

Gone but Not Forgotten: Yearning for Lost Loved Ones Linked to Altered Thinking About the Future

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People suffering from complicated grief may have difficulty recalling specific events from their past or imagining specific events in the future, but not when those events involve the partner they lost, according to a new study published in [*Clinical Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

The death of a loved one is among the most painful and disruptive experiences a person can face. For most, the grief subsides over time. But those who suffer from complicated grief continue to yearn for the lost loved one, experience waves of painful emotion, and feel hopeless about the future.

Research suggests that that people who suffer from complicated grief, similar to those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression, have difficulty recalling many of the specific memories of their past.

But there's an exception: They often retain their ability to recall specific memories for events that include the lost loved one.

Graduate student Donald Robinaugh and professor of psychology Richard McNally of Harvard University were intrigued by this cognitive paradox, and it raised another question: Do thoughts of lost loved ones also shape how people with complicated grief think about the future?

To find out, the researchers recruited adults who had lost their spouse or life partner in the last one to three years. Some of the participants showed signs of complicated grief, while others showed signs of more typical bereavement.

The participants completed a series of tasks to assess their memory for past events and their ability to imagine future events, both with and without the deceased. They were asked to generate specific events based on positive cue words (e.g., safe, happy, successful, loved) and negative cue words (e.g., hurt, sad, afraid, angry).

Adults suffering from complicated grief showed deficits in their ability to recall specific autobiographical memories and to imagine specific events in the future compared to adults experiencing typical grief, but only for events that did not include the deceased. They showed no difficulty generating events that included the partner they had lost.

"Most striking to us was the ease with which individuals with complicated grief were able to imagine the future with the deceased relative to their difficulty imagining the future without the deceased," say Robinaugh and McNally. "They frequently imagined landmark life events — such as the birth of their first child or a 50th wedding anniversary — that had long since become impossible. Yet, this impossible

future was more readily imagined than one that could, at that point, realistically occur.”

These findings point to a cognitive mechanism underlying the distressed yearning that is characteristic of complicated grief.

The research also underscores the importance of generating goals and aspirations for the future after the loss of a loved one. According to the researchers, “setting goals and working toward them may be an important component of natural recovery from the disruptive and painful experience of loss.”