

Examining the effects of physical activity on the impact of older people's bereavement in ELSA data

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The loss of a loved one and consequent bereavement and grief have a negative impact on physical and mental health and can cause high stress levels.

Given previous evidence for a positive impact of physical activity on mental health, and specific wider benefits for older adults this quantitative longitudinal study examined the relationship between physical activity, bereavement and mental health among older people. It also explored whether physical activity moderates the relationship between bereavement, depression, quality of life and life satisfaction.

The study had a longitudinal quantitative design and analysed four waves from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA). The study hypothesised that physical activity would moderate the impact of bereavement on depression, quality of life and life satisfaction. The final sample included 518 (155 male, 363 female) participants. Matched married participants (N=259) were compared with the bereaved participants (N=259) whose marital status changed from married to widowed in a consecutive wave. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to examine whether physical activity was associated with levels of mental health outcomes in the sample and whether physical activity moderated the impact of bereavement on depression, quality of life and life satisfaction.

The results showed that bereaved participants experienced lower levels of life satisfaction and quality of life compared to continuously married participants. Bereavement was a significant predictor for depression and life satisfaction and physical activity was a significant predictor for quality of life. In addition, physical activity participation before bereavement was linked to lower levels of depression after loss. However, physical activity did not moderate the relationship between bereavement and mental health variables.

The outcomes highlighted the complex relationship between physical activity, bereavement, depression, life satisfaction and quality of life and add evidence that bereavement is

positively associated to depression and negatively associated to life satisfaction and quality of life. To explore whether physical activity moderates the relationship between bereavement and mental health more research is needed. As the results suggest that increased physical activity participation before bereavement predicted decreased depressive symptoms after loss, future research exploring this association can help to understand the relationship between previous life experiences and physical activity participation during grieving.