Bereaved mothers and fathers

Grief and psychological health 1 to 5 years after losing child to cancer

The loss of a child is a devastating event for parents. This thesis increases the understanding of grief and psychological ill health in cancer-bereaved parents. It also examined mothers’ and fathers’ experiences during their child’s illness and what parents found affected their coping with grief. The findings provide knowledge to better support parents in pediatric oncology contexts and in bereavement, which can also improve care for their children.

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Ersta Sköndal Bräcke College has a PhD programme within the field The Individual in the welfare society, with currently two third-cycle subject areas, Palliative care and Social welfare and the civil society. The area frames a field of knowledge in which both the individual in palliative care and social welfare as well as societal interests and conditions are accommodated.
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Akademisk avhandling
som för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen vid Ersta Sköndal Bräcke högskola offentligen försvaras

fredag den 17 april 2020 kl 9.30
Plats: Aulan Campus Ersta

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Abstract

Bereaved mothers and fathers. Grief and psychological health 1 to 5 years after losing a child to cancer

Lilian Pohlkamp

Bereaved parents often experience severe suffering and are at elevated risk for developing grief complications such as prolonged grief and other negative psychological health outcomes. The general aim of this thesis was to investigate symptoms of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, anxiety, rumination, and sleep disturbance in parents who had lost a child to cancer 1 to 5 years earlier. Attention was also given to the potential impact on the parents’ grief of their experiences during the child’s illness, and finally to the parents’ views on their coping with grief. Methods: A cross-sectional design for data collection was used for all four studies in this thesis. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data analysis, to provide various and complementing perspectives on bereaved parents’ grief and their psychological health. Results: Bereaved parents’ symptom levels of prolonged grief and psychological symptoms were found to be elevated and neither time- nor gender-dependent across the first five years after the loss. We also found that some of the parents’ experiences during their child’s illness were associated with their grief and psychological symptoms. These factors differed for mothers and fathers. Mothers valued trustful relations with health care professionals, while fathers reported better psychological health when they had received support in practical matters. Findings also showed that parents found certain factors facilitated or complicated their coping with grief. Unsurprisingly, social support promoted positive coping with grief, while a less familiar factor – going back to work – could make coping with grief harder. Clinical implications: The findings provide knowledge which can improve the care for children, through development of support to their parents in pediatric oncology contexts and in bereavement.

Keywords: Bereavement, grief, pediatric oncology, parents, psychological health
Thank you for your stories
List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.


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Abbreviations

**DSM-5**  Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition

**GAD-7**  The Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale

**EAPC**  European Association for Palliative Care

**ICD**  International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems

**MADRS**  Montgomery-Asberg Depression Rating Scale

**PCL-5**  Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist (version 5)

**PG-13**  Prolonged Grief Disorder Instrument

**PGD**  Prolonged Grief Disorder

**PTSD**  Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

**UGRS**  The Utrecht Grief Rumination Scale

**WHO**  World Health Organization
Preface

Resilience in mental health and how people regain balance after adverse life events have been interests of mine throughout my professional life, starting as a nurse specialized in mental health care. I found the field very rewarding; there was much to learn about life and people living life. Progressing to higher education of health care professionals, I focused on communication and professional relationships within assessment and treatment in mental health.

Practicing as a registered psychotherapist during the past decade, the many encounters I have had with people who found it hard to recover and reconstruct meaning in their lives after a painful loss or other challenging life events, have further deepened my interest in the area. During the 5 years before the start of this research project, I was a group therapist in support groups for bereaved parents, sponsored by the Swedish Childhood Cancer Fund. We had time to talk in depth, as each group met 15 times over the course of 18 months. The stories of these parents regarding their distressing experiences made me aware of the necessity for improved assessment of parents’ need for support during the illness and after the death of a child. Simultaneously, I guided healthcare professionals working in palliative care, gaining further insights into their challenges in supporting dying patients and their families.

As I had begun to understand the full complexity of the process of grief, and the varying ways of adjusting to loss, I joined the Palliative Care PhD program at Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College, within a newly framed research area: The individual in welfare society. It was time to plunge into research in the landscape of grief, the consequences of death – sometimes considered to be our last societal taboo. The deepened knowledge on loss and life I have gained during my graduate studies will be presented in this thesis.
1. Introduction

The death of a child violates the perceived order of living in the family life cycle; combined with strong attachment bonds, this puts parents at increased risk for severe suffering and developing grief complications, such as prolonged grief and other negative psychological health outcomes (Barrera et al., 2007; Morris, Fletcher, & Goldstein, 2018). The term ‘prolonged grief’ refers to an intense and persistent type of grief, impairing a person’s psycho-social functioning in daily life.

Every year, just over 300 children in Sweden are diagnosed with childhood cancer (Childhood Cancer Fund Annual Report, 2019). The most common cancer forms are leukemias and brain tumors. Improved treatment has raised survival rates for childhood cancer over the past decades, but around 60 children still die of their disease each year, leaving their families in great despair. To develop the best possible support and reduce suffering in cancer-bereaved parents, it is important to obtain more knowledge and deeper understanding of parental grief and possible psychological symptoms, and to identify factors associated with prolonged grief.
2. Background

2.1. Death and grief in society

One key aspect of a welfare society is how it supports people in connection with adverse life events. For clarity, it should be stated that the welfare society and the welfare state are, to some extent, different concepts. In the welfare society, there is a large shared community responsibility for support in illness and bereavement in addition to state-organized health care. In the welfare state, people often expect the state to carry full responsibility for health care, including mental health care. This is the case in Sweden, where tax levels enable welfare to cover broad groups of the population (Jegermalm & Jeppsson Grassman, 2012). However, the Swedish health care system does not yet have a clear structure for bereavement support. Some pediatric care units offer bereavement follow-up to parents and siblings, and grief counseling is offered at certain primary care clinics. However, primary care health care staff often need to guide bereaved persons who ask for support to private counselling or informal structures, where support is usually offered by volunteer patient organizations and churches. Sometimes, support is provided based on self-help models in groups with bereaved peers, while sometimes professionals are employed (The Swedish Family Care Competence Centre, 2019). To what extent and how bereavement care is provided in other European countries is not well-known according to the European Association for Palliative Care, and planning of bereavement care provision needs to be formalized (Guldin et al., 2015).

The loss of a loved one can cause widely varying grief reactions, and everyone’s grieving process is influenced by individual characteristics. However, the complexity of an individual’s grief is also affected by cultural and societal traditions associated with death and loss and the accepted or expected expressions of mourning (Harris, 2009; Zisook & Shear, 2009). Sometimes, the terms grief and mourning cause confusion with regard to definitions, but grief is often seen as the personal range of reactions that an individual feels or shows after the loss of a loved one, whereas mourning refers to the more public course of managing bereavement (Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe, 2008).
People have in all times pondered their mortality and the questions related thereto. Through literature, art, and philosophy, humans have attempted to explore and uncover possible truths and meanings of death. Clearly, death is a universal part of human existence, but our approaches to it fluctuate over time (Harris, 2009; Walter, 2012). At a societal level, death is sometimes suggested to be subconsciously felt to threaten the security that comes from being a group, which has historically been necessary for survival. As a way of coping with this subconscious fear of death, social structures are set up to regulate accepted emotions in mourning – for example, the “year of mourning” was common in Sweden in earlier days – and how memorial services are to be conducted. An alternative perspective is offered by Bauman (1992), who describes youth, health, and hopes of immortality as ideals in the postmodern society. He implies that we try to ‘solve’ our death anxiety by acting as if we will live forever, and that this attitude also directs our actions in the care of severely ill persons, when we suffer the loss of loved ones, and how we mourn (Bauman, 1992).

Death shatters our illusion of or wish for order and control in life. Cultural rituals around death and grief help us manage the chaos that death can cause, and create some sense of order. Cultural ideas influence how members of a society talk and think about loss and grief and also how they expect themselves and others to react to the loss of a loved one. The assumptions about death and grief responses that exist within every culture and society provide the people in that social context with possible models for making sense of death and loss (Harris, 2009). Conversations about dying and impending death may sometimes be hindered by cultural taboos, often expressed as well-meaning attitudes of never giving up hope. Unfortunately, when the need for mourning before and after a loss is not met, a person's perceived suffering and loneliness may increase (Kellehear, 2009). Taking cultural ideas into consideration is important when creating structures for relevant bereavement support in a society, because the thought models used by the bereaved society members affect their ability to adjust to bereavement and care for each other.

2.2. The palliative care context

The term ‘palliative care’ is used to describe both the philosophy of care for patients with a life-threatening illness and the specialized clinical services delivered
by specialized health care professionals to meet the needs of seriously ill and dying patients and their relatives. Palliative care aims to provide comprehensive treatment for the discomfort, stress, physical, and psychological symptoms related to a patient’s illness. In order to meet the complex needs for physical, social, psychological, and spiritual support, palliative care should preferably be delivered by a multi-professional team (Ahmedzai et al., 2004; Clark, 2007). The term ‘supportive care’ is sometimes used either as a synonym to palliative care or to describe palliative care at an early stage.

In addition, the phrase ‘a palliative care approach’ has emerged to describe the total system of care for people at the end of life regardless of place. Palliative care encompasses an attitude intended to integrate a holistic approach in care and to promote quality of life for the patient until death, as well as the services delivered in this spirit (Sawatzky et al., 2016; World Health Organization (WHO), 1990). Some confusion over the changing concept of palliative care, regarding features, core elements, and terminology, is common (Meghani, 2004). A recently proposed conceptual model of the palliative care approach entails the following three main domains: whole-person care, quality of life focus, and mortality acknowledgement. Each domain represents elements that were included in the majority of 19 reviewed definitions of palliative care. Another concept frequently mentioned in this review was the inclusion of family members in the unit of care. However, this did not clearly fall within any of the three domains (Touzel & Shadd, 2018). It could be argued that the family concept would be relevant for the domain of whole-person care, but this was not the result of the aforementioned content analysis. However, that would be in line with Clarke et al., who stated that communication with the patient and all family members about care decisions and goals is fundamental to palliative care (Clark, 2007).

Another important feature of palliative care is the intention to adjust the care to the severely ill person’s individual needs (person-centered care). It is sometimes described as being delivered at different intensity levels: a palliative care approach, general palliative care, and specialized palliative care. However, the palliative care approach remains applicable when proceeding to the next intensity level (Ahmedzai et al., 2004; Radbruch, Payne, & Directors., 2009). Most parents with a child with cancer have experienced these levels of intensity of care in relation to their severely ill child. They have met with either a palliative approach or general
palliative care in pediatric settings where young patients with a life-threatening disease are cared for, such as pediatric oncology or intensive care wards. Often, they have also encountered specialized palliative care, which is required for children suffering of incurable and life-limiting cancer diseases with complex and difficult needs. This is offered either in specialized palliative care settings or at home (Jalmsell et al., 2013).

### 2.2.1. Pediatric palliative care

In Sweden, care of children with cancer is offered primarily at six pediatric oncology units. Integration of pediatric palliative care with ongoing cancer treatment is common in hospital care, but is also provided in the child’s home in some regions (Jalmsell et al., 2013). The only hospice for children in Sweden is located in the Stockholm area. A main concept in pediatric palliative care is family support. This includes support to the parents who are caring for a seriously ill child, but also to other close relatives, such as siblings (Lovgren, Jalmsell, Eilegard Wallin, Steineck, & Kreicbergs, 2016) or grandparents. Specialized palliative care is not yet easily accessible to all families in Sweden who need such care, partly due to large distances in the rural areas of the country. However, the intention in pediatric palliative care is to apply an early integration of the palliative care approach in the care of the ill child, similarly called supportive care, focusing on symptom control and quality of life. This working line has been evidenced to provide meaningful opportunities to improve quality of life for both the child and the whole family, and to offer bereavement support (Stephen, 2014; Weaver et al., 2015; Weidner et al., 2011; Wolfe et al., 2000).

When a child dies due to cancer, this is often preceded by a long period of illness and demanding treatments, causing suffering to the whole family (Kreicbergs et al., 2005). Times of hope, when treatment has positive results, are interspersed with periods of despair when relapses occur or tumors resist treatment and progress. Many parents experience significant psycho-social distress when their child is cared for in a pediatric cancer setting and this may make them vulnerable to prolonged grief (van der Geest et al., 2014). Evidence shows that protective factors from this distressing period were a good relationship and communication with the physician, when parents felt trust for health care professionals regarding symptom management of the child’s anxiety and pain, and when they felt they
could share responsibility for the child. Awareness of the child’s prognosis (Valdimarsdóttir et al., 2007) and receiving psycho-social support from health care professionals during the last month of the child’s life were also perceived by the parents as being supportive in their distress (Kreicbergs, Lannen, Onelov, & Wolfe, 2007).

The need for good communication in complex care situations for seriously ill children is obvious. However, recent findings from pediatric care settings revealed that although health care providers spent a lot of time relaying medical information, parents stated that they could not fully understand what they were told (Lannen et al., 2010; Michelson et al., 2011). This might have been due to the distressing circumstances of having a child with a life-threatening illness or unclear information, or both these factors. Improving prognostic communication and guiding parents through the trajectory of cancer treatments would make parents feel more involved in care decisions, give them opportunities to prepare for the worst, and might decrease parental regret in relation to treatment decisions (Mack et al., 2019). Health care professionals may keep a distance out of fear of intruding on private emotions, leading to parents with dying children occasionally feeling abandoned in their time of sorrow (Weidner et al., 2011). This calls for a progression in pediatric palliative care, whereby all members in a family with dying children become the main focus for care. Families should gently be made aware of the child’s prognosis and what still can be offered when shifting the focus from curative treatment to increasing quality of life (Breen, Aoun, O’Connor, & Rumbold, 2014). Evidence shows that when parents were involved in treatment decisions during end-of-life, they felt that their child suffered less (Edwards et al., 2008; Mack, Cronin, & Kang, 2016). Clinicians need to adopt a curious and humble approach when trying to understand children’s and their families’ changing definitions of goals of care, listening to each family’s unique narrative on their experiences of being ill and receiving care for a life-limiting disease (M. Jordan et al., 2018).

Health care professionals carefully, but actively, addressing topics of grief and distress with the dying child and their family members may alleviate suffering in the emotional and social experience of mourning. In this, they should try to stay positive, but also be realistic and transparent (Nuss, 2014). Of course, all communication needs to be moderated to the child’s development, and to the
parents’ needs, either as a couple or individually. It is a challenge for health care professionals to identify the level of support needed by the child and family members (i.e., information and compassion, nonspecialized support, or specialist intervention). Compassionate and respectful end-of-life conversations may have positive implications for how children live the end of their lives, how they die, and how their families manage to cope with bereavement. Therefore, they are well worth the effort (Rosenberg, Wolfe, Wiener, Lyon, & Feudtner, 2016). Evidence indicates that parents’ experiences during a child’s illness trajectory may affect bereavement outcomes; however, it is still unclear what impact they have on parents’ grief and also whether they differ between mothers and fathers (Clarke, McCarthy, Downie, Ashley, & Anderson, 2009).

2.3. Bereavement

2.3.1. Grief

Grief in a wider meaning is everything experienced by a person in response to a loss. Grief is the emotional suffering experienced when someone we were attached to has died. Death is a natural part of human life, and grief is our natural reaction to loss. Grief is the painful cost of having relationships with our loved ones. Grief can change shape or be experienced in different ways during a person’s life course.

Despite the universality of grief as a natural response to the loss of a beloved one, discussions have been ongoing as to whether grief should be defined as an adaptational response, a possible trauma, a crisis, or a mental illness (Archer & Freeman, 1999). The efforts to understand and label grief reactions have a long history; Freud (1917) tried to clarify the distinction between mourning as a natural reaction and major depression as a mental disorder already a century ago. Grief as a reason for ill health in its own right was put forward in the 1940s, after a night club fire with many victims: the Cocoanut Grove disaster in Boston. Survivors, relatives, and friends reported symptoms such as respiratory problems, extreme exhaustion, emotional numbness or agitation, and problems with appetite and digestion related to bereavement. A distinction between normal and pathological grief was indicated, with consequences on duration, intensity, and need for professional support. The term ‘anticipatory grief’ was suggested to describe the
separation anxiety experienced in the face of a threat of death when close relatives were sent to war (Lindemann, 1994). Theories on grief and bereavement have evolved during the last century, from ‘grief work’ models to stage models of the grieving process, where efforts to work through emotions eventually may lead to acceptance. Bowlby’s and Parke’s pioneering works on separation stage theory and attachment theory led to greater understanding of bereavement adjustment (Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1993) and increased understanding of why grief reactions differ between individuals. How grief is experienced and expressed can be related to individual attachment styles, and what the attachment bond to the lost loved one looks like. A person’s more or less secure attachment style can give an understanding of how the person develops new relationships, but also how the person copes with loss (N. Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005).

An alternative explanation for the social and individual experience of grief and finding ways of adjusting to the loss comes from social constructivism theory, which assumes that human beings seek meaning in mourning and do so by struggling to reconstruct a coherent narrative in their bereavement, thus preserving a sense of direction in life (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2016). The ongoing process of grappling with telling and retelling the stories of our lives may take time and not always go in one straight direction. In Walter’s model, bereavement is seen as part of how people reconstruct their biography, finding ways to live with the dead (1996). This indicates that the recovery concept, as seen from a medical perspective, i.e., the return to an earlier, normal state of health, is probably not relevant to grief. It may be better to look at recovery as is commonly done within the mental health field, where the concept of recovery implies that people may not return to their pre-illness state, but to a new acceptable state, regained quality of life, given the new circumstances (Parkes, 2009). As an analogy to this, the goal of coping with grief may not be to return to previous levels of functioning, but rather to navigate and find ways forward to a meaningful life without the deceased. It is likely that bereaved persons experience long-lasting changes because of their loss. These changes may be negative, such as a reduced ability to regulate anxiety (Rubin & Malkinson, 2001), as well as positive, such as enhanced feelings of competence and self-esteem (Wortman, Silver, & Kessler, 1993), or changes in identity, relationships, values and worldview, sometimes called post-traumatic growth (Neimeyer et al., 2016).
2.3.2. Coping with bereavement

Coping is often understood based on the classic definition of Lazarus and Folkman: as an individual’s constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. This is illustrated in their transactional model for stress, appraisal, and coping (Lazarus, 1984). The loss of a child can be one such demanding situation, where persons feel they do not have earlier experiences to use as resources or they lack trust in their ability to manage their grief. Coping with bereavement and the eventual adjustment to loss are associated with personal and relational factors in the individual loss experience (van der Houwen, Stroebe, Schut, Stroebe, & van den Bout, 2010). Proactive coping, i.e., focusing on coping with transitions and preparedness for the impending death of a loved one, is sometimes proposed as a resilience factor for coping with loss. Social support, feelings of security, and habits of communication within the family are also suggested to promote positive coping with grief (Stroebe & Schut, 2015). In the 1990s, the exploration of concepts in coping and attachment theories related to bereavement, resulted in the formulation of the Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), which is now an important conceptual framework for understanding coping with grief, both in research and for professionals meeting bereaved persons.

The everyday course of coping in bereaved individuals is illustrated in the Dual Process Model (DPM), which assumes that bereaved individuals oscillate between two types of coping processes. One coping track includes appraisal and dealing with loss orientation (sadness, yearning, helplessness, crying). The other track focuses on restoration orientation, e.g., engaging necessary instrumental tasks and experimenting with new life roles. Loss orientation is a more emotionally directed coping track, trying to make sense of the loss and the lost relationship. The restoration orientation track is more of a task-oriented coping. Alternating between the two coping processes is considered necessary in grief work in everyday life. DPM describes emotional regulation through a person’s oscillation between the coping processes. This means dealing with stressors by alternating between the loss-oriented and restorative coping processes and is fundamental for adaptation to bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Some gender differences are known regarding the process of grieving: women tend to show a preference...
for loss-oriented coping, while a majority of men tend to choose a restoration-oriented style, especially in acute situations (Stroebe, 1998).

The death of a family member can lead to individual grief responses, and trigger painful differences in how each family member grieves and attempts to make sense of the death of a loved one. The loss of a child is painful for each individual family member (as a child or a sibling), but it is also a loss in the family system. Reactions to the loss influence family relations and ongoing family conversations. Thus, developing a coherent life narrative is crucial for families trying to make sense of their loss. This helps family members reconstruct family-meaning, supports the restoration of secure attachment bonds, and helps them eventually adjust to their loss (Nadeau, 1998). The concept of maintaining bonds with the deceased (Klass, 1997) is described in modern multi-domain models of grief work and highlights the importance of keeping memories of the deceased child alive in the family and other contexts.

2.3.3. Problems in adjusting to loss

Usually, most people can gradually adjust to the loss of a loved one, using their own resources and the support of their social network to recover. However, a loss and subsequent grief reactions lead to serious health concerns for approximately 10% of a general population (Parkes, 2009). Understanding and explaining mental health and mental illness is complex. Why do some people develop a mental health disorder, while others in similar circumstances are more resilient? People are raised in more or less resourceful families (nurture) and are born more or less robust (nature), and some are more vulnerable with an increased risk for some kind of mental illness (Walsh, 2002), but overwhelming adverse life events may cause mental illness also in less vulnerable persons.

A clinically significant deviant manifestation of grief regarding time course, intensity, and level of impairment is commonly understood as some kind of complicated or disturbed grief. There are no clear boundaries for when a person’s grief responses should be considered more complicated than the expected, normal, usually painful process of adapting to the loss of a significant person (Bonanno, 2004; Bonnano & Kaltman, 2001; Walter, 2006). However, grief being a normal part of life, many clinicians meet bereaved people with severe problems
in adjusting to loss and these complications have been characterized in the literature as prolonged, absent, delayed, “frozen,” complicated, or chronic grief. By now, it is accepted to state that there are complications in bereavement, aside from grief, that merit clinical attention (Parkes, 2009; Shear, 2012). This is considered a very important topic of concern for health care professionals and bereavement research: what makes grief go awry? Contemporary research literature on bereavement has expanded enormously in the last decades and difficulties in operationalizing definitions and concepts are frequently discussed (Bonanno & Malgaroli, 2019).

