

From Emptiness to Acceptance: The Phenomenology of Adolescent Loneliness After the Loss of a Parent

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness is one of the most prominent psychological impacts experienced by adolescents after the loss of a parent, driven by the absence of emotional attachment figures who previously provided security and support. This study aims to describe the subjective experience of loneliness among adolescents grieving the death of a parent. A qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological method was employed, involving three adolescents aged 13–18 years through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Giorgi's Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis (DPA). The findings reveal four central themes: (1) deep emptiness and profound loneliness, (2) coping strategies through diversion and substitute activities, (3) self-change and the gradual process of accepting grief, and (4) shifting family roles and emerging new responsibilities. These results indicate that adolescent loneliness is shaped not only by the physical absence of a parent but also by the loss of emotional support and the increasing psychosocial burden they must carry. This study contributes a deeper phenomenological understanding of adolescent grief and highlights the need for appropriate psychosocial and counseling support.

1. INTRODUCTION

Loss is a phenomenon that can affect a person's psychological condition, including teenagers who are in a period of transition and search for identity (Julianti & Laksmiwati, 2022). When that loss occurs, they are faced with waves of emotions such as sadness, anger, confusion, and deep loneliness (Nurriyana & Savira, 2021). Based on UNICEF data (Wilander, 2021) shows that since the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 25,000 children in Indonesia have lost one or both parents. The majority of them are between the ages of 11 and 15, and experience emotional symptoms such as deep sadness, loneliness, and feelings of being neglected. This condition shows the importance of special attention to the psychological impact of loss, especially loneliness, experienced by adolescents. In the context of emotional bonding, the loss of a parent has implications for the loss of a sense of security, mentoring, and attachment that has been the basis of adolescent psychological development (Vera, Handayani, & Dian, 2024). When a teenager loses a loved one, he or she will feel empty and disoriented. Even in the midst of a crowd, the bereaved teenager will still feel a deep loneliness. In line with the opinion of Kubler-Ross in (Sari & Mahpur, 2022), there are five stages of grief experienced by individuals, namely denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These five stages are not always experienced sequentially and can differ from one individual to another, including adolescents who have experienced the loss of a parent. The reactions shown also vary, ranging from withdrawing, showing aggressive behavior, to losing motivation in carrying out daily activities.

For some teenagers, loneliness appears even in the midst of a crowd marked by a feeling of emptiness and no longer finding someone to return to. Teens who experience grief can feel alienated from peers, family, and even themselves. Losing an important figure in their lives can shake the sense of security, stability, and emotional support that has been the basis for their development. (Vastyia et al., 2021). Therefore, they may face challenges in building meaningful social relationships, actively engaging in social activities, and optimizing their academic achievement. Loneliness in grief feels even stronger when the routine that used to be lived together now has to be done alone. Loneliness is not only about the absence of the person, but also about the loss of the feeling of having someone who is always there to listen, understand, and accompany in joys and sorrows (Sessiani, 2018). Thus, loneliness becomes an integral part of the grieving process, which can affect a person's behavior and psychology. Loneliness in this context is not only about social isolation but also feelings of not being understood and losing the emotional support they have been relying on (Noni & Aviani, 2024).

Previous research (Ausie & Mansoer, 2021) revealed that loneliness due to grief can have an impact on more serious psychological conditions. Factors such as lack of social support and shifting family roles after loss also exacerbate adolescents' emotional states. Therefore, it is important to conduct an in-depth study of the subjective experience of loneliness due to the grief of loss in order to deepen knowledge about loneliness due to the grief of losing one's parents. In addition, it is also based on research (Mirza et al., 2022) Children who have lost their parents explain that there are many situations and conditions that can make adolescents who experience grief loss stressful so that it can inhibit the decrease in grief reactions and make grief reactions more complex. Further research by (Risani, 2024) suggests that adolescents often experience profound changes in their self-view after the loss of a parent. A process that can be challenging from a psychological point of view, but can also be an opportunity to develop a better self-concept. Furthermore, research by (Zahira & Savira, 2024) Showing that when entering early adulthood, the death of one or both parents can make life more shaken and losing even the process of acceptance takes a long time. The loss of a parent makes it necessary to immediately adjust the situation, and replace the missing position. So another view is needed from the perspective of adolescents in dealing with the grief of loss. Based on these conditions, this research has a relevant urgency for academics, practitioners, and teachers in the school environment to understand the process of adolescent grief in more depth. Loss of a parent not only has short-term emotional impacts, but also affects the psychological and social dynamics of adolescents, including the emergence of loneliness that is subjective and complex. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe adolescents' subjective experiences in dealing with loneliness and the accompanying psychological and social dynamics after experiencing the grief of losing a parent. An in-depth understanding of these experiences is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of guidance and counseling services that are more effective and responsive to the needs of bereaved adolescents. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the main question: How is the subjective experience of loneliness experienced by adolescents due to the grief of losing a parent?.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological method to describe what adolescents experience in feeling loneliness due to the grief of losing a parent. In the phenomenological method, this study focuses on what participants experience related to loneliness after the grief of losing a parent. The subjects in this study consisted of 3 adolescents aged 13-18 years who experienced loneliness due to the grief of losing their parents. Participants

