**Exploring the process of adjustment following partner death in younger, widowed individuals: A qualitative systematic review**

E. Andersona\* J. Van Vuurena K. M. Bennett b L. K. Soulsby b

aDepartment of Primary Care and Mental Health, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom; bDepartment of Psychology, University Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom

Correspondence details:

Ellen Anderson

Department of Primary Care and Mental Health

Whelan Building, Quadrangle

Brownlow Hill

Liverpool

L69 3GB

Tel: 0151 794 5534

Email: Ellen.Anderson@liverpool.ac.uk

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Age influences the experience of widowhood and the likelihood of adverse outcomes. This review synthesizes 13 qualitative papers, that explored adjustment following the death of a partner at a younger age, within a Western-cultural context. Thematic synthesis identified six analytical themes: Unique challenges; Identity changes; Levels of distress; Coping; Support; and Adapting Following Loss. Bereavement challenges younger widow(er)’s life expectations, identity and friendships. Social support, faith and access to age-specific support may facilitate positive adjustment. The findings inform the development of effective interventions to support positive adjustment in younger widowhood.

Keywords: bereavement; young widowhood; adjustment; qualitative; off time

The death of a spouse is considered one of life’s most distressing events (Boelen & Prigerson, 2007). Surviving partners must adjust to a wholly changed world, including disruptions to established routines, roles and identity (Haase & Johnston, 2012; Naef et al., 2013). Compared to the general population, widowed individuals are more likely to experience adverse psychological and physical health outcomes (Hughes & Waite, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2003), particularly for those widowed at a younger age (Onrust et al., 2007; Sasson & Umberson, 2014). The bereavement experience is highlighted as different in younger adults, who may be unprepared emotionally and practically to cope with death, as it is a less expected event (Cupit et al., 2013; Scannell-Desch, 2003). They also encounter different challenges such as facing unmet life expectations and parenting alone (Lowe & McClement, 2010; Yopp et al., 2015).
 Cultures vary in how they conceptualise and ascribe meaning to death (Gire, 2014). This can influence how individuals perceive and respond to death, including expectations of grief and socially acceptable ways of coping with death (Granek, 2015). It is, therefore, important to consider the cultural context in which bereavement takes place. In Western cultures, widowhood is characterised as an event typically affecting individuals in later life, most often women (Naef et al., 2013). In the United Kingdom (UK), the median age of becoming widowed is 76 years (ONS, 2020). This provided rationale to focus the current review on studies that took place within a similar cultural context.

To the best of our knowledge, no existing systematic review focuses on the experience of those widowed at a younger age, whilst considerable literature is available on those aged over 65 (Naef et al., 2013). Younger, in this review, was considered as being 50 years and under at time of partner death. This age limit was decided as a UK organisation for those widowed young specifies an upper age of 50. This review explores factors which influence the process of adjustment following the death of a partner at a younger than expected age, within a Western-cultural context. Increased understanding of the experience of younger widow(er)s will contribute to the development of effective support for this population.

## Method

Four electronic databases PsycINFO, Medline, CINAHL and PsycARTICLES were searched in May 2022 using search terms related to younger age, partner death, and bereavement experience. Search terms were formulated based on the PICO search tool (Methley et al., 2014). Google Scholar and key journals (Death Studies, OMEGA and Mortality) and reference lists of included papers were hand-searched to identify additional literature.Included papers were: (a) peer-reviewed, primary research (b) focused on experiences of partner bereavement (c) included participants aged 50 and younger at time of death (authors contacted for clarification if unclear) (d) used qualitative methodology (e) were set in a Western culture (f) dated from 2001 onwards and (g) were available in English.
 Five studies were included despite not wholly meeting the age inclusion criteria. They were included as i) it was possible for participants to be distinguished by age (Daggett, 2002; Danforth & Glass, 2001; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2021), allowing only data to be included from those aged 50 and under and ii) all participants were under 51 years at time of death (Anderson et al., 2022; Wehrman, 2019).
 Figure 1 details the searches, screening process and included studies. An independent researcher screened 20% of studies at both the title/abstract and full text stage to decrease personal bias and confirm eligibility. EndNote reference management software was used to store the articles and aid the screening process.
*[Figure 1 near here]*