Loss and bereavement are natural and unavoidable elements of life. Their consequences can be resolved, but they can also complicate people’s life and mental health. When we say that a grief reaction is a medical disorder rather than a normal form of human suffering, some aspects have to be considered (Wakefield, 2007). Within mental health history, the term ‘disorder’ has been a value-laden concept and a discussion on whether grief reactions are to be considered a disorder has been going on for the last decades. The stress-vulnerability model is sometimes used to explain differences in individual stress responses. Healthy grief should not be seen as a disorder, as it is a normal response to a loss and there is no dysfunction. This is the leading idea in this view (Bonanno, 2004).

On the other hand, the acknowledgment of impairing grief reactions and understanding that grief complications can be pathological, has been increasing for many years and gradually become more accepted. Unfortunately, the concept of dysfunction in medical tradition has often been associated with biological dysfunction, which is not always prominent in disturbed grief, even though physical features of grief were described already in 1944 (Lindemann). Another challenge is to understand what is prototypical for complicated grief, as a mental condition needs to be frequent and prototypically described to be called a disorder. The concept of mental disorder has scientific, factual, and value components and challenges simple description. To date, neither clinicians or grief scholars are in full agreement about what constitutes complicated grief (Stroebe, Schut, & Van den Bout, 2013); furthermore, what is written about grief is mainly applicable to Western cultures (Harris, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1988). In this thesis,
prolonged grief is considered as a distinct concept within the wider range of complicated grief responses.

Grief rumination is another behavior that is common in grief responses, here referring to repetitive and recurrent thinking about the causes and consequences of a loss and loss-related negative emotions. Reflection and adaptive rumination are common in connection with adverse life events and do not always become a problem. However, if a bereaved person develops a ruminative approach to coping with grief, and a more brooding way of thinking, for example focusing around feelings of guilt towards the deceased, this can become problematic and may lead to prolonged grief. Rumination occurs also in depression (M. Eisma et al., 2015; M. Eisma & Stroebe, 2017; Marroquin, Fontes, Seilletta, & Miranda, 2010).

2.3.3.1. Prolonged grief

As stated earlier, grief is a normal reaction to loss, and includes psychological, physical, spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions (Stroebe et al., 2008; Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2017). While most bereaved individuals find that time heals their suffering and discover ways to adjust to the loss of a loved one, the grieving process is debilitating, intense, and persistent for some. They appear to get “stuck” in their grief (A. Jordan & Litz, 2014; Maercker et al., 2013a; Prigerson et al., 2009) and the terms ‘prolonged’ or ‘complicated grief’ are used. Evidence shows that prolonged grief symptoms tend to be more prevalent among women than men (Kersting, Brahler, Glaesmer, & Wagner, 2011; van der Geest et al., 2014).

Grief reactions in prolonged grief are essentially similar to those in normal grief. When separation distress is so persistent and pervasive that it impairs the bereaved person’s functioning in daily life more than six months after the loss, the concept of prolonged grief may be applicable. Complicated grief includes a broader range of pathological complications than normal grief (Shear & Shair, 2005). To date, five different sets of criteria are used for variants of pathological grief, and the number of symptoms varies between 7 and 16 for each variant (Lenferink, Boelen, Smid, & Paap, 2019). The term ‘prolonged grief’ was introduced by Prigerson et al. (2009), while Shear et al. proposed criteria for a diagnosis called ‘complicated grief.’ The proposed criteria were devised for the
diagnosis to be included in diagnostic manuals, such as ICD-11 and DSM-5. Maercker et al. presented a set of alternative, nonetheless similar, diagnosis criteria (2013b). The criteria were presented to characterize “caseness,” when the persistent yearning, preoccupation with the deceased, and intense emotional pain cause significant functional impairment more than 6 months after the loss. Other symptoms are: feeling that a part of yourself died, trouble accepting the death, avoidance of reminders, finding it hard to trust others, feelings of anger, bitterness, numbness, lack of meaning in life, feeling stunned by the loss, and having trouble to move on in life (Boelen & Smid, 2017). Prolonged grief disorder (PGD) has recently been included as a diagnosis in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (2019). The DSM-5 (2013) had already introduced criteria for persistent complex bereavement disorder (PCBD), which can be diagnosed 12 months after a loss, and is classified as a condition that should be the focus of further research. While there are differences between PGD and PCBD – the scope of PGD is little wider – they are essentially the same entity. Differences between all the diagnostic entities may be partly semantic, but all hinge on the question if all grief is normal. A short answer to this complex question is that all symptoms of grief are normal, but some impairing combinations of symptoms duration and severity are not, and the persons suffering from these may need professional support (Maciejewski, Maercker, Boelen, & Prigerson, 2016).

2.3.4. Psychological symptoms in bereavement

Common psychological symptoms associated with bereavement include symptoms of depression, insomnia, and posttraumatic stress (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007). Evidence shows that prolonged grief, depression, and posttraumatic stress are distinguishable concepts, even though they are strongly related, with partially similar symptoms (Aoyama et al., 2018). A loss that is unexpected, violent, or too early in life can cause a range of psychological symptoms. Sometimes, it is hard to understand the difference between grief and depression, since many symptoms – such as sadness, tearfulness, insomnia, and decreased appetite – are similar. However, two well-known and distinctive symptoms of depression are feelings of worthlessness or low self-esteem. In a longitudinal study on bereaved couples, it was shown that grief was predicted by bereavement-specific factors, while depression was predicted by individual factors.
This means that grief is always preceded by a loss, whereas depression can occur at any time in depression-sensitive persons. Sometimes it occurs after a loss, but not always. Notably, the explicit and persistent suicidal ideation typical of major depression is uncommon in grief, although bereaved persons may sometimes fantasize about being reunited with a lost loved one through death (Friedman, 2012). Loss of meaning can be experienced in both depression and bereavement, but in bereavement one can often see a connection to the loss, which makes the bereaved feel that the world is an empty place, in depression such a connection is rare (Neimeyer et al., 2016).

A common health problem associated with bereavement is disturbed sleep (Boelen & Lancee, 2013; Buckley et al., 2012) or its debilitating form: insomnia. Sleep disturbances have also been associated with elevated symptom levels of prolonged grief (Prigerson, Frank, et al., 1995), depression (Alvaro, Roberts, & Harris, 2013), and posttraumatic stress (Germain, Hall, Krakow, Shear, & Buysse, 2005).

### 2.3.5. Bereaved parents are at risk for prolonged grief and psychological symptoms

Parents who lose a child often experience this as a traumatic life event (Dias, Brandon, Haase, & Tanabe, 2018). Moreover, parents who cared for a seriously ill child over an extended period may often have overlooked their own needs, and are already tired and worn out when faced with bereavement. Having lived in uncertainty for a longer time, as many do, and fearing a relapse of the child’s illness, may further increase vulnerability due to high stress levels (De Graves & Aranda, 2008).

Bereaved parents are known to be at elevated risk for developing prolonged grief disorder and other negative psychological health outcomes, lasting over an extended period (Kreiebergs, Valdimarsdottir, Onelov, Henter, & Steineck, 2004; Middleton, Raphael, Burnett, & Martinek, 1998). Prolonged or otherwise complicated grief affects about 10% in adult non-violent bereavement (Lundorff, Holmgren, Zachariae, Farver-Vestergaard, & O’Connor, 2017), but prevalence tends to be higher in samples of people experiencing a violent loss or the loss of a child (Kersting et al., 2011) or spouse (Kersting et al., 2011; Lichtenthal, Corner,
et al., 2015). Regarding bereaved parents, several studies show a higher risk for mothers than fathers as regards symptoms of prolonged grief and psychological ill health after the loss of a child. For example, bereaved mothers are reported to show more intense grief reactions (Büchi et al., 2007; Keesee, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2008), more symptoms of depression (Vance et al., 1995), and more posttraumatic stress symptoms (Christiansen, Elklit, & Olff, 2013) than fathers. A recent review encompassing bereaved parents suggested that the death of an infant was such a traumatic event, with higher risk for mothers than fathers, that healthcare professionals should consider the possibility of posttraumatic stress symptoms when meeting bereaved parents (Christiansen, 2017). A longitudinal study also showed elevated levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms in cancer-bereaved parents, five years after the child’s death, with higher symptom levels in mothers (Ljungman, Hoven, Ljungman, Cernvall, & von Essen, 2015).

### 2.4. Project rationale

Parents who have experienced the death of a child are at risk for developing prolonged grief and elevated psychological symptoms. Exploring parents’ grief and their experiences during their child’s illness will give a deeper understanding and promote development of appropriate bereavement support to bereaved parents. More knowledge and deeper understanding are needed regarding factors that may be associated with parents’ grief and psychological symptoms, and whether these factors differ between mothers and fathers. This knowledge may be important for staff in pediatric care settings and others to improve specialized palliative care for families with children and may hopefully help the families alleviate suffering and gain better health in both the short and long term.
3. Aims

The general aim of this thesis was to investigate symptoms of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, anxiety, rumination, and sleep disturbance in parents who had lost a child to cancer 1 to 5 years earlier. Attention was also given to the potential impact on the parents’ grief of their experiences during the child’s illness, and to the parents’ views on their coping with grief.

The specific aims of the studies in this thesis were:

3.1. Study I
To examine the psychometric properties of the Swedish version of the Prolonged Grief Disorder scale (PG-13) in bereaved parents 1 to 5 years post loss.

3.2. Study II
To assess differences in prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and sleep disturbances in bereaved parents across years since their loss (1 to 5 years) and by gender. A secondary aim was to assess potential interactive effects of time since loss and gender on bereavement outcomes.

3.3. Study III
To examine possible contributing factors associated with prolonged grief in cancer-bereaved mothers and fathers 1–5 years post loss.

3.4. Study IV
To explore bereaved parents’ views on what facilitated or complicated their grief 1–5 years after losing a child to cancer.
4. Methods

4.1. Overview of the studies

Exploring grief and psychological health of cancer-bereaved parents has been central in this thesis. A cross-sectional design for data collection was used for all four studies in this thesis. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data analysis, to provide various and complementing perspectives on bereaved parents’ grief and their psychological health. An overview of samples, measures, and analyses for Studies I–IV is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The samples and methods for Studies I–IV.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study I</th>
<th>Study II</th>
<th>Study III</th>
<th>Study IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sample</strong></td>
<td>225 parents</td>
<td>225 parents</td>
<td>225 parents</td>
<td>161 parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measures</strong></td>
<td>Symptoms of prolonged grief, anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress, and rumination</td>
<td>Symptoms of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia</td>
<td>Symptoms of prolonged grief, study-specific questions on the illness and death of the child and parents’ relations and communications with pediatric care staff</td>
<td>Two open-ended questions on parental coping with grief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analyses</strong></td>
<td>Wilcoxon’s rank-sum test, chi-squared analyses, Spearman’s correlation analyses, factor analysis with oblique rotation, mean inter-item correlation, Cronbach’s α</td>
<td>Wilcoxon’s rank-sum test, chi-squared analyses, Spearman’s correlation analyses, ANOVA</td>
<td>Wilcoxon’s rank-sum test, chi-squared analyses, Spearman’s correlation analyses, descriptive analysis, univariable and multivariable regressions</td>
<td>Qualitative content analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2. Population

The data for the studies in this doctoral project were collected in 2016 by means of a population-based nationwide postal survey among parents who had lost a child to cancer. When the study had been approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm, Sweden (No: 2015/2183-31/5), potential participants were identified using the Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry, the Cause of Death Registry, and the Swedish Population Register at the Swedish Tax Agency. The Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry is a national database with information on all children who have received a cancer diagnosis. The children who had died because of their cancer were identified by linkage with the Cause of Death Registry. Their personal identification numbers were used to identify their parents through the Swedish Population Register at the Swedish Tax Agency. The inclusion criteria were: all parents who lost children or young adults (age 0–24 years) to childhood cancer (diagnosis age 0–16 years) during the period August 2010–July 2015 in Sweden. At the time of the study, the parent should live in Sweden and understand enough Swedish to be able to respond to the questionnaire based on their own opinions. This was impossible to check before sending out information letters.

4.3. Data collection

4.3.1. Procedure

Eligible parents (N = 512) received an information letter describing the study purpose and procedure and inviting them to participate, see Figure 1. Parents could contact the PhD candidate or the professor responsible for the project with questions, by mail or telephone. In the information letter, the potential participants were also informed of the possibility to opt out of the study or further contact, without needing to give a reason. After two weeks, each parent of each child was contacted separately, by telephone, and asked if they would consent to participate. Some parents mailed or called (LP) soon after they received the letter, stating that they wanted to participate, so they were not contacted by telephone. Parents with unlisted telephone numbers received a request by post to contact us. In total, 373 consented to participate, 76 parents could not be reached, and 63 declined to participate. Those who consented to participate were sent a
questionnaire with a prepaid return envelope. No questionnaires were sent without consent. After a few weeks, reminder calls were made to those who had not returned the questionnaire. Out of 373 individuals who consented to participate, 232 returned the questionnaire and 225 filled out all the questions, included the psychometric validated measures, while 7 parents only responded to the study-specific questions.

No statistically significant differences were found between responders (n = 232) and non-responders (n = 280) regarding the parents’ age at the time of the study, age at the time of the child’s death, years passed since loss, child’s gender, or child’s age at time of diagnosis or death. The only significant difference was that the percentage of women was higher among responders than among non-responders ($X^2 = 8.83, p < 0.05$). Data on all parents and children (including non-
responders) were derived from the Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry combined with the Swedish Population Register.

4.4. Measures

4.4.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was largely based on items from an earlier survey, which was developed using a stepwise approach described by Charlton (2000). It consisted of 90 questions covering socio-demographics, parents’ experiences from their child’s illness and death, parents’ communication with health care professionals, perceived social support and family communication with closed-ended multiple choice answers (Kreicbergs, Valdimarsdottir, Onelov, et al., 2004). Several open-ended questions were also included in the questionnaire. See Table 2. for the study-specific questions selected for this thesis, translated into English.

4.4.2. Questionnaire validation

The questionnaire was validated through face-to-face interviews (LP) with eight cancer-bereaved parents. The aim was to determine whether the survey seemed to measure what it was supposed to measure and appeared clear and relevant to the participants, as a step in developing a questionnaire (Charlton, 2000). The eight parents were asked if they found the questions clear and phrased in a respectful manner and if they thought any relevant topics were missing for them to adequately describe their experiences. They received the questionnaire some days before their interview, so that they had time to read it and reflect on possible suggestions. During the interview sessions, which took around 45 minutes, we read through the entire questionnaire together, including the questions in the instruments assessing psychological health. The parents reflected on the individual items and the questionnaire as a whole.

The parents who were invited for the face validation interviews were a so-called convenience sample, consisting of parents I had gotten to know in a recent bereavement support group, whom I had told about the planned study. They volunteered to read and reflect on the questions in the preliminary questionnaire and participate in an interview. The support group meetings were finished by then, so that processes were not mixed. Six of the parents participated individually.
and two as a couple. Some of the parents had discussed the questions with their respective partners before the interview.

Minor adjustments were made to the wordings of some questions, based on the parents’ suggestions. All eight parents participating in the interviews felt that it was appropriate, and even important, to invite bereaved parents to participate in research, which is in line with earlier evidence showing that bereaved parents can find benefit in research participation (Omerov, Steineck, Dyregrov, Runeson, & Nyberg, 2014).

4.4.3. Measurement

In addition to the study-specific questions, the following commonly used instruments for psychological health assessment were included in the questionnaire.

4.4.3.1. The Prolonged Grief Disorder-13 Instrument

The Prolonged Grief Disorder-13 instrument (PG-13) was used to assess prolonged grief symptoms (Studies I–III), in accordance with Prigerson’s criteria (Prigerson et al., 2009). It consists of 13 items: 2 items on duration and impairment that are to be answered “yes” or “no,” and 11 items assessing cognitive, behavioral, and emotional symptoms experienced during the past month. Four of those symptom items are rated on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from “not at all” to “several times a day” (scoring 1–5), and six items on an intensity scale ranging from “not at all” to “overwhelmingly” (scoring 1–5). PG-13 is scored as a continuous measure by summing the eleven symptom items and excluding the two duration and functional impairment items (Prigerson et al., 2009). The total score ranges from 11 to 55, with a higher score indicating more symptoms of prolonged grief; the cut-off is ≥ 35 (Pohlkamp, Kreicbergs, Prigerson, & Sveen, 2018). Cronbach’s α was 0.89.

4.4.3.2. The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale

The Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7) (Kroenke, Spitzer, Williams, Monahan, & Lowe, 2007) was used to assess symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (Study I). It consists of 7 items, rated on a 4-point scale with response categories from “not at all” to “nearly every day” (scoring 0–3). The total score
can range from 0 to 21 points, with a higher score indicating a greater risk for anxiety. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was 0.92.

### 4.4.3.3. Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale

The Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale (MADRS) (Montgomery & Åsberg, 1979) was used to assess symptoms of depression (Studies I–II). It consists of 9 items: sadness, inner tension, reduced sleep, reduced appetite, concentration difficulties, fatigue, inability to feel, pessimistic thoughts, and suicidal thoughts. The items are rated on a 7-point scale (scoring 0–6) and the total score ranges from 0 to 54; a higher score indicates a greater risk for depression. The range for mild depression is 13 to 19, for moderate depression it is 20 to 34, and the cut-off for severe depression is $> 34$. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was 0.90.

### 4.4.3.4. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for DSM-5

The Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5) (Weathers, 2013) was used to assess symptoms of PTSD (Study I–II). It consists of 20 items divided into four subscales: Intrusion, Avoidance, Negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and Alterations in arousal and reactivity. The items are rated on a 5-point scale (scoring 0–4) and the total score ranges from 0 to 80; a higher score indicates more symptoms of PTSD. The cut-off is $\geq 33$. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was 0.94.

### 4.4.3.5. The Utrecht Grief Rumination Scale

The Utrecht Grief Rumination Scale (UGRS) (M. Eisma et al., 2014) was used to measure grief-specific rumination, defined as recurrent, repetitive, and self-focused thoughts about the causes and consequences of the loss and related to negative feelings (Study I). The scale consists of 15 items including five subscales. The items were rated on a 5-point scale with response categories from “never” to “always.” The UGRS was translated from Dutch and English into Swedish by two of the authors (LP and JS) and then back-translated by a professional translator and validated for the Swedish sample (Sveen, Pohlkamp, Kreicbergs, & Eisma, 2019). Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was 0.92.
4.4.3.6. The Insomnia Severity Index

The Insomnia Severity Index (ISI) (Morin, 1993) was used to assess symptoms of insomnia (Study II), and consisted of 7 items: severity of problems falling asleep, staying asleep, and early morning awakening problems, sleep dissatisfaction, interference of sleep difficulties with daytime functioning, noticeability of sleep problems to others, and distress caused by the sleep difficulties. The items are rated on a 5-point scale from “no problem” to “severe problem” (scoring 0–4) and the total score ranges from 0 to 28; a higher score indicates more symptoms of insomnia. The cut-off is ≥ 10. Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) was 0.94.

4.5. Analysis of data

4.5.1. Quantitative analyses (Studies I–III)

In Study I, the characteristics of responders and non-responders to the questionnaire were compared using Wilcoxon’s rank-sum test and chi-squared analysis. We continued analyses of the responders \((n = 232)\), with the sample for the first study consisting of 225 parents, since 7 participants did not fill out the PG-13 instrument. In total, the nationwide sample included 76 parent dyads. Spearman’s correlation analyses and scatter plots were used to evaluate dependency of data because parent dyads of the same child were included (i.e., 152/323 parents in the study). The analysis indicated a weak but significant correlation for MADRS, assessing depression (Spearman’s \( r_{ho} 0.26, p = 0.03 \)), and a moderate correlation for scores on PG-13, assessing symptoms of prolonged grief (Spearman’s \( r_{ho} 0.44, p < 0.001 \)) between mothers and fathers of the same child. No significant correlations were seen for PCL-5 (assessing posttraumatic stress) or ISI (assessing insomnia). The significance level for all analyses was \( p < 0.05 \). Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) was used to measure internal consistency for the items in all measures included in the questionnaire.

A principal component analysis with oblique rotation (in the study referred to as a factor analysis) was performed to examine the factor structure of PG-13 in the Swedish sample. After having validated the PG-13 in this sample, symptom levels of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia were examined in Study II among the bereaved parents, including 133 mothers and 92 fathers. The sample was subdivided into five subsamples, one for each year since loss. A
two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess differences in psychological symptom levels associated with years since loss and parent’s gender, as well as interaction effects between time since loss and gender.

In Study III, first univariable and then multiple regression analyses were used to assess the associations between symptoms of prolonged grief and possible contributing parent variables. These parent variables were the parents’ responses to questions concerning experiences during their child’s illness and death (see questions listed below in Table 2). They were categorized as loss-oriented factors, i.e., related to circumstances of the death of the child, relational factors regarding parent with health care professionals, relational factors regarding parents with family and friends, and other factors. Some response alternatives were dichotomized for analysis purposes.