were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) having experiences of loneliness due to the loss of a parent ranging from the loss of a father alone, the loss of a mother alone and the loss of both, (2) willing to participate in an in-depth interview voluntarily, and (3) in a psychological condition that made it possible to be interviewed. The data collection technique was carried out through in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were used to explore participants' subjective experiences related to loneliness due to the grief of losing a parent, interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner so that participants could express their experiences freely and deeply. The researcher also applied the member check technique as a test of data validity, namely by asking participants to review the results of interviews and data interpretation, to ensure that the data produced really presented their experiences. The data analysis technique uses Giorgi's version of the Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis (DPA) method by bracketing, reading the transcript thoroughly, identifying important parts as units of meaning, grouping these units into themes, and then compiling them into an overview of adolescents' lonely experiences after the loss of a parent (Refinia, Arifin, Rini, & Pratitis, 2023).

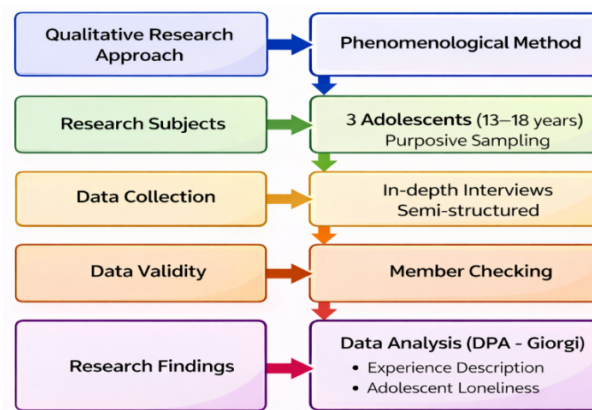


Figure 1. Data collection process

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Based on the results of the analysis of research data from interviews conducted on 3 participants who experienced the grief of losing a parent using the Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis (DPA) analysis method, it was found that 4 main themes in the thematic synthesis described the experience of adolescents who experienced the grief of losing their parents, namely (1) emptiness and deep loneliness, (2) coping strategies through self-diversion and other activities, (3) changes in self and the process of accepting grief, and (4) shifts in roles in the family and new responsibilities

Deep emptiness and loneliness

This first theme shows that all participants experience a feeling of emptiness and loss that is difficult to explain. This loneliness appears every routine that is carried out under certain circumstances. Despite being in a crowded state, some participants still felt like they were isolated. Participants described a feeling of loss that was difficult to define: *"It's like something is missing but I don't know what."* (P1) *"Sometimes I am confused about who to go to. There used to be a mother, now there is no one."* (P2) *"I often look cheerful on the outside so that people don't know how empty I am on the inside"* (P3)

Home is a trigger for loneliness: *"If you stay at home, you keep thinking, so you don't feel at home in the room" (P1) "Every time I come home from school and open the door of a lonely house, it feels very empty" (P3)*. Certain moments such as holidays reinforce the experience of loneliness. *"Very often... especially if Eid sees other families gathering" (P2)*. Loneliness is not only due to the absence of parents physically, but because of the loss of an emotional place to rest. This strengthens the research (Sasmita, Wulanningrum, & Kusuma, 2024) that when adolescents lose the affection and attention of their deceased parents, it will cause adolescents to feel a lack of support system that they have. This feeling of loneliness arises when losing attention from the closest people, considering that adolescents still need more attention to support their developmental process towards adulthood.

Coping Strategies Through Diversion or Other Activities

The second theme illustrates that to reduce sadness and loneliness, the participants have carried out various coping strategies. Most choose to do more activities outside the home to distract their minds. *"If it's outside, it feels better... If you are at home, you will always be at home." (P1) "Usually worship, confide in Allah when you are sad." (P2) "Cleaning the house... Sometimes it makes you think." (P2) "I've seen a lot of sad movies so I have a reason to cry." (P3)*. Participants' efforts to survive difficult situations in their lives, these findings support research (Anastacia & Setiawan, 2024) That is, after carrying out the coping strategy, participants can overcome deep feelings of sadness, can manage emotions and can divert themselves from lonely situations due to abandonment.

