

Life Situation of Widowed Seniors

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to answer the question what the life situation of widowed seniors is like. The basis of the paper is depiction of life situation of widows and widowers at the senior age with an emphasis on clarifying their problems and coping abilities and on defining the demands and expectations by their milieu. The article further deals with social support which can help widowers and widows in adapting to the death of their life partner. The terms are given here based on available literature.

Key words: loss of life partner, widowhood, old age, life situation

Introduction

In the presented article, the life situation of widows and widowers in the period of old age is depicted, with special emphasis laid on the characteristics of their problems due to

loss of their life partner and the expectations by their milieu towards them. Furthermore, the topic of the paper aims at a deeper understanding of the concept of social support to bereaved people. The main thematic parts respond to the particular question: what is the life situation of widowed seniors like?

The purpose of this article as a whole is to specify and depict in greater depth the character of life situations of bereaved spouses after becoming widowed in the specific period of old age.

The notion of life situation is defined as an individual configuration of barriers and preconditions of social functioning of individuals or a specific group. (Musil, Navrátil, 2000) The term social functioning can be understood as an interaction taking place between the demands by the environment and the individuals concerned.

(Bartlett, 1970 In Musil, Navrátil, 2000)

Characteristics of social functioning consist in four dimensions:

- the individual's problem and their ability to cope with it,
- demands and expectations by their milieu,
- support by the environment,
- interaction between the individual's coping ability and the demands by their milieu.

The final result of the mutual interactions is either a balance or an imbalance. (Bartlett, 1970 In Musil, Navrátil, 2000) The imbalance on the part of the individual is caused by lacking skills and on the part of the milieu by unreasonable demands on the individual or in case of insufficient support with respect to the expectations. (Musil, Navrátil, 2000)

At the beginning of the whole article I give my own characteristic of old age with regard to widows and widowers, then based on the above stated theory of life situation I define the problems of bereaved people associated with the event of becoming widowed and subsequently I give the readers of this article an insight into the possible expectations by the milieu towards senior aged widows and widowers, and in conclusion I refer to ways of social support by the milieu to widowed seniors.

1 Characteristic of Widows and Widowers in Old Age

Considering that the paper focuses on widows and widowers in old age, I deem it necessary to define and characterize this stage of life briefly so as to make the context of the paper better understandable. Old age is a specific period in human life which brings along many changes in all dimensions of an individual's life. This obviously has an impact on the way of life of seniors and on their managing and coping with difficult life situations.

Age definition of old age is according to Langmeier and Krejčířová (2006) determined by the lower limit of 65 years. Vágnerová (2007) further states that during this period, an individual's personality starts to change and some of their features are accentuated. The changes are mostly caused by worsened skills and declining tolerance to stress. With time, seniors withdraw increasingly into their private life and their need for social contacts outside their family decreases. In old age, family becomes important as it satisfies the need for intimacy, primarily in the role of grandparents, especially in women. (Vágnerová, 2007)

Also biological changes, mainly of eyesight, hearing, loss of muscle strength, degradation of motor skills and higher susceptibility to disease can be limiting for seniors. In addition to unpleasant feelings

of greater limitation in seniors, this may affect their possibility of inclusion in the social environment. (Pichaud, Thareauová, 1998)

In old age, marriage of two seniors goes through changes as well. Řičan (2004) claims that marriage in an older age is seen by the spouses themselves as happier than before. Partners live together under the same conditions, the same stimuli influence them and thus there is a high presumption that they will share the same attitudes and values.

Retirement itself means for the spouses a change in their mutual relationships and roles. It is usually the woman who takes a more dominant position within her feminine identity in the role of carer for the household, deciding on most things and thus strengthening her self-confidence. In contrast, men after retiring from their job seek application with regard to using their free time and confirmation of their values with more difficulties. This change in lifestyle results in greater coherence between the spouses than in earlier stages of their life. The spouses are much more reliant on each other. (Vágnerová, 2007)

Hrozenká (2008) sees the main burden for a senior marriage in compelled spending of common leisure time of both spouses, which in the cases when they were not used to it, is as if they had to

learn to live together again. Another pitfall for spouses – seniors can be abundance of common leisure time which they do not know how to use, which is particularly a crucial issue for individuals with a physical limitation.