Table 2. The study-specific questions included in the questionnaire, translated into English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loss-oriented factors</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you intellectually understand that your child would die earlier than one day before the actual event? (yes vs. no)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you emotionally understand that your child would die earlier than one day before the actual event? (yes vs. no)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you understand and accept the information that your child’s illness could not be cured? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1–4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there any health care staff present at the moment of death? (yes vs. no)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there an atmosphere of peace and quiet at the moment of death? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1–4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you say farewell after your child’s death in the way that you wanted? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1–4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did your child, at any time during the last month before death, have pain which lasted 4 hours or longer and could not be relieved? (yes vs. no)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did your child have any anxiety at any time during the illness? (no/yes, once/yes, occasionally/yes, several times, coded 1–4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you talk to your child about important things during the last month of his/her life? (yes vs. no)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relational factors; health care professionals

When you were told that your child’s cancer was incurable, was this said in a respectful way? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1–4)

Did you receive sufficient information on your child’s illness trajectory? (yes vs. no)

Did you receive sufficient information on how to handle acute problems related to your child’s illness? (yes vs. no)

Did you receive sufficient information from health care professionals on how to take care of your child? (yes vs. no)

Do you feel that you had an adequate level of responsibility for your child’s care during his/her last month of life? (yes vs. no)

Did you receive sufficient information on who could answer questions regarding the care of your child? (yes vs. no)

Did you receive practical support from health care professionals during the illness trajectory? (no/yes, a little/yes, sufficiently, coded 0–2)

Do you trust that every possible effort was made by health care professionals to cure your child? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1–4)

Were you able to influence decisions regarding your child’s care? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1–4)

Did you receive sufficient information regarding who you could turn to for personal psycho-social support? (yes vs. no)

Relational factors, family and friends

Did you receive any practical support from your family during your child’s illness? (no/yes, a little/yes, sufficiently, coded 0–2)

Did you receive any practical support from friends during your child’s illness? (no/yes, a little/yes, sufficiently, coded 0–2)

Did you speak with your partner about your child’s anticipated death? (yes vs. no)

During your child’s illness, could you talk within your family about how you were feeling? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1–4)

Other factors

Do you have any children today other than the child you lost? (yes vs. no)

Are you religious? (yes vs. no)

If yes, has your faith been affected by your child’s illness and death? (yes vs. no)
The following adjustment variables were also added to the linear regression models: the parents’ age at the time of the child’s death, education level and employment at the time of diagnosis, time from diagnosis to loss, the child’s gender, and the child’s age at diagnosis.

IBM SPSS Statistics version 22 was used for all statistical analyses. Results of the analyses were discussed in the research group and with a statistician to increase understanding and ensure evidence.

4.5.2. Qualitative content analysis (Study IV)

Qualitative content analysis was chosen for Study IV to broaden the understanding of the collected data. Content analysis is widely used as a research method in health studies. It entails a range of techniques used to analyze text data. The aim is to interpret meaning from the content of text data. Content analysis focuses on words and language as communication concerning the content or contextual meaning of the text. The text that was analyzed in this study encompassed the written responses from the parents to open-ended questions in the questionnaire. In brief, the analysis procedure of conventional content analysis means that meaning units derived from the text, that respond to the research question, are first coded and then sorted into categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The analysis was based on two open-ended questions from the questionnaire: “Is there anything that has helped you cope with your grief after your child’s death?” and “Is there anything that made it harder for you to cope with your grief?” All the parents’ responses to both open-ended questions were documented in a text file (LP), and they were repeatedly read, to obtain a sense of the whole, by four researchers independently. Overall first impressions were discussed within the author group. The responses were then condensed into meaning units (LP), which were then coded based on similarities in their content. These codes led to formation of categories which were discussed at group meetings. During this process, the categories were narrowed and refined, with the goal of creating categories that reflected important yet distinct aspects of the parents’ responses. Finally, all categories were revised in the group until agreement was achieved and the categories presented in the study were established.
4.6. Ethical considerations

The studies were conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, developed by the World Medical Association (WMA), as revised in 2013, and all procedures contributing to this work complied with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees. The Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm, Sweden, gave ethical approval for this study (No 2015/2183-31/5).

There are four key principles developed from moral principles that have played a central role in the history of ethics which are still widely acknowledged as general guidelines in medical research: respect for autonomy (respecting autonomous decisions), non-maleficence (avoiding causing harm), beneficence (balancing benefits against risks), and justice (fairly distributing benefits, risks and costs) (Beauchamp & Childress, 2009).

The ethical issues necessary to consider in this doctoral project were: autonomy in the participation decision, feeling secure in that the results of the research would be used for a good cause (beneficence), avoiding the risk of inflicting emotional harm to bereaved parents (non-maleficence) when inviting them to the study and filling out the questionnaire, and, lastly, making an effort to be just when collecting data and publishing results of the studies (justice).

To support autonomy in participant decision-making, informed consent was achieved by sending an information letter to bereaved parents describing the study purpose and procedure when inviting them to participate. They could contact members of the research group with any questions, or to opt out of the study and further contact, without giving a reason. We included information on both e-mail addresses and telephone numbers, and used an answering machine. We informed them that participation was voluntary and that confidentiality was guaranteed. After 1–2 weeks, each parent of each child was contacted by telephone separately (unless they had opted out), to ask if they would consent to participate and if they had any questions. We were careful to respect the autonomy of each person and not to influence the decision-making process.

Concerns on possible harm were alleviated by evidence showing that many bereaved parents find research participation a positive experience. It is linked to
a valuable possibility to share the experiences of a very distressing time, which may provide relief and also raise hope of helping others in the future. Although reminiscence can be painful, the benefits seem to outweigh the risks (K. Dyregrov, 2004; Kreicbergs, Valdimarsdottir, Steineck, & Henter, 2004; Omerov et al., 2014). The possible harm that a project may inflict should also be balanced against the scientific knowledge it produces. We informed possible participants that the results of the research were going to be published in international research literature or presented at conferences. We mentioned that deeper understanding of aspects of bereaved parents’ grief process resulting of the research might provide health care professionals with enhanced knowledge to improve support to parents and severely ill children in pediatric palliative care settings, and to bereaved parents. Moreover, results might be used for the purpose of education of health care professionals. During the consent request call or when they returned the questionnaires, many parents in the study mentioned altruism as an important reason to participate. Something good that might come of their suffering felt rewarding. Finally, the effort to be just was adopted in this data collection by having very open inclusion criteria for participation, not excluding any cancer-bereaved parents in the time frame of the study. The collected data were stored on a secure university server and all data were anonymized, without names and identity numbers. Thus, no identification of individuals was possible during data analysis procedures.
5. Results

5.1. Sample characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the parents are summarized in Table 3. At the time of the data collection for the research project, the mean age of the parents (Studies I–III) was 46.0 years. The sample contained 133 (59%) mothers and 92 (41%) fathers, with 196 (87%) parents either employed or studying and 126 parents (56%) living in an urban area. When examining statistical differences between mothers and fathers with regard to their characteristics, no statistically significant differences were found, except in age and employment; fathers were older than the mothers, $t(230) = 2.05$, $p < 0.05$, and fathers were more often in employment than mothers, $\chi^2 = (1, N = 224) 9.49$, $p < 0.01$, as more mothers were on parental leave.
Table 3. Characteristics of the bereaved parents (n = 225).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent age at study (years)</td>
<td>46.0 (8.15)</td>
<td>24–66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent age at child death (years)</td>
<td>42.2 (8.01)</td>
<td>20–62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since loss</td>
<td>3.1 (1.47)</td>
<td>1–5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of the parents at the time of the study</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>133 (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>92 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other children than the deceased child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not religious</td>
<td>131 (58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting</td>
<td>206 (91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>17 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education completed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary/secondary school</td>
<td>117 (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>107 (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential region</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>96 (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town</td>
<td>71 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>55 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed/studying</td>
<td>196 (87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On sick leave/parental leave/unemployed</td>
<td>28 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Characteristics of the deceased children are summarized in Table 4. The mean age of the deceased children (n = 151) was 7.3 years at diagnosis and 9.9 years at death, with mean length of the children’s illness being 2.7 years. Out of 232 parents, 160 stated that they perceived that their child had received palliative care.

Table 4. Characteristics of the deceased children (n = 151).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child age at diagnosis (years)</td>
<td>7.25 (5.3)</td>
<td>0–16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age at death (years)</td>
<td>9.93 (6.5)</td>
<td>0–24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child illness length in years</td>
<td>2.7 (3.51)</td>
<td>0–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>66 (44)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>85 (56)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain tumor</td>
<td>56 (37)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leukemia/lymphoma</td>
<td>42 (28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcoma</td>
<td>22 (14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>32 (21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2. Results of Study I

As a first step in this doctoral project, the internationally used instrument PG-13, used to assess symptoms of prolonged grief, was validated in a Swedish sample of bereaved parents, in preparation for the use of the instrument in the planned studies. The results of the principal component analysis, hereafter referred to as factor analysis, indicated that the PG-13 items were best characterized as one factor. A one-factor analysis rendered a significant Bartlett’s test of sphericity (P < 0.001); the sampling adequacy was 0.88 (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin), which is considered excellent (A. Field, 2013). The one-factor analysis explained 48.4% of the total variance.

All items had loadings above 0.40; nine of the items had high loadings (range 0.64–0.81) and two items – item 4 (avoid reminders) and item 8 (distrust others) – had somewhat lower loadings, 0.45 and 0.59, respectively.
The internal consistency of PG-13 was good, as measured with mean inter-item correlation (MIIC) and Cronbach’s α coefficients. The MIIC was 0.42 (range 0.22–0.74), which is very good, and Cronbach’s α was high (α = 0.89). The internal consistency of the scale did not improve when examining Cronbach’s α values “if item is deleted.”

At a group level, the participating parents scored highest on the item assessing “yearning” and second highest on “having trouble accepting the loss,” which may show these to be the strongest symptoms of prolonged grief in PG-13. The lowest score was on “avoiding reminders of the deceased” and the second lowest score was on “distrusting others.” The mean item score was 2.7 (SD = 0.86).

The concurrent validity of PG-13 was assessed in relation to other variables (i.e., symptoms measured by GAD-7, MADRS, PCL-5, UGRS, and ISI), and statistically significant correlations were found with all the psychological symptoms. The strongest correlation was found with symptoms of posttraumatic stress.

Significant correlations were found between parents’ prolonged grief and the child’s age – both at diagnosis and at time of death – with more symptoms when children were older, and also with the parent’s gender; mothers reported higher scores. There were no significant correlations between a parent’s prolonged grief and time since loss or the parent’s age.

To summarize, the results indicate satisfactory psychometric properties of the instrument, supporting the use of the PG-13 as a valid measure of prolonged grief in our sample.

**5.3. Results of Study II**

The second study examined prolonged grief and psychological symptoms in the bereaved parents in our sample. At a group level, parents reported elevated levels of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia across the first five years post loss, regardless of how many years had passed since the loss. Mothers reported higher symptom levels of prolonged grief, depression, and posttraumatic stress than fathers, but no statistically significant differences between mothers and fathers were found regarding insomnia.
Parents’ average score for symptoms of prolonged grief was 29.7 (range 11 to 55). Parents’ average score on depression was 12.9, indicating mild depression. The average score for posttraumatic stress symptoms was 21.3, indicating moderate symptom levels, and parents reported an average insomnia score of 10.1, which was over the cut-off for diagnosis. Table 5 presents all mean scores for symptoms of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia for the total sample and for mothers and fathers separately.

Table 5. Self-reported mean symptom levels in bereaved parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All parents Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Mothers Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Fathers Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prolonged grief</strong></td>
<td>29.70 (9.54)</td>
<td>31.01 (10.11)</td>
<td>27.80 (8.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(range 11 to 55)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Depression</strong></td>
<td>12.91 (9.30)</td>
<td>13.89 (9.64)</td>
<td>11.36 (8.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(range 0 to 54)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posttraumatic stress</strong></td>
<td>21.34 (15.94)</td>
<td>23.40 (16.59)</td>
<td>18.24 (14.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(range 0 to 80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Insomnia</strong></td>
<td>10.12 (7.46)</td>
<td>10.70 (7.63)</td>
<td>9.11 (7.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(range 0 to 28)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, symptom levels were elevated for all subsamples of parents grouped according to years since loss (see Table 6).

Table 6. Self-reported symptom levels in bereaved parents; subsamples by years since loss.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years since loss</th>
<th>Prolonged grief Mean (SD; n)</th>
<th>Depression Mean (SD; n)</th>
<th>Posttraumatic stress Mean (SD; n)</th>
<th>Insomnia Mean (SD; n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All parents N = 225</td>
<td>Mothers N = 225</td>
<td>Fathers N = 222</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>30.47 (9.59; 45)</td>
<td>12.22 (9.00; 45)</td>
<td>19.33 (14.21; 44)</td>
<td>9.56 (7.23; 43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>31.26 (10.28; 43)</td>
<td>13.86 (10.49; 42)</td>
<td>23.36 (18.20; 43)</td>
<td>9.59 (7.80; 42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>29.56 (9.52; 45)</td>
<td>12.84 (10.17; 45)</td>
<td>20.26 (15.27; 43)</td>
<td>8.98 (6.35; 45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>29.14 (9.64; 37)</td>
<td>13.79 (8.97; 38)</td>
<td>22.48 (16.08; 37)</td>
<td>11.92 (8.85; 39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>28.35 (8.95; 55)</td>
<td>12.20 (8.23; 55)</td>
<td>21.44 (16.11; 55)</td>
<td>10.65 (7.10; 53)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The two-way ANOVA analysis showed no significant interaction effect between years since loss and gender (or vice versa) on the symptom levels of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia (see Table 7). Mothers had significantly higher symptom levels of PGD, depression, and posttraumatic stress than fathers, while no difference was found between mothers and fathers regarding symptoms of insomnia.

We found no significant interaction effect between years since loss or gender and the bereavement outcomes. However, the graphs presented in the published study (Pohlkamp, Kreicbergs, & Sveen, 2019) show a pattern of mothers reporting more intense reactions than fathers in years one to three, while the intensity of mothers’ and fathers’ grief and psychological reactions were rather similar in years four and five. Interestingly, for insomnia, the pattern was somewhat different, with fathers showing increased symptoms four years after loss, with levels higher than those of the mothers.

Table 7. Results of ANOVA analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Prolonged grief F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Depression F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Posttraumatic stress F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Insomnia F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years since loss</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction effect</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4. Results of Study III

The third study reported on factors during a child’s illness trajectory (see Table 2) that might contribute to levels of prolonged grief symptoms in mothers and fathers one to five years after the loss of their child to cancer.

A univariable analysis showed that higher levels of prolonged grief in mothers were associated with feeling that their child suffered from anxiety during the illness trajectory or was in pain during the last month of life. When they felt that they had not received sufficient information on how to take care of their child or
handle acute problems related to the illness, this was also associated with more prolonged grief. In fathers, higher levels of prolonged grief symptoms were found when they had perceived an inadequate (too high or low) level of responsibility for their child’s care during the last month of their child’s life. Higher levels were also seen when fathers felt they lacked enough information about their child’s illness trajectory or about where they could turn for their own psycho-social support.

In the multivariable regression, variables found to be associated with lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms for mothers were if they had been able to talk about feelings within the family and if they felt that they could trust that health care professionals made every possible effort to cure the child. In the final model of the multiple regression analysis, after inclusion of demographic adjustment variables, 20.5% of the variance (adjusted $R^2$) was explained by the variables: “being able to talk within the family” ($\beta = 2.83; 95\%$ CI $1.09–4.57; P = 0.0017$) and “trust in health care” ($\beta = 2.56; 95\%$ CI $0.78–4.35; P = 0.0055$).

The statistically significantly associated variables for fathers’ lower levels of prolonged grief were: having said farewell to the deceased child in the way they wanted and feeling that they had received practical support from health care professionals during the child’s illness trajectory. In the final model of the multiple regression analysis, after inclusion of demographic adjustment variables, 33.2% of the variance (adjusted $R^2$) was explained by the variables “having said farewell to your deceased child in the way you wanted” ($\beta = 3.40; 95\%$ CI $1.70–5.10; P = 0.00016$) and “received support from health care professionals in practical matters” ($\beta = -3.43; 95\%$ CI $-5.90–0.95; P = 0.0073$).

5.5. Results of Study IV

The results of the fourth study showed parents’ views on what facilitated or complicated their grief. Six categories emerged from the parents’ responses to the open-ended questions. They were categorized as follows: (1) the social network of family and friends, (2) memories of the child, (3) sharing experiences with other bereaved parents, (4) professional counselling support, (5) activity and work, and (6) personal growth and spirituality.
Parents reported that having a supportive social network of family and friends that was open for sharing and expression of thoughts and emotions, and having remaining children, promoted positive coping with grief. This helped them back to life. Meeting professional counselors was necessary for some to be able to ‘move forward’ and being able to share experiences with other bereaved parents was beneficial to many. They felt it promoted their coping if they felt deeply understood in their sorrow. Taking action to keep memories of the child alive in various contexts – family, friends, the child’s school, and together with staff at pediatric care settings where the ill child had been cared for – was also reported as facilitating their coping.

Parents expressed that the following experiences complicated their coping: when they could not share emotions with their partner or when they perceived that friends, relatives, or colleagues lacked empathy or patience. Some suffered additional losses in their social networks, which made them feel overwhelmed. The parents’ work places could complicate their coping when they felt demands from employers to manage tasks that were too challenging at an early stage.
6. Discussion

The main focus of this doctoral project was to explore parental grief after the loss of a child due to cancer by means of a nationwide survey, including questions on the parents’ experiences during the child’s illness. The findings of the project revealed that the parents’ symptom levels of prolonged grief and psychological symptoms were elevated and neither time- nor gender-dependent across the first five years after the loss. We also found that some of the parents’ experiences during the child’s illness were associated with their grief and psychological symptoms. These factors differed for mothers and fathers. Findings also showed that parents found certain factors facilitated or complicated their coping with grief. Unsurprisingly, social support promoted positive coping with grief, while a less familiar factor – going back to work – could make coping with grief harder.

6.1. Prolonged grief is a measurable construct

As an element of this research project, the internationally used instrument PG-13, developed to assess prolonged grief, was validated in a Swedish sample of bereaved parents. It demonstrated good psychometric properties. The PG-13 showed good internal consistency, indicating that the items of the instrument measured the same attribute, thus supporting reliability. The factor analysis confirmed evidence from other samples (1995; 1999), showing a unidimensional factor structure of prolonged grief, hence demonstrating construct validity. The associations between prolonged grief symptoms and symptom levels of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, rumination, and insomnia provided evidence in support of the instrument’s concurrent validity.

The significant correlations between scores for prolonged grief, anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress indicated that the conditions measured by these instruments often overlap. However, evidence confirms that prolonged grief is distinct from other possible bereavement-related disorders, such as posttraumatic stress and depression (Boelen, van de Schoot, van den Hout, de Keijser, & van den Bout, 2010; Prigerson, Maciejewski, et al., 1995). The low loadings on the avoidance and distrust items may help to distinguish grief from posttraumatic stress, showing that they are related, but still different concepts.
The two items found to show lowest factor loadings, items 4 (avoidance of reminders) and 8 (distrust others), were consistent with previous studies (Boelen et al., 2010; Boelen, Van Den Bout, De Keijser, & Hoijtink, 2003; Prigerson et al., 1999). Comparing with another grief-measuring instrument, the Inventory of Complicated Grief (ICG), Boelen et al. (Boelen & Smid, 2017) found a low factor loading for the avoidance item. These findings may indicate that avoidance and distrust are weak markers of prolonged grief as a pathological phenomenon, i.e., that persons may experience avoidance and distrust, but for other reasons and in other ways. People with posttraumatic stress feel a fear response that leads to avoidance of triggers or persons. Prolonged grief symptoms are based on attachment and separation anxiety and the emotion of fear in prolonged grief is related to the painful separation that one has experienced. Parents want to think about their child, but also want to avoid being reminded of the loss of the child.

From a theoretical perspective, one might consider the fact that parents sometimes try to avoid being reminded about the loss of the child to be a restorative element in their coping, in line with what is suggested in the DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Involvement in restorative coping may be a strategy to avoid being confronted with reminders of the loss – “taking a break” from the energy-demanding involvement in the emotions and cognitions of loss-oriented coping.

6.2. Prolonged grief, psychological health, and gender differences

In the devastating experience of losing a child to cancer, most parents rely heavily on each other for sustained support. Nonetheless, they may experience difficulties in comforting and supporting each other. They sometimes feel that their partner has experienced the same loss, but is going through a different grieving process (Lannen, Wolfe, Prigerson, Onelov, & Kreicbergs, 2008) (Wing, Burge-Callaway, Rose Clance, & Armistead, 2001). They may, in coping with their grief, focus on differing experiences during the child’s period of illness and treatment. We found associations between high levels of prolonged grief symptoms and experiences when the child was ill, which is interesting information for health care professionals. Even more interesting was that these significant experiences differed for mothers and fathers. This may imply gender differences in coping.
with distress both during the time a child is ill in cancer and after the death of the child. Differing individual themes promote positive coping with grief. Increased awareness of the differences in traumatizing experiences during a child’s illness may facilitate communication between bereaved parents.

Prolonged grief was shown to be more prevalent among mothers than fathers in this sample, confirming earlier evidence (Kersting et al., 2011; Li, Precht, Mortensen, & Olsen, 2003; van der Geest et al., 2014; Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2005). However, although the current study was not longitudinal, an interesting pattern was observed (in the subsamples divided based on years since loss), where mothers showed higher symptom levels and fathers showed lower symptom levels at one year post loss. However, at five years post loss, fathers’ symptoms were the same or higher than mothers’ symptoms in later years. Mothers’ symptoms were reduced and fathers’ symptoms had increased. The prevalence rate of prolonged grief in all bereaved parents in this sample was 16%, which is higher than the 12% that Lichtenthal et al. (2015) found in a similar sample of 120 cancer-bereaved parents. We do not know the reason for the difference.

Ljungman et al. (2015) found that cancer-bereaved mothers reported higher symptom levels of posttraumatic stress than fathers soon after the loss of the child. These symptoms declined from 9 months to 5 years post loss. While the posttraumatic stress symptoms of fathers were initially lower than those of mothers, they declined more slowly. At 5 years post loss, mothers and fathers had similar symptom levels. Observing such gender differences in the course of the symptoms raises questions about the often-reported higher symptom levels of women: is it possible that they are due to a lack of longitudinal studies in which a decline over time could be observed? Might an increase of fathers’ symptoms be observed after a few years?

