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The role of death notification in the grief trajectory

N. Statharakos[1,2]

[1]*"G. Papanikolaou" General Hospital of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki*
[2]*Psychiatric Hospital of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece*

Ο ρόλος της αναγγελίας θανάτου στην πορεία του πένθους

Περίληψη στο τέλος του άρθρου

Death notification is a pivotal moment that initiates the bereavement process and can profoundly influence survivors' psychological trajectory. When delivered abruptly, ambiguously, or without support, it may intensify acute distress and increase the risk of prolonged grief disorder (PGD), especially after sudden or violent losses. Poorly managed notifications are linked to traumatic reactions, emotional numbing, disrupted meaning-making, and persistent functional impairment. Key mechanisms include acute trauma responses, interference with attachment reorganization, and cognitive distortions that hinder acceptance and prolong suffering. Risk is further amplified by individual vulnerabilities such as pre-existing mental health conditions, insecure attachment, and lack of social support. Conversely, notifications characterized by clarity, empathy, and provision of follow-up resources can buffer the traumatic impact and facilitate adaptive grieving. Despite the evidence, many professionals lack formal training, leading to inconsistent practices. Death notification should be recognized not as a procedural task but as a psychologically consequential intervention. Structured training, standardized protocols, and integration of psychosocial support are essential to reduce the risk of PGD and promote healthier bereavement outcomes.

Key words

Bereavement
Death notification
Emotional processing
Grief trajectory
Prolonged grief disorder
Traumatic loss

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1. INTRODUCTION

Death is an inevitable aspect of human existence, yet the process of death notification has profound implications for subsequent psychological adjustment. Death notification is not a mere administrative formality but a significant interpersonal event that can shape the emotional and cognitive processing of the loss from its very onset.[1,2] As such, the manner in which death is communicated may either facilitate a gradual integration of the loss into one's life narrative or, conversely, disrupt natural grieving processes and predispose individuals to maladaptive responses, notably prolonged grief disorder (PGD).[3]

Death notification comprises the initial and, in many cases, traumatic encounter with the reality of loss, thereby setting the stage for either adaptive or maladaptive grieving responses.[1] When death notification is conducted in a timely, clear, and compassionate manner, it may help buffer the immediate shock and facilitate early emotional processing; however, when it is abrupt, ambiguous, or lacking in empathy, it can amplify feelings of disbelief, helplessness, and distress.[2,4] The bereaved's narrative of the loss often begins with the notification, and if that initial message is experienced as a sudden and poorly framed intrusion, it can instill a persistent sense of unreality and impede the essential cognitive and emotional processes required for healthy mourning. In this context, death notification is more than an information delivery; it becomes an integral component of the grief experience that interacts with pre-loss vulnerabilities and contextual factors.[5] This narrative review explores how death notification impacts bereavement trajectories and elucidates the psychological mechanisms implicated in the development of PGD.

2. MECHANISMS BY WHICH DEATH NOTIFICATION INTERFERES WITH NORMAL GRIEF TRAJECTORIES

One primary mechanism through which death notification disrupts the grieving process is by inducing acute trauma that overwhelms the bereaved's capacity for immediate emotional regulation.[2,6] In cases where the notification is characterized by insensitive delivery or severe legal and procedural delays, the bereaved may experience intense shock and dissociative responses that interfere with the normal acknowledgement of the loss.[1] Such dissociative or peritraumatic responses can inhibit the integration of

the death into the bereaved's autobiographical memory, leading to persistent intrusive thoughts and emotional numbing that are hallmarks of PGD.[2,7] Furthermore, inadequate information at the time of notification often leaves the bereaved with unresolved questions about the circumstances of the death, fostering a state of ambiguity that precludes the acceptance of the irreversible nature of the loss.[5]

A second mechanism involves the disruption of attachment processes that are critical for the adaptive processing of loss.[2] When death notification is poorly handled, the bereaved may be left with unprocessed feelings of abandonment, injustice, and anger that interfere with their ability to reformulate the continuing bond with the deceased in a way that is life-affirming.[7] This interruption in the normal reorganization of attachment patterns can hinder the natural oscillation between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping activities, a dynamic that is essential for transitioning from acute grief to eventual adaptation.[8] Moreover, the sudden, unexpected nature of some death notifications, particularly those associated with violent or unnatural deaths, exacerbates these attachment disruptions and creates a fertile ground for maladaptive grief trajectories.[9,10]