### Quality Assessment

Using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) quality assessment tool, a numerical score was assigned to each question to indicate whether the criteria had been met (=2), partially met (=1) or not met (=0) (Butler et al., 2016). The results of the quality appraisal can be seen in Table 1 alongside study characteristics. It was considered important to include all available data in this limited research area, therefore all papers were included in the review regardless of scoring on the quality assessment. Less weighting was given to studies considered lower quality when drawing conclusions, by corroborating with and using quotes where possible from higher scoring papers.

*[Table 1 near here]*

### Data Synthesis

Thematic synthesis was used as it provides a high level of analytic abstraction from primary qualitative research, allowing new interpretations to be discovered (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This considers all text labelled 'results' or 'findings' as raw data, which included large amounts of participant quotes, enabling the review to be grounded in participants’ experiences (Toye et al., 2014). In line with steps outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008), line-by-line, descriptive codes were compared and integrated to inform analytical themes which captured meaning and new insights. For instance, maintaining purpose, faith and maintaining connection formed the analytical theme of coping. Microsoft Excel was used to store data and facilitate this method of synthesis.

## Results

The results of the quality assessment showed that eight studies were deemed to be moderate-high quality, meeting most of the criteria (scoring 15/20 or above on the CASP; Butler et al., 2016). Glazer et al. (2010) and Daggett (2002) scored 13 and were deemed low-quality studies (scored <15; Butler et al., 2016). A lack of sufficient detail was provided regarding researcher bias, sampling, data collection and analysis. Three studies failed to meet most of the CASP criteria, scoring less than 12 (Danforth & Glass, 2001; DeMichele, 2009; Taylor & Robinson, 2016). All papers were included in the data analysis.
 Six main themes were identified from the data: 1) Unique challenges; 2) Identity changes; 3) Levels of distress; 4) Coping; 5) Support; and 6) Moving forward.

### Theme 1: Unique Challenges

The first theme highlighted the unique challenges that those widowed at a younger age face. Participants needed to navigate these to adjust to life following partner death.
Unexpected Life Event

Participants acknowledged that it was out of the ordinary to experience the death of a partner at a younger age, regardless of means of death (e.g., if anticipated through long-term illness). This led to difficulties in coming to terms with the death, as “this wasn’t the way it was supposed to be” (Jones et al., 2019, p.188). Participants were not prepared for the absence of that person, alongside its implications on their finances, family roles and work life. Furthermore, those around them were experienced as unprepared to support them in their grief: “we don’t prepare for death as a society” (Anderson et al., 2022, p. 6). An absence of a peer group was highlighted: “nobody has been a young widow, everybody is much older” (Taylor & Robinson, 2016, p.73).

#### Loss of Hopes and Dreams

The unexpectedness of the death due to the younger age was intrinsically linked to a loss of future opportunities and hopes and dreams they shared with their partner (Daggett, 2002; Danforth & Glass, 2001; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008, 2021; Jones et al., 2019; Lowe & McClement, 2010). One offered, “I mourn what could have been” (Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2021, p.83). A disrupted future left younger widow(er)s feeling hopeless: “I was adrift without even a goal anymore”(Wehrman, 2019, p.6).

#### Single Parenting and Navigating Pregnancy Alone

Five studies referred to the challenge of transitioning to single parenthood (Anderson et al., 2022; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2021; Glazer et al., 2010; Lowe & McClement, 2010; Wehrman, 2019). Surviving parents described feeling overwhelmed by sole parental responsibility, one example read: “so much is dependent on me” (Glazer et al., 2010, p. 534). They grieved a loss of a co-parent to share experiences with and for their child’s loss: “my daughter graduating from college and her daddy not being there” (Wehrman, 2019, p.6).