Both mothers and fathers reported values near or over the cut-off for insomnia symptoms. These findings indicate that parents may also suffer from multiple psychological symptoms that are associated with insomnia (Alvaro et al., 2013; Monk, Germain, & Reynolds, 2008). This reveals the risk for a vicious circle of grief reactions, sleep disturbances, and psychological symptoms. It has been hypothesized that starting treatment of one of the problems – in this case, sleep disturbances – may gradually also have a positive impact on other symptoms.
(Blom et al., 2015). An internet-based sleep intervention is being conducted within this research project, but the study is not included in this thesis (Sveen, 2020, in manuscript).

Apart from methodological accounts, possible theoretical explanations for differences between mothers’ and fathers’ grief reactions may also be found in the Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). While women tend to cope with loss-oriented stressors, focusing on their grief and expressing emotions, men often prefer more externally oriented coping, engaging in practical tasks. This may reflect cultural and societal habits regarding behavior and emotional reactions in both genders (A. Dyregrov & Matthiesen, 1987). Women are considered to be at higher risk for prolonged grief. However, this may not mean that they grieve more than men, only differently and sooner after the event of the loss. For their part, men do not grieve less, only differently and somewhat later after the loss. Gender patterns are important to reflect on: all people have effective ways of adapting to loss, but they are also socialized in ways of mourning and expressing emotions, or regarding when to seek support (Doka & Martin, 2014).

6.3. Towards improved care for families with severely ill children with cancer

6.3.1. Parents’ experiences during their child’s illness

The experiences of parents during their child’s illness were shown to be associated with symptom levels of prolonged grief years after their loss. In mothers, factors found to predict lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms were the feeling that they could talk within their family about thoughts and emotions, and trusting that health care professionals had made every possible effort to cure their child. In fathers, factors found to predict higher levels of prolonged grief symptoms were not having been able to say farewell to their deceased child in the way they wanted and not feeling that they received practical support during the child’s illness trajectory.

The association between lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms in mothers and being able to talk within the family indicates that facilitating communication
about feelings among members of the family during times of emotional upheaval might reduce long-term distress in bereaved mothers. This confirms earlier results in parents who lost their child 4–9 years earlier (Kreicbergs et al., 2007). The finding shows that parents may need information on possible differences in their emotional reactions to what is happening to their child; understanding this may help maintain family cohesion and family communication. Furthermore, evidence shows that parental concordance in decision-making and sharing how they feel during their child’s illness improves both their own and their child’s well-being (Hill, Nathanson, Fenderson, Carroll, & Feudtner, 2017).

The findings in this thesis showed that perceived pain and anxiety in children correlated with higher levels of prolonged grief in their mothers, while trust that health care professionals had made every possible effort to cure the child was associated with lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms. The importance of trust in a therapeutic alliance, as found in this study, supports an earlier study of parents with children with cancer, who felt that trust in health care professionals made them feel more secure, despite uncertainty and upsetting information (Sisk, Mack, Ashworth, & DuBois, 2018).

For fathers, not having been able to say farewell to their deceased child in the way they wanted contributed to higher levels of prolonged grief symptoms. This calls for health care professionals to support fathers in prognostic awareness throughout the difficult journey towards their child’s death and to ask questions about their needs and wishes during the end-of-life period. The concept of having ‘continuing bonds’ with the deceased, as described in modern theoretical models of grief work (Klass, 1997), may provide a basis for new strategies for clinicians to support parents. The idea is that parents, to cope with their loss, need to feel the continued presence of their child. Having mementos from the child after death, such as footprints, can be of help. Offering suggestions about farewell rituals, such as taking photographs of the child, can also be beneficial (Riches & Dawson, 1998). Health care professionals need to be aware of the importance and positive impact of good, trustful relations, and offer the parents what is called a ‘safe haven’ in attachment theory, to support them during the most difficult time of the parents’ life, when the parent-child relationship is under threat (Bowlby, 1973; Kearney & Byrne, 2015).
Fathers’ reports that they lacked practical support from health care professionals may reflect the fathers’ needs for information on how to handle their child’s clinical condition, since the treatment and symptoms of severely ill children can be highly distressing for family members (Blazin, Cecchini, Habashy, Kaye, & Baker, 2018). Targeted supportive interventions may need to be offered to each parent separately, because of different needs and communication styles. The findings in this thesis also confirm earlier evidence that health care professionals can influence parental coping with bereavement by providing sufficient so-called prognostic guidance. This involves providing information continuously, starting before the death of the child, verifying that the parents have understood the information (Rando, 1983), and communication and preparations for the death of the child (Mack et al., 2005; Rini & Loriz, 2007).

6.3.2. Parents’ experiences after their child’s death

Struggling with meaning was common among many parents who had lost a child. Parents stated that having a supportive social network of family and friends was of a great help in surviving what felt unbearable. This involved others being open for sharing and expression of thoughts and emotions. When parents perceived that friends or relatives lacked empathy or patience, this made them feel isolated in their grief. Having remaining children was seen as helpful in coping with grief, since this forced them to function as parents. Meeting professional counselors and sharing experiences with other bereaved parents was also reported as facilitating coping with parental grief. Taking action to keep memories of the child alive in various contexts, including with staff at the pediatric care settings where the child was cared for, was reported by parents to be important in coping with grief.

Parents stated that the following experiences made coping with grief difficult: when they suffered additional losses in their family or social network, when they could not share emotions with their partner, and when they felt demands from employers that were too challenging at an early stage.

The facilitating and complicating factors for coping with grief found in the fourth study partly support the results in a recent review article (Snaman et al., 2019) involving parents of children who had died from cancer. Protective factors were
social support and personal growth, and these were also mentioned by the parents in our study as crucial for positive coping with grief. Other findings in the current study, e.g., that parents found it hard to go back to work and meet demands from employers, were not mentioned by the parents in the review article. However, the review did find that financial strain was a risk factor. This can be a result of not having been able to work full-time when the child was ill. In a study on bereaved parents in Australia and the US (Dussel et al., 2011), economic stress was common in families that had suffered work disruptions during a child’s illness. The parents in this study did not report being under any financial strain, probably because of social welfare systems in Sweden covering the costs for health care and treatment of children with cancer. Nevertheless, parents found it hard to meet colleagues and talk about other things, if managers and colleagues had not mentioned the deceased child. The bereaved parents felt the need for some sort of acknowledgement of their new ‘status,’ but felt that many were afraid to ask or say something. The Childhood Cancer Fund in Sweden offers support groups for bereaved parents and many appreciate these meetings and continue to meet without a therapist after the organized sessions end.

6.4. Methodological considerations

In quantitative research, the concepts of validity, reliability, and generalizability are used to evaluate the use of the research methods, while the preferred concepts in qualitative research are credibility, dependability, and transferability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Polit & Beck, 2010). The studies in the thesis used both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods to provide a depth of understanding and to elicit the perspectives of the participating parents.

Evidence of face validity was collected through interviews with cancer-bereaved parents, to ensure that the targeted cohort understood the questions. In the fourth study, which contained content analysis, efforts were made to reach credibility through repeated readings of the open-ended text responses, as well as discussion of the emerged categories among several researchers, to ensure that no information was missed and that the interpretations and coding were trustworthy.

The psychometric properties of the PG-13 instrument were examined in this sample. All properties, i.e., its concurrent and construct validity as well as its reliability, were found to be good. Symptoms of depression, anxiety,
posttraumatic, stress, and insomnia were examined by means of internationally widely used instruments tested in many populations, which can be considered to be a strength. Another strength was that the relatively new instrument, UGRS, used to measure grief rumination, was also evaluated in this sample and shown to have good psychometric properties (Sveen et al., 2019).

No data were available on the psychological health of non-responders, which limits the generalizability of our findings. Bereaved parents with poor psychological health may not have responded due to fear of triggering difficult memories. On the other hand, non-response may also be due to a lack of interest among parents who are recovering and do not feel motivated to participate in an extensive survey given their current life situation. Some of the non-responders may have been bereaved parents who did not understand enough Swedish to understand the questionnaire. Of the parents who agreed to participate, 62% returned the questionnaires and the number of missing responses within the questionnaire was small. This may be considered to be a fairly high response rate, as the tendency for nationwide studies is falling.

The findings are based on self-reported data, and no clinical assessment interviews were conducted, which should be considered when evaluating the results of this project. Clinical interviews may give a deeper knowledge of some aspects of the parents’ lives after the loss of a child and would add the assessment of a professional. However, it is convenient and cost-effective to use self-report questionnaires, enabling data collection in large nationwide samples which include most of the people in a population, within a limited time frame. The participants may also find this convenient, as they can fill out the questionnaire at home, at their own pace. There was a fairly equal gender distribution among responders, which is unusual in this type of research, and there were participants from all parts of Sweden. The validity interview showed that the parents found the topics of the questions relevant to the reality of cancer-bereaved parents, which may have increased motivation to participate.

Since the parents were surveyed one to five years after their child’s death, there is a possibility of recall bias: the recalled memories may have changed over time. Parents with current high levels of prolonged grief and/or psychological symptoms may remember their experiences during the child’s illness and death in
a more critical light than those with lower levels of grief symptoms, which may have affected results. On the other hand, one could argue that whatever they remember is part of their story.

Since the findings of this study are based on a Swedish nationwide population, one could assume our results to be valid for parents in Sweden who have lost a child to cancer, as study results are always specific for the place, time, and participants. It is not certain that the results can be generalized to other cultural contexts or to other causes of children’s death, as other aspects may be more prominent in those situations than they were in this population. However, one could assume that some of the findings are generalizable to other populations of parents to children with other life-threatening illnesses. Hopefully, the findings enable a richer understanding of the experiences of bereaved parents. Further research should try to assess grief and psychological symptoms among parents who have lost children due to varying causes, in samples from other countries, and compare results to gain even deeper understanding.
7. Conclusions

This thesis has increased the understanding of grief, prolonged grief, and psychological ill health in cancer-bereaved mothers and fathers. Evidence was found for the use of the PG-13 instrument to measure prolonged grief, and the loss of a child was shown to have long-lasting effects on the psychological health of the parents. Cancer-bereaved mothers and fathers are vulnerable to symptoms of prolonged grief, depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, and sleep disturbances up to five years after the death of their child. Elevated symptom levels of prolonged grief were found to be associated with certain parental experiences during the child’s illness; in mothers with not being able to talk about feelings within the family and when they could not trust that health care professionals made every possible effort to alleviate the suffering of the child. In fathers, more prolonged grief was associated to feeling they had not received sufficient information or were not able to take farewell in the way they wanted.

The deepened knowledge of the differing patterns of mothers and fathers regarding significant experiences during the child’s illness associated to psychological suffering may contribute to a more targeted communication approach in pediatric care contexts. The aspects of what parents found promoted or complicated their coping with grief may be of use to health care professionals and others when developing bereavement support. Grief after the loss of a child deserves attention in its own right, both in future research and in the development of bereavement care.
8. Implications

The findings indicate that some cancer-bereaved parents may suffer from prolonged grief and psychological symptoms up to at least five years after the death of their child. Clinicians should be aware of this when meeting bereaved parents – as this may be a much longer timespan than expected – and find respectful ways to ask about possible prior losses. The psychological problems reported by the parents in the project accentuate the need to establish policy guidelines for assessment of the need for bereavement support to cancer-bereaved parents, which may remain for many years after a child’s death. To reach out to the parents for yearly follow-ups would enable identification of those at risk for psychological symptoms, who could then be directed to targeted support if needed (Lichtenthal, Sweeney, et al., 2015).

Lichtenthal et al. (2015) showed that many cancer-bereaved parents do not receive bereavement support, partly because the loss is too painful for them to talk about, but also due to difficulties in finding such services. This may be a task for a professional care pilot to guide those in need of support. The grief process is fluid and repeated assessment of the need for support may be necessary to meet bereaved parents’ changing needs over time. Currently, childhood cancer centers often lack routines for assessment of the parents’ needs of bereavement care, prior to and after loss, and even if such services are available, there are large variations in how they are delivered (Wiener, Rosenberg, Lichtenthal, Tager, & Weaver, 2018).

Grief experienced by parents is generally very severe (Dias et al., 2018), possibly reflecting the strong attachment relationship between parents and children. Therapeutic alliances between parents and health care professionals established during the child’s illness may be a comfort to the parents following the loss of their child (Morris et al., 2017). Parents with severely ill children often develop strong relationships with health care staff whom they have come to rely on during the distressing time when their child was ill. The needs of the parents for continued bonds with health care staff and the hospital community, which offer them a chance to reconnect, may be considered when developing interventions aimed at improving parents’ bereavement outcomes. For example, friends, relatives, and all parents who have ever had a child cared for at a given pediatric
oncology center could be invited to an ‘open house’ once a year, to reminisce and talk about their children. This is a gesture that many bereaved parents would be likely to appreciate highly. Grief is an individual process regarding time and needs. Inviting bereaved parents even years later may be of value for them; during the first year, it may be too difficult to come back to the hospital and be confronted with painful memories. Apart from reconnecting to health care professionals, parents have reported the benefit of meeting other families with recognizable experiences. To share and compare emotions, behavior and thoughts, to find out what is ‘normal’ in their shattered world of grief and to be able to support others may be empowering.

As shown in this thesis, people have differing preferences regarding what kind of support they want when their child is ill in cancer. Health care professionals must find ways to assess parents’ differing needs in order to offer relevant support. The findings provide knowledge that can be used in the improvement of care for children with cancer and in the support to their parents and families in pediatric oncology contexts and in bereavement. Interventions may focus on psycho-education regarding grief reactions for bereaved parents, their networks, and at a societal level. Knowledge should be shared about the grieving process and the varying need for support that may take time to develop in the bereaved. At a societal level, health insurance organizations and workplaces may need to develop facilitating policies for bereaved parents who return to work.
Sammanfattning

Sorg är en normal reaktion på en förlust. De flesta människor kan hantera sin saknad och smärta på egen hand eller med hjälp av nära och kära. Sorg efter förlusten av ett barn anses vara mycket intensiv och långvarig, och föräldrar som har mist ett barn har därmed en ökad risk att uppleva så kallad ’förlängd sorg’ och utveckla psykisk ohälsa. Syskon och andra i och nära familjen är självklart också berörda. I Sverige är det varje år drygt 300 barn som får en cancerdiagnos och trots förbättrade behandlingsmetoder under de senaste decennierna dör runt 55 till 60 barn varje år i sin sjukdom.

Föräldrars sorg och psykiska ohälsa under de första fem åren efter förlusten av sitt barn i cancer har inte studerats i Sverige tidigare. Syftet med avhandlingsprojektet som helhet var att undersöka sorg och psykisk ohälsa hos föräldrar ett till fem år efter förlusten av sitt barn i cancer, samt om det fanns faktorer under barnets sjukdomstid som eventuellt påverkat sorgen och den psykiska hälsan hos föräldrarna. Frågan om hur föräldrarna såg på vad som hade hjälpt respektive försvårat deras sorgeprocess var också en del i undersökningen. Den undersökta populationen var föräldrar/vårdnadshavare som hade mist barn som var upp till 24 år gamla i cancer, under åren 2010–2015, i Sverige.


Den tredje delstudien visade att mammor och pappor har olika erfarenheter under barnets sjukdomstid som påverkar deras mående efter barnets död. För mammor
var det viktigt att kunna prata inom familjen om allt som häände dem och att kunna lita på att personalen gjorde allt de kunde för deras sjuka barn samt kunde lindra barnets smärta och andra symptom. För pappor kändes det viktigt att under barnets sjukdomstid få hjälp med praktiska saker och att få ta avsked av barnet på det sätt man själv önskade. Föräldrar har alltså individuella behov av stöd under tiden deras barn får vård, delvis olika beroende på kön, vilket kan vara viktigt för vårdpersonal att vara medveten om, för att kunna ge god vård till hela familjen.

Den fjärde delstudien visade vad föräldrarna tyckte hade underlättat respektive försvårat deras sorg. Att ha en partner som man kan prata med och ett socialt nätverk som förstår och där man kan dela känslor och prata om sitt barn hade gjort sorgen lättare för många föräldrar, liksom att ha syskon till barnet som dog och därmed få ett fortsatt familjeliv. Annat som var till hjälp i att komma vidare var att få träffa och dela sina erfarenheter med andra föräldrar som hade mist barn i cancer, samt att få professionellt stöd. Det som ä andra sidan hade försvårat bearbetning av sorgen var när föräldrarna var med om andra förluster av en nära anhörig eller upplevde att vänner inte ville eller kunde prata om barnet och sjukdomstiden. Att behöva gå tillbaka till arbetet för tidigt eller där behöva prestera mer än vad man orkade gjorde också sorgen svårare att ta sig igenom, enligt föräldrarna.

Resultaten av avhandlingsarbetet som helhet bidrar med viktig kunskap inom forskningsområdet onkologisk och palliativ vård av barn, och det kliniska värdet av studien är därför stort både nationellt och internationellt. Det har visat sig att riktnägot om stöd vid sorg i samhälle och vården behöver utvecklas. Den nya kunskapen kan förhoppningsvis bidra till utveckling av vården av barn med cancer och stödet till deras familjer, både under och efter barnets sjukdomstid.
Acknowledgements

Like climbing a mountain or sailing a rough sea …. What is a suitable comparison? However, writing a thesis is truly a team effort, so many people have contributed to this project in various ways. I feel very grateful for all the encouragement and friendship I have received during these years. It would be difficult to list everyone who has supported me, but I would like to say a few words to some of them:

I want to express my sincere gratitude and respect to all the parents who gave of their time and involvement by participating in the survey. Without your generous efforts, it would not have been possible to conduct this research project.

Thank you to Lena Linderholm, who created the illustration for the cover of the questionnaire after hearing about the aims of the project, and then graciously donated her beautiful painting to the children’s hospice Lilla Erstagården.

Thanks to my main supervisor Josefin Sveen, who guided me through the research journey and encouraged me to learn all about the quantitative research methods essential to the thesis. Thanks to my co-supervisor Ulrika Kreicbergs, for sharing all your research skills and experience with me. I am indebted to Holly Prigerson and Malin Lövgren, my co-authors, for valued support and inspiration.

Ida Hed Myrberg deserves my sincere thanks for guidance in the world of statistics, and I want to express my appreciation to Linnéa Holmén and Janet Holmén for their ways with my words.

Thank you to Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College, for providing me with a PhD position, and to the Childhood Cancer Fund for financial support.

Great thanks to my peer group of PhD students; Anna, Annica, Bodil, Elin, Hanna, Maria, Megan, Rakel, Susanne, Tina and Viktoria: sharing experiences, laughing at lunches and coffee breaks, and discussing challenges and questions together has made it possible to keep working in good spirits and health.
I am very grateful to all my colleagues in the clinical and teaching environments for caring conversations. For our deeply shared continuous interest in people and how we deal with life and with death. To obtain in-depth understanding demands repetitive articulating. The insights from all our talks have motivated me throughout the project and helped me see the big picture.

I would never have managed without all my dear friends joining me in the wonderful playgrounds of music, sailing and other excursions. Without time and space for play, I feel it would not have been possible to plunge into the sometimes-harsh realities that are at the center of this thesis.

Thanks to Henrik; your loving support was invaluable for the completion of the project. My wonderful sons and their girlfriends: thank you for your inspiration and for always reminding of life’s true priorities, such as great dinners together with your near ones.
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Papers
Psychometric properties of the Prolonged Grief Disorder-13 (PG-13) in bereaved Swedish parents

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to validate the Swedish version of the Prolonged Grief Disorder-13 tool (PG-13) by examining its psychometric properties, including factor structure, discriminant and concurrent validity. The PG-13 was assessed in a sample of Swedish parents who had lost a child to cancer 1–5 years previously. The sample included 225 parents (133 mothers and 92 fathers) with a mean age of 46.02 years (SD = 8.15) and 16.0% met the criteria for Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD). A principal component analysis was performed, and the results supported a one-factor structure of the PG-13. The PG-13 was shown to have high internal consistency and intelligible associations with concurrent psychological symptoms and grief rumination as well as with known risk factors for PGD. These results indicate satisfactory psychometric properties of the instrument, thus supporting the use of the PG-13 as a valid measure of PGD.

1. Introduction

Grief is a normal reaction to loss, and includes psychological, physical, spiritual, social and cultural dimensions (Stroebe et al., 2008; 2017). Most bereaved individuals find that time heals their suffering as they go through their grieving process and they adjust to the loss of a loved one. However, for some the grieving process is debilitating, intense and persistent; they appear “stuck” in their grief (Jordan and Litz, 2014; Maercker et al., 2013a; Prigerson et al., 2009), a phenomenon commonly called prolonged grief. Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD), introduced by Prigerson et al. (2009) is characterized by persistent yearning, preoccupation with the deceased and intense emotional pain that causes significant functional impairment, and lasts more than 6 months after the loss. A shortened version of PGD is proposed for inclusion in the forthcoming 11th revision of the WHO International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11; WHO), due by 2018. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders version 5 has introduced criteria for persistent complex bereavement disorder (PCBD), where it is classified as a condition for further research, and can be diagnosed 12 months after the loss. Even though there are differences between PGD and PCBD, they are essentially the same (Maciejewski et al., 2016).

