

Volunteering Improves Older Parents' Mental Health After the Death of a Child

Hyungmin Cha and Patricia A. Thomas

INTRODUCTION

About 13% of parents experience the death of their child, a devastating and stressful life event. Many studies have demonstrated that the death of a child leads to negative mental health consequences for the surviving parents. Few studies, however, have asked whether parents' mental health eventually returns to the levels they had before losing their child, and if so, how long the healing process takes. Still fewer studies have examined whether certain activities, such as volunteering, might shorten recovery time.

Previous studies have demonstrated that relying only on close ties, such as other family, during bereavement can have negative consequences for mental health recovery. This is because the death of the child negatively affects those close ties as well, making it difficult for some family members and close others to provide meaningful support. It also may entrap the parent in a role (for example, as a grieving parent) and make it harder to transition to new roles.

Therefore, the authors examine the impact of volunteering on recovery time because ties to the broader community may help with recovery. Indeed, studies have shown that seeking support

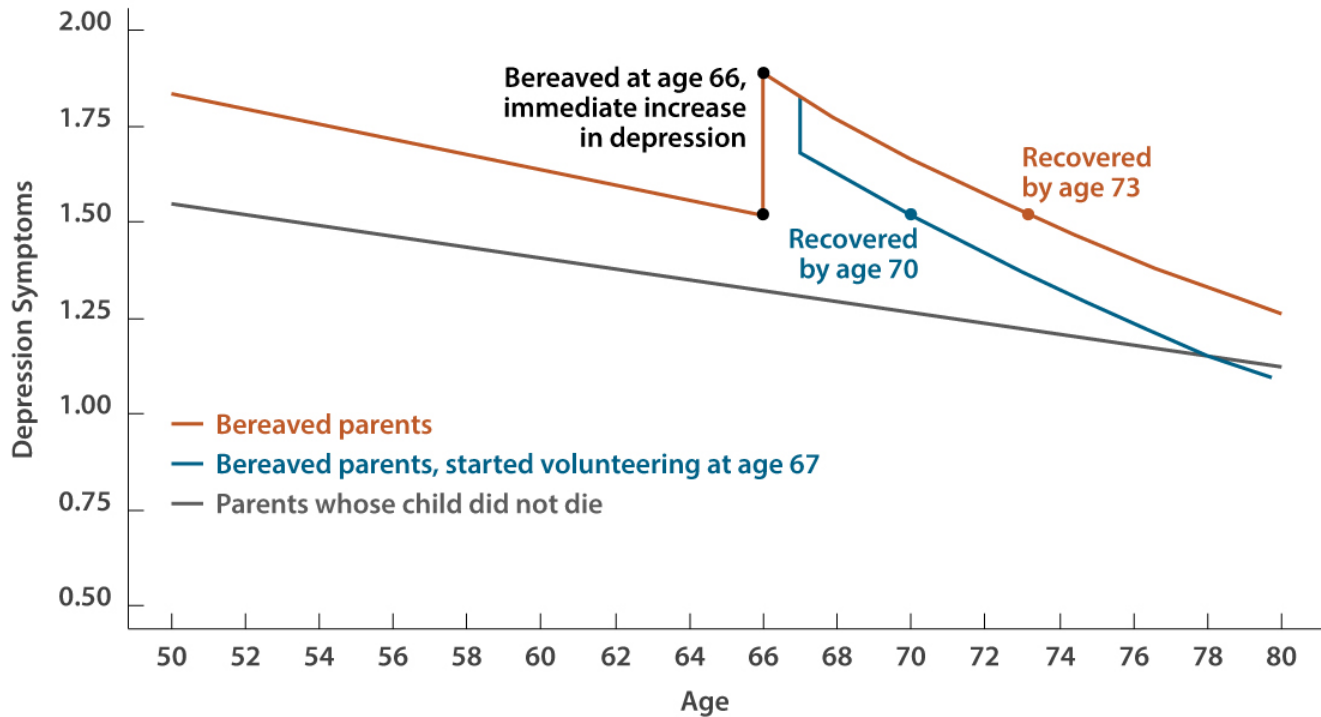
outside of family and friends networks can be more effective in dealing with loss. These weaker ties can help parents reintegrate their lives and transition to new roles.

The authors analyze Health and Retirement Study (HRS) data from 1998 to 2016. The HRS is a nationally representative survey of people age 50 and older who are surveyed every two years. They analyze data on levels of depression among parents whose child died during the study period and compare them to parents whose child did not die. Using sophisticated statistical techniques, they calculate the immediate impact of experiencing a child death and then map the trajectory of recovery for bereaved parents [1]. They ask: Does the mental health of mid-to-later life parents whose child died eventually return to pre-bereavement levels? If so, how long does it take? Finally, they ask: Does engaging in volunteer work after the death of their child help parents to recover more quickly?

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Compared to nonbereaved parents, parents aged 50 and older whose child died between 1998 and 2016:
 - ▶ were 66 years old, on average;
 - ▶ were more likely to be racial or ethnic minorities, have lower socioeconomic status, and less likely to be married;
 - ▶ had higher levels of depression before child loss (*see figure*); and
 - ▶ had an immediate increase in depression after child loss (*see figure*).
- ▶ Depression for bereaved parents eventually returned to their pre-bereavement levels; this process took approximately 7 years (*see figure*).
- ▶ Depression for bereaved parents who started volunteering after their loss returned to their pre-bereavement levels more quickly; this process took approximately 4 years (*see figure*).
- ▶ Parents in both groups – those who lost a child and those who did not – had lower levels of depression at age 80 compared to age 50 (*see figure*).

After the death of a child, mental health recovers to pre-bereavement levels after about 7 years. Mental health recovers more quickly for parents who volunteer after the death of a child.



This figure shows depression levels for parents who experienced the death of a child at age 66 among those who did and not start volunteering at age 67, compared to those who did not experience bereavement. Age 66 is the average age of parents aged 50-80 whose child died. See figure 2, panel a in the original article for confidence intervals.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Volunteering after the death of a child helps parents in mid-to-later life recover their mental health more quickly. Therefore, it is imperative that policies and programs be developed to encourage volunteering for older parents who experience child loss, particularly in communities that are hard hit by the death of children.

REFERENCE

[1] Cha, H., & Thomas, P.A. (2023). A time of healing: Can social engagement after bereavement reduce trajectories of depression after the death of a child? *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbad094>

SUGGESTED CITATION

Cha, H., & Thomas, P.A. (2023). Volunteering improves older parents' mental health after the death of a child. *CAPS Research Brief 2(2)*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/48103>

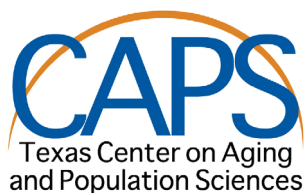
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by grant P30AG066614, awarded to the Center on Aging and Population Sciences at The University of Texas at Austin by the National Institute on Aging, grant R01AG054624, awarded to Debra Umberson, principal investigator, by the National Institute on Aging and by grant P2CHD042849, awarded to the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

This brief is published in partnership with UT Austin's Population Research Center, which provides CAPS with high-quality services and resources to facilitate large-scale, population-based aging research.



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