

# Do continuing bonds always help with adjustment to loss?



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**In recent years there has been considerable interest in the effect on the grieving process of a 'continuing bond', an ongoing, inner connection between the mourner and the person who has died. The view of those who coined the term is that maintaining an attachment to the deceased is an integral part of successful adaptation to bereavement. But is this so, or can holding on to memories sometimes be a barrier to the resolution of grief? Here the authors present their research, which attempts to answer this question.**

Advocates of the continuing bond in bereavement<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup> see this as a departure from traditional Freudian-inspired views of mourning. In their view, Freud emphasises the importance of giving up the attachment to the dead person as a precondition for grief resolution<sup>1</sup>, though this may misrepresent what Freud meant<sup>5</sup>. Bowlby and Parkes' theories on adjustment to loss<sup>6, 7</sup> have been similarly criticised, on the same grounds although, again, there is some controversy as to whether this is an accurate interpretation<sup>8</sup>.

Whether or not these more recent views constitute a misreading of Freud<sup>5</sup>, or Bowlby and Parkes<sup>8</sup>, they have important implications for bereavement counselling. Those who see an ongoing relationship with the deceased as a healthy component of grief are critical of interventions that actively challenge bereaved people on their attempts to maintain such attachments. Instead, they suggest, bereavement workers should foster a sense of continuing connection.

However, despite its prominence in contemporary bereavement literature, there

is surprisingly limited empirical support for continuing bonds as a facilitator of grief. In our research, we found that the relationship between connections maintained with the dead person (continuing attachment expressions) and adjustment to bereavement, is more complex. These findings have important implications in that they make it clear that not all expressions of a continuing bond are necessarily helpful in the resolution of grief and that clinicians should not indiscriminately reinforce such ways of coping with loss.

## MIDLIFE CONJUGAL BEREAVEMENT PROJECT

Our study is a part of a larger midlife conjugal bereavement research project conducted at University of California at San Francisco, in which participants were studied over the course of five years following the loss of their spouse. We examined the relationship between various ways of maintaining the attachment to the dead person (see examples in Table) and bereavement-related distress at different

points after the death.

Our aim was to look at the complexity of the relationship between continuing bonds and adjustment. Specifically, we sought to find out if the *type* of continuing attachment expression and *time* since death are important factors in whether or not continuing bonds are therapeutic.

## The initial study at six months post-loss

In an initial study, we found that psychological wellbeing depended on the way the continuing bond with the bereaved person was expressed<sup>9</sup>. As part of a structured interview six months post-loss, participants were asked to what extent their thoughts and behaviour during the previous month had still involved their spouse. We found that those who reported a greater tendency to keep their spouse's possessions as they were before the death, or to seek comfort through physical contact with their belongings, showed more severe grief on the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief (a standard grief symptom inventory). They were also more distressed while engaging in

## EDITOR'S NOTE

There is nothing new in the recognition that, when people die, the memories of the relationship persist in the minds of the survivors and can be a source of comfort and inspiration. Klass *et al* used the term 'continuing bonds' for this relationship and dismissed the idea that the treasured relationship with a person long dead may represent an unhealthy form of psychological denial of reality. Silverman and Nickman, in the concluding chapter of *Continuing Bonds*, the book they edited with Klass, emphasise that 'A significant part of professional intervention can be focused on facilitating the survivor's construction of a bond with the person who has died'. (A critical review of this and a rejoinder from Klass were published in *Bereavement Care* 1998; 17[3]: 47). This article is a timely reminder of the danger of idealising these continuing bonds. In their research Gal-Oz and Field identify some of the problematic as well as the valuable consequences of such ties and warn us 'not to uncritically embrace continuing bonds as an adaptive expression of bereavement'. *CMP*

\*Klass D, Silverman PR, Nickman S (eds) *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Washington DC, USA and London: Taylor and Francis, 1996. Available from Cruse Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond TW9 1UR, UK.

a monologue role-play in which they were asked to speak to their dead partner. In contrast, those who reported greater comfort through memories or dreams exhibited *less* distress in the monologue role-play.