Navigating pregnancy alone was another unexpected life event faced by younger widows: “parents are supposed to bring their baby home from the hospital together” (Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008, p.106). This included specific tasks in decision making and managing the birth (Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008; Taylor & Robinson, 2016).
 Being younger at the time of partner death clearly brought its own unique challenges. An overwhelming sense of being unprepared and a loss of future plans left participants feeling hopeless and insufficiently supported.

### Theme 2: Identity Changes

Many participants considered their relationship to be integral to their sense of self. Consequently, the death of a partner challenged both their private and social identities, which prompted a process of self-discovery and a need to reconstruct their identity.

#### Loss of Identity

Participants shared thoughts such as “I’m not the same person that I was” (Anderson et al., 2022, p.5) and “I don’t know who I am anymore” (Haase & Johnston, 2012, p.211). They described a part of themselves dying, too: “I feel like I'm only half there” (Lowe & McClement, 2010, p.211). Identity changes showed the intertwined nature of identity with a partner (Anderson et al., 2022; Daggett, 2002; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2021; Haase & Johnston, 2012; Lowe & McClement, 2010; Wehrman, 2019). Participants described a sense of social awkwardness and not belonging as a newly single person (Danforth & Glass, 2001; Taylor & Robinson, 2016; Wehrman, 2019). They spoke about their social world being equipped for couples and how engaging in social activities was difficult, often feeling “the fifth wheel, the seventh person” (Danforth & Glass, 2001, p.519).

#### Navigating Identity Changes

Identity loss created a need to “find your new place in society” (Wehrman, 2019, p. 4). Participants discussed a need to find new avenues for social contact, better suited to their new identity as a single person. For many, bereaved support groups offered a chance to connect with those with shared experiences (Anderson et al., 2022; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008; Glazer et al., 2010; Hornjatkevyc & Alderson, 2011; Lowe & McClement, 2010). Support groups positively impacted a sense of belonging and social connection, and one participant expressed “what I was feeling and experiencing was similar to what they were feeling and I wasn’t crazy” (Lowe & McClement, 2010, p.139).
 Mixed perspectives were shared of the widowed label, described by some as the “primary thing” that defined them and signified that the loss endured (Haase & Johnston, 2012, p. 212). Others described it as an unwelcomed label, associated with “helplessness” (Lowe & McClement, 2010, p.134).
 Identity was clearly impacted by the death of a partner, affecting multiple aspects of life. Navigating identity involved conflicts, adjusting their social life and connecting with similar others.

### Theme 3: Levels of Distress

 Distress experienced due to partner death was often described as overwhelming, embodying physical and psychological pain.

#### Physical Distress

Participants described their grief as physically painful and debilitating, different to any pain previously experienced (DeMichele, 2009; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008; Haase & Johnston, 2012; Jones et al., 2019; Lowe & McClement, 2010). “I feel like I have a big elephant on my chest… No matter what, it stays there… there's actual physical pain in your chest” (Haase & Johnston, 2012, p.210).

#### Psychological Distress

 Participants described a range of difficult emotions, including anger, shock and disbelief (Anderson et al., 2022; Daggett, 2002; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008, 2021; Haase & Johnston, 2012). Psychological difficulties were discussed (Anderson et al., 2022; DeMichele, 2009; Glazer et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2019). “I just sat there and rocked for a year, just barely able to handle their everyday needs, let alone my needs” (Taylor & Robinson, 2016, p.70). The unexpected nature of experiencing death at a younger age appeared to contribute to distress: “I wasn’t prepared for how emotionally exhausting that was” (Haase & Johnston, 2012, p.210). Helplessness was associated with grief, as participants struggled to manage the loss in the absence of a partner who would usually provide emotional support (Jones et al., 2019; Lowe & McClement, 2010). A perceived lack of support and isolation contributed to poorer psychological wellbeing (Anderson et al., 2022; Danforth & Glass, 2001; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008; Lowe & McClement, 2010).
 Grief impacted both participant’s physical and psychological wellbeing. Being emotionally unprepared, perceived support and the manner in which their partner died impacted the level of distress experienced.