2. COGNITIVE-EMOTIONAL PROCESSING AND THE IMPACT OF TRAUMATIC NOTIFICATION

Grief involves both cognitive acceptance and emotional processing of the death, which typically evolve over time through confrontation with reminders of the loss and the performance of culturally congruent mourning rituals. Death notification that is delivered in a traumatic or abrupt fashion can compromise these processes by instigating cognitive distortions, such as denial or maladaptive rumination that persistently challenge the reality of the loss.[2] The inability to form a coherent death narrative may lead to intrusive re-experiencing of the moment of notification or the circumstances surrounding the death, thereby reinforcing the emotional pain associated with the loss.[5,7] This phenomenon is particularly evident when the notification is linked with feelings of betrayal by institutions or perceived injustices in legal proceedings, further entrenching negative appraisals and self-blame that are difficult to resolve through standard grief processes.[11,12]

The role of cognitive appraisal is central in this context; bereaved individuals who perceive death as sudden and notification as poor or isolating are more likely to develop maladaptive cognitions that impede the acceptance of the new reality.[5] Research suggests that the subjective unexpectedness of a death –often reinforced by the manner in which the notification is handled– can significantly elevate the risk for prolonged grief symptoms by disrupting the normal pathway of integration and meaning-making.[13–15] Additionally, the failure to receive clarifying and supportive information during the initial moments after the loss can contribute to a feedback loop of cognitive distortions, where the bereaved persistently question the circumstances of the death, thereby maintaining a state of chronic grief.

3. RISK FACTORS AND VULNERABILITIES AMPLIFIED BY POOR DEATH NOTIFICATION

Individual predispositions, including previous mental health conditions, insecure attachment styles, and prior experiences of loss, interact with the trauma of a poor death notification to further elevate the risk of developing PGD.[2,5,16] For instance, individuals with a history of depression or anxiety are more likely to exhibit intense peritraumatic distress when faced with a sudden and ambiguous death notification, which in turn exacerbates grief-related symptoms over time.[5,12] The psychological impact is compounded in cases of violent or unnatural loss, such as homicide or suicide, where the death notification may not only trigger intense grief but also significant trauma-related symptoms and feelings of stigmatization.[9,11] Moreover, bereaved individuals who perceive the notification as lacking empathy or failing to provide necessary support are more vulnerable to social isolation and reduced perceived belonging, which are well-documented risk factors for chronic grief trajectories.[13,14]

Furthermore, the absence of immediate practical or emotional support during and after the notification process can undermine the bereaved person's ability to mobilize adaptive coping resources and engage in restorative social activities.[2,5,17] Such deficits in support not only amplify the immediate emotional distress but also hinder the establishment of new patterns of meaning and identity that are crucial for recovery. Over time, these vulnerabilities crystallize into persistent patterns of functional impairment, characterized by difficulties in work, social engagement, and everyday decision-making, which are emblematic of prolonged grief disorder.[18,19]

4. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE LINKING DEATH NOTIFICATION WITH PROLONGED GRIEF DISORDER

A growing body of evidence supports the contention that the nature and quality of death notification can influ-

ence the trajectory of grief and increase the risk for PGD. Studies have consistently demonstrated that families who report dissatisfaction with the notification process –characterized by delays, ambiguous explanations, and perceived insensitivity– also report more intense grief symptoms in the subsequent months and years.[2,11] For example, research conducted on families bereaved by traumatic workplace deaths indicates that dissatisfaction with information provision at the time of notification significantly correlates with elevated levels of prolonged grief disorder, depression, and posttraumatic stress symptoms.[1] In addition, studies of bereaved mothers following the sudden, unexpected death of an infant have shown that inadequate and insensitive death notifications can intensify feelings of isolation, role confusion, and a diminished sense of self, all of which contribute to a disrupted grief process and the persistence of PGD symptoms.[11]

In the context of violent or traumatic losses, the empirical literature further reveals that a poorly managed death notification not only intensifies grief but may also predispose individuals to engage in avoidance behaviors and maladaptive rumination that complicate adaptive mourning.[15,20] Moreover, the evidence suggests a significant relationship between the subjective unexpectedness of the bereavement, often accentuated by the manner of notification, and the long-term risk of PGD.[5,21] Although randomized controlled trials specifically targeting death notification practices remain scarce the converging data from observational and retrospective studies underscore the critical role of death notification as a modifiable risk factor in the development of prolonged grief disorder.[17,22–24]

5. INTERVENTIONS AND BEST PRACTICES IN DEATH NOTIFICATION

Given the substantial empirical link between adverse death notification experiences and the subsequent risk for prolonged grief disorder, it is imperative that professionals involved in the delivery of death news adopt best practices that prioritize clarity, timeliness, and empathy. Training programs for healthcare providers, law enforcement officers, and other professionals tasked with death notification should include components focused on communication skills, emotional support, and culturally sensitive approaches to ensure that the notification process minimizes additional trauma.[2,3,25] For instance, guidelines that emphasize the need to provide clear, accurate, and prompt information about the circumstances of the death can prevent prolonged feelings of ambiguity and help foster early acceptance among the bereaved.[1,5,26]