Self-Change and the Process of Accepting Grief

Changes in participants' behavior and psychological state after experiencing a loss. They become more reserved and withdrawn from the social environment and feel that life is unfair when they feel lonely. *"It used to be noisy, now I prefer to be alone." (P1) "Now it's more silent... It feels like I have no one." (P2) "I feel like my life is so unfair compared to other people." (P2) "It took years for me to be able to tell a story without crying." (P3) "Now let's be sincere... But I think it's still there." (P3)*. The reactions shown by these participants are normal when experiencing grief. Proven in research (Maulidia, Suzanna, & Dewi, 2024) Kublerr-Ross's theory of the 5 phases of grief is included in the depressive phase which refers to the reaction of participants who become quiet and lonely.

Shifting Roles in the Family and New Responsibilities

This fourth finding illustrates that the loss of a parent encouraged participants to take on larger family roles, sometimes beyond their age and emotional capacity as adolescents. *"If you're sad, just keep it hidden... At home, it's hard work." (P1) "Now I want to be alone... I used to take them out with my mom." (P1) "Now you have to be ready to listen to your story... If not me, who else." (P2) "I'm more familiar with my younger brother now because I want to be with anyone if it's not my younger brother." (P2) "It's always nice to be able to clean the house, but it's also a great way to help out." (P2) "I don't have anyone to hug me and tell me everything is going to be okay." (P3)* In this period of searching for identity, the participants must accept the situation when they should receive special attention. In contrast to early adulthood studied by (Zahira & Savira, 2024) The many demands that individuals have in early adulthood require them to make greater efforts to adapt.

Essential Synthesis of Experience

The four themes suggest that parental loss for adolescents is related to repeated experiences of emotional loneliness in daily activities, the use of various activities as a form of coping to reduce the intensity of grief, gradual changes in behavior and acceptance processes, and shifts in family roles that demand greater responsibility. The essential structure of this experience

illustrates how grief is not only present in the form of momentary emotions, but affects the way participants live their daily lives, interpret themselves, and live family relationships.

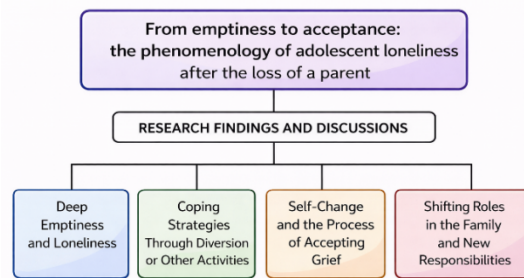


Figure 2. Result and Discussions

DISCUSSION

This study aims to describe the experiences of adolescents who experience loneliness due to the grief of losing their parents. This thematic synthesis finds 4 main themes: (1) emptiness and deep loneliness, (2) coping strategies through self-diversion and other activities, (3) self-change and the process of accepting grief, and (4) shifting roles in the family and new responsibilities. These findings provide a comprehensive picture of how adolescents experience and manage grief after losing a key figure in their lives. The first finding showed that the three participants experienced intense and profound loneliness. They describe the feeling of emptiness that arises both when alone and when in a crowded environment. Of course, this can happen, based on Russel's theory in (Alfianoor & Arbi, 2025) Loneliness can occur if there is a gap between the social relationships you have and the expected social relationships. Adolescence is a phase where individuals experience changes in social relationships, find identity and are very sensitive, adolescents not only feel physically lonely but there are needs and social relationships that are not met even when in crowded places. This is also supported based on the results of a literature review that the loss of a parent in adolescence is prone to cause prolonged loneliness and decreased mental well-being (Maulidia et al., 2024). These findings are consistent with research (Soetioso & Fithriyah, 2024) which suggests that grieving the death of a parent can increase the risk of loneliness that has the potential to affect long-term mental health, academic functioning, and relationship development. Therefore, loneliness in adolescents after loss is not only a temporary feeling but can be a chronic condition that affects various aspects of life in line. The second finding described participants coping with loneliness due to grief loss through other activities such as watching sad movies, worship, or cleaning the house. This is a coping strategy that can be good or vice versa depending on the context, social support, and emotional regulation mechanism (Sandra & Surjaningrum, 2022). This coping strategy is often called escape avoidance or self-avoidance when there is a problem involving emotions (Nurrahman & Chairani, 2024). As all three participants did, they used coping strategies to control loneliness, with participants feeling their social distress diminished as they shrugged off problems. While coping strategies through diversion or fixed activities can help reduce emotional burden in the short term, they may not be enough for the long-term healing process and can even prolong grief if they don't get deeper social and emotional support.