Another natural burden for marriage occurring at the senior age is widowhood. According to Vymětal (2003), many widowed seniors die within two years from the death of their partner for the reasons of social isolation, loss of meaning of life and failure to ensure basic life needs. (Vágnerová, 2007)

2 Problems of Bereaved Widows and Widowers and their Coping Abilities

The root cause of the problem of the defined group of bereaved people is widowhood, i.e. the loss of life partner due to death. The bereaved person gets from their original social role of a husband or wife into the role of a widow or widower. The purpose of this chapter is to capture the changes and problems which widowhood brings along for the bereaved person himself/herself. At the same time, I outline the differences in perception and the impact of the loss on men and women, and then I deal with circumstances influencing the impact of the loss on widows.

The partner's death is one of the toughest losses which a person may have

to face. Death represents a permanent and definitive loss. (Špatenková, 2005) Marriage is usually positively affected by a person's feeling of life satisfaction, thus widowhood brings a radical life change and the adaptation process is difficult and often lengthy, too. The adaptation is mainly influenced by the quality of the remaining primary social relationships and the individual's ability to establish and develop new relationships. (Špatenková, 2004) Therefore, meeting other people is of enormous significance for widows and widowers, also functioning as a preventative measure against possible social isolation. (Kubíčková, 2001)

Widowhood brings stress connected with the loss of partner and increases proportionately with age. Older people endure the loss with more difficulties, although it can be assumed that socially it is a more expected phenomenon than a death of partner in the working age. The loss of partner affects all areas of life of the bereaved person, a feeling of loneliness and emptiness emerges, structures of the existing mode of life collapse and the impact may be reflected in the economic sphere as well. (Vágnerová, 2007)

The loss of life partner means a loss of social perspective, established customs, rituals and securities. A space for formation of entirely new social positions and roles is created. This may bring a number of

disadvantages but also advantages for the bereaved person. On the one hand, the old identity ceases to exist and on the other hand, a new identity must be formed. In this context of searching for a new identity, there are differences between women and men. Widows need a time for forming their new identity of approximately four years, while widowers less than one year. (Kubíčková, 2001)

2. 1 Dissimilarities of Widowers and Widows

The basic difference between widowed men and women is in the perception of loss of the partner. For women – widows, the loss of their husband means adjusting to life in abandonment. Their husband was a source of security and protection for them. On the contrary, men – widowers perceive the loss of their wife as being torn out of the family background heavily, they perceive their spouse as part of their home and themselves. By death of their wife, this concept of a man of himself is disturbed. (Rock, 2006)

Widowers struggle to cope with the new life situation and with arranging their new life. Social milieu has a higher tendency to provide assistance to widowers rather than widows, because it is assumed that they are more helpless in daily life after losing their wife. On the contrary, it may be difficult for widowers that socially

they are not allowed to express their feelings and grief. (Wolf, 1982)

Women – widows often feel more helpless and have a higher tendency to maintain a relationship to their deceased husbands, as opposed to men – widowers who less frequently show that the loss of wife stroke them, holding their emotions within themselves and consequently having a tendency to drink alcohol by which they try to suppress the sadness from the loss of their wife. (Shuchter, Zisook, In Stroebe, 2008)

2. 2 Loss Determinants

Circumstances of the partner loss affect the impact of the whole situation on the widow or widower. For this reason, in this paragraph I list the basic loss determinants influencing the bereaved people. These are mainly *situational factors* concentrating on the circumstances accompanying the death itself. In fact, it concerns what happened, to what extent the partner was prepared for the death of the other partner, how upsetting the death was for them, and of what influence other concurrent events were. (Relfová, in Payneová, 2007)

Circumstances of death capture how the death occurred, whether it was a natural death caused e.g. by a disease, or whether the death occurred suddenly, traumatically, or with an injury and damage to the body of the bereaved

person. All these circumstances have an impact on coping with the loss on the part of the bereaved person. (Wright, 2007)

It is often claimed that *anticipated losses*, i.e. losses expected as a result of a long-term illness, are better endured by the bereaved people as they can prepare for the loss. However, from the opposite perspective, a protracted fatal disease is demanding for the caring partner and the whole family both physically and emotionally. (Relfová, in Payneová, 2007)

