A last taboo in public health

The death of a parent is one of the last taboos in public health. The acute and chronic pain of parental loss and the resulting tragedy for the children and remaining parent left behind are almost too distressing to contemplate. Too often, our societies struggle to acknowledge, let alone comprehend and address, the effects of the premature death of a parent through physical illness, suicide, accident, or natural disaster. But this omission is an error that needs to be urgently corrected. For as many as one in 20 children must live with the loss of a parent. Childhood bereavement is a substantial, yet largely hidden, public health challenge that must be seen, confronted, and managed.

No two children react the same to the death of a parent, even within the same family. A child’s understanding of parental death depends on their age, their stage of development, the family background, and their previous exposure to death. In a recent qualitative study of adults who suffered the death of a parent as a young person, several consistent themes emerged. Distance and isolation are common, with friends being uncertain about how to react. This uncertainty may lead the affected child to distance themselves from others and block out the death from their minds. The emotional journey that each child took was a unique mix of anger, anxiety, denial, guilt, devastation, and depression. Physical impacts manifested as maladaptive behaviours, panic attacks, and physical illnesses. Some adults described a sense of post-traumatic growth—the death of a parent gave them a new outlook on life (“life is for living and it is for living now”) and helped to build resilience and to strengthen relationships within their families. But at the same time, they reported that life would never be the same after the loss of a parent. Adults recognised that love, support, and understanding were essential to successfully navigate the grieving process. This support was mediated by family, peers, and professionals. And finally, even some time after the parental death, the older child or adult may experience periods of re-grief. The substantial emotional and physical consequences of a parent’s death on the child are complex and not easily reduced to a simple formula for standardised treatment.

In this issue of The Lancet Public Health, Ayako Hiyoshi and colleagues extend our understanding of the risks of parental death. Using Swedish national registers, they found that among adolescents and young adults, and especially among women and girls, the risks for substance use and suicide-related behaviours increased around the first few death anniversaries. They conclude that “bereaved individuals, especially women and girls, could benefit from preventive measures to reduce distress related to anniversaries of the death of a parent”, a view endorsed in a linked Comment by Annette Erlangsen.

The effects of parental loss are not quickly extinguished. In a 2018 study, Steven Pham and colleagues followed up children who lost a parent over a 7-year interval. They reported negative impacts on academic and social functioning, with children who lost a parent being more than twice as likely than nonbereaved children to show impairments at home. The peak incidence of depression and post-traumatic stress was 2 years after the parental loss, and was especially severe for children younger than 12 years. This study highlights the need to implement careful monitoring programmes for children at risk. But the evidence shows that health professionals can do more than monitor. In their 2017 systematic review, Ann-Sofie Bergman and colleagues summarised findings from support programmes that had large, medium, and small effects for parentally bereaved children and their caregivers. Emotional support can be successful when given through group, family and parental guidance interventions provided by counsellors or social workers. The negative effects of parental loss on children are not immutable.

Even before COVID-19, the issue of parental bereavement was an important and neglected public health priority. After 2 years of the pandemic, with millions of preventable deaths worldwide, the consequences of losing a parent for the children and caregivers left behind have only multiplied. Enabling open conversations about grief among young people afflicted by a parental death and offering proven multidisciplinary support services to affected families is now its own public health emergency of international concern.

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