### Theme 4: Coping

 The theme of coping captures the way participants dealt with the loss, for instance through attending to the needs of others, drawing on religious beliefs and maintaining a connection with the deceased.

#### Maintaining Purpose

 Keeping busy, employment and caregiving responsibilities helped participants to cope by providing them with a focus besides themselves and their grief (Anderson et al., 2022; Daggett, 2002; DeMichele, 2009; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008, 2021; Taylor & Robinson, 2016; Wehrman, 2019). “I depended on them [children] for my survival probably as much as they depended on me” (Anderson et al., 2022, p.3).

#### Faith and Spirituality

Some participants found that religious beliefs offered a framework to accept and find meaning in the death, which helped them to cope with the loss (DeMichele, 2009; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2021; Jones et al., 2019; Taylor & Robinson, 2016). “My faith in God kept me going” (Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2021, p.82). Some were comforted by religious practices and the support religious groups provided (Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2021; Glazer et al., 2010; Lowe & McClement, 2010; Taylor & Robinson, 2016). For others, the bereavement challenged their faith, expressing anger towards God.

#### Maintaining Connection

 Maintaining connection with a deceased partner was prominent in life post-death. Both men and women described a sense of continued presence with their partner as comforting (Daggett, 2002; Haase & Johnston, 2012; Hornjatkevyc & Alderson, 2011; Jones et al., 2019). “I swore I could feel him and sense him. It was the only thing that kept me sane” (Haase & Johnston, 2012, p.217). This was often done by keeping their partner’s belongings, memorabilia and symbolic reminders of them (Daggett, 2002; Haase & Johnston, 2012; Lowe & McClement, 2010). Children were influential to maintaining a connection, as parents felt a need to do so for them (Lowe & McClement, 2010). Children were also described as a part of the deceased, therefore a source of continued connection (Anderson et al., 2022).
 Certain coping strategies were consistently reported across younger widow(er)s. Keeping active was a helpful distraction from grief and a sense of continued connection with their partner was considered comforting. Some participants also drew upon religious beliefs and practices to help them manage the loss.

### Theme 5: Support

 Support was valued and facilitated positive adjustment: “I do have a lot of support. I’m really glad. It would be really hard to do this by yourself” (Glazer et al., 2010, p.535).

#### Family, Friends and Groups

 Family, friends and support groups helped younger widow(er)s cope with their distress. However, support was often short-lived: “it seemed like a week after the funeral everybody stopped coming over” (Taylor & Robinson, 2016, p.74), and emphasised the need of long-term support (Daggett, 2002). Many discussed a lack of support from friends, highlighting the absence of support where it might have been expected (Anderson et al., 2022; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008; Glazer et al., 2010). “You do definitely discover who your real friends are” (Anderson et al., 2022, p.4). Some experienced avoidance from those around them, attributed to death being a difficult topic (Anderson et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2019; Lowe & McClement, 2010; Taylor & Robinson, 2016).
 “A lot of people that I thought were such good friends turned out not to be. I think because they were uncomfortable with my husband’s death, they avoided me” (Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008, p.107).

#### Professional Help

 Six studies reported that participants accessed professional support, such as individual and family counselling to help cope with the loss and psychological distress. Bereavement support groups were experienced as positive (Daggett, 2002; Lowe & McClement, 2010), and offered “an outlet to make you feel that you’re not alone” (Glazer et al., 2010, p.535). The absence of age-specific support for those widowed younger was noted however, which increased feelings of isolation (Daggett, 2002; Lowe & McClement, 2010; Taylor & Robinson, 2016).
 This theme shows the value of social and professional support to facilitate positive adjustment following partner death, but also highlights missed opportunities for younger, widowed peer-support.