On the contrary, *sudden death* is usually not anticipated, it occurs unexpectedly, tragically, prematurely and without prior warning. Pathological reactions of the bereaved people may occur more frequently. In the event that the bereaved person is present at the accident, there is a high probability of developing post-traumatic stress disorder. (Kubíčková, 2001)

Other situational factors affecting the bereaved person include *concurrent life events*. Simultaneously at the moment of the partner's death, the situation on the part of the bereaved person may be complicated by serious health problems, multiple crises or losses as well as financial problems. (Relfová, in Payneová, 2007)

Apart from situational factors, the bereaved person is also subjected to *individual factors* resulting from life experiences, history and personality of the

particular bereaved person. These factors include *the age* of the deceased person, their *gender identity*, *the intensity of the relationship to the deceased person*, *previous health situation* and *personality traits*. (Relfová, in Payneová, 2007)

The question of gender identity and difference of the importance of the life situation for men - widowers and women - widows is depicted in chapter 1.2.1 Dissimilarities of Widowers and Widows, therefore I do not deal with it further and continue with the theme of *relationship to the deceased person*.

We can encounter two *types of relationships* of the bereaved person to the deceased one. The first is over-dependence and the other relationship is an experienced ambivalence to the deceased person. (Relfová, in Payneová, 2007)

The factor of personal frame of mind of the bereaved person represents another determinant, to which belongs: character, temperament, adaptability, stress tolerance, ability to cope with stressful situations and to overcome mental pain. (Kubíčková, 2001)

3 Demands and Expectations by the Milieu

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, social functioning of a person also depends on the demands and expectations by their social milieu. Allowing for it, this

theme is addressed below so as to ensure a deeper understanding of the life situation of widows and widowers.

The demands and expectations by the milieu towards the bereaved people evolve based on the attitude of the whole society to the very topic of death and subsequent mourning. Death and mourning have no place in today's society and are pushed out by the cult of beauty, youth, health and success. A mourning bereaved person is in this context of the present time received with difficulties. The ground may be a change in the nature of social bonds in the modern society, departing from religion, an austere social network of individuals and tabooing of death. This can cause that manifested mourning of the bereaved person is not only disapproved, but even rejected by the milieu. (Špatenková, 2008)

Elimination of the topic of death and dying from life in the modern society leads to uncertainties towards grief and mourning of the bereaved people, too. In traditional societies, faith, community and rituals provided a certain security as for assessing life and what followed after it, which contributed to integrating death into people's daily lives. Now, due to gradual disappearance of these values, also the natural attitude fades away and denial of death becomes a tempting idea. As a result, mourning becomes a present-day taboo,

divesting bereaved people of being recognized the special need of support. (Student, 2006)

The primary cause of tabooing death in society is the very fear of the finitude of life. Unlike in traditional societies, a modern human tries to escape death, making use of the fact that it is possible to do so. Some stages of dying described by Kübler-Ross (In Přidalová, 1998) can be applied to society. The first stage of shock and denial is a response of modern humans to the fact that they do not admit their own mortality and that only other people die. The second stage of anger can be interpreted as astonishment that at the time of steady progress, humans may still be threatened by death.

The tabooing is further supported by collapse of traditional rituals which were associated with death. Modern rationality came to the fore, divesting social and religious rituals of their sense. Thus even rituals connected with mourning have become unacceptable for the social environment, giving rise to an empty space, depriving modern humans of the ability to face death, both their own, as well as in relation to other people around them. (Přidalová, 1998)

This is how death has disappeared from the social context. It has become more confidential and the society makes efforts with a view to death occurring in

places outside the public attention. Subsequently, the society does not know what to do, how to behave and what to say at the moments of encountering death or a person who has been directly affected by death of a loved one. (Haškovcová, 2007)

At the moment when themes of death are not acceptable for the society, a space for mourning, grief and accepting the legitimacy of the need for support of the bereaved people is missing, too. Mourning as such was removed in the 20th century and in people's everyday life, the society does not allow any space for it. A consequent expectation by the society towards the bereaved people is that as soon as possible, they should achieve the normal state and live their normal life as they did before the death. (Student, 2006)

The milieu expects and can accept public manifestations of mourning of the bereaved person for the first six to eight weeks after the death. However, pressure is exerted on the bereaved people to keep this time as short as possible and subsequently to minimize other attributes of open grief. The earlier tradition of wearing mourning, which could publicly last up to one year, had its social advantages because the milieu knew in which life situation the bereaved person is and how to approach this person. Then the bereaved people were not expected to make merry and to participate in various jaunty activities.

