The impact of loss identified in this study includes regret, guilt, feelings of insecurity, loss of energy, anger, deep sadness, anxiety, grief, and longing. Regret and guilt were dominant, especially in relation to the role as a child before the death of a parent, as also reported by Belen (2021) and Stroebe et al. (2014).

Furthermore, feelings of insecurity were found to stem from the sudden absence of primary figures who provided essential emotional and financial stability (Ellis et al., 2013). This destabilization is often accompanied by a significant loss of energy and pervasive sadness, which together diminish an individual's capacity for engagement in daily activities and social responsibilities (Hanetz-Gamliel, 2022). Additionally, the presence of anxiety, anger, and persistent longing serves to complicate and prolong the adaptation process, potentially leading to more chronic forms of distress (Morcom, 2021; Djelantik et al., 2021; Eisma et al., 2020). These findings indicate that the impact of loss is multidimensional and interrelated.

Overcoming the loss

The process of overcoming loss in this study is divided into internal and external strategies. Internally, individuals use busyness and ego defense mechanisms such as sublimation, catharsis, identification, and rationalization (Mauludya et al., 2018; Bekess & Perry, 2020; Knoll et al., 2020).

When these mechanisms are no longer adequate, individuals turn to religious coping through prayer and surrender to God. Prayer serves as a form of collaborative religious coping that helps regulate emotions and adapt to loss (Utami, 2012; Nashori, 2024). Externally, individuals share their feelings with those closest to them and utilize professional counseling services. This strategy strengthens the acceptance process and reduces feelings of loneliness, in line with Kubler-Ross and Kessler's (2014) views on recovery from loss.

Meaning-making

The construction of meaning following loss is formed through three primary processes: *recollection*, *belief–acceptance*, and *change*. The *recollection* process helps individuals accept the reality of loss through remembering and internalizing the values and memories left behind (Ogliastri, 2020). Religious belief plays an important role in the acceptance of loss. Individuals with religious beliefs tend to be better able to find meaning after loss (Burke et al., 2012). In the context of Islam, the acceptance of misfortune is understood as part of Allah's decree, without negating sadness (Rimiru & Mokua, 2020). This belief encourages change in the form of increased responsibility, self-awareness, and a more meaningful life orientation. These findings align with established psychological perspectives that loss brings permanent changes that require psychological adaptation and new roles in an individual's life (Attig, 1996; Bergman et al., 2017; Çakar, 2020).

CONCLUSION

No individual plans to experience loss. When the loss of a close family member occurs, it can cause temporary psychological and social barriers for individuals. To cope with this loss, individuals go through a series of stages to achieve psychological balance. This study highlights that meaning is fundamentally reconstructed through a deep reflection on the virtues and legacies of the deceased, which helps them feel their mental presence. In addition, individuals also adopt an attitude of acceptance and face life changes with the help of religious beliefs to give meaning to the process of loss.

Several recommendations can be implemented by relevant parties, including the provision of psychological services by the government, religious organizations, and religious leaders for individuals who are grieving. These services can be provided through community health centers or hospitals in the form of counseling, psychoeducation, and psychological therapy to prevent prolonged grief disorder. It is also recommended that future researchers conduct similar studies on individuals who have lost their spouses or children due to the deadly pandemic, as this study only covers individuals who have lost their parents. This is expected to complement the understanding of life after loss: a continuous recovery process.

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