Furthermore, immediate follow-up support –such as providing access to grief counselling or crisis intervention services– can mitigate the acute emotional distress associated with death notification and serve as a protective buffer against the development of PGD.[20,27] Evidence from grief-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy trials suggests that interventions aiming to facilitate the emotional processing of death-related memories are effective in reducing prolonged grief symptoms, thereby highlighting the importance of early and supportive interventions that address issues raised during death notification.[2,5,28] In sum, adopting structured, empathetic practices in death notification is essential for disrupting the cascade of negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses that predispose bereaved individuals to prolonged grief disorder.[29]

6. DISCUSSION

The available literature suggests a clear, though complex, link between the experience of death notification and the subsequent development of prolonged grief disorder. Death notification serves as both a precipitating event and a potential intervention point in the grief process, with the quality of communication at this juncture significantly influencing the trajectory of bereavement. When death notification is delivered insensitively, it may intensify immediate emotional trauma, catalyze avoidance and dissociative processes, and prevent the constructive integration of the loss into the bereaved individual's life narrative.[2,7] These disruptions in cognitive-emotional processing –manifesting as persistent disbelief, intrusive recollections of the death scene, or chronic feelings of isolation and mistrust– can interfere with the natural oscillation between loss orientation and restoration orientation that is critical for recovery from bereavement.[5,8,30]

Moreover, individual vulnerabilities, such as pre-existing depressive symptoms, insecure attachment styles, and previous experiences of loss, further compound the negative impact of traumatic death notifications.[5,14,31] For these individuals, an unsupportive or ambiguous death notification may not only delay the initiation of adaptive grief processes but also trigger a cascade of maladaptive coping mechanisms –such as excessive rumination, emotional suppression, and withdrawal from social networks– that ultimately impede functional recovery.[12,13] The enduring functional impairments that characterize prolonged grief disorder –ranging from persistent role difficulties to impaired interpersonal relationships– are emblematic of a breakdown in the processes that ordinarily facilitate acceptance and meaningful reengagement with life.[18,19]

A critical feature in understanding the link between death notification and PGD is the role played by social support. Empirical evidence consistently indicates that sufficient, compassionate, and timely social support following a death notification can significantly reduce the risk of chronic maladaptive grief trajectories.[5,21] Conversely, when death notification is delivered in a manner that isolates the bereaved or fails to connect them with supportive resources, the resulting social isolation can exacerbate feelings of loss and entrench negative cognitive styles, thereby increasing vulnerability to PGD.[7,14] It follows that the manner in which death notification is administered is not an inconsequential detail, but rather a central determinant of both immediate and long-term grief outcomes.[32] The convergence of evidence from studies on violent deaths, sudden and unexpected losses, and disaster-related bereavement further reinforces the notion that death notifications that fail to provide clear, supportive, and culturally sensitive information are significantly more likely to lead to enduring and disabling grief responses.[2,16,23]

These conclusions hold important implications for both clinical practice and policy formation. Training protocols for professionals charged with delivering death notifications must prioritize the development of skills that promote empathetic communication and the rapid mobilization of post-notification support systems.[3,27,33] Moreover, integrating routine assessments of bereavement-related distress immediately following the notification can help identify individuals at heightened risk for PGD, thereby enabling timely and targeted interventions.[5,20] In doing so, the potential for preventing the onset of prolonged grief disorder by mitigating early notification-related trauma is maximized, ultimately contributing to improved long-term psychological outcomes for bereaved populations.

Despite growing attention, many gaps remain. There are few longitudinal studies linking notification factors to later PGD trajectories; most data are cross-sectional or qualitative. The specific temporal pattern by which notification quality influences grief (e.g. whether it affects initial shock only or also grief intensity six months later) is not well mapped. Similarly, how cultural, age, or relationship differences modulate these effects is understudied. Most work focuses on sudden violent deaths; the role of notification in more expected losses is less clear. The effects on children, or on non-English speaking communities with different mourning traditions, need exploration. Methodologically, standardized measures of notification "quality" are lacking. Finally, few intervention trials have tested whether improving notification skills (through simulation training) reduces PGD rates in bereaved cohorts. Addressing these gaps would guide evidence-based best practices.

Future research should aim to clarify the precise causal pathways linking death notification to PGD and to identify the most effective intervention strategies for ameliorating its adverse effects. Meanwhile, practical improvements in death notification protocols –including enhanced training for professionals, systematic debriefing opportunities for the bereaved, and the establishment of immediate post-notification support services– are essential steps toward reducing the risk of prolonged grief disorder and its associated functional impairments.[19,21,34]

Ultimately, recognizing death notification as a crucial juncture in the bereavement process can lead to significant improvements in both clinical practice and public policy, ensuring that individuals coping with loss receive the compassionate support necessary to navigate their grief in a healthy and adaptive manner.[15,24] Taking such measures not only honors the dignity of the deceased and the bereaved but also reduces the substantial mental health burden associated with prolonged grief disorder.[3,5]

7. CONCLUSION

In summary, the process of death notification plays a fundamental and multifaceted role in shaping the trajectory of grief and may serve as a critical point at which the risk of developing prolonged grief disorder is either mitigated or exacerbated. When death notification is conducted in a sensitive, clear, and supportive manner, it provides the bereaved with the opportunity to begin the process of emotional integration and acceptance, thereby facilitating adaptive mourning and eventual psychological recovery. In contrast, when death notification is administered in a manner that is abrupt, ambiguous, or lacking in empathy, it can induce acute trauma and trigger maladaptive cognitive and emotional responses that derail the natural grieving process and potentiate the emergence of prolonged grief disorder.