These results suggested that whether or not continuing bonds are adaptive may depend on the nature of their expression. Some forms of attachment are expressed in the context of full acknowledgement of the permanence of the physical separation, while others may be indicative of refusal to accept the loss. Specifically, excessive use of the deceased's possessions at six months after the death is associated with poorer adjustment.

#### Five years later

In a follow-up study on the same bereaved sample at five years post-loss, we examined the relationship between a broad range of continuing attachment expressions and adjustment. If indeed a continuing bond with the deceased is an integral component of successful adaptation to bereavement, participants should have reported continued use of these expressions long after the death. Moreover, greater continuing bonds should be associated with less severe bereavement-related distress.

Bereaved participants completed the Continuing Bonds Scale (CBS), an 11-item scale which addresses different forms of attachment (see Table on this page). The broad assortment of continuing attachment expressions addressed in the CBS provided us with the opportunity to examine possible differences in the relationships between different types of continuing attachment and concurrent symptoms.

Consistent with the continuing bonds view that an ongoing attachment to the deceased is an enduring part of adaptation to bereavement, our participants reported moderate use of continuing attachment expressions at five years post-loss. However, we found nothing to support the suggestion that a continuing attachment with the deceased was adaptive. Instead, those who reported greater use of continuing bonds at five years post-loss, indicated significantly more severe grief symptoms on the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief.

This relationship was consistent across virtually all of the CBS items, including the 'use of fond memories for comfort', an item that was indicative of better adjustment at a point earlier on after the death. This suggests that, five years after the death, greater involvement in continuing attachment, independent of the way it was expressed, was associated with poorer adaptation to the loss.

Furthermore, we found that those with

higher CBS scores five years on, had also had higher grief symptom levels at six months after the death, relative to bereaved individuals with lower CBS scores at the five year point. The former also showed less of a decline in grief symptom levels over the five years. In other words, continuing attachment expressions at a later point after the death are associated with a chronically elevated grief symptom pattern.

No differences in the use of continuing attachment expressions were found between those who remarried and those who did not. There was some evidence that those who reported greater use of continuing attachment expressions on the CBS at five years post-loss, had been more anxiously attached to their spouse during their marriage. The results of the five-year follow-up study thus indicate that a continuing bond to the deceased at a later point after the death is not necessarily indicative of successful adaptation.

#### CONCLUSIONS

It is not our aim to dismiss wholesale the possible value of a continuing bond with the deceased. Rather, our goal has been to alert bereavement counsellors to the complexity of the issue, so they are aware not to uncritically embrace continuing bonds as an adaptive expression of bereavement.

Advocates of continuing bonds may have rightly alerted counsellors to the dangers of treating attempts to maintain a connection with a dead person as simply a form of denial. However, holding back from confronting unhealthy attempts to hang on to the deceased may, equally, be a disservice to some clients. It is important for bereavement counsellors to be able to distinguish between a continuing bond which is an attempt to deny reality and one which is a healthy expression of the positive impact of the deceased carried forward into the new life of the bereaved.

Based on our research, we propose that the *type* of continuing attachment expression and the *extent of its use* at a given point after the death are both important factors in determining its influence on the grief process. For example, it could be that excessive involvement with the deceased's possessions, even early on after the death, may be an important indicator of avoidant coping that interferes with working through the loss. In this case, a bereavement worker could take appropriate steps to prevent a complicated grief process from ensuing. On the other hand, a tendency to dwell on positive memories involving the deceased or to idealise him or her early on after the death may be a healthy part of

#### CONTINUING BOND SCALE ITEMS describing types of continuing bond or attachment expressions

Reminisce with others about spouse
Seek out reminders
Keep items as reminders
Turn to spouse for comfort
Spouse as loving presence
Taking on spouse's habits, values, interests
Positive influence of spouse
Spouse living on through bereaved
Attempt to carry out spouse's wishes
Fond memories that bring joy
Use spouse's viewpoint in decision-making

normal grieving. At a point well on after the death, however, a tendency toward preoccupation with the deceased, whatever the nature of its expression, may be indicative of unresolved grief.

An important step in future research will be to determine more precisely the effect on adjustment to bereavement of various types of continuing bond expressions at different times after the death. This could provide important information for the assessment of complicated grief and for improving practice. BC

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