Research has shown that grief after the death of one’s child is more intense and prolonged than after other losses (e.g. of a spouse or a parent) (Middleton et al., 1998; Rando, 1983) and bereaved parents are a risk group for developing PGD (Kersting et al., 2011). Lichtenthal et al. (2015) found a PGD prevalence rate of 12.0% in bereaved parents 6 months to 6 years after the loss and McCarthy et al. (2010) reported a prevalence rate of 10.3% among cancer-bereaved parents, an average of 4.5 years after the loss. Other common mental health problems in bereaved parents include anxiety, depression (Kreicbergs et al., 2004; Rosenberg et al., 2012) and post-traumatic stress (Djelantik et al., 2017; He et al., 2014; Ljungman et al., 2015). In addition, parents with unresolved grief reported significantly greater deterioration in psychological health than parents whose grief had resolved (Lannen et al., 2008).

It is important to identify vulnerable bereaved individuals at risk for severe health concerns, such as PGD, so they can be offered interventions to reduce the associated distress and dysfunction. An instrument that is frequently used to assess persistent and prolonged grief is the Inventory of Complicated Grief-Revised (ICG-R). Prigerson et al. (1995b) showed that h ICGR had good psychometric properties and a factor analysis indicated that the scale measured a single underlying construct of prolonged grief. More recently Prigerson et al. (2009) proposed a set of PGD symptom criteria, based on a diagnostic algorithm with a sensitivity of 1.00 and a specificity of 0.99. For a diagnosis of PGD, the algorithm stipulated yearning as a...
mandatory symptom and a minimum of five out of nine other symptoms: avoidance of reminders of the deceased; disbelief or trouble accepting the death; a perception that life is empty or meaningless without the deceased; bitterness or anger related to the loss; emotional numbness; feeling stunned, dazed, or shocked; feeling a part of oneself had died along with the deceased; difficulty trusting others; and difficulty moving on with life. Based on this diagnostic algorithm, Prigerson et al. developed the Prolonged Grief Disorder-13 (PG-13), to assess PGD caseness and symptom levels, thus helping clinicians avoid pathologizing normal grief reactions. The PG-13 has been widely used (He et al., 2014; Lichtenhal et al., 2015; Litz et al., 2014; Tsai et al., 2015) and has been translated into several African, Middle Eastern, Asian and European languages, including Swedish. There have been several validation studies of PG-13 (Delalibera et al., 2011; Field et al., 2014; Gökler Danışman et al., 2017; Maciejewski et al., 2016; Tsai et al., 2018) but so far not in Sweden. The aim of this study was to examine the psychometric properties of the Swedish version of PG-13, in cancer-bereaved parents, specifically the factor structure, the internal consistency, and other aspects of validity.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

This psychometric study of PG-13 was based on data from a nationwide Swedish postal survey.

2.2. Participants

Data were collected from parents of children who had died of cancer one to five years earlier. Potential participants (n = 530) were identified using the Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry and the Population Registry at the Swedish Tax Agency. The Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry is a national database with information on all children who receive a cancer diagnosis. The Registry also receives data from the Cause of Death Registry, which enabled the identification of those children who died as a result of their cancer. Their personal identification numbers could then be used to identify the parents through the Population Registry at the Swedish Tax Agency.

The inclusion criteria were: being a parent who lost a child (age 0–24 years) to childhood cancer (age at diagnosis 0–16 years) during the period August 2010–July 2015 in Sweden. Eligibility also required that the parent should live in Sweden and understand Swedish. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm, Sweden (no. 2015/2183-31/5) and the study was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

2.3. Procedure

In September 2016, the identified parents who met the inclusion criteria (n = 512) were invited to participate by means of an information letter describing the study. The participants could e-mail or call the research group if they had questions or concerns. One week later both parents of each child were contacted separately by telephone, and asked if they would consent to participate. Some parents e-mailed us their consent after they received the letter. The parents for whom we had no telephone number received a letter asking them to contact us by telephone or e-mail. Those who did not respond to this request were sent a second information letter and contact request after one month. Seventy-six parents could not be reached, 63 declined and 373 parents consented to participate. The consenting parents were sent a questionnaire and a prepaid return envelope. Thus, no questionnaires were sent without consent. About two weeks after the questionnaires were sent out, thank-you cards were sent to all parents who had received a questionnaire. Parents who did not return the questionnaire within one month were contacted by telephone and asked if anything could be clarified. Out of 373 individuals who consented to participate, 232 (62.2%) returned the questionnaire. Comparison between responders (n = 232) and non-responders (n = 141) revealed no significant differences with regards to the parents’ age at the time of the study, age at the time of the child’s death, years passed since loss, child’s gender and child’s age at time of diagnosis and death (data not shown, p > 0.05), except for the parents’ gender: the percentage of women was higher among responders than among non-responders (X² = 8.83, p < 0.05).

2.4. Measures

2.4.1. Prolonged Grief Disorder-13 (PG-13)

The PG-13 was used to assess PGD (Prigerson et al., 2009). The PG-13 instrument contains 13 items: two items (items 3 and 13) on duration and impairment that are to be answered “yes” or “no”, and 11 items assessing cognitive, behavioral and emotional symptoms, rated on a 5-point scale. Items 1, 2, 4 and 5 are rated on a frequency scale ranging from: “not at all” to “several times a day” (scoring 1–5), and items 6–12 are rated on an intensity scale ranging from “not at all” to “overwhelmingly” (scoring 1–5). To assess the presence of PGD, five criteria (A–E) must be met. These criteria include (A) an event criterion: the respondent has experienced loss; (B) a separation distress criterion: the respondent must experience grief related yearning at least daily; (C) a duration criterion: the symptoms of separation distress must be elevated at least 6 months after the loss; (D) cognitive, emotional and behavioral symptoms: the respondent must experience at least 5 symptoms based on items 4–11 at least “once a day” or “quite often” and (E) an impairment criterion: the respondent must have significant impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning. PG-13 can be scored as a continuous measure by summing the symptom items and excluding the two duration and functional impairment items (Prigerson et al., 2009). These total scores, ranging from 11 to 55 are used in the current study. There are no officially recommended cut-off scores. The PG-13 was previously translated into Swedish by researchers at the National Centre of Disaster Psychiatry at Uppsala University. It was subsequently back-translated by a professional and approved by the original authors.

2.4.2. The Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7)

The GAD-7 was used to assess symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (Kroenke et al., 2007). It consists of 7 items, rated on a 4-point scale with response categories from “not at all” to “nearly every day”, and the total score can range from 0 to maximum 21 points, with a higher score indicating a greater risk of Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Cronbach’s α coefficient was 0.92 for the sample in this study.

2.4.3. The Montgomery-Åsberg depression rating scale (MADRS)

The MADRS (Montgomery and Åsberg, 1979; Svanborg and Åsberg, 1994) was used to assess symptoms of depression. It consists of 9 items assessing sadness, inner tension, reduced sleep, reduced appetite, concentration difficulties, fatigue, inability to feel and pessimistic and suicidal thoughts. Each item is rated on a 6-point scale. The total score is calculated by summing the scores on the nine items and can range between 0 and 54, with a higher score indicating a greater risk of depression. Cronbach’s α was 0.90 for the sample in this study.

2.4.4. The Posttraumatic Stress Disorder checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5)

The PCL-5 (Blevins et al., 2015; Bovin et al., 2016; Weathers et al., 2013; Wortmann et al., 2016) was used to assess symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The items refer to feelings and thoughts during the past month and to a specific event, which in this case is the loss of a child. The checklist consists of 20 items that can be divided into four subscales related to clusters B-D in DSM-5: Intrusion, Avoidance, Negative alterations in cognitions and mood and Alterations in arousal and reactivity. The items are rated on a 5-point scale with response categories from “not at all” to “extremely”. Total scores range
from 0 to 80 with higher scores indicating more symptoms of PTSD and a preliminary cut-point score of 33 is suggested as indicating PTSD caseness (Wortmann et al., 2016). The PCL-5 was translated into Swedish by the National Centre of Disaster Psychiatry at Uppsala University (2014) and shown to have good psychometric properties (Sveen et al., 2016). For the sample in the present study Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for total score was 0.94.

### 2.4.5. The Utrecht Grief Rumination Scale (UGRS)

The UGRS (Eisma et al., 2014) was used to measure grief-specific rumination, defined as recurrent, repetitive and self-focused thoughts about the causes and consequences of the loss and related to negative feelings. The scale consists of 15 items including five subscales. The items were rated on a 5-point scale with response categories from “never” to “always”, with higher scores indicating more rumination. The UGRS was translated from Dutch and English into Swedish by two of the authors (LP and JS) and then back-translated by a professional translator. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for the total score was 0.92 for the sample in this study.

### 2.4.6. The study-specific questionnaire

The study-specific questionnaire was based on an earlier survey and contained questions on demographics, health care and family factors (Kreiebergs et al., 2004). During the development of the study-specific questionnaire, eight face-to-face validation interviews with cancer-bereaved parents were conducted by the first author (LP). Following these validation interviews, some of the questions were adjusted. The questionnaire included one single item question on grief: Do you think you have worked through your grief? It was rated on 4-point scale with response categories from “no, not at all” to “yes, totally”. This single item question has been used in earlier studies (Kreiebergs et al., 2007; Lannen et al., 2008; Lövgren et al., 2017; Sveen et al., 2014).

### 2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis was performed with the statistical package IBM SPSS Statistical package version 22. Responders and non-responders were compared with Wilcoxon’s rank-sum test and $\chi^2$ analysis. Spearman correlation analyses and scatter plots were used to evaluate dependency of data because many parent dyads of the same child were included (i.e. 152 of the 323 parents in the study). However, the analysis indicated that these parents had responded independently. A principal component analysis (referred to as factor analysis) with oblique rotation was performed to examine the factor structure of PG-13. Initial criteria used to extract factors included Eigenvalues $\geq 1$ and a visual evaluation of the scree plot. The limit for factor loading was set to 0.40 (Costello and Osborne, 2005). At least 75.0% of the items in the PG-13 had to be completed for the participants to be included in the study, which meant that seven participants were excluded and thus in total 225 participants were included in the study. Fourteen participants had one missing item and these missing scores were imputed by replacing with the individuals’ mean for all items completed. The internal consistency of PG-13 was analyzed with Cronbach’s $\alpha$ coefficients and mean inter-item correlations (MIIC). A Cronbach’s $\alpha$ of $> 0.70$ is regarded as satisfactory, whereas the recommended range of MIIC is 0.15–0.50. The MIIC is not affected by the number of items as opposed to Cronbach’s $\alpha$ and thus provides additional information. Concurrent validity of PG-13 with the measures GAD-7, MADRS, PCL-5 and UGRS was assessed with Pearson’s correlations. In addition, validity was assessed by analyzing correlations with known risk factors, such as age, gender (of both parent and deceased child) and time since loss.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of the bereaved parents (n = 225) and deceased children.</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent age at study</td>
<td>46.02 (8.15)</td>
<td>24-66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent age at child death</td>
<td>42.19 (8.01)</td>
<td>20-62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since loss</td>
<td>3.10 (1.47)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age at diagnosis</td>
<td>7.25 (5.32)</td>
<td>0-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age at death</td>
<td>9.93 (6.54)</td>
<td>0-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>133 (59.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>92 (40.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>66 (43.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>85 (56.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting</td>
<td>202 (89.8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>4 (1.8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>17 (7.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>2 (0.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>15 (6.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>102 (45.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>107 (47.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>1 (0.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential region</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>96 (42.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town</td>
<td>71 (31.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>55 (24.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>2 (0.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed/ studying</td>
<td>196 (87.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On sick/ parental leave</td>
<td>21(9.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>7(3.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>1 (0.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Characteristics of the sample

The sample comprised 133 (59.1%) mothers and 92 (40.8%) fathers. Demographics characteristics of the parents and deceased children are summarized in Table 1. At the time of the study, the mean age of the parents was 46.02 (SD = 8.15) years, 196 (87.1%) parents were either employed or studying and 126 parents (56.0%) lived in an urban area.

The parents’ average PG-13 score was 29.70 (SD = 5.54), the score range was 12-54 and 16.0% (n = 36) of the individuals met criteria for PGD caseness. The range of PG-13 scores among those meeting diagnostic criteria for PGD was 35 to 54, suggesting a preliminary cutoff score of 35 on PG-13, as it is the score most closely associated with meeting diagnostic criteria. The Kappa agreement between those meeting the diagnostic criteria and those scoring $\geq$ 35 on PG-13 was 0.56 ($p > 0.001$).

The mean score for each symptom item is shown in Fig. 1, which shows that on a group level the participants scored highest on the item assessing “yearning” and second highest on “trouble accepting the loss”. The lowest score was on “avoiding reminders of the deceased” and the second lowest score was on “distrusting others”. The mean item score was 2.7 (SD = 0.86).

#### 3.2. Scores on related measures

The mean scores on GAD-7 were 5.80 (SD = 5.26) and on MADRS 12.86 (SD = 9.29). The mean scores on PCL-5 were 21.30 (SD = 15.97) and on UGRS 36.46 (SD = 13.56).
3.3. Factor structure

The results of the factor analysis indicated that the PG-13 items were best characterized as one factor. Although a first analysis provided two factors with an eigenvalue above one (5.33 and 1.12 respectively), the scree plot showed that the elbow of the curve was after the first component. Moreover, the component matrix showed stronger correlations for all items with the first component than with the second. Thus, a one factor solution was judged to be the best fitting model. A one factor analysis rendered a significant Bartlett's test of Sphericity ($P < 0.001$); the sampling adequacy was 0.88 (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) which is considered excellent (Field, 2013). The one factor analysis explained 48.4% of the total variance. As seen in Table 2, all items had loadings above 0.40, nine of the items had high loadings (range 0.64–0.81) and two items - item 4 (avoid reminders) and item 9 (trust others) - had somewhat lower loadings, 0.45 and 0.59 respectively. The results suggest that the PG-13 was measuring a single underlying construct, i.e. prolonged grief.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 How often have you felt longing or yearning for the person you lost?</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 How often have you had intense feelings of emotional pain, sorrow or pangs of grief?</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 How often have you tried to avoid reminders that the person you lost is gone?</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 How often have you felt stunned, shocked, or dazed by your loss?</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Do you feel confused about your role in life or feel like you don't know who you are?</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Have you had trouble accepting the loss?</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Has it been hard for you to trust others since your loss?</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Do you feel bitter over your loss?</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Do you feel that moving on (e.g., making new friends, pursuing new interests) would be difficult?</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Do you feel emotionally numb since your loss?</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Do you feel that life is unfulfilling, empty, or meaningless?</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained variance</td>
<td>48.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4. Internal consistency

The internal consistency of PG-13 was good as measured with mean inter-item correlation (MIIC) and Cronbach’s α coefficients (Clark and Watson, 1995). The MIIC was 0.42 (range 0.22–0.74) which is very good and was highest between items 11 (numb) and 12 (life empty) (0.74), second highest between items 1 (yearning) and 2 (emotional pain) (0.72). MIIC was lowest between 4 (avoiding reminders) and 7 (trouble accepting) as well as between 4 and 11 (life empty) (both 0.22). The Cronbach’s α of PG-13 was high (α = 0.89). The internal consistency of the scale did not improve when examining Cronbach’s α values “if item is deleted”, except that it improved slightly from 0.888 to 0.892 if item 4 (avoid reminders) was deleted. This is in line with the results of the factor analysis, that all items of the PG-13 are good indicators of the underlying construct i.e. prolonged grief.

3.5. Validity

The concurrent validity of PG-13 was assessed in relation to other measures, and statistically significant correlations were found with all of them (Table 3). The strongest correlation was with PCL-5 total; the correlations with the PCL-5 subscales were moderate to strong, of which the correlation with the Avoidance subscale was weakest. The correlation with GAD-7 was moderate, whereas there were strong correlations with MADRS and UGRS. There was a somewhat weaker correlation between the single-item grief question and PG-13, indicating discriminant validity. There were significant correlations between PG-13 and the child’s age both at diagnosis and at time of death, and also with the parent’s gender (mothers reported higher scores). There were no significant correlations between PG-13 total score and time since loss or parent’s age.

4. Discussion

This study shows that the Swedish version of the PG–13 has satisfactory psychometric properties in a sample of parents who had lost their child to cancer 1–5 years previously. PG-13 showed a good internal consistency, which indicates that the items of PG-13 measure the same general construct. The results of the factor analysis showed a one-factor solution to be the best fit model, which indicates that PG-13 measures the underlying construct prolonged grief. This is in line with the study by Prigerson et al. (1995b) showing a unidimensional factor structure of prolonged grief.
The factor analysis showed that the two items with lowest factor loadings were items 4 (avoidance of reminders) and 8 (disturb and others). During the face to face validation, parents expressed a risk that these two questions might be misunderstood, but the items were not changed as they belong to a standard instrument. PG-13 item 8 inquired about not wanting to be reminded of the loss of a child. This slight shift in interpretation might explain the lower loadings of the items. The lower loading on the avoidance-item is consistent with previous studies (Boelen et al., 2010; Boelen et al., 2003; Prigerson et al., 1999). Boelen et al. (2010) found a low factor loading (0.26) on the avoidance-item in ICG and Prigerson et al. (1999) found that avoidance was the least informative item. This indicates that avoidance is a weak marker of PGD. On the other hand, the low loadings found that avoidance was the least informative item. This indicates that avoidance was the least informative item. The correlation between scores for PG-13 and GAD-7, MADRS, PCL-5, UGRS and sociodemographic characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PG-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GAD-7 (n = 224)</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MADRS (n = 224)</td>
<td>0.76**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCL-5 total (n = 224)</td>
<td>0.81**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCL-5 Subscales (n = 221)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrusion</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>0.63**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitions and mood</td>
<td>0.75**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arousal and reactivity</td>
<td>0.70**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UGRS (n = 224)</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked through grief (n = 223)</td>
<td>–0.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time since loss</td>
<td>–0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age at death</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent age at child death</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent gender</td>
<td>–0.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child gender</td>
<td>–0.089</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ 0.01; **p ≤ 0.001

GAD-7 = The Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale
MADRS = Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale
PCL-5 = Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for DSM-5
UGRS = The Utrecht Grief Rumination Scale, gender: 1 = female, 2 = male

The factor analysis showed that the two items with lowest factor loadings were items 4 (avoidance of reminders) and 8 (disturb and others). During the face to face validation, parents expressed a risk that these two questions might be misunderstood, but the items were not changed as they belong to a standard instrument. PG-13 item 8 inquired about not wanting to be reminded of the loss of a child. This slight shift in interpretation might explain the lower loadings of the items. The lower loading on the avoidance-item is consistent with previous studies (Boelen et al., 2010; Boelen et al., 2003; Prigerson et al., 1999). Boelen et al. (2010) found a low factor loading (0.26) on the avoidance-item in ICG and Prigerson et al. (1999) found that avoidance was the least informative item. This indicates that avoidance is a weak marker of PGD. On the other hand, the low loadings found that avoidance was the least informative item. This indicates that avoidance was the least informative item. The correlation between scores for PG-13 and GAD-7, MADRS, PCL-5 indicates that PG-13 is complementary, although the conditions these instruments measure often overlap. Several studies confirm that PGD is distinct from other possible bereavement-related disorder such as PTSD and depression (Boelen et al., 2010; Prigerson et al., 1995a; Prigerson et al., 1995b). Prolonged grief and symptoms of PTSD are shown to correlate to some extent (He et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2003) which was confirmed in this sample, as the strongest correlations were between PG-13 scores and PCL-5 total score. Boelen et al. (2010) examined the symptoms of PGD, depression and PTSD and found that PGD is a distinct clinical entity. According to Friedman (2012) and others it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between grief and depression, since many symptoms such as sadness, tearfulness, insomnia, and decreased appetite are similar. Noticeable differences, however, are low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness, both well-known distinctive symptoms of depression. The explicit and persistent suicidal ideation typical of major depression is uncommon in grief, although bereaved persons may sometimes in their yearning fantasize about being reunited with a lost loved one through death (Friedman, 2012).

In the current study, there was a high correlation between PGD and grief rumination, which is repetitive and recurrent thinking about the causes and consequences of a loss and loss-related negative emotions. Reflection and adaptive rumination is usual and unproblematic in adverse life events and grief, while the more brooding way of thinking can become a maladaptive way of coping both in depression and prolonged grief (Eisma et al., 2015; Eisma and Stroebe, 2017; Marroquin et al., 2010).

The current study showed significant correlations between older age of the child and higher levels of prolonged grief symptoms, which is in line with earlier studies (Kreicbergs et al., 2004; Sirkir et al., 2009; van der Geest et al., 2014). Female gender of the bereaved was positively correlated with PG-13 scores, which was also shown in a recent study in Dutch, German and Danish samples where prolonged grief was shown to be more prevalent among women than men (Kersting et al., 2011; Li et al., 2003; van der Geest et al., 2014; Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2005). The prevalence rate of PGD in this study was 16.0%, which is higher than the 12.0% Lichtenthal et al. (2015) found in a similar sample. Our samples’ prevalence rate is also higher than seen in a recent meta-analysis on 14 studies, reporting a pooled prevalence rate of 10.3% in the adult bereaved population (Lundorff et al., 2017). The different prevalence rates may be due to different sample populations (most common were spousal or parental bereavement, only 5.2% had lost a child) and to varying time spans (M = 6.7–117.1 months) since loss.

The study has some limitations. One is that there were no data available on the mental health of non-responders, which limits the generalizability of the results. Another limitation is that the results are based on self-reported data and no clinical assessment interviews were conducted. Thus, validation studies in clinical samples would be of value. In addition, the findings of this study may not generalize to studies using PGD criteria per Maercker et al. (2013b). A third limitation is that only 62.2% of the parents who agreed to participate returned the questionnaires. However, it is the first study to examine the psychometric properties of PG-13 in a Swedish population of parents who lost a child to cancer. Other strengths include the essentially equal gender distribution among responders and the small number of missing responses in the questionnaire.

5. Conclusion

This study provides support for the use of the Swedish version of PG-13 in bereaved parents as a screening tool for PGD. The PG-13 was shown to be a reliable scale for the assessment of individuals at risk for developing PGD with high scores on internal consistency. The associations between the PG-13 total score, the level of self-reported symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD provided evidence in support of the instrument’s concurrent validity.