(Kubíčková, 2001)

4 Social Support for Bereaved People

The period of mourning is not only a difficult situation for the bereaved people themselves, but also for their milieu. Anyone who tries to help the bereaved person experiences an unpleasant and tense atmosphere when interacting with the person. The dramatic nature of the situation is highlighted by the appearance of the bereaved person and their behaviour which is influenced by emotions. Thus it is difficult to face human suffering and pain helplessly. (Špatenková, 2008)

As bereaved people live being connected with their milieu, it is natural that there is a certain mutual interaction. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to show ways how the milieu can react to the bereaved person and ways by which it can provide its own social support.

To ensure that assistance can be provided, the social milieu must meet several conditions. On the one hand, an effort *to want* should be made and on the other hand, the possibility *to be able to* help. (Haškovcová, 2007) Yet giving social support to bereaved people is more demanding. The social milieu should *know*, i.e. have theoretical knowledge regarding the given issue, *be able to*, i.e. be practically equipped with skills and *be*, in terms of personality dispositions.

(Špatenková, 2008)

Based on the stated theory of the conditions of the part of the social milieu, I deduced the following topics. In respect of “being able to” it is mainly the skill of the milieu to communicate with the bereaved person, in respect of “being” I depict the possibilities and dimensions of relations between the milieu and the bereaved person, and as for the last perspective of “knowing” I deem knowledge of the social milieu on what specific social support may be offered to the bereaved person decisive.

4. 1 Communication with Bereaved People

One of the first competence prerequisites on the part of the social milieu of the bereaved person is *the ability to communicate*. As social support is provided in mutual interaction between the bereaved person and the milieu, identifying and satisfying the person’s needs is implemented through communication. In relation to the bereaved person, it entails some specifics.

When communicating with a bereaved person, people should try to listen actively, create the conditions for trust and openness, communicate effectively and motivate towards cooperation and change. (Špatenková, 2008)

Communication can be both verbal and non-verbal and it can concentrate on

feelings or thoughts. Active listening requires paying attention to all forms of communication which the bereaved person expresses.

According to Payne (2007) some bereaved people need to notice encouragement in communication. This can be done through appropriate eye contact, nodding, smile, or a direct verbal message. In communication, it is also important to show acceptance by means of feedback to the bereaved person. In our answer, we show respect for the bereaved person, helping to build a relationship of trust and uncritical acceptance.

Common are also moments of silence in which it is important not to interfere, because the bereaved person is often carrying out reflection at the moment. For the listener, silence may be sore temptation or an unpleasant passive moment. For the bereaved person, just the very presence of another person is often beneficial. (Timulák, 2006)

At times it may happen that any spoken word could have an inappropriate effect, a way of expressing support at such a moment can also be touch. However, it is necessary to pay attention that this form of communication really conveys what is intended. People react differently to touch, and for some it may be even bothersome. (Parkes, 2007)

Bereaved people tend to be very

sensitive and receptive to reactions by their milieu. However, it is frequently unable to behave and react to bereaved people adequately. The bereaved people then often hear inappropriate words of comfort (e.g. "Do not worry about it." or "You mustn't think about it, life goes on.") Nevertheless, by these reactions the social milieu makes it clear to the bereaved person that it is not able to, does not want to or does not know how to help. (Špatenková, 2008)

In the words of Špatenková (2008), other mistakes in communication with bereaved people include using euphemisms instead of so-called "strong" words. Metaphors are often confusing for the bereaved person. Uncertainty in communication may also be caused by concern on the part of the milieu over mentioning the deceased person. Last but not least, giving so-called "good" advice (e.g. "You have the whole life ahead of you!") is of no contribution to the bereaved person. (Špatenková, 2008)

