

DO BEREAVED PARENTS HAVE higher death rates?

DR. BOB BAUGHER

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Yes—but only slightly.

No one can argue that the death of a child places a tremendous burden on the emotional and physical well-being of the family. A vitally important question that follows from this is whether bereaved parents actually have shorter life spans than their nonbereaved counterparts. The purpose of this article is to give you an overview of a recently published study which attempted to answer this question. Information on this study is as follows.

This study used the national registers in Denmark, and followed 21,062 parents whose child (under age 18) had died, up to 18 years after the death. The death rates of these parents were compared with 293,745 nonbereaved parents of similar background (number of children, age of children, single/living together).

The authors reported their findings in ratios. A 1:1 ratio would indicate no difference in death rates between the two groups. A 2:1 ratio would indicate that the bereaved parent group had twice the death rate of the nonbereaved group, and so on.

When bereaved mothers and fathers were compared with their nonbereaved counterparts, the bereaved mother group was 1.43 times more likely than non-bereaved mothers to die both from natural and unnatural causes.

Bereaved fathers did not show an overall increased death rate. However, bereaved fathers did show an increased death rate in one specific area: only from unnatural causes and only during the first three years following their child's death (ratio: 1.57—meaning that bereaved fathers during the first three years were 1.57 times more likely than nonbereaved fathers to die from unnatural causes, such as accident and suicide).

There were several other findings in this study, but for the purpose of this article, we want to help you make sense of the major results. One reason we were asked to write this article is because reporters in the media have, at times, taken the results of a research study and misinterpreted the findings in their report.

For example, we were concerned that a misrepresented headline might read, "*Bereaved Parents Doomed to Early Death*"—which is *not* what

this study found. With this in mind, we wish to help you accurately interpret the results of this study. First, let's look at the finding of the 1.43 ratio of bereaved to nonbereaved mothers.

If we look at actual numbers, we will discover that the effect of a child's death on a mother's mortality risk is actually fairly small. There were 11,221 bereaved mothers in this study. An overall average death rate in a population of people is approximately 1% per year. So, if bereaved mothers had no higher death rates than nonbereaved mothers, we would expect 1% of 11,221 bereaved mothers or 112 to die in any given year.

However, the study found a ratio of 1.43. Therefore, multiple 1.43 times 112 and you get 160 bereaved mothers would die in any given year rather than 112. If you subtract the expected deaths from the actual deaths (160 minus 112), you get an excess of 48 deaths of bereaved mothers for each year following their child's death. If you multiply 48 deaths times 18 years (the length of the study), you get 867 excess mother deaths out of 11,221, which is 7.7% of the total.

Bereaved mothers have an approximate 7.7% increase in risk of dying during the first 18 years following the death of their child.

FINDINGS:

Certainly, one death is a tragedy. But, let's put these findings in proper perspective: the vast majority of bereaved mothers will *not* experience a death earlier than they might have, had their child lived.

Next, let's look at fathers. Recall that the *overall* death rate of bereaved fathers was not greater than the nonbereaved fathers. However, let's look

at the one area where there was a slightly higher risk: unnatural causes (accident and suicide) during the *first three years*. Using the same formula as above, we would expect 1% of the 9,841 bereaved fathers or 98 to die each of the 18 years. The actual death rate was 1.57 times 98 or 154 deaths, which is an excess of 56 deaths per year. Multiple 56 times three years and we get a total excess of 168 deaths of fathers. The percent of excess deaths (168) to total deaths is 1.7%. This means that bereaved fathers have an approximate 1.7% increase in unnatural deaths, but it only lasts the first three years following the death of their child. Otherwise there is no difference between death rates of bereaved compared to nonbereaved fathers.

SUMMARY:

The death of a child clearly does put parents at risk for an early death. But the risk is small. While the study did not investigate the specific factors that contribute to an early death, it is clear that bereaved parents need to take extra care to guard their health by obtaining social support, making appointments for physical check-ups, and following healthy diet and exercise programs. Don't get us wrong. We are aware that sometimes you may feel that you can't or don't wish to go on. However, there are still people in your life who need you.

And they want you around for a long time.

RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Mortality in parents after death of a child in Denmark: a nationwide follow-up study. **RESEARCHERS:** JIONG LI, DORTHE HANSEN PRECHT, PREBEN BO MORTENSEN, JØRN OLSEN.
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