Funding

Funding for this project has been provided by the Swedish Childhood Cancer Foundation, Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College and the Gålö Foundation.

Acknowledgments

The authors are very grateful to all the parents who gave of their time and energy to participate in the survey that made this study possible.

References

Bereaved mothers' and fathers' prolonged grief and psychological health 1 to 5 years after loss—A nationwide study

Lilian Pohlkamp1 | Ulrika Kreicbergs1,2 | Josefin Sveen1,3

Abstract
Objective: To assess differences in prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and sleep disturbances in bereaved parents across years since loss (1-5 years) and by gender and to assess potential interactive effects of time since loss and gender on bereavement outcomes.

Methods: This study examined symptom levels of prolonged grief disorder, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia in bereaved parents. A sample, including 133 mothers and 92 fathers who had lost a child to cancer 1 to 5 years previously, subdivided to five subsamples, one for each year since loss. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess differences in symptom levels, related to years since loss, and gender.

Results: Regardless of how many years had passed since the loss, symptom levels of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and insomnia were elevated in all subsamples. Mothers showed higher symptom levels of prolonged grief, depression, and posttraumatic stress than fathers. However, no significant interaction effects were found between years since loss and gender on any of the symptom levels.

Conclusions: Cancer-bereaved mothers and fathers are vulnerable to prolonged grief and psychological symptoms up to 5 years after the death of their child. Findings highlight that bereaved parents may need long-term support, and the results deserve further attention in research and clinical care.

KEYWORDS
childhood cancer, depression, fathers, mothers, insomnia, pediatric oncology, PGD, posttraumatic stress, prolonged grief

1 | INTRODUCTION

The death of a child violates the perceived order of living in the family life cycle; combined with strong attachment bonds, it puts parents at increased risk for severe suffering and an elevated risk for developing prolonged grief disorder (PGD) and other negative psychological health outcomes.1,2 Grief reactions in PGD are essentially similar to those in natural grief, but when separation distress is so persistent and pervasive that it impairs the bereaved person’s functioning in daily life more than 6 months after the loss, a PGD diagnosis may be applicable according to ICD-11.3 A recent meta-analysis reported a pooled PGD prevalence rate of 10% in nonviolent adult bereavement,4 but PGD prevalence rates tend to be higher in samples of bereaved parents.5,6

Common psychological symptoms associated with bereavement are depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia.7 Although prolonged grief, depression, and posttraumatic stress are strongly related, they are distinguishable concepts.8 Evidence of this...
distinctiveness includes a longitudinal study on bereaved couples, showing that grief was predicted by bereavement-specific factors, while depression was predicted by individual factors.9

Although the prevalence of prolonged grief and depression in bereaved parents is frequently studied, posttraumatic stress and sleep disturbances have been studied less. A recent review on bereaved parents suggests that the death of an infant is such a traumatic event that health care professionals should keep in mind the possibility of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when meeting bereaved parents.10 A recent longitudinal study showed elevated levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms in parents bereaved owing to a child’s cancer.11 While there is a growing body of research on the intensity of grief reactions and other psychological health problems in parents who have lost a child to cancer, a recent review found that many of these studies had small sample sizes or did not use validated measures.12

Another common health problem associated with bereavement is sleep disturbance.13,14 A study15 reported that fathers were more likely to have sleep disturbances than mothers were, 4 to 9 years after the loss of a child to cancer. In addition, disturbed sleep has been associated with elevated symptom levels of PGD,16 depression,17 and posttraumatic stress.18

Theories on grief and bereavement have evolved during recent decades; Bowlby’s and Parke’s pioneering works on separation stage theory and attachment theory led to greater understanding of bereavement adjustment.19,20 They suggested that how grief is experienced and expressed may be related to individual attachment styles. Further exploration of these concepts resulted in the formulation of the dual process model of coping,21 which is now a leading conceptual framework for research on coping with bereavement. Coming to terms with the loss of a child takes time—often years—but few studies have examined the grief of mothers and fathers in relation to the time since loss. The aim of this study was to assess differences in prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and sleep disturbances in bereaved parents across years since loss (1-5 years) and by gender. A secondary aim was to assess potential interactive effects of time since loss and gender on bereavement outcomes.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Design

This cross-sectional study was based on data from a nationwide postal Swedish survey.

2.2 | Participants

Eligible parents were identified through the Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry (a national database on all children who receive a cancer diagnosis) combined with the Cause of Death Registry and the Swedish Population Register at the Swedish Tax Agency. Inclusion criteria were being a parent of a child (age 0-24 years) who had died during the period August 2010 to July 2015 of cancer (age at diagnosis 0-16 years) in Sweden. At the time of the study, the parent should live in Sweden and understand Swedish. No significant differences were found between responders and nonresponders regarding the parents’ age at the time of the study, age at the time of the child’s death, years since loss, child’s gender, and child’s age at time of diagnosis and death.

The only exception was that the percentage of women was higher among responders than among nonresponders (X² = 8.83, P < .05). Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm, Sweden (No: 2015/2183-31/5).

2.3 | Procedure

Eligible parents (N = 512) received an information letter describing the study’s purpose and procedures. All potential participants could contact the research group with questions about the study. Each parent of each child was contacted separately by telephone and asked whether he or she would agree to participate. Parents with unlisted telephone numbers were sent a letter requesting that they contact us by phone or e-mail. A second letter of invitation was sent after 1 month to those who had not responded. Seventy-six parents could not be reached, 63 declined, and 373 parents consented to participate and were sent a questionnaire with a prepaid return envelope. Parents who did not return the questionnaire within 1 month were contacted by telephone. Of the 373 parents who agreed to participate, 232 returned the questionnaire. Seventy-six parent dyads were included; however, we do not know if they were living together at the time of the study.

2.4 | Measures

The questionnaire was based on an earlier survey22 and contained questions on demographics, health care experiences from diagnosis until the child’s death, and family communication. While developing the questionnaire, eight face-to-face validation interviews with cancer-bereaved parents were conducted by the first author (LP), and questions were adjusted according to their suggestions.

Prolonged grief disorder-13 (PG-13)23 was used to assess PGD. It consists of 13 items: two items on duration and impairment that are to be answered “yes” or “no,” and 11 items assessing cognitive, behavioral, and emotional symptoms experienced during the past month, rated on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from: “not at all” to “several times a day” (scoring 1-5), or an intensity scale ranging from “not at all” to “overwhelmingly” (scoring 1-5). PG-13 is scored as a continuous measure by summing the eleven symptom items and excluding the two duration and functional impairment items.23 The total score ranges from 11 to 55, with a higher score indicating more symptoms of PGD, cut-off24 equal to or more than 35. Cronbach’s α was 0.89.

The Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale (MADRS)25 was used to assess symptoms of depression. It consists of nine items: sadness, inner tension, reduced sleep, reduced appetite, concentration difficulties, fatigue, inability to feel, pessimistic thoughts, and suicidal thoughts. The items are rated on a 7-point scale (scoring 0-6), and
the total score ranges from 0 to 54, a higher score indicating a greater risk of depression. Range for mild depression is 13 to 19, moderate 20 to 34 and cut-off for severe depression equal to or more than 34. Cronbach’s α was 0.90.

The Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5)\textsuperscript{26} was used to assess symptoms of PTSD. It consists of 20 items divided into four subscales: intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity. The items are rated on a 5-point scale (scoring 0-4), and the total score ranges from 0 to 80, with a higher score indicating more symptoms of PTSD, cut-off equal to or more than 33. Cronbach’s α was 0.94.

The Insomnia Severity Index (ISI)\textsuperscript{27} was used to assess symptoms of insomnia and consisted of seven items: severity of problems falling asleep, staying asleep, early morning awakening problems, sleep dissatisfaction, interference of sleep difficulties with daytime functioning, noticability of sleep problems to others, and distress caused by the sleep difficulties. The items are rated on a 5-point scale from “no problem” to “severe problem” (scoring 0-4) and the total score ranges from 0 to 28, with a higher score indicating more symptoms of insomnia, cut-off equal to or more than 10. Cronbach’s α was 0.94.

2.5 | Data analysis

Significance level for all analyses was $P < .05$. Characteristics of responders and nonresponders were compared with Wilcoxon’s rank-sum test and χ\textsuperscript{2} analysis. Spearman correlation analyses and scatter plots were used to evaluate dependency of data, as dyads of parents of the same child were included (ie, 152 of the 232 parents in the study). Analysis indicated a weak but significant correlation for MADRS (Spearman’s ρ 0.26, $P < .03$) and a moderate correlation for PG-13 (Spearman’s ρ 0.44, $P < .001$) between mothers and fathers of the same child, while the analysis showed no significant correlations for PCL-5 and ISI. Since the correlations between dyads were so weak, the data were treated as independent in the further analyses.

First, descriptive analysis was conducted on demographic characteristics of the total sample. Then, the sample was divided into five subsamples according to the number of years since loss. Once mean scores for the subsamples were retrieved, scores for each subsample were assessed separately for mothers and fathers.

Finally, two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess differences in psychological symptom levels associated with years since loss and parent’s gender, as well as interaction effects between time since loss and gender. IBM SPSS Statistics version 22 was used for all statistical analysis.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Sociodemographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics of the parents and deceased children are summarized in Table 1. At the time of the study the mean age of the parents was 46.0 years; 133 (59%) were mothers and 92 (41%) fathers; 196 (87%) parents were either employed or studying, and 126 parents (56%) lived in an urban area. When examining statistical differences between mothers and fathers with regards to the

| TABLE 1 Characteristics of the bereaved parents (n = 225) and deceased children (n = 151) |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Mean (SD)                                  | Range          |
| Parent age at study                        | 46.0 (8.15)    | 24-66          |
| Parent age at child death                  | 42.2 (8.01)    | 20-62          |
| Children’s illness length in years         | 2.7 (3.51)     | 0-21           |
| Years since loss                           | 3.1 (1.47)     | 1-5            |
| Characteristics of the parents at the time of the study | n (%)          |
| Parent gender                              |                |
| Female                                     | 133 (59%)      |
| Male                                       | 92 (41%)       |
| Other children than the deceased child     | 201 (90%)      |
| Not stated                                 | 1              |
| Religious                                  | 90 (40%)       |
| Not religious                              | 131 (58%)      |
| Marital status                             |                |
| Married/cohabiting                         | 206 (91%)      |
| Single                                     | 17 (8%)        |
| Not stated                                 | 2 (1%)         |
| Residential region                         |                |
| Rural                                      | 96 (43%)       |
| Town                                       | 71 (32%)       |
| City                                       | 55 (24%)       |
| Not stated                                 | 2 (1%)         |
| Employment                                 |                |
| Employed/studying                          | 196 (87%)      |
| On sick/parental leave/unemployed          | 28 (12%)       |
| Not stated                                 | 1 (0.4%)       |
| Characteristics of the deceased children   | n (%)          |
| Child gender                               |                |
| Girl                                       | 66 (44%)       |
| Boy                                        | 85 (56%)       |
| Diagnoses                                  |                |
| Brain tumors                               | 56 (37%)       |
| Leukemia/lymphoma                          | 42 (28%)       |
| Sarcoma                                    | 22 (14%)       |
| Other                                      | 32 (21%)       |
| Child age at diagnosis                     | 7.25 (5.32)    | 0-16           |
| Child age at death                         | 9.93 (6.54)    | 0-24           |
characteristics in Table 1, no statistical differences were found except for statistical differences in age and employment; fathers were older than the mothers, \( t(230) = 2.05, P < .05 \), and fathers were in employment more than mothers, \( \chi^2 = (1, N = 224) 9.49, P < .01 \), as more mothers were on parental leave. The mean age of the deceased children (\( n = 151 \)) was 7.3 years at diagnosis and 9.9 years at death.

### 3.2 Symptoms of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia

All mean scores in the total sample as well as for mothers and fathers separately are summarized in Table 2 and for subsamples by year in Table 3. Figure 1 illustrates symptom levels for mothers and fathers in subsamples. Parents’ average score for prolonged grief was 29.7 with 32.9% (\( n = 74 \)) of parents scoring over the cut-off indicating possible PGD. Parents’ average score on depression was 12.9, indicating mild depression. The average score for posttraumatic stress symptoms was 21.3, indicating moderate symptom levels. Parents reported an average insomnia score of 10.1, which is over cut-off. Table 2 presents the scores for symptoms of PGD, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia, subdivided according to number of years since loss.

### 3.3 Differences in psychological symptom levels across years since loss and between mothers and fathers

The two-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant main effect of years since loss on symptoms of PGD, \( F_A = 0.74, .57 \). Mothers had significantly higher PGD symptom levels than fathers, \( F_A = 6.22, .01 \). However, there was no interaction effect between years since loss and gender on PGD, \( F_A = 0.98, .42 \).

**TABLE 2** Self-reported mean symptom levels in bereaved parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Parents Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Mothers Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Fathers Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged grief</td>
<td>29.70 (SD 9.54)</td>
<td>31.01 (10.11)</td>
<td>27.80 (8.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>12.91 (SD 9.30)</td>
<td>13.89 (9.64)</td>
<td>11.36 (8.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttraumatic stress</td>
<td>21.34 (SD 15.94)</td>
<td>23.40 (16.59)</td>
<td>18.24 (14.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insomnia</td>
<td>10.12 (SD 7.46)</td>
<td>10.70 (7.63)</td>
<td>9.11 (7.06)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We found no significant main effect of years since loss on symptoms of depression, \( F_A = 0.27, .90 \). There was, however, a significant effect for gender on symptoms of depression, \( F_A = 4.06, .05 \), with mothers scoring higher than fathers. There was no sign of significant interaction between years since loss and the parents’ gender on depression, \( F_A = 1.17, .32 \).

No significant difference was observed in posttraumatic stress symptoms across years since loss, \( F_A = 0.49, .75 \). Mothers scored significantly higher on posttraumatic stress symptoms than fathers, \( F_A = 5.24, .02 \). There was no significant interaction between years since loss and gender on posttraumatic stress symptoms \( F_A = 1.60, .17 \).

In symptoms of insomnia, we saw no significant effect of years since loss, \( F_A = 1.12, .35 \) and no difference between genders, \( F_A = 1.92, .17 \). There was no significant interaction between years since loss and gender on insomnia \( F_A = 1.16, .33 \).

Symptom levels of mothers and fathers in the subsamples corresponding to years since loss are illustrated in Figure 1. Overall, symptom levels are elevated for all subsamples. Even though we found no significant interaction effect between years since loss and gender on the bereavement outcomes, the graphs show a pattern of mothers reporting more intense reactions than fathers in years 1 to 3, while the intensity of mothers’ and fathers’ in grief and psychological reactions are more similar in years 4 and 5. However, for insomnia, the pattern is somewhat different.

**TABLE 3** Self-reported symptom levels in bereaved parents: subsamples by years since loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years since loss</th>
<th>Prolonged grief Mean (SD; n)</th>
<th>Depression Mean (SD; n)</th>
<th>Posttraumatic Stress Mean (SD; n)</th>
<th>Insomnia Mean (SD; n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 225</td>
<td>N = 225</td>
<td>N = 222</td>
<td>N = 222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>30.47 (9.59; 45)</td>
<td>12.22 (9.00; 45)</td>
<td>19.33 (14.21; 44)</td>
<td>9.56 (7.23; 43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>31.26 (10.28; 43)</td>
<td>13.86 (10.49; 42)</td>
<td>23.36 (18.20; 43)</td>
<td>9.59 (7.80; 42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>29.56 (9.52; 45)</td>
<td>12.84 (10.17; 45)</td>
<td>20.26 (15.27; 43)</td>
<td>8.98 (6.35; 45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>29.14 (9.64; 37)</td>
<td>13.79 (8.97; 38)</td>
<td>22.48 (16.08; 37)</td>
<td>11.92 (8.85; 39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>28.35 (8.95; 55)</td>
<td>12.20 (8.23; 55)</td>
<td>21.44 (16.11; 55)</td>
<td>10.65 (7.10; 53)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study examined bereavement outcomes and psychological symptoms in a Swedish sample of 232 parents who had lost a child to cancer 1 to 5 years earlier. Parents reported elevated levels of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia across the first 5 years postloss. Mothers reported higher symptom levels of prolonged grief, depression, and posttraumatic stress than fathers, but no differences between mothers and fathers were found regarding insomnia.

When splitting the total sample into subsamples according to years since loss, there was no significant interaction effect between years since loss and gender on the symptom levels of prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia.

This study showed that adjustment to a loss for parents takes at least 5 years, since all the subsamples divided by years since loss showed similar symptom levels. Even though the present study is
not longitudinal, a pattern was observed where mothers showed higher symptom levels and fathers showed lower symptom levels at 1-year postloss. However, at 5 years postloss, fathers' symptoms, which had been lower at year 1, were the same or even higher than mothers in later years. Similarly, Ljungman et al. found that cancer-bereaved mothers reported initially higher symptom levels of post-traumatic stress, which declined from 9 months to 5 years postloss; fathers' posttraumatic stress symptoms were initially lower than mothers' but had a weaker decline, and at 5 years postloss, mothers and fathers had similar symptom levels. A recent review on parental grief concluded that the grief experiences after the loss of a child are generally so long lasting and severe that they might warrant parental grief being considered a distinct subtype of grief.

In the present study, both mothers and fathers report values near or over the cut-off for insomnia symptoms. There is growing evidence for sleep disturbance being associated with mental health symptoms following loss, which is consistent with research in other populations showing that long-lasting sleep disturbance is related to poor psychological and physical health. This indicates that parents may also suffer from multiple psychological or physiological symptoms that are associated with insomnia.

On a group level, mothers in this study reported more symptoms than fathers. This is consistent with several studies showing a higher risk for mothers than fathers regarding psychological ill health after the loss of a child. For example, bereaved mothers are reported to show more intense grief reactions, more symptoms of depression, and more posttraumatic stress symptoms than fathers. Possible theoretical explanations for differences between mothers' and fathers' grief reactions may be found in the dual process model of coping with bereavement. To undertake the process of adjustment, oscillating between two types of coping is needed. While women tend to use loss-oriented coping, focusing on their grief and expressing emotions, men often prefer more externally oriented coping, engaging in practical tasks; this may reflect cultural and societal habits regarding behavior and emotional reactions in both genders.

How individuals adjust to bereavement is predicted by various factors, but the grief experienced by parents is generally very severe, probably reflecting the strong attachment relationship between parents and children. Parents with severely ill children often develop strong relationships with health care staff whom they come to rely on in a distressed situation. The need of the parents for continued connection with health care staff and hospital community, thus offering them access to available attachment figures, may be considered when developing interventions aimed at improving parents' psychological bereavement outcomes. Standardized follow-ups of the parents will enable identification of those at risk for psychological symptoms and offer them targeted support if needed. The results of this study indicate that bereaved parents may need access to support up to 5 years postloss.

Lichtenthal et al. showed that many cancer-bereaved parents do not receive bereavement support, partly because the loss is not only too painful to talk about but also due to difficulties in finding such services. Currently, childhood cancer centers often lack routines for assessment of the parents' needs of bereavement care, prior to and postloss, and even if such services are available, there are large variations in how they are delivered. The other recommended standard is community-based resources as a sustainable framework for bereavement care, but the availability and quality of such support are highly variable. Therefore, standardized bereavement support is suggested to be included as an integral part of pediatric care settings. Therapeutic alliances between parents and health care professionals are already established during the child's illness, which may help facilitate the
adjustment and the healing of the parents following the loss of their child. Clearly, grief after the loss of a child deserves attention in its own right, both in future research and in the development of bereavement care.

4.1 Study limitations

This is the first study to examine both prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress, and insomnia by means of validated instruments in a total population of parents in Sweden who had lost a child to cancer 1 to 5 years previously. Other strengths include the equal gender distribution among responders and the small number of missing responses in the questionnaire. One limitation is that the unavailability of data on the psychological health of nonresponders, which limits the generalizability of the results. Since the results of this study are based on a Swedish nationwide population, we can speculate that our results could be valid for all parents in Sweden who have lost a child to cancer. Because of cultural differences in grief and bereavement care, we cannot be certain that our results would be generalizable to other cultural contexts or other causes of death. Another limitation is that the results are based on self-reported data, and no clinical assessment interviews were conducted.

4.2 Clinical implications and conclusions

The death of a child has long-lasting effects on the psychological health of the parents. Cancer-bereaved mothers and fathers are vulnerable to prolonged grief, depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and sleep disturbances up to 5 years after the death of their child. Mothers showed higher symptom levels of prolonged grief, depression, and posttraumatic stress than fathers. However, we found no interaction effect of time and gender on parents’ grief over the first 5 years following loss. Since the results indicate that some cancer-bereaved parents may suffer from prolonged grief and psychological symptoms at least up to 5 years after the death of their child, clinicians should be aware of this when meeting bereaved parents. This is a much longer timespan than is current practice for bereavement care in most pediatric oncology settings. The long-lasting psychological problems reported by the parents in the present study underscore the need to establish policy guidelines for provision of psychological support to cancer-bereaved parents, who may need support even years after a child’s death.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the parents who participated in the study. This study was financially supported by the Swedish Childhood Cancer Foundation, Gålö Foundation, and Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None declared.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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REFERENCES


Factors During a Child’s Illness Are Associated With Levels of Prolonged Grief Symptoms in Bereaved Mothers and Fathers

Lilian Pohlkamp, MSc1; Ulrika Kreicbergs, RN, PhD1,2; and Josefin Sveen, PhD1,3

PURPOSE Previous research shows that bereaved parents are at an increased risk for intense and prolonged grief responses. To offer effective support to parents during a child’s cancer treatment and after their child’s death, more knowledge is needed about factors related to the child’s illness trajectory that may contribute to prolonged grief in bereaved parents and about possible sex differences related to such factors. Therefore, we examined possible contributing factors associated with prolonged grief in cancer-bereaved mothers and fathers 1 to 5 years after their child died of cancer.