4. 2 Relation to Bereaved People

This aspect of "being" is applied *in relation* to the bereaved person. The one who provides assistance should try to ensure an atmosphere of trust by their personality approach, because this helps the grieving person to share their difficulties and not to go through the sorrow alone. (Kubičková, 2001)

The attitude of the social milieu should rest on three principles. The bereaved people should be *respected* in their life situation and their specific behavioural manifestations. They should receive a message that despite all the difficulties which they are currently experiencing, they are valuable, unique and appreciated human beings. They should be accepted without being assessed and judged. (Hájek, 2007)

The second essential element is *empathy* through which the bereaved people should be shown that their momentary experiences are understood. Empathy can be expressed by reflection of the feelings or mirroring the behaviour of the bereaved person. (Prochaska, Norcross, 1999)

The third pillar is called *trueness* or honesty towards the bereaved person. According to Hájek (2007), it is the ability of the helping people to be true and themselves. The interest for the bereaved person should be real and not feigned.

All three attitudes conveyed to the bereaved person enable establishing a trustworthy relationship which is important for the bereaved person when providing social support. This is expressed through the above described communication. (Parkes, 2007)

4. 3 The Way of Providing Social

Support

The last aspect which is applied in relation of the social milieu to the bereaved person is the *knowledge* of how to provide social support. In fact, it is some theoretical background which the milieu should be equipped with. (Špatenková, 2008)

In professional literature, five kinds of social support are defined, by which assistance to bereaved people can be given. These are:

- *informational support* – provision of appropriate knowledge in the situation which the bereaved person is experiencing,
- *factual support* – specific activities carried out by other people,
- *emotional support* – a possibility to share thoughts and feelings with somebody,
- *affirmative or approving support* – recognition of adequacy of conviction and feelings of the bereaved person,
- *social inclusion* – system of reciprocal obligations and relations of the bereaved person with other individuals or institutions. (Payneová, 2007)

According to Křivohlavý (2001), *informational support* means providing information which could be useful for orientation in the difficult life situation into which the bereaved person got. Advice can be provided by people who have experience with a similar situation or by specialists who are professionally equipped

for this purpose. (Křivohlavý, 2001) Bereaved people may also seek this kind of support themselves, because they need to check, confirm or explain something. They wish to obtain information which can help them to deal with their situation further. (Špatenková, 2008)

Factual support (also referred to as practical or instrumental) represents a specific form of assistance, such as giving finance, provision of various necessary things, handling urgent matters which the bereaved person cannot do alone, provision of material support. The initiative for this type of assistance does not usually stem from the bereaved people, but from their social milieu. (Křivohlavý, 2001)

Emotional support is based on an empathic form of conveying emotional closeness. It is expressed by kind behaviour and attachment. (Křivohlavý, 2001) Emotional support communicates a positive feeling to the bereaved person in the form of trust and ability to trust, closeness, understanding, empathy and interest. The bereaved people should feel loved, valued and should gain a sense of confidence that they can ask for help. (Baštecká, 2005)

Affirmative (also referred to as evaluative) *support* is expressed to the bereaved people by treating them with dignity, respect, while strengthening their positive self-image and self-confidence.

(Křivohlavý, 2001)

According to Rákoczyová (2006) *social inclusion* can be understood as a process within which an individual participates in the community life. In the context of social support for widows and widowers, I perceive social inclusion in compliance with the stated definition as possibilities on the part of the bereaved people leading to their participation in social life.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to understand in greater depth the life situation of widows and widowers in the context of social support by their milieu. In the text I summarized theoretical findings from different authors. I divided the subject matter into four areas concerning both the characteristics of old age and depiction of problematic situations of seniors due to loss of their life partner, I introduced the possible expectations by the milieu and in the end I presented possibilities of social support related to bereaved people in general and especially to the widowed ones.

On the basis of the propounded findings it can be stated that the expectations and demands on the part of the milieu are not in balance towards the bereaved seniors and their coping abilities. Old age is a developmental period in human life where

accumulation of losses of various kinds is presupposed, with the loss of life partner belonging to the most difficult ones. Here a question and a task arise directed at social work whether it should react to the stated problem and on the one hand to try to help widowed seniors to cope with their problems connected with becoming widowed and on the other hand, to encourage the milieu of the widowed senior to provide adequate and balanced support.

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