In the findings, the three participants experienced behavioral changes and psychological conditions became quiet and withdrawn after experiencing grief loss. The acceptance process that they experience takes a long time, this must happen to all circles including teenagers because when they go through this condition they will experience major changes which can trigger stress and last quite a long time so that it requires teenagers to adjust (Faridah, Salama, &

Yustina, 2025). Loss, especially a parent, is a deep trauma and each adolescent describes a different sense of grief according to (Rusli & Widyastuti, 2023) who found that the ability to adapt to the grief of loss is varied and takes a short time and requires social support. Research from (Abidina & Mujahid, 2022) It also explains the process of accepting grief when losing a parent for good, such as withdrawing and losing direction. This is in line with findings about self-change and self-acceptance processes in which participants become quiet, withdrawn, and feel that life is unfair (Lopulalan & Wenno, 2024). So that the changes in behavior and self-acceptance found in participants are not unusual, but a natural process that occurs in the process of grief, loss, and self-acceptance, so that social support can help reduce feelings of loneliness. This fourth theme highlights the changing roles in the family where adolescents have to take on emotional and practical responsibilities that are not actually appropriate for their age. Of course, these findings indicate that the loss of a parent not only has a temporary impact but also triggers a shift in roles and also provides new responsibilities in the family and the surrounding environment. However, this is not always negative, according to Schonfeld & Kappelman in (Sari & Mahpur, 2022) The experience of loss can make teenagers become more mature and have more mature experiences than their peers. This is clarified by research (Feigelman et al., 2017) which shows that shifting roles in the family and new responsibilities can have a positive or negative impact on the one hand which on the one hand can increase independence and closeness of siblings, but on the other hand has the potential to increase the psychological burden. Therefore, changing roles in the family after the loss of parents has dualistic consequences, which has the potential to be a source of positive growth as well as a risk factor for stress and loneliness. The impact that arises depends greatly on the context of family support, the social environment, and the ability of adolescents to face and adjust to these new situations.

Research in recent decades has shown that the loss of a parent can increase the risk of loneliness, emotional distress, and developmental disorders in adolescents (Vedder et al., 2022). Most studies only highlight clinical or long-term aspects and there is also not much literature that addresses subjective experiences such as deep forms of loneliness, coping strategies such as worship when feeling longing for the elderly and using sad movies as a means of diversion to cry. Additionally, when adolescents take on emotional roles and practical responsibilities after the loss of a parent, it is still rarely discussed phenomenologically although recent research shows its significant impact on adolescent identity and self-acceptance (Chater et al., 2022). Through a descriptive phenomenological approach, this study describes 4 main themes that are integrated to expand understanding. The first novelty lies in the revelation of deep loneliness as a core experience that has rarely been focused on in the study of adolescent grief, this can expand the understanding of previous literature that emphasizes loneliness as a symptom rather than an experience of meaning. Second, identifying coping strategies such as outdoor activities to distract one's mind, the use of worship as a way to communicate emotionally, cleaning the house as a distraction, and watching sad movies as a safe coping strategy. These patterns enrich the coping literature which has tended to be categorized as adaptive and maladaptive coping so far. The third novelty regarding the shift in roles and responsibilities, namely when adolescents take on emotional roles and family responsibilities after their parents die, it will have an impact on their psychic development and the emergence of psychological burdens that were previously poorly researched in the Indonesian context. The last is a novelty that shows that the dynamic relationship between loneliness, coping, self-change, and shifting social roles can be a theoretical contribution that has not been widely discussed (Novianti, 2023). These findings expand the literature on adolescent grief by revealing subjective experiences that have not been widely explained in previous research. In addition, these findings make an important contribution to

enriching phenomenological understanding of adolescent loneliness after parental loss. These findings also show that adolescent loneliness is not just the result of reduced social interaction, but rather an emotional and profound experience related to the loss of attachment figures and changes in family structure. However, there is a limitation in this study, namely that the small sample size cannot be representative of the experiences of all adolescents who have lost their parents. This study also only describes the experiences of adolescents at one time so that they cannot see long-term emotional development. For this reason, further research can use a larger and diverse number of participants so that the results are more representative. In addition, future research can use a combined approach between qualitative and quantitative to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

4. CONCLUSION

The experience of loneliness in adolescents after the loss of a parent emerges as a profound emotional process, characterized by a sense of emptiness and the loss of an important figure in their lives. Adolescents try to adapt through various coping strategies, such as doing diversion activities to stabilize emotions. The loss also triggers a change in self and a shift in roles in the family that demands new responsibilities. Although it adds to the psychological burden, this experience can encourage gradual maturity and acceptance. Thus, post-loss adolescent loneliness is a complex experience that touches on emotional, social, and family aspects at the same time.

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