

Widowhood and Coping Strategies Used by Widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, Kenya

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Abstract

Losing a life partner can be an overwhelming and traumatic life event which forces the remaining spouse to cope not only with the painful loss but also with their new widowhood status. This study seeks to establish the coping strategies used by widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, Kenya. A mixed method research design was used in the study. The target population consisted of widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, Kenya. The sampling technique used was purposive in nature. This technique was used to get a sample of 50 widows in Kisumu East Sub County. The instruments used for data collection were questionnaires and focus group discussion. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics were employed in data analysis, Reliability and validity check of the instruments was done to attest the degree to which items measured the indicators for which they were designed. The findings of the study show that widows in Kisumu East subcounty use both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies to cope with widowhood stress. Adaptive coping strategies used by widows were: counseling, social support networks, engaging in business, church activities, keeping significant memoirs of the deceased while maladaptive coping strategies included denial, sex, withdrawal, and substance use. The study recommends that widows should use adaptive coping strategies to cope with widowhood. Additionally, widows should be given enough platforms, space and support in the society to share their experiences as this enhances their general wellbeing. The study also recommends that widows should be empowered on self-awareness and assertive skills to help in building their self-esteem.

Keywords: widowhood, widows, coping strategies

1. Introduction

Coping strategies can be defined as techniques that an individual uses to deal with challenges that come their way; more precisely, the things that widows engage in to navigate the overwhelming stress that comes with the death

of a spouse. (American Psychological Association, 2015; Balmores, 2018). Studies reveal that there are functional and harmful coping strategies used by people. The coping strategies range from being busy, active involvement in social groups, acquisition of new skills, reflecting on the loss, prayer, chatting

with the dead spouse, and holding on glorious moment spent together. However, some widows also employed denial, guilt, self-blame, fantasy, alcohol and substance use (Franscini, 1990; Chima, 2006; Mburugu, 2020).

According to American Psychological Association (APA, 2023), there are individual differences in terms of diverse coping strategies used by widows. This includes community participation, interacting with family members, seeking clinical care where necessary and coming to the realization and acceptance that life must go on in spite of the loss. A study by Sakal (2022) highlights various coping strategies that may be helpful to widows after the death of their spouses. The study encourages widows to seek the help of counselors, join social support networks in order to share and listen to others, reading books and pod casts on widowhood and grief related articles as well as keeping happy memories of the loved ones through art and other methods of creativity.

Baird, Lucas & Donnellan (2010) argue that studies on widowhood not only focus on the challenges that widows go through but also bring to light coping strategies that widows use to harness strength to pass through the stress associated with their new status. The study further postulates that widows with strong social networks are happier and experience good mental health even as they struggle with the change of status. Comparatively, another study shows that widows who share their burdens with others are more emotionally and cognitively healthier than those who live in solitude (Sasson & Umberson, 2014). Thus, there is agreement in literature that healthy supportive relationships can be useful coping strategies for widows.

One of the studies reveal that both young and old widows use similar coping strategies and resources (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Moreover, other findings reveal that widows use different coping strategies to deal with widowhood stress. Such strategies range from adaptive coping techniques that enhance positive thinking and problem solving to avoidant, cognitive and behavioural coping strategies. (Akinlabi, 2013). Although, widows also use unhealthy coping strategies like denial, withdrawal, complaining, repression and self-harm, they should be helped to deal with the root cause of the problem much more candidly and with an open mind. (Barlin, Vojvodic, Mercan & Kalasic, 2021). Similarly,

Silva, Goncalves, Magalhaes and Matos (2022) opine that strong social support is a central coping strategy to help in managing effect of widowhood, since the death of a spouse leads to loss of love and companionship. Such social networks can help widows with social, economic and psychological support that they need during this critical time in their lives.

Ogwen (2010) postulates that widows use their own individual coping resources as well as relying on social support networks in their communities to cope with widowhood stress. The study reveals that widows use a variety of coping techniques such as involvement in business (selling illicit brew, small retail shops), participating in church activities, joining small women groups/Chama, depending on their children, sex and substance abuse. A comparative study by Carr (2020) on coping strategies used by widows and widowers reveals that while widows use positive thinking, dynamic healthy distraction, seeking assistance and support from friends and family, turning to religion for inner peace and strength, widowers on the other hand use avoidant coping mechanisms like denial, withdrawal and substance abuse to manage the burden of widowhood stress. Moreover, the widows and widowers have to learn to accept the reality of spousal death and be able to manage their emotions in a healthier manner. In spite the fact that widows in Kisumu County are burdened by widowhood and the negative effect that comes with it, little is known about the coping strategies they use. Therefore, the current study seeks to establish the coping strategies used by widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, Kenya.

