

Case study for Barbara

Barbara is in the category of late adulthood, more specifically, the old old age group of late adulthood. Young old which are ages 60 through 75, the old old which are ages 75 through 85, as well as the oldest old which is the age of 85 and over are the subgroups of late adulthood according to gerontologists (Boyd & Bee, 2019). Barbara has lived a long life with many life experiences which she has experienced along the way such as getting married, losing her husband as well as with her son getting married and moving out of her home. Not only did Barbara lose her husband and the warmth he brings to her life, but she also misses the warmth of being seen and felt by her community. Barbara now only interacts with the outside world on a bare minimum, causing her to feel left out of the world and her community. These life experiences have significantly impacted her life as a 76 year old which will be further delved into in this essay.

Spouse bereavement

Firstly, it has to be stated that Barbara was a happy person as well as had a positive outlook on life up to the passing of her husband four years ago which quickly turned her mood from happy and positive to sad and negative. The medical morbidity related to bereavement varies greatly and is connected to coexisting psychiatric diseases, specifically depression and anxiety disorders (Rosenzweig, MD, MPH et al., 1997). The article by Resenzweig and colleagues does show that the general consensus was that the loss of a loved one, especially a spouse, would lead to psychological illnesses which include depression and anxiety disorders.

Therefore, it could be deduced that the loss of her spouse led Barbara to develop some form of depression or anxiety which led to Barbara to stop doing her usual activities after the loss of her husband.

Successful adaptation to spousal bereavement is linked to elevated levels of psychological resilience and extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness, as well as reduced levels of neuroticism (Spahni et al., 2015). With the results of the studies from Spahni and colleagues, seeing as Barbara has low extraversion as she has now reduced all contact to anyone to a bare minimum, this could in fact cause her to not adapt well to the bereavement of her husband, which adds to her feeling left out of her community and alone. Adding on to this, the lack of ability for Barbara to adapt to the loss of her husband is stopping her from going back out into the world and participating in activities again such as ballroom dancing. This problem presents itself in the form of a paradox, where her grief is stopping her from leaving her home, however leaving her home and being with others is what she needs to adapt to her grief.

Besides that, the loss of Barbara's husband not only contributes to her feelings of despair and sadness, but the bereavement of her spouse may also cause cognitive decline. In the study done by Kim et al. (2022), their research indicates that the loss of a spouse may lead to the development of dementia or cognitive decline by causing damage to the blood vessels in the brain, especially in older adults and those with less skilled jobs. Therefore, not only is Barbara more likely to develop psychological illnesses such as depression and anxiety disorder, but also

more likely to develop illnesses such as dementia or other disorders or illnesses which causes cognitive decline.

Social exclusion and social isolation

Barbara, who used to have visits and meet ups with some of her old friends have been getting less and less frequent due to them having their own families of their own. This would lead to Barbara going out less and less, effectively spending less time with other people. According to the study done by Huang et al. (2022), increased levels of social isolation as well as loneliness were found to be strongly linked to a higher likelihood of developing cognitive impairment. Therefore, the less Barbara interacts with the outside world, the more likely this social isolation will cause her to develop cognitive impairment due to the extreme levels of social isolation that Barbara faces in this current phase of her life. This is in line with the findings of the study done by Rohde et al. (2015) where the main discovery of their study was that there is compelling empirical evidence indicating and proving that social isolation has a detrimental effect on mental health. The more socially isolated or excluded Barbara is from her community and her friends, the higher risk Barbara is to facing deterioration in her cognition as well as her mental health.

Barbara constantly feels cold throughout the day, needing to take afternoon naps as well as retiring to her bed as early as 9pm in the evening as it makes her feel warmer. To further understand this, there is research that was done which suggests that social exclusion or social isolation does in fact cause individuals to feel physically colder. One of these researches is the

study done by Zhong & Leonardelli (2008) where through two separate experiments, they discovered that individuals had actual physical sensations of coldness or displayed a preference for warm food compared to cold food when they are faced with social exclusion. This could explain why Barbara increasingly feels cold, as she is socially excluded from her community and her friends which causes Barbara to develop physical embodiments of said social exclusion and isolation, causing her to feel physically colder.

Ways to negate the negative effects

We have discussed how Barbara could have cognitive decline as well as be more likely to develop mental illnesses. However, there are many ways that Barbara is able to help herself in order to prevent these disorders and illnesses from developing.