### Theme 6: Adapting Following Loss

 Despite acknowledging the significance of, and enduring impact of partner death, participants stressed the need to rebuild life. They discussed finding meaning and strength in their experiences, as well as the possibility of new romantic relationships.

#### Meaning Making

 Finding meaning and integrating loss into life were important processes that helped participants live meaningfully. Religious beliefs facilitated the meaning making process for some individuals. Others used their partner’s death as a new frame of reference for life. The death commonly instilled a greater appreciation for life (Anderson et al., 2022; Daggett, 2002; Danforth & Glass, 2001; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008). “I have a new outlook on life… I am not afraid of anything anymore... My husband’s murder by terrorists is my frame of reference” (Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008, p.108).

#### Personal Growth

Participants’ narratives reflected that growth after loss can occur, whereby the experience of bereavement enriched their lives. “I started to gain strength from the loss that I had endured” (Haase & Johnston, 2012, p. 211). Participants learnt new skills, found inner strength and increased in self-confidence due to their experiences (DeMichele, 2009; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2008, 2021; Haase & Johnston, 2012; Hornjatkevyc & Alderson, 2011).

#### New Romantic Relationships

New romantic relationships were a key consideration in moving forward and rebuilding life (Daggett, 2002; DeMichele, 2009; Lowe & McClement, 2010). Participants discussed feelings of guilt and drawing comparisons with their deceased partner in the context of future relationships (Haase & Johnston, 2012; Hornjatkevyc & Alderson, 2011), which highlighted the inner conflicts younger widowed individuals face and challenges associated with new relationships. “I feel, well, if I say I love [my boyfriend], then I’m betraying [my husband]” (Haase & Johnston, 2012, p. 213).
 Meaning making and personal growth were found to be prominent processes in moving forward. Younger widow(er)s considered new romantic relationships in their future, but experienced inner conflicts related to this.