The evidence synthesized herein demonstrates that various mechanisms –including the disruption of cognitive processing, the interference with attachment reorganization, and the amplification of negative affective states– are activated by poor death notifications, particularly when compounded by individual vulnerabilities and insufficient social support. Studies collectively underscore the critical importance of the initial notification experience in determining long-term grief outcomes. Death notification, if mishandled, can substantially interfere with the trajectory of grief by introducing acute trauma, hindering emotional

processing and acceptance, and exacerbating existing vulnerabilities, ultimately contributing to the persistence of maladaptive grief responses characteristic of prolonged grief disorder. It is therefore incumbent upon all professionals involved to ensure that death notifications are conducted with the utmost sensitivity and care, thereby promoting resilience and facilitating a smoother transition through the complex journey of loss.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ο ρόλος της αναγγελίας θανάτου στην πορεία του πένθους

Ν. ΣΤΑΘΑΡΑΚΟΣ[1,2]

[1]Γενικό Νοσοκομείο Θεσσαλονίκης «Γ. Παπανικολάου», Θεσσαλονίκη,

[2]Ψυχιατρικό Νοσοκομείο Θεσσαλονίκης, Θεσσαλονίκη

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Η αναγγελία θανάτου αποτελεί καθοριστική στιγμή που σηματοδοτεί την έναρξη της διαδικασίας του πένθους και μπορεί να επηρεάσει βαθιά την ψυχολογική πορεία των οικείων. Όταν πραγματοποιείται βιαστικά, με ασάφεια ή χωρίς υποστήριξη, ενδέχεται να εντείνει την οξεία δυσφορία και να αυξήσει τον κίνδυνο εμφάνισης διαταραχής παρατεταμένου πένθους (ΔΠΠ), ιδιαίτερα σε περιπτώσεις αιφνίδιου ή βίαιου θανάτου. Μη ορθά διαχειριζόμενες αναγγελίες συνδέονται με τραυματικές αντιδράσεις, συναισθηματικό μούδιασμα, δυσκολία νοηματοδότησης της απώλειας και επίμονες λειτουργικές δυσκολίες. Κύριοι μηχανισμοί περιλαμβάνουν την πρόκληση οξέος τραύματος, τη διαταραχή των δεσμών προσκόλλησης και τις γνωσιακές στρεβλώσεις που εμποδίζουν την αποδοχή της απώλειας. Ο κίνδυνος ενισχύεται από ατομικές ευαλωτότητες, όπως προϋπάρχουσες ψυχικές διαταραχές, ανασφαλείς δεσμούς και περιορισμένη κοινωνική υποστήριξη. Αντίθετα, αναγγελίες που γίνονται με σαφήνεια, ενσυναίσθηση και συνοδεύονται από παροχή υποστηρικτικών πόρων μπορεί να μετριάσουν το τραυματικό φορτίο και να διευκολύνουν την προσαρμοστική πορεία του πένθους. Ωστόσο, πολλοί επαγγελματίες υγείας στερούνται επίσημης εκπαίδευσης, γεγονός που οδηγεί σε ανομοιογενείς πρακτικές. Συνεπώς, η αναγγελία θανάτου πρέπει να αναγνωριστεί όχι ως ένα διαδικαστικό έργο αλλά ως ψυχολογικά κρίσιμη παρέμβαση. Η συστηματική εκπαίδευση, τα δομημένα πρωτόκολλα και η ενσωμάτωση ψυχολογικής υποστήριξης συνιστούν απαραίτητα βήματα για τον περιορισμό του κινδύνου ΔΠΠ και την ενίσχυση υγιών εκβάσεων πένθους.

Λέξεις ευρετηρίου: Αναγγελία θανάτου, Διαταραχή παρατεταμένου πένθους, Πένθος, Πορεία πένθους, Συναισθηματική επεξεργασία, Τραυματική απώλεια

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Corresponding author:

N. Statharakos, "G. Papanikolaou" General Hospital of Thessaloniki, Papanikolaou Ave., Exochi, 570 10 Thessaloniki, Greece
e-mail: nicstath@gmail.com; nstathaa@auth.gr