2. Research Methodology

A mixed method research design was used in the study. The target population consisted of widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, Kenya. The sampling technique used was purposive in nature. This technique was used to get a sample of 50 widows in Kisumu East Sub County. The instruments used for data collection were questionnaires and focus group discussion.

The researcher carried out five focus group discussions with the participants to help in harnessing more information on coping strategies used by the widows. During the focus group discussions, the researcher had in depth

discussion with the participants that enriched understanding of coping strategies that widows use. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics were used in data analysis, Reliability and

validity check of the instruments was done to attest the degree to which items measured the indicators for which they were designed.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Responses on Adaptive Coping Strategies used by widows(n=50)

Items	Less frequently (1)	Frequently (2)	More frequently (3)	Most frequently (4)
Counseling,	40(80%)	5(10%)	3(6%)	2(4%)
Engaging in business	13(26%)	10(20%)	23(46%)	4(8%)
Church activities	10(20%)	11(22%)	7(14%)	22(44%)
Keeping significant memoirs of the deceased	20(40%)	19(38%)	6(12%)	5(10%)
Prayer	15(30%)	16(32%)	14(28%)	5(10%)
Exercise/nature walk	42(84%)	3(6%)	4(8%)	1(2%)
New skills acquisition	38(76%)	4(8%)	2(4%)	6(12%)
Support group networks	19(38%)	8(16%)	20(40%)	3(6%)
Chama/Women group	14(28%)	6(12%)	2(4%)	28(56%)
Talking to friends/relatives	3(6%)	7(14%)	9(18%)	31(62%)
Positive Thinking	27(54%)	10(20%)	11(22%)	2(4%)
Talking to a doctor	30(60%)	11(22%)	2(4%)	7(14%)
Seeking guidance/advice	7(14%)	17(34%)	15(30%)	11(22%)
Fun activities	31(62%)	9(18%)	7(14%)	3(6%)
Crying	4(8%)	8(16%)	30(60%)	8(16%)

Table 1 shows the study results on adaptive coping strategies that are used by widows. The questionnaire had a total of 15 items in which the participants gave their opinion on coping strategies used, ranging from; less frequently used (1) to most frequently used (4). The study reveals that 40(80%) of widows, less frequently use counseling as a coping strategy. Additionally, from the focus group discussion, widows assert that, although, they desired to go for counseling the cost of accessing therapy was beyond their reach as they were now the sole providers for their families. Comparatively, the current study concurs with the results of Sakal (2022) which reports that in as much as a limited number of widows seek counseling they should be encouraged to go for therapy since it contributes positively to their mental health.

Moreover, the results reveal that 23(46 %) of the participants engaged in business. From the focus group discussion, most widows decried lack of finances to invest in large scale business and

therefore the majority were involved in small retail shops, sale of alcohol, small scale agriculture and second hand clothe business (mitumba). Similarly, findings by Ogwen (2010) indicate that widows use a variety of coping techniques such as involvement in business (selling illicit brew, small retail shops), participating in church activities, joining small women groups/Chama, depending on their children, sex and substance abuse.

It is evident that, while 22(44%) of the respondents took to church activities as a coping strategy only 5(10%) prayed most frequently. Whereas 20(40%) of the widows less frequently kept significant and pleasant memories of the deceased, 19(38%) of the widows frequently thought of the happy moments they shared as a couple before the spouse passed on and usually programmed memorial services. Furthermore, the study opines that a majority of widows less frequently used exercise 42(84%) and acquisition of new skills 38(76%) as coping strategies.

Additionally, only 6(12%) acquired new skills. The results from the focus discussion groups reveal the opinion of the widows that, lack of finances, heavy responsibilities that comes with their new status and little motivation were great hindrances in learning new skills. Nevertheless, 20(40%) of the widows had good support network and more frequently benefited from such social support. The current study is in agreement with other studies that widows who have strong social networks cope favorable well with challenges of widowhood as they are more emotionally and cognitively stable than those who live in solitude (Baird, Lucas & Donnellan, 2010; Sasson & Umberson, 2014; Sakal, 2022).