## Discussion

Participants’ narratives reflected both the challenges and factors that facilitated adjustment following bereavement within six analytical themes. The findings showed that being younger at time of death brought specific challenges to widowhood, such as facing unmet life expectations, pregnancy and parenting alone. The unexpectedness of experiencing the death of a partner at a younger age contributed to physical and psychological distress, as well as identity-related challenges. Participants coped with the loss through keeping occupied, religious faith and maintaining connection with their partner. Social support provided reassurance and facilitated positive adjustment, yet avoidance from others led to friendship losses. Integrating the loss, finding meaning and strength in their experiences supported younger widow(er)s to rebuild life following the death.
 Participants’ narratives indicated that the ‘off-time’ nature of becoming widowed meant they were unprepared to cope with loss, and negatively impacted the support received. The context of an ageing world population may contribute to the ill-prepared nature of younger widow(er)s, as people expect to live longer, especially in developed countries (United Nations, 2017). Unmet life expectations and loss of hopes and dreams experienced by younger widow(er)s, such as raising children together, were embedded in life stage. This differs from that of older widow(er)s who may be retired, facing health concerns and no longer still have children at home (Naef et al., 2013). This suggests younger widow(er)s would benefit from tailored bereavement support that considers the life course timing of widowhood.
 Social support protected from the negative effects of bereavement and facilitated positive adjustment in younger widow(er)s. However, participants often experienced avoidance from those around them, and experienced support as short-lived, which hindered adjustment. This experience is less documented in existing widowhood literature involving older adults, which may reflect a wider, cultural issue of addressing and communicating about death in younger individuals. Grief is often defined as a social process (van Wielink et al., 2020), therefore, it is important that bereaved individuals perceive they have others sharing in and supporting their experiences. This gives insights into associations between being widowed at a younger age and adverse outcomes. Furthermore, grief in younger widow(er)s was commonly embodied in physical pain and suffering, which negatively impacted their wellbeing.
 Remaining active and engaged in activities that provided a purpose were considered helpful in managing grief. Work and childcare commitments were ways that younger widow(er)s could do this, being of working age and who may have children at home. This gives insights into the restoration-orientated stressors experienced by younger widow(er)s (Dual Process Model DPM; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Distracting oneself from the suffering associated with grief reflects the strategy of avoidance and is considered vital in adaptive coping (DPM; Stroebe & Schut, 1999).
 When grieving for their changed life and rebuilding meaningful lives, younger widow(er)s drew upon established belief systems, found meaning in the loss, and found strength in their experiences. Personal growth following loss has been documented in older widow(er)s (Lopez et al., 2015).
 Maintaining a connection with their deceased partner was an important, comforting part of bereavement. A sense of continued presence may help younger widow(er)s to cope with a future where their partner is physically absent. Personal belongings of the deceased provided a tangible source of connection. Children were influential in this process, which may highlight a specific factor in the experience of younger widow(er)s who are more likely to have dependent children. A continued bond is well-regarded as important within the grief process, for coping and emotion regulation (Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Sandler et al. 2008).
 Marriage and cohabitation are central to an individual’s identity (Soulsby & Bennett, 2017) and the death of a partner prompted a process of identity change. Adopting the widowed label was experienced as difficult for some younger widow(er)s, potentially as this identity is typically associated with older adults, highlighting specific identity-related challenges in younger widowhood. Furthermore, this review highlighted a loss of social belonging for younger widow(er)s, in a perceived world of couples. The cultural context of bereavement and societal views of widowhood may also impact the bereavement experience. Discussions around new romantic relationships were prevalent, reflecting the time advantage younger adults have to recouple. This highlights the value of applying a life course approach to understanding experiences of bereavement and widowhood (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2013).

This review demonstrates that those widowed younger experience intense distress, hopelessness and difficulty in accessing age-appropriate support. Findings help to understand the specific challenges and factors that facilitate adjustment in younger widow(er)s, which can support healthcare professionals to better understand the needs of this population and develop effective interventions to support them. Individual interventions could support the processes of meaning-making and integrating loss into life following partner death. The significance of faith to meaning making, as a framework that can both support and challenge bereavement, emphasises the need of professionals to be attuned to individual religious and spiritual beliefs. Interventions that enhance younger widow(er)s sense of themselves, their future and goal setting would also be beneficial, as a loss of hopes, dreams and feelings of hopelessness was experienced.
 Younger widow(er)s experienced a sense of unbelonging and avoidance from others, which posed a challenge for them socially and resulted in relationship losses. This, alongside the highlighted value of social support in supporting distress, indicates professionals should work closely with individual support networks and community groups. This could increase awareness of the challenges and factors which support positive adjustment in younger widowed individuals. For example, through psychoeducation around death and communication skills to family and friends of bereaved individuals. Interventions that promote meaningful relationships would also help younger widow(er)s to navigate relationships that have been challenged by the death, as well as new romantic relationships. Long-term support following loss was also highlighted as lacking. Interventions that promote social connection could reduce psychological distress and feelings of isolation. In particular, those that enable younger widow(er)s to meet people of a similar age with similar experiences. Communication platforms such as social media could facilitate such peer-interactions. The findings suggest the need for specific support for those widowed at a younger age, such as that offered by Widowed and Young, a UK charity aimed to support those widowed age 50 and under.
 Social constructs of widowhood highlighted in the review suggests a need to increase awareness of the bereavement experience in those widowed younger at a wider, cultural level. Community initiatives and media campaigns could help to address negative associations related to the widowed label which may impact the process of identity reconstruction in those widowed younger.