METHODS We studied data from a population-based nationwide survey, including 133 mothers and 92 fathers who had lost a child to cancer 1 to 5 years earlier, using univariable and multiple regression analyses to assess the associations between prolonged grief and possible contributing variables.

RESULTS The variables associated with lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms for mothers were being able to talk about feelings within the family (P = .00) and trusting that health care professionals made every possible effort to cure the child (P = .01). The statistically significantly associated variables for fathers were having said farewell to the deceased child in the way they wanted (P = .00) and feeling that they had received practical support from health care professionals during the child’s illness trajectory (P = .01).

CONCLUSION We found factors during the illness of children with cancer that contributed to prolonged grief for parents; these were different for mothers and fathers. The results may have implications for design of family bereavement support within pediatric oncology care, including addressing the differing needs of mothers and fathers more effectively.

J Clin Oncol 38:137-144. © 2019 by American Society of Clinical Oncology

INTRODUCTION

The loss of a child to cancer is one of the most painful events a parent may experience. Most bereaved parents can eventually adjust to the loss of a child, but some have persistent and pervasive grief reactions, commonly termed prolonged grief or complicated grief.1-4 Throughout this manuscript, we use the term prolonged grief. Data from a recent meta-analysis of the prevalence of prolonged grief disorder suggested that one in 10 bereaved adults is at risk, with parents being at particularly high risk and women tending to report more intense reactions than men.5,6 A child’s cancer-related death is often preceded by a long trajectory of illness and demanding treatments; many parents experience significant psychosocial distress in the context of pediatric cancer care, which may render them more vulnerable to prolonged grief.7 On the other hand, the following factors from the distressing period are associated with less severe parental grief responses: parents trusting health care staff regarding symptom management and the child’s anxiety and pain,8 a good relationship and communication with the physician,9 emotional and intellectual awareness of the child’s impending death,10 and receiving psychosocial support from staff during the child’s last month of life.11 Although evidence indicates that parents’ experiences during a child’s illness trajectory may affect bereavement outcomes,12,13 it is unclear what impact factors like the aforementioned have on parents’ prolonged grief and also whether they differ between mothers and fathers. Increased knowledge is needed on possible sex-linked factors related to a child’s illness trajectory that may contribute to bereaved parents’ prolonged grief to better support parents during a child’s cancer treatment and after loss. The aim of this study, therefore, was to examine possible contributing factors associated with prolonged grief in cancer-bereaved mothers and fathers 1 to 5 years after their child died of cancer.
METHODS

Study Design and Participants

In 2016, we conducted a population-based nationwide survey among parents who had had a child die of cancer between August 2010 and July 2015 in Sweden. We identified potential participants using the Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry, the Cause of Death Registry, and the Swedish Population Register at the Swedish Tax Agency. The Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry is a national database with information on all children who have received a cancer diagnosis. We identified by linkage with the Cause of Death Registry the children who had died as a result of their cancer. We could then use the children’s personal identification numbers to identify their parents through the Swedish Population Register at the Swedish Tax Agency. Eligible parents were those living in Sweden and who understood Swedish. The Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm, Sweden, gave ethical approval for this study (No. 2015/2183-31/5).

Procedure

Eligible parents (N = 512) received an information letter describing the study purpose and procedure and inviting them to participate. Parents could contact the research group with questions or to opt out of the study and additional contact. Next, the researchers contacted each parent of each child separately, by telephone, and asked if they would consent to participate. Parents with unlisted telephone numbers received a request by post to contact us. Seventy-six parents could not be reached, 63 declined to participate, and 373 consented to do so. No questionnaires were sent without consent. After a few weeks, we made reminder calls to those who did not return the questionnaire. Of 373 individuals who consented to participate, 232 returned the questionnaire. The sample for this study was 225 parents, because seven parents did not complete the Prolonged Grief Disorder-13 (PG-13) instrument. In total, the sample included 76 parent dyads.

We found no significant differences between responders and nonresponders regarding the parents’ age at the time of the study, age at the time of the child’s death, years passed since loss, child’s sex, or child’s age at time of diagnosis and death. The only significant difference was that the percentage of women was higher among responders than among nonresponders (χ² = 8.83; P < .05). We obtained data on all parents and children (including nonresponders) from the Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry combined with the Swedish Population Register.

Measures

The questionnaire was based on items from an earlier survey14 and covered sociodemographics, parents’ experiences from their child’s illness trajectory, perceived social support, family communication, and prolonged grief symptoms. One researcher (L.P.) conducted face-to-face interviews with cancer-bereaved parents to validate the questionnaire before its use. We selected the variables for this study on the basis of the primary outcome of this study: parental experiences predicting levels of prolonged grief symptoms.

We used the PG-13 instrument15 to assess prolonged grief symptoms according to Prigerson’s criteria16 (which differ from the recently released International Classification of Diseases, Eleventh Revision, prolonged grief disorder criteria). PG-13 contains 13 items: two items on duration and impairment, to be answered “yes” or “no”; and 11 items assessing cognitive, behavioral, and emotional symptoms rated on a 5-point scale (1 to 5) ranging from “not at all” to “several times a day” or from “not at all” to “overwhelmingly.” PG-13 is scored as a continuous measure by summing the scores for the 11 symptom items; we used this total score in the current study. The total score ranges from 11 to 55, with a higher score indicating more symptoms of prolonged grief. The Cronbach α was 0.89.

Data Analysis

First, we compared responders and nonresponders through the Wilcoxon rank-sum test and χ² analyses. We used Spearman correlation analyses and scatter plots to evaluate dependency of data, because the data included many parent dyads (ie, 152 of the 232 parents in the study). The analyses indicated that there was a moderate correlation for PG-13 scores (Spearman ρ, 0.44; P < .001) in parent dyads. However, because we analyzed mothers and fathers separately in all regression analyses, we did not take the correlation into consideration. We conducted descriptive analyses on the demographic characteristics of the total sample and mean scores for symptom levels of prolonged grief. We used linear regression to assess the associations between the PG-13 total score and independent variables (ie, potential risk factors and sociodemographic characteristics). Variables for which P < .25 in univariable linear regression were selected for inclusion in multiple linear regressions with the PG-13 total score as the dependent variable. If several variables had similar themes, we chose those with the strongest association. We selected the number of variables for mothers and fathers on the basis of the sample sizes: 12 variables for mothers and nine for fathers. Because of the large number of potential factors, we used a backward entry regression method, with entry and removal limits set to P = .05 and .051, respectively. We added variables excluded in earlier steps to the final selected models, one by one, and then included significant variables in another round of backward selection. Finally, we added the following adjustment variables to the models: the parents’ age at the time of the child’s death, education level and employment at the time of diagnosis, and also the time from diagnosis to loss, the child’s sex, and the child’s age at diagnosis. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences for Windows, version 22 (SPSS, Chicago, IL), was used for all statistical analyses.
**RESULTS**

**Sample Characteristics**

The sample comprised 133 mothers (59%) and 92 fathers (41%). Characteristics of the parents and deceased children are listed in Table 1. The mean age of the mothers was 45.1 years (standard deviation, 7.97) and that of the fathers was 47.4 years (standard deviation, 8.26). The mean age of the deceased children (N = 151) was 9.9 years at death.

**Associations Between Prolonged Grief and Contributing Factors**

Table 2 shows the associations between symptoms of prolonged grief and proposed contributing factors for mothers and fathers. For mothers, higher levels of prolonged grief symptoms were associated with feeling their child suffered from anxiety during the illness trajectory or pain during the last month of life, but also with feeling they had not received sufficient information on how to take care of their child or handle acute problems related to the illness.

For fathers, higher levels of prolonged grief symptoms were associated with having perceived they had an inadequate level of responsibility for their child’s care during the last month of life, they got insufficient information on their child’s illness trajectory, and they received insufficient information on where to turn for their own psychosocial support.

**Multiple Regression Analysis of Contributing Factors for Prolonged Grief in Mothers and Fathers**

The results of the multiple regression analysis are listed in Table 2. We retained one independent variable after a backward selection procedure in the sample of mothers: “being able to talk within the family.” To further examine the independent variables, we added the excluded variables, one by one, into a model with the “being able to talk within the family” variable. This resulted in four statistically significant variables (P < .05): “trust in health care,” “child anxiety,” “practical support from family,” and “information on personal support,” together with the “being able to talk within the family” variable. We created a final backward model with “being able to talk within the family,” “trust in health care,” “child anxiety,” “practical support from family,” and “information on personal support” as independent variables, from which we retained “being able to talk to the family” and “trust in health care.” In this last model, after inclusion of demographic adjustment variables, 20.5% of the variance (adjusted $R^2$) was explained by the variables “being able to talk within the family” ($\beta = 2.83; 95\% CI, 1.09 to 4.57; P = .0017$) and “trust in health care” ($\beta = 2.56; 95\% CI, 0.78 to 4.35; P = .0055$).

We retained two variables in a first backward model in the sample of fathers: “having said farewell to your deceased child in the way you wanted” and “support from health care professionals in practical matters.” To further examine the independent variables, we added the excluded variables, one by one, into a model with these two variables. However, none of the other variables was statistically significant with those variables. Hence, we retained this final model and, after including demographic adjustment variables, found that 33.2% of the variance (adjusted $R^2$) was explained by the variables “having said farewell to your deceased child in the way you wanted” ($\beta = 3.40; 95\% CI, 1.70 to 5.10; P < .001$) and “support from health care professionals in practical matters” ($\beta = -3.43; 95\% CI, -5.90 to -0.95; P = .0073$).

**DISCUSSION**

In this population-based nationwide study, we report on factors during a child’s illness trajectory that might predict levels of prolonged grief symptoms in mothers and fathers 1 to 5 years after their child died of cancer. In mothers, factors that predicted lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms were feeling they could talk within their family about how they were feeling and feeling trust that health care professionals had made every possible effort to cure their child. In fathers, factors that predicted higher levels of prolonged grief symptoms were not having been able to say farewell to their deceased child in the way they wanted and not feeling they received practical support during the child’s illness trajectory.

The association between lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms in mothers and being able to talk within the family indicates that facilitating communication about feelings among family members during times of emotional upheaval might reduce long-term distress in bereaved mothers. Parents may also need information on possible differences in their emotional reactions to what is happening to their child; understanding this may help retain family cohesion. Evidence shows that parental concordance in decision-making and sharing how they feel during their child’s illness improves their own and their child’s well-being. When clinicians involved parents in treatment decisions and strived to create agreement regarding treatment goals during end of life, parents felt their child suffered less. It can be demanding for parents to collaborate in care decisions when they are in despair about the child’s illness, and compassionate support from health care professionals is needed.

Mothers who trusted that health care professionals had made every possible effort to cure the child showed lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms, which illuminates the importance of establishing strong therapeutic alliances in pediatric oncology. When assessing clinical relationships, trust is generally associated with positive health outcomes. Parents who felt their needs for support and sensitive information were acknowledged reported greater trust in the physician and felt more secure, despite uncertainty and upsetting information. Clinicians should be aware that parents want to feel that every effort is made to alleviate their child’s suffering from pain or anxiety.
when cure is not possible. The results of our study confirmed that perceived pain and anxiety in children correlated strongly with higher levels of prolonged grief in mothers.

Our findings confirm known resilience factors for parental grief coping, such as social support and awareness of impending death. But men and women have different preferences regarding how to talk about emotions—a fact to be considered in communication between health care staff and mothers and fathers.

For fathers, not having been able to say farewell to their deceased child in the way they wanted contributed to higher levels of prolonged grief symptoms. This calls for health care professionals to support fathers in prognostic awareness throughout the difficult journey toward their child’s death and to ask questions about their needs and wishes during the end-of-life period. The concept of maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased, as described in modern theoretical models of grief work, may provide a basis for new strategies for clinicians to support parents. Offering suggestions about farewell rituals, such as taking photographs of the child, can also be beneficial. The positive impact of good relations and communication with health care staff on the parents’ anticipatory grieving and preparations for the death of their child has been shown in earlier research. When parents felt they had received clear information on what to expect during the end-of-life period and prepared for the circumstances surrounding the child’s death, they reported greater satisfaction with care.

Fathers’ unmet needs for practical support from health care professionals may reflect the fathers’ needs for clear descriptions of what to expect, so-called prognostic guidance, and well-tailored information on how to handle their child’s clinical condition, because the treatment and symptoms of severely ill children can be highly distressing for family members. Targeted supportive interventions may need to be offered to each parent separately because of different needs and communication styles. The findings also confirm earlier evidence that health care personnel can influence parental coping with bereavement by providing information continuously, starting before the death of the child, and verifying that the parents have understood the information.

Although most of the factors related to prolonged grief symptoms found in this study were consistent with earlier research findings, the factors relevant for mothers and fathers differed notably. This is in line with results in a recent study in which bereaved parents stated they felt their partner had experienced the same loss but went through a different grieving process. Most parents rely heavily on each other for sustained support and understanding. However, parents may experience difficulties in giving each other comfort and support over time. This may partly

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Characteristics of the Bereaved Parents (N = 225) and Deceased Children (N = 151)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents at the time of the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at study, mean (SD), years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at child’s death, mean (SD), years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since loss, mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged grief disorder score, mean (SD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PG-13 score, mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children other than the deceased child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of education completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary/secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residential region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
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<tr>
<td>Town</td>
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<tr>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed/studying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On sick leave/parental leave/unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of the deceased children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s age at diagnosis, mean (SD), years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s age at death, mean (SD), years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of illness, mean (SD), years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain tumor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leukemia/lymphoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE. Data presented as No. (%) unless otherwise indicated. Abbreviations: PG-13, Prolonged Grief Disorder-13; SD, standard deviation.
### TABLE 2. Univariable and Multiple Regressions With PG-13 Scores as Dependent Variable and Possible Risk Factors as Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Mothers Univariable Regression</th>
<th>Mothers Multivariable Regression</th>
<th>Fathers Univariable Regression</th>
<th>Fathers Multivariable Regression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loss-oriented factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you intellectually understand that your child would die earlier than 1 day before the actual event? (yes v no)</td>
<td>$-0.52 (-4.23$ to $3.20; .78)$</td>
<td>$1.60 (-2.05$ to $5.25; .39)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you emotionally understand that your child would die earlier than 1 day before the actual event? (yes v no)</td>
<td>$0.22 (-3.40$ to $3.83; .91)$</td>
<td>$-3.04 (-6.62$ to $0.54; .10)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you understand and accept the information that your child’s illness could not be cured? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1-4)</td>
<td>$1.60^* (-0.19$ to $3.39; .08)$</td>
<td>$2.24^* (0.15$ to $4.33; .04)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you emotionally understand that your child’s illness could not be cured? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1-4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there any health care personnel present at the moment of death? (yes v no)</td>
<td>$-0.46 (-3.94$ to $3.02; .79)$</td>
<td>$-2.66 (-6.12$ to $0.80; .13)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you say farewell after your child’s death in the way that you wanted? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1-4)</td>
<td>$2.08^* (0.26$ to $3.90; .03)$</td>
<td>$4.15^* (2.51$ to $5.79; .00)$</td>
<td>$3.40 (1.70$ to $5.10; .00)$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did your child, at any time during the last month before death, have pain that lasted ≥ 4 hours and could not be relieved? (yes v no)</td>
<td>$4.76^* (1.29$ to $8.22; .01)$</td>
<td>$1.00 (-2.64$ to $4.63; .59)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did your child have any anxiety at any time during the illness? (no/yes, once/yes, occasionally/yes, several times, coded 1-4)</td>
<td>$2.51^* (0.90$ to $4.12; .00)$</td>
<td>$1.31^* (-0.29$ to $2.91; .11)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you talk to your child about important things during the last month of his/her life? (yes v no)</td>
<td>$-0.17 (-3.76$ to $3.42; .93)$</td>
<td>$1.20 (-2.37$ to $4.77; .51)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational factors; health care professionals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you were told that your child’s cancer was incurable, was this said in a respectful way? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1-4)</td>
<td>$0.77 (-1.06$ to $2.60; .41)$</td>
<td>$2.12 (0.35$ to $3.88; .02)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive sufficient information on your child’s illness trajectory? (yes v no)</td>
<td>$1.24 (-3.69$ to $6.18; .62)$</td>
<td>$-7.94^* (-13.23$ to $-2.65; .00)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive sufficient information on how to handle acute problems related to your child’s illness? (yes v no)</td>
<td>$-4.19^* (-8.89$ to $0.51; .08)$</td>
<td>$-3.32 (-8.26$ to $1.62; .19)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive sufficient information from health care professionals on how to take care of your child? (yes v no)</td>
<td>$-4.22^* (-9.37$ to $0.92; .11)$</td>
<td>$-0.58 (-9.08$ to $7.92; .89)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued on following page)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Mothers Univariable Regression $\beta$ (95% CI; $P$)</th>
<th>Mothers Multivariable Regression $\beta$ (95% CI; $P$)</th>
<th>Fathers Univariable Regression $\beta$ (95% CI; $P$)</th>
<th>Fathers Multivariable Regression $\beta$ (95% CI; $P$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel that you had an adequate level of responsibility for your child's care during his/her last month of life? (yes v no)</td>
<td>-0.11 (−1.85 to 1.63; .90)</td>
<td>2.52* (0.61 to 4.43; .01)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive sufficient information on who could answer questions regarding the care of your child? (yes v no)</td>
<td>-1.33 (−7.40 to 4.74; .67)</td>
<td>-5.78 (−12.70 to 1.13; .10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive practical support from health care professionals during the illness trajectory? (no/yes, a little/yes, sufficiently, coded 0-2)</td>
<td>-2.26 (−4.75 to 0.22; .08)</td>
<td>-4.45* (−6.93 to −1.97; .00)</td>
<td>-3.43 (−5.90 to −0.95; .01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you trust that every possible effort was made by health care professionals to cure your child? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1-4)</td>
<td>3.02* (1.12 to 4.92; .00)</td>
<td>2.56 (0.78 to 4.35; .01)</td>
<td>3.06* (1.31 to 4.81; .00)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you able to influence decisions regarding your child's care? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1-4)</td>
<td>0.97 (−0.86 to 2.80; .30)</td>
<td>1.22 (−0.67 to 3.10; .20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive sufficient information regarding who you could turn to for personal psycho-social support? (yes v no)</td>
<td>-4.75* (−8.92 to −0.57; .03)</td>
<td>-4.76* (−9.27 to −0.24; .04)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Relational factors, family and friends**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Mothers Univariable Regression $\beta$ (95% CI; $P$)</th>
<th>Mothers Multivariable Regression $\beta$ (95% CI; $P$)</th>
<th>Fathers Univariable Regression $\beta$ (95% CI; $P$)</th>
<th>Fathers Multivariable Regression $\beta$ (95% CI; $P$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive any practical support from your family during your child’s illness? (no/yes, a little/yes, sufficiently, coded 0-2)</td>
<td>-4.10* (−7.21 to −1.00; .01)</td>
<td>-2.80 (−5.66 to 0.06; .06)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive any practical support from friends during your child’s illness? (no/yes, a little/yes, sufficiently, coded 0-2)</td>
<td>-1.29 (−3.83 to 1.26; .32)</td>
<td>-2.75 (−5.31 to −0.20; .04)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you speak with your partner about your child’s anticipated death? (yes v no)</td>
<td>-4.03* (−7.95 to −0.11; .04)</td>
<td>-1.41 (−5.61 to 2.79; .51)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During your child’s illness, could you talk within your family about how you were feeling? (yes/to a great extent/to some extent/no, coded 1-4)</td>
<td>3.29* (1.53 to 5.05; .00)</td>
<td>2.83 (1.09 to 4.57; .00)</td>
<td>1.12* (−0.70 to 2.94; .22)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any children today other than the child you lost? (yes v no)</td>
<td>-7.36 (−12.89 to −1.84; .01)</td>
<td>-3.42 (−9.23 to 2.39; .25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you religious? (yes v no)</td>
<td>1.80 (−1.73 to 5.33; .31)</td>
<td>1.58 (−2.01 to 5.18; .38)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, has your faith been affected by your child’s illness and death? (yes v no)</td>
<td>4.30 (−1.71 to 10.32; .16)</td>
<td>2.40 (−2.65 to 7.44; .35)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Abbreviation:** PG-13: Prolonged Grief Disorder-13.

*Factor was used in the multiple regression analyses.
depend on sex differences in grief coping, but another possible explanation is that they are suffering too much to give comfort. This might be the case for parents in our sample, because most of the bereaved parents in this study reported high levels of prolonged grief symptoms.

This study has some limitations. First, the parents were surveyed 1 to 5 years after their child’s death; their reports may have been affected by the time that had passed and by their ongoing grieving process. The cross-sectional design of the study means we cannot claim causality; although we can show how the parents have answered at one point in time, their feelings may have changed during their grieving process. Another limitation could be that the parents with high levels of prolonged grief symptoms perceive their experiences during the child’s illness and death in a more critical light than those with lower levels of grief symptoms, which may have affected our results.

Strengths of this study include the large nationwide sample of participants, with equal distribution of time since loss, a high participation rate among fathers, and few missing answers in the questionnaires. Furthermore, we used a validated instrument to measure prolonged grief.

In conclusion, we found that satisfactory communication within the family and trust in health care professionals having made every effort to cure the child predicted lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms in bereaved mothers. In bereaved fathers, having been able to say farewell to the deceased child in the way they wanted and receiving practical support during the child’s illness predicted lower levels of prolonged grief symptoms. The results of this study can improve the care provided to severely ill children and their families, and health care professionals’ awareness of the importance of these factors may have a positive effect on parents’ grief outcomes.