Moreover, the study unveils that nearly half of the widows who participated in the study were involved in women group/ "Chama" as a technique of coping. Additionally, findings from the focus discussion groups indicate that widows join "chama" as a way of generating income and also a means of fellowshiping with others. The participants further reported that, involvement in these women groups also allow them to interact and share personal experiences and also help them to generate new ideas from others. While 31(62%) of widows most frequently talked to friends and relatives about their challenges, 27(54%) less frequently thought

positively about their new status. This is in agreement with the results of the focus group discussion showing that many widows confided in friends and a few relatives. However, most participants were of the opinion that they often had negative thoughts and fears that constantly nagged them. Contrastingly, unlike the current study that opines that widows dwell on negative thinking, Carr (2020) study on coping strategies used by widows and widowers reveals that widows use positive thinking and healthy distraction to manage widowhood stress.

The findings of the present study report that only 7(14%) most frequently sought the help of a doctor, whereas 15(30%) more frequently asked for guidance and advice. Asked the reason why many don't seek the support of doctors, participants during the focused group discussion revealed that most of them lacked medical insurance covers and so a visit to the doctor was quite expensive, given the burden they already have as heads of families. While only 3(6%) got involved in fun activities, nearly 30(60%) always cried when overwhelmed by widowhood challenges. The focus discussion groups also revealed that a good number of widows cried when they did not know how to deal with painful emotions and loneliness that comes with the death of their husbands.

Table 2. Responses on Maladaptive Coping Strategies used by widows(n=50)

Items	Less frequently (1)	Frequently (2)	More frequently (3)	Most frequently (4)
Denial	4(8%)	2(4%)	3(6%)	41(82%)
Withdrawal	2(4%)	1(2%)	8(16%)	39(79%)
Alcohol	40(80%)	3(6%)	3(6%)	4(8%)
Sex	35(70%)	5(10%)	4(8%)	6(12%)
Over sleeping	24(46%)	10(20%)	10(20%)	6(12%)
Personal blame	3(6%)	8(16%)	13(26%)	26(52%)
Complaining/Whining	5(10%)	6(12%)	33(66%)	7(14%)

Table 2 presents the participants responses on the use of maladaptive coping strategies used by widows. Seven (7) items were used to assess the indicators/constructs on maladaptive coping strategies employed by widows. The participants were asked to rate their perception on the key constructs as follows; less frequently (1) to most frequently (4).

The results of the study indicates that a good

proportion of widows use maladaptive coping strategies. A majority of widows use denial 41(82%) and withdrawal 39(79%) respectively as coping strategies. Similarly, past literature show that widows use unhealthy coping strategies like denial, withdrawal, complaining, repression and self-harm. (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Akinlabi, 2013; Barlin, Vojvodic, Mercan & Kalasic, 2021). Although, 6(12%) of widows use

sex to ward of widowhood stress, 35(70%) of the widows assert that they use sex less frequently as a coping strategy. This concurs with findings from the focus discussion groups where widows opined that, in as much as men see them as easy target for casual sex due to their widowhood status, sex is the last thing that comes in their schedule as they have to look for ways to provide for their families. A few widows however, agreed that they get involved in sex for financial gain and not as a coping strategy.

Moreover, 40(80%) of the participants were of the opinion that they use alcohol less frequently to cope with widowhood, in as much as 4(8%) of the widows used alcohol to manage the effect of widowhood. From the focus discussion group, widows report that some sold alcohol as an income generating activity and not as a means of coping directly with widowhood.

The findings also indicate that 33(66%) of widows more frequently complained and whined about the loss of their spouses and the challenges that come with the change of status. While 23(46%) of widows overslept less frequently to dull the pain of their loss, only 20% of them slept more frequently to cope with widowhood. Results from the focus group discussions indicates that most widows were early risers and were the last to go to bed as they sourced for income to take care of their families. From table 2, findings show that 26 (52%) of widows blamed themselves for the desperate situation they found themselves as widows.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In a nut shell, the findings of the current study show that widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County use coping strategies. The widows employ both healthy/adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies to manage widowhood stress. Healthy/ adaptive coping strategies were inclusive of counseling, social support networks, engaging in business, church activities, keeping significant memoirs of the deceased. On the other hand, widows in Kisumu East Sub County also use maladaptive coping strategies such as denial, sex, withdrawal, and substance use. The study recommends that widows should use adaptive coping strategies to cope with widowhood. Additionally, widows should be given enough platforms, space and support in the society to share their experiences as this enhances their general wellbeing. The study also recommends that widows should be

empowered on self-awareness and assertive skills to help in building their self-esteem.

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