A strength of the review was the comprehensive search strategy used. Although some studies fell within the low-quality range, all subthemes, except for pregnancy were supported across a minimum of three papers. The synthesis captured overarching themes, consistent across studies. Furthermore, the review provided new insights into the unique experience of being widowed at a younger age, an area previously underexplored. Including data collected in a specific cultural context only was an advantage considering the cultural context in which professionals work, which involve shared ways of working. This does however limit the review findings to increase understanding of the bereavement experience in younger widow(er)s in other cultural contexts. Future research should seek diversity in relation to ethnicity and religion to better understand how culture may affect young, widowed individuals’ experiences of bereavement, and potentially enhance person-centred interventions.

 In conclusion, widowhood at a younger age has a profound effect on the surviving partner and is associated with unique challenges, including disruption to friendships, identity, and established life expectations. Access to age-specific support, social connection and a sense of purpose supports adjustment. This information is important to the development and evaluation of effective support for younger widow(er)s. The review findings suggest that tailored family and individual interventions to support distress, and facilitate meaning making, and offer opportunities for social connection and peer-support may be of value for people experiencing the death of a partner at a young age.

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Figure 1.
*PRISMA Flow Diagram (adapted from Moher et al., 2009)*

Records identified through database searching
(*n* = 1,591)

CINAHL *n* = 626
PsycINFO *n* = 542
Medline *n* = 361
PsycARTICLES *n* = 62

Screening

Included

Eligibility

Identification

Additional records identified through other sources (*n =* 5)

Death studies *n* = 3
Search of reference lists *n* = 2

Studies included in qualitative synthesis
(*n* = 13)

Met inclusion criteria (*n* = 8)
Papers with data that met inclusion criteria (*n* = 5)

Records screened
(*n* = 1,125)

Records after duplicates removed
(*n* = 1,125)

Records excluded
(*n* = 1,067)

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility
(*n* = 58)

Full-text articles excluded
(*n =* 45)