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SUPPORT
Supported by the Swedish Childhood Cancer Foundation (J.S.), Gåö Foundation (U.K.), and Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College (L.P.).

AUTHORS’ DISCLOSURES OF POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Disclosures provided by the authors and data availability statement (if applicable) are available with this article at DOI https://doi.org/10.1200/JCO.19.01493.

REFERENCES
AUTHORS' DISCLOSURES OF POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Factors During a Child's Illness Are Associated With Levels of Prolonged Grief Symptoms in Bereaved Mothers and Fathers

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Ulrika Kreicbergs
Honoraria: Philips Electronics, Biogen

No other potential conflicts of interest were reported.
Parents’ views on what facilitated or complicated their grief after losing a child to cancer

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Parents’ views on what facilitated or complicated their grief after losing a child to cancer

Abstract

Objectives: The loss of a child is a devastating event and bereaved parents are known to suffer intense and long-lasting grief reactions and to be at risk for psychological symptoms. Learning more about how parents cope with grief may improve the support to bereaved parents. This study therefore aimed to explore parents’ views on what facilitated or complicated their grief coping after losing a child to cancer.

Methods: The data for this study was derived from a nationwide postal survey. Cancer-bereaved parents (n = 161) provided written responses to two open-ended questions: “Is there anything that has helped you cope with your grief after your child’s death?” and “Is there anything that made it difficult for you to cope with your grief?” Content analysis was used to analyze the responses.

Results: The findings suggest that having a supportive social network of family and friends, open for sharing and expression of thoughts and emotions, and having remaining children, promote positive grief coping. Meeting professional counselors and sharing experiences with other bereaved parents were also reported as facilitating coping. Keeping memories of the child alive in various contexts, including with staff at the pediatric care settings where the child was cared for, was reported to be important in coping with grief. Parents stated that the following experiences made coping difficult: when they suffered additional losses in their family or social network, when they could not share emotions with their partner, when they perceived that friends, relatives or colleagues lacked empathy or patience, and when they felt demands from employers were too challenging at an early stage.
Significance of results: This nationwide study contributes to the understanding of parents’ grief experiences and what has facilitated or complicated their grief coping, which can help health care professionals improve bereavement support services.

Keywords: Bereavement, coping, grief, pediatric oncology, parents
Introduction
The loss of a child is a devastating event and bereaved parents are known to suffer intense and long-lasting grief reactions and to be at risk for psychological symptoms (Rando, 1983; Rosenberg et al., 2012; Hendrickson, 2009). Grief is the emotional response to loss and may include changes to mental and physical health, social relationships, and spirituality. Most people suffer after a loss, but can eventually find ways to integrate it into their lives. Bereaved parents have to deal with the rupture of the natural course of family life expectations (Bogensperger & Lueger-Schuster, 2014) and this, combined with the strong attachment bond to the child, means that they often struggle to ‘make meaning’ out of the loss (Lichtenthal & Breitbart, 2015). Many bereaved parents face a crisis of meaning (Neimeyer, 2019) – and adapting to the loss of a child takes time. Evidence shows that cancer-bereaved parents are vulnerable to prolonged grief and psychological symptoms up to 6 years after the death of their child (Pohlkamp et al., 2019; Lannen et al., 2008).

Various theories on grief, from stage models and theories on attachment to coping influenced models, aid the understanding of how people manage grief reactions and increase respect for the complexity of the mental and social processes involved in the grief experience (Parkes, 1993; Archer, 2008). The idea of a need to maintain a bond with the deceased as part of adjustment to a loss (Field et al., 2005) was first presented in the nineties. In the same decade, the Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement (DPM) (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) was published and has influenced the direction of research into bereavement coping strategies with its focus on psychological and practical adjustment to loss in everyday life. Coping with grief can be challenging for a person, both as an individual and as a member of a family system, since a loss affects all relationships (Stroebe & Schut, 2015). The DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) clarifies how coping with grief involves oscillation between two types of coping activities: loss-oriented coping and restauration-oriented coping. Coping with stressors
relating mainly to the loss (loss-oriented coping) entails confronting aspects of the loss experience and dealing with grief-related emotions and cognitions, while restoration orientation entails coping activities focusing on the changes in life caused by the death. The alternation between the two coping strategies is central in the model; the bereaved person repeatedly relives the loss and the associated emotions, but also tries out new roles and masters new skills and responsibilities in a changed world without the loved one (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This is believed to facilitate psychological and practical adaptation to the loss. Another relevant theoretical perspective is the ‘meaning reconstruction’ approach to grief (Neimeyer, 2019), since many bereaved parents struggle to make sense of their child’s death by struggling to make sense of life without the child. Such struggles are associated with greater intensity of grief (Keesee et al., 2008).

Past research on grief coping among bereaved parents has largely been based on interviews and small samples (Riley et al., 2007; Meert et al., 2001; Sirkiä et al., 2000) and showed that positive reframing and actively seeking support promoted positive coping in bereaved mothers (Riley et al., 2007). It also showed that parents’ coping resources and perception of a caring emotional attitude from pediatric care staff influenced the intensity of grief (Meert et al., 2001). One study showed that the parental ability to cope with grief did not differ depending on if the child had died during cancer or during palliative care treatment (Sirkiä et al., 2000). Thus far, there are not many studies on large samples. There is a Swedish nationwide study on cancer-bereaved parents, which showed that parents who had shared their problems with others during the child's illness and had access to psychological support during the last month of their child's life were more likely to have worked through their grief 4–9 years after the loss (Kreicbergs et al., 2007). Parents with unresolved grief were more likely to report psychological ill health and sleep disturbances than parents with resolved grief (Lannen et al., 2008).
More understanding is needed regarding bereaved parents’ experiences of coping with bereavement, as they are a vulnerable group at risk for intense and long-lasting grief reactions. Knowledge about factors that can facilitate or complicate coping with grief is needed to help professionals and others improve bereavement support services to these parents in order to prevent psychological symptoms. This paper, based on a nationwide survey, therefore aimed to explore bereaved parents’ views on what facilitated or complicated their grief coping 1–5 years after losing a child to cancer.

**Methods**

**Study design and population**

In 2016, a population-based nationwide survey was conducted among parents who had lost a child to cancer between August 2010 and July 2015 in Sweden. Potential participants were identified using the Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry supplemented with the Swedish Population Register at the Swedish Tax Agency. The Swedish Childhood Cancer Registry is a national database with information on all children who have received a cancer diagnosis. Through linkage with the Cause of Death Registry, the children who had died because of their cancer were identified. Their personal identification numbers could then be used to identify their parents through the Swedish Population Register at the Swedish Tax Agency. Eligible parents were those living in Sweden and who understood Swedish. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm, Sweden (No 2015/2183-31/5).

**Procedure**

Eligible parents (N = 512) received an information letter describing the study purpose and procedure and inviting them to participate. Parents could contact the research group with questions or to opt out of the study and further contact. Next, a research assistant contacted each parent of each child separately, by telephone, and asked if they would consent to
participate. Parents with unlisted telephone numbers received a request by post to contact us. Seventy-six parents could not be reached, 63 declined to participate and 373 consented to do so. No questionnaires were sent without consent. After a few weeks, reminder calls were made to those who had not returned the questionnaire. Out of 373 individuals who consented to participate, 232 returned the questionnaire (response rate: 62%), including 76 parent dyads. No significant differences between responders (n = 232) and non-responders (n = 141) were found regarding parent age at the time of the study, age at the time of the child’s death, years since loss, child’s gender or child’s age at time of diagnosis and death. The only significant difference was that the percentage of women was higher among responders than among non-responders (X2 = 8.83, p < 0.05).

**Measures**
The questionnaire was based on items from an earlier survey (Kreichbergs et al., 2004) and covered socio-demographics, parents’ experiences from their child’s illness trajectory, perceived social support, family communication and prolonged grief symptoms. It also contained instruments measuring mental health. While developing the questionnaire, the first author conducted face-to-face interviews with eight cancer-bereaved parents to validate the questionnaire prior to use. Minor changes were made based on their suggestions. The current study is based on two open-ended questions from the questionnaire: “Is there anything that has helped you cope with your grief after your child’s death?”, and “Is there anything that made it difficult for you to cope with your grief?” Out of the 232 responding parents, 161 had written a response to at least one of these two questions.

**Data analysis**
The study used a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) approach. All the responses to both open-ended questions were documented in a text file. The responses were then read repeatedly by all authors independently, to get a sense of the whole. Overall first
impressions were briefly discussed in the research group. The first author then condensed the responses into meaning units and coded these based on similarities in content. These codes led to the formation of tentative themes which were discussed at research group meetings. During this process, the themes were narrowed down and refined, with the goal of creating categories that reflected important yet distinct aspects of the parents’ responses. Finally, all categories were revised in the research group until agreement was achieved. Thus, the categories presented in this article were established. Quotes from the parents are used to illustrate these categories.

Results

Participant characteristics
At the time of the study, the mean age of the parents was 45 years; 108 (67%) were mothers and 53 (33%) fathers. The mean age of the deceased children (n = 151) was 7 years at diagnosis and 9 years at death (Table 1).

Parents’ views on what facilitated or complicated their grief coping
Six categories emerged from the parents’ responses to the open-ended questions; they were categorized as follows: (1) the social network of family and friends, (2) memories of the child, (3) sharing experiences with other bereaved parents, (4) professional counselling support, (5) activity and work, and (6) personal growth and spirituality.

The social network of family and friends
The support received from the social network – partners, parents, friends and relatives – was reported by many parents to be essential for their grief coping. They felt grateful for the secure relationships within the family (with surviving and/or new children), and with supportive relatives and friends. Participating in the activities of everyday family life was considered beneficial in coping with grief; the feeling of “still being a parent” was frequently mentioned as helpful. On the other hand, seeing the grief of the deceased child’s siblings
caused a lot of parental suffering and was considered hard to handle. When partners or friends were not supportive, or did not want to talk about the deceased child, parents reported that this caused sadness, disappointment and loneliness. Bereaved parents who had suffered additional losses, i.e., relatives who passed away during the child’s illness or soon after the death of the child, stated that this had also complicated their grief coping. Some parents had experienced that “forgotten” losses returned to them: “I had to work through the grief for my father, who died when I was 9 years old.” Divorces or illnesses in the family were also considered to make coping harder; parents could feel overwhelmed and drained of energy.

**Memories of the child**
A sense of purpose from having been the parent of the deceased child was mentioned as an important part of the meaning and motivation described as necessary in life after the loss. Having known and lived with the child gave many parents keys for coping with their grief. “He would want us to continue family life like before,” wrote one parent. Taking action to keep memories of the child alive in various contexts, including in meetings with pediatric care staff, was also reported as facilitating grief coping. Parents would honor their child’s characteristics, such as courage or an optimistic attitude, by adopting those characteristics themselves. Taking loving care of the child’s pet or keeping in touch with the child’s friends and attending events at school also facilitated coping with grief, even if this triggered negative emotions when confronted with the loss – the other children at school were still alive, but their child was not. Visiting and taking care of the child’s grave was also as reported by parents as a way to connect with the child and helped them in their grief. Something that made coping more difficult for the parents was if they had memories of their child suffering because of painful cancer treatments.
Sharing experiences with other bereaved parents
Some parents described meeting with other bereaved parents to be invaluable as a way of coping with grief: “With other bereaved parents, it is possible to share emotions and experiences, in a way that is not possible with friends and family, even if they want to be there for us.” Attending support groups offered by the Childhood Cancer Foundation or other non-profit organizations for parents who lost children facilitated grief coping; it alleviated the experience of loneliness in grief. Parents found it helpful to be able to talk about their deceased child or show pictures of the child’s grave, without making others feel awkward. Seeing that the loss of a child had happened to others and how those families managed to get on with life was also mentioned as important.

Professional counselling support
Many parents stated that “endless” talking about their child and about their experiences during the period of the child’s illness helped them in coping with grief; they needed to talk about their despair and feelings of powerlessness from not being able to protect their child. The support from counselors was mentioned by many parents as necessary for coping with grief and finding ways to get on with life. Conversations with professional counselors or clergymen also enabled a cognitive understanding of grief and thus helped parents endure the emotional rollercoaster of the grieving process. Parents stated that professional support was necessary because such meetings provided a space to talk about thoughts and emotions that needed to be dealt with, when friends did not want to talk or were tired of listening.

Activity and work
Some parents stated that they used physical activity as a way of coping with their grief or that they often went for walks in nature: “the only place where I can breathe.” Other activities were reading, painting, playing an instrument or listening to music that conveyed feelings, which sometimes ameliorated the emotional pain evoked by the loss. Going back to work was perceived as facilitating grief coping for some: “a possibility to feel like life is normal.” On
the other hand, for other parents, work could complicate their coping with grief; when they perceived that colleagues were not sensitive to their emotional reactions to the loss, when they had to go back to work too soon, or when they felt demands from employers were too challenging at an early stage.

**Personal growth and spirituality**

Responses concerning aspects of personal development that had helped parents in their coping with grief were multifaceted; they included thoughts on personal growth, understanding more about human suffering and becoming more empathetic to others. Many parents expressed a deeper understanding of what really matters in life; they experienced stronger feelings of “gratitude for the little things” and consequently changed their priorities in life. Some parents read books about others who had survived disasters and found this helpful in their grief coping. Some parents who had not been spiritual or religious before now found comfort in believing in life after death or reincarnation. “I want to believe my grandparents now look after our daughter in heaven,” as one parent wrote. Some parents became involved in concrete activities to help others in need, such as fundraising activities for the Childhood Cancer Foundation or charity work with homeless people, which helped them cope with grief.

**Discussion**

The findings in this study revealed a depth in the parents’ experiences of coping with grief and their endeavors to find purpose and make meaning in the loss of their child. The parents described the importance of meeting other cancer-bereaved parents to share memories of their child’s illness and treatment. They felt their emotions were profoundly understood in conversations with these people. Also, being able to share the emotional impact of the loss within the family or with friends was mentioned as helpful for parents in coping with grief. The parents’ efforts to maintain bonds with the deceased child were found helpful in adjusting to a life without the child, as was meeting professional counselors. Experiencing additional
losses in the social network, perceiving a lack of shared emotions or empathy from a partner, friends, relatives or colleagues made grief coping harder, as did demands from employers that were too challenging at an early stage.

The network of family members and social relationships was experienced as very helpful for parents in grief coping, helping to create a feeling of security in a shattered world. Being surrounded by people to whom one is closely attached is known to alleviate the pain associated with a loss (Xu et al., 2015). Especially in the case of a loss of a child, a parent’s closest attachment figure, family and near friends can give the security needed to manage the strong yearning and emotional pain in the new reality. Integrating the child’s death is part of reworking the attachment relationship to the lost child (Neimeyer, 2019). The parents reported that they felt they could share the emotional impact of the loss of their child with family members and friends, which is part of loss-oriented coping according to the DPM. Another element of being with family or close friends is the sense of purpose gained by engaging in daily life (Lichtenthal et al., 2019). The same can be achieved by doing family activities with a partner and any remaining children. The parents in this study reported social interactions as healing. After the loss of a child, a majority of parents feel vulnerable and one aspect of coping with grief is the need to redefine parenthood (Nuss, 2014), which is done both in private and within social networks. As an element of meaning making in everyday family life, the parents reported that they felt a sense of control over their functioning, despite the continuing pain of their loss. This experience of coming “back to normal life” in everyday family functioning is considered to be a balanced integration of grief following the loss of a child, in line with a study on parents’ bereavement patterns (Barrera et al., 2007). Meeting other bereaved parents was important, as it made parents realize they were not the only family with this devastating experience, which helped them reconstruct the narrative of their lives (Lichtenthal et al., 2019). Losing a child may lead to a shattered parent identity; they had
believed that, being a parent, they could protect their child. Sharing the reconstruction of the parental self and feelings of loneliness with other bereaved parents was helpful.

So-called meaning reconstruction and creating new life narratives is usually associated with grief coping (Neimeyer et al., 2016). Meeting family and friends and other bereaved parents can also be seen as engaging in loss-oriented coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999); sharing, thinking and dealing with the emotions and sometimes unexpected behaviors induced by the loss may serve as a grief coping strategy. The way parents try to maintain bonds with the deceased child and find purpose in the child’s shortened life is known to be associated with bereavement outcomes (Rubin & Shechory-Stahl, 2013). In this study, parents mentioned engaging in activities like keeping in touch with the deceased child’s friends and school. Even more important was continuous contact with pediatric care staff from the settings where the child had been cared for during the illness period, also evidenced by Weidner et al. (2011). Parents appreciated reminiscing about the child together with those with whom they had become close during the most distressing period of their lives and reported that this helped them cope with their grief (Lichtenthal et al., 2015). They did not want to lose contact with those to whom they became attached (Kearney & Byrne, 2015). Parents reported that a lack of shared emotions or empathy from their partner, friends, relatives or colleagues made coping with grief harder. This shows how social expectations on mourning influence social relations, especially if a bereaved person does not react as expected.

The parents in this study engaged in loss-oriented coping by sharing and dealing with the pain of their bereavement with family, friends and other bereaved parents. They engaged in restorative-oriented coping by finding new activities and trying to go back to work. The reports on changed priorities and values in life may reflect the parents’ integration of the loss and adjustment to the new reality without their child, a process that takes time (Buchi et al.,
2007). Support from professional counselors to understand and move forward in the grieving process was mentioned by the bereaved parents as helpful and can be seen as restorative-oriented coping, along with going back to work and taking up activities like physical exercise or new hobbies. The bereaved parents felt that being forced to return to work too soon and not being able to do what was expected from employers made it harder to cope with grief.

The facilitating and complicating factors for coping with grief found in this study can also be seen in a review article (Snaman et al., 2019) on parents of children who had died from cancer. Some of the results in this study confirm factors in their findings, e.g., social support and personal growth, which were labelled as protective factors. Other findings in the current study, e.g., that parents find it hard to go back to work and meet demands from employers, are not explicitly mentioned by the parents in the review article, but can contribute to the financial strain found to be a risk factor. As shown in a study on bereaved parents in Australia and the US (Dussel et al., 2011), these factors can add economic stress to families that have often suffered work disruptions during the child’s illness and are thus already burdened.

**Methodological considerations**

To our knowledge, this is the first nationwide study with free-text comments from cancer-bereaved mothers and fathers on their ways of coping with grief. Nevertheless, the study has some limitations that should be considered. Its cross-sectional nature does not allow understanding of the evolution of coping strategies during the grief process; however, the results can be understood in the light of several theoretical frameworks, which have been shown to be of value in understanding parental grief 1–5 years after the death of a child. Strengths were that the sample size of this nationwide study was quite large and that 33% of the 161 parents were fathers. Although the bereaved parents in this study had lost their child to cancer, their reports may be valid also for parents who have lost children to other diseases.
Conclusion and clinical implications
The parents reported that social functioning in their network of family and friends, keeping the memory of the child alive, professional counselling support, activities or work facilitated grief coping. Experiences of spiritual and personal growth, sometimes called post-traumatic growth, were reported as benefits from the painful process of adjustment to the loss of a child. These findings can be understood in the light of theoretical frameworks such as DPM and meaning reconstruction in grief. The empirical data can be used in several ways by professionals and others when supporting parents in coping with grief. Firstly, asking about parents’ social functioning can be beneficial, as this has been shown to be an important element of grief integration. Secondly, psycho-education can be offered to parents to increase their understanding of their own grief responses and the possible impact of their grief on others. Bereaved parents may need help to explain to others what can be normal and expected in the grief experience and to understand how family and friends can support them. Thirdly, at a societal level, health insurance organizations and workplaces may need to develop facilitating policies for bereaved parents who return to work.

Conflicts of interest
None declared.

Ethical standards
The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2013.
Acknowledgements

We thank all the parents who participated in the study. Funding for this project has been provided by the Swedish Childhood Cancer Foundation, the Gålö Foundation and Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College.
References


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Table 1. Characteristics of the parents (n = 161) and deceased children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent age at study (years)</td>
<td>45 (8.0)</td>
<td>24–66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent age at child death (years)</td>
<td>41 (7.8)</td>
<td>20–61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age at diagnosis (years)</td>
<td>7 (5.4)</td>
<td>0–16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age at death (years)</td>
<td>9 (6.5)</td>
<td>0–24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illness length in years</td>
<td>2.7 (3.5)</td>
<td>0–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since loss of child</td>
<td>3.8 (1.4)</td>
<td>1–5</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had remaining children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious beliefs</td>
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<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not religious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
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<td>Married/cohabiting</td>
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<td>In a relationship</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education completed</td>
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<tr>
<td>University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residential region</td>
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<tr>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
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<td>Occupation</td>
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<tr>
<td>On sick leave/parental leave/unemployed</td>
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<td>Child gender</td>
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<td>Girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child diagnosis</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Sarcoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
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Theses from
Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College


No. 3. Lilian Pohlkamp (2020) Bereaved mothers and fathers. Grief and psychological health 1 to 5 years after losing a child to cancer.
Bereaved mothers and fathers
Grief and psychological health 1 to 5 years after losing child to cancer

The loss of a child is a devastating event for parents. This thesis increases the understanding of grief and psychological ill health in cancer-bereaved parents. It also examined mothers’ and fathers’ experiences during their child’s illness and what parents found affected their coping with grief. The findings provide knowledge to better support parents in pediatric oncology contexts and in bereavement, which can also improve care for their children.

Lilian Pohlkamp is a registered nurse and registered psychotherapist, with long clinical experience in mental health and palliative care settings. In addition to teaching and supervising health care professionals, she provides psychotherapy, especially in the areas of coping with grief and loss.

Ersta Sköndal Bräcke College has a PhD programme within the field The Individual in the welfare society, with currently two third-cycle subject areas, Palliative care and Social welfare and the civil society. The area frames a field of knowledge in which both the individual in palliative care and social welfare as well as societal interests and conditions are accommodated.