Firstly, Barbara should try to put herself out there in the world again, specifically mingling with her peers and the rest of her community. As discussed previously, social isolation and social exclusion can cause the development of both cognitive decline as well as mental illnesses. Therefore, the only logical solution would be for Barbara to start leaving the comfort of her home and to start participating in her community. The more Barbara is involved in her community, the more she feels the warmth of being surrounded by people as well as helping prevent the development of cognitive decline in her old age.

Although Barbara does spend her time tending to her garden as well as listening to her radio and watching her television, taking part in social activities such as walking around the park

with fellow elders, or even just strolling around town and talking to the people in the community, can significantly decrease the likelihood of developing cognitive decline. This is also backed up by the study done by Lin et al. (2023) which states that engaging in outdoor activities, performing household chores, caring for children, regularly playing card games or mah-jong, reading books and newspapers, watching television, and listening to the radio can greatly enhance the cognitive capacity of older individuals. When it comes to the relationship between factors, cognitive function exhibited a negative association with depression, while demonstrating favourable relationships with Information and communication technology (ICT) use and social activity. (Lee, 2022).

Another way to help Barbara prevent the development of cognitive decline as well as mental illnesses would be for her son to contact her more. It is understood that her son does not live with her and has moved away with his wife and 3 children. It is also known that her son does not contact her very frequently which adds on to Barbara's feelings of being socially excluded and left out from her community. Children are primarily inclined to provide emotional support and guidance, while they are less inclined to offer money assistance. It appears that the low rates of support reflect the lower need for older parents for assistance (Zarit & Eggebeen, 2005). This shows that perhaps since Barbara is still capable, her son does not feel the need to contact her very frequently as he would if Barbara was not physically capable anymore. However, maybe her son does not know how socially isolated and excluded Barbara really feels, if he did perhaps he would be contacting Barbara more in order to ease her anxiety and to help encourage her to start participating and being involved and a part of her community again.

Besides that, Barbara also has to learn to live with the grief of the loss of her husband. Although her husband passed away four years ago, it is clear that the death of her husband is still affecting her. This is due to the fact that grief can last over a long period of time. One example would be the study done by Dekel et al. (2021) where their findings indicated that the majority of the widows in their study maintained these long-term ties even after losing their first husbands three decades earlier and having second husbands with whom, as noted, they had long marriages with. This shows that the loss and bereavement of a spouse can last for a long time, spanning decades. Therefore, Barbara has to learn to live with the death and the grief that comes with the bereavement of her husband in order to live the rest of her life happily and free from the effects of mental illnesses as well as cognitive decline which is a possibility due to her social exclusion.

One of the many ways Barbara can learn to deal with the grief is through creative writing. Writing therapy can be a helpful way for people to process traumatic events (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Smyth & Helm, 2003 as referenced in Matthews, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the social exclusion that Barbara faces may put her in jeopardy of cognitive decline as well as mental illnesses such as depression and even anxiety disorders. However, there are many ways that Barbara is able to overcome these challenges in order to lead a healthy and fruitful life after all the traumatic events that has happened in her life such as the bereavement of her husband.

Barbara should start putting herself out there in the world again regardless of whether she feels like she is ready or not. The study done by Dekel et al. (2021) already shows that grief over the loss of a spouse is able to span decades. Therefore, Barbara should take the initiative to take the first step in learning how to live with the grief which is by doing activities that she enjoys as well as going out into the community and catching up with old friends again. This way, Barbara is able to start making herself happy again and learning to live with the grief of losing her husband.

Additionally, Barbara's son should also take more initiative to check up on his mother as she has been silently dealing with the grief of losing her husband in a not so healthy way which is by socially isolating herself from the world. Barbara's son should be more supportive and communicate with her more in order to soothe her desire to make contact with the outside world as she is purely just cooped up in her own world.

Barbara should take the initiative to catch up with old friends as well as contact her son more in order to soothe her sadness from the social isolation. Although Barbara does not want to bother her child with her worries as well as distracting her son from his work, she does have to take the first step in reaching out to others in order to maintain a healthy mental health. Barbara has to do it for herself, because no one is going to take the initiative for her, not even her friends or son. Barbara needs to take the first step in order for her to get better at dealing with the grief of losing her husband four years ago, as well as dealing with the feelings of being out of touch with her friends, son as well as her community.

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