Unable to determine participants age
*n* = 6

Unable to access paper *n* = 4

Historical data (collected in 1960s) *n* = 1

Not specific to spousal death *n* = 2

Participants over 50 years *n* = 16

Quantitative / mixed methodology *n* = 3

Not English language *n* = 1

Set in an Eastern-culture *n* = 12

Table 1.
*Characteristics of Studies and Participants and Presence of Analytical Themes*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Author, year of publication**  | **Research aims** | **Participant characteristics**  | **Sampling approach and setting** | **Method-ology** | **Analysis** | **CASP score** | **Themes[[1]](#footnote-2)** |
|  **1 2 3 4 5 6**  |
| Jones et al. (2019) | To explore the lived experiences of young widows (under 50 years) and how they navigate death | *n* = 118 women, 3 menMean age at interview = 34.64 years Mean time since becoming widowed = 15.17 months (range 3.5 months - 3.5 years) | Convenience and snowball sampling USA | Video call semi-structured interviews | Phenomenological analysis | 19 | X | X | X | X |  |  |
| Lowe & McClemont (2010) | To understand the lived experience of spousal bereavement from the perspective of young Canadian widows | *n* = 5Women, aged under 45 years at time of deathMean time since death = 4 years | Snowball samplingCanada | Face to face unstructured interviews | Phenomenological method | 19 | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Anderson et al., (2022) | To explore the factors which influence adjustment to partner death whilst raising dependent children | *n* = 125 mothers and 7 fathers raising children 16 years and under at time of partner deathAge range at time of death = 24 - 51 yearsMean time since becoming a widow was 11.4 years (range 2 - 50 years) | Self-selected sampleUK | Face to face and remote semi-structured interviews | Grounded theory | 18 | X | X |  | X | X | X |
| Doherty & Scannell-Desch (2008) | To describe the lived experience of widowhood during pregnancy | *n* = 10Women whose husbands were killed in terrorist attack/war conflict and were pregnant at the time of deathMean age at time of death = 29.5 years (range 21 - 28 years)Mean time since becoming a widow = 4.25 years (range 11 months - 5.5 years) | Convenience SamplingUSA | Face to face and telephone semi-structured interviews | Phenomenological method | 17 |  | X | X | X | X | X |
| Hornjatkevyc & Alderson (2011) | To explore the bereavement experiences of gay men who have lost a partner to non-AIDS related deaths | *n* = 8Men, age range at interview = 44 - 53 yearsTime range since bereaved = 18 months - 18 years | Self-selected samplingCanada | Face to face and telephone un-structured interviews | Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis | 17 | X |  | X | X | X | X |
| Doherty & Scannell-Desch (2021) | To describe the experiences of women who have lost their spouse or partner to death using the theoretical framework of posttraumatic growth | *n* = 15Women who have experienced the death of a spouse or long-term partner (defined as more than 5 years)Mean age at time of death = 47.2 years (range 24 - 88 years)Mean time since becoming a widow = 16 years (range 6 - 42 years) | Purposive and snowballing SamplingUSA | Face to face and telephone semi-structured interviews | Content analysis | 16 | X | X |  | X |  | X |
| Haase & Johnston (2012) | To explore the experiences of young widows, particularly in relation to identity and coping | *n* = 11Woman, mean age at time of interview = 33 years (range 25 - 39 years)Mean time since becoming widowed = 16 months | ConvenienceSamplingUSA | Face to face semi-structured interviews | Phenomenological method | 15 | X | X | X | X |  | X |
| Wehrman (2019) | To explore the identity reconstruction experiences of bereaved military spouses | *n* = 9Women, mean age at bereavement = 35.1 years (range 24 - 51 years)Mean time since becoming widowed = 11.14 years (range 6 - 27 years) | Convenience and snowball samplingUSA | Telephone or video call semi-structured interviews | Thematic analysis | 15 | X | X |  |  |  |  |
| Daggett (2002) | To describe the grief experience of middle-aged men who face spousal bereavement | *n* = 7Men, mean age at time of interview = 47.5 years (range 41 - 54 years)The mean time since bereaved = 2.2 years (range 6 months - 6 years) | Convenience sampling USA | Face to face and telephone semi-structured interviews | Phenomenological method | 13 | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Glazer et al., (2010) | To understand the lived experience of parents as they transition to single parenthood following the death of a spouse | *n* = 62 men, 4 womenParents who have lost a spouse(Author confirmed that participants were widowed in their 30s) | Convenience sampling USA | Face to face semi-structured interviews  | Phenomenological method | 13 | X |  | X |  | X |  |
| Danforth & Glass (2001) | To explore how women widowed in midlife give meaning to the experience of loss in the process of grief resolution following the first year of bereavement | *n* = 3Women, mean age at bereavement = 51.3 years (range 46 - 56 years)Mean time since bereaved = 3.5 years (range 2 - 6 years) | Convenience samplingUSA | Face to face un-structured interviews | Narrative analysis | 12 | X | X | X |  |  | X |
| Taylor & Robinson (2016) | To understand the lived experience of young widowed individuals | *n* = 123 men, 9 womenMean age at time of death = 35.17 years (range = 24 - 44 years)Mean time since becoming a widow = 3.7 years (range 1 - 8 years) | Convenience samplingUSA | Face to face semi-structured focus group | Phenomenological method | 11 | X | X | X | X | X |  |
| DeMichele (2009) | To examine the life stories of three elderly women who were widowed in early life (“off-time”) | *n* = 3Women who had been widowed “off-time” and later widowed againMean age at time of (first husband’s) death = 40.3 years (range 36 - 48 years)Mean time since becoming a widow was 45.6 years (range 42 - 48 years) | Selected from a larger qualitative studyUSA | Face to face interviews | Narrative | 10 | X |  | X | X | X | X |

1. (1) Unique challenges (2) Identity changes (3) Distress (4) Coping (5) Support (6) Moving forward [↑](#